Historical Social Research
Historische Sozialforschung

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doi: 10.12759/hsr.44.2019.3.101-126.

Published in:

Historical Social Research 44 (2019) 3

Cite as:

Schielke, Samuli. 2019. Is Prose Poetry a Conspiracy Against the Noble Qur'an? Poetics, Humans, and God in Contemporary Egypt *Historical Social Research* 44 (3): 101-126. doi: 10.12759/hsr.44.2019.3.101-126.

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Is Prose Poetry a Conspiracy Against the Noble Qur'an? Poetics, Humans, and God in Contemporary Egypt

Samuli Schielke *

Abstract: *»Ist Prosadichtung eine Verschwörung gegen den heiligen Koran? Poetik, Menschen und Gott im zeitgenössischen Ägypten«*. There is a peculiar relationship between contemporary poetry and perspectives that are deemed to be heretical by conservative audiences. This relationship is not fully accounted for by current anthropological theories of the secular. The field of literature has been successfully studied as a secular institution – both in the sense of the differentiation of institutions as well as in the sense of the subordination of the religious to the political. Such secularity appears as a rather safe, less controversial way to claim the power of some human entities in relation to God. Some poetry, by contrast, may be accused of heresy or unbelief even when written with pious intention. This suggests a dimension to being secular that is more offensive to conservative societal sensibilities, as it contrasts with deeply-held views on the proper form of the God-human relationship and the associated imaginaries, languages, and aesthetics. Based on a combination of ethnographic research in historical context and a theoretical focus on aesthetics and imagination of divine power as a constituent of human lives, it is proposed in this article that in addition to looking at state power, institutions, and the creation of a secular aesthetic normality, it is also necessary to look more closely at issues of faith, including heretical faith.

Keywords: Poetry, literature, Islam, Egypt, secularism, heresy.

1. Introduction

At a literary gathering in Alexandria in 2014, a poet in attendance claimed that "prose poetry is a conspiracy against the Noble Qur'an" and demanded a com-

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Acknowledgements: This article is based on presentations held at the Universities of Heidelberg and Leipzig in 2017. I am grateful for ideas and feedback from Mukhtar Saad Shehata, Susan Richter, Mark Sedgwick, Michael Allan, Giedre Šabasevičiūtė, Mohamed Bahaa, Fouad Halbouni, the participants of the Muslim Secularities conference in Leipzig, and the editors and anonymous peer reviewers of this special issue. Research for this article was made possible by funding from the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research.

mitment to the discipline of metred and rhymed poetry. Around the same time, another poet from Alexandria faced personal threats and legal complaints in the school where he worked after some of his colleagues interpreted his newest volume of prose poetry as an attempt to rewrite religious scripture, which in their view was a dangerous heresy, even tantamount to unbelief.

In Arabic poetry since the 20th century, a pattern has emerged linking classicist poetics with conservative and God-fearing stances on life and politics, and experimental modernist and postmodern ones with leftist-nationalist, bohemian-cosmopolitan, irreverent, and secular stances. Why this is so requires explanation. Why does commitment to classical metres resonate with conservative perspectives, and what is the relationship between experimental aesthetics and postmodern cosmopolitan stances? Why would some people feel threatened and offended by experimental poetry that only circulates in the small bubble of avant-garde literary circles? Poets working in more mainstream styles may also face opposition and censorship when their poetry is understood to deal with religion in an irreverent manner or otherwise offend societal taboos and sensibilities. But prose poetry, a highbrow genre that reaches a limited audience, has the capacity to irritate conservative sensibilities because of both content and form. How can this be explained?

My main argument is that poetry is capable of encouraging imaginative explorations that a conservative societal mainstream experiences as a heretical threat to their carefully guarded certainties about the proper relationship between humans and God. This capacity has been enhanced by, but cannot be reduced to, the historical process of crafting relatively autonomous spheres of life that may be called secular.

To expand on this particular coming together of aesthetic, spiritual, and moral sensibilities, I first explore the modern history of poetic aesthetics and ethics before providing an ethnographic account of a recent poetry festival in Egypt. I then look at accusations of unbelief and heresy which Montaser Abdel Mawgoud,[1] a participant at the festival, faced because of his poetry. Finally, I reflect on the usefulness and limits of analysing the relationship between poetics, humans, and God in terms of secularity.

Research for this article is based on an ongoing long-term ethnography of literary writing in Alexandria that I have conducted since 2011 in collaboration with the novelist Mukhtar Saad Shehata. Approaching poetry from an ethnographic perspective, I build on sociological and anthropological research on literature, especially but not only in the Middle East (Olszewska 2015, Furani 2012, Jackson 2013, Jacquemond 2008), as well as contemporary literary studies that look at the societal and historical context of literary writing and reading (Pepe 2015, Allan 2016).

[1] Following Egyptian conventions of polite address, I refer to Montaser Abdel Mawgoud in the following with his first name Montaser rather than his patronym Abdel Mawgoud.

Poetry is one of the productive practices through which communities and networks of humans express and experiment with their desires, values, and the horizon of the conceivable. Along with other creative practices such as arts, music, crafts, and literary fiction, poetry is part of the "productive surplus of imagination in a wider social milieu. It may exceed the taken-for-granted of the societal mainstream, but is never unlimited" (Schielke and Shehata 2016, 18-9). Poetry is among the practices through which we may understand the limits and transformations of the familiar and taken-for-granted in a specific historical and societal context.

Two productive limits and – possibly – transformations are the focus of this article. The first is transnational and national social milieus and bubbles that allow the normalisation of a specific literary taste as an unmarked category of "literature." The second is limits to how the relationship between humans and God ought to be imagined, expressed in language, and lived.

These two issues link poetics with the ongoing academic discussion about secularism and secularity. Inspired by the work of Talal Asad (2003), Khaled Furani (2012) has shown that much of contemporary Palestinian poetry is secular in the sense that it marks religion as a specific, separate field, marginalising it while depending on it for the constitution of the secular modern. In a historical analysis of literary reading in colonial Egypt, Michael Allan (2016) also draws on Asad to understand the disciplining practices that establish certain forms of writing and reading (and exclude others) as belonging to the world of world literature. Allan's and Furani's approaches resonate with this special issue's editors' concept of secularity as a form of differentiation (Dressler, Salvatore, and Wohlrab-Sahr 2019), but they add a more critical note, working to problematize what they see as hegemonic secular assumptions about the world. I build on Furani's and Allan's insights, but also argue that their analytical framework of the secular needs to be expanded in two directions.

First, additional attention should be paid to the specific societal milieus and their means of differentiation that make it possible to take for granted specific understandings of literature as "literature." Such milieus can generate bubbles, that is, communicative loops where persons in the loop can feel that their specific way of life is the normal one, and where their ideas and strivings are mutually reinforced and seldom challenged. Literary elites may appear hegemonic when seen from within, but we should not take that appearance for granted.

Second, the secular in Furani's and Allan's understanding certainly is a feature of the language, imaginary and senses of prose poetry, the literary circles that produce and appreciate it, and their relationship with the Egyptian state. But when it comes to imagining and living the relationship between God and humans, closer attention should be paid to societally hegemonic sensibilities about the proper form of the God-human relationship and the imaginaries, languages, and sensibilities that embody that relationship. Vis-a-vis those sensibilities, some poetry emerges as heretical rather than secular.

2. A Short Genealogy of Genres and Struggles

Poems form the oldest known layer of the Arabic textual tradition. Pre-Islamic poetry continues to inform Arabic poetic and rhetorical eloquence today and, alongside the Qur'an, is a formative corpus of classical Arabic language. The distinction between divine revelation and human poetry is as old as the Qur'an. God states in the Qur'an that His words are not poetry (Qur. 36:69; 69:41-2), and generations of Muslim learned specialists and poets alike have maintained aesthetic standards and practices that set the Qur'an apart from human speech. Classical Arabic poetry has a remarkable thematic range, including mystic devotion, romantic love, heroic epics, panegyrics, piety, and irreverence (Van Gelder 2012); it also has a largely constant form that today is known as *'amudi* or "columnic" poetry – called so because of its double verse structure that in writing looks like two columns. *'Amudi* poetry is based on the millennia-old tradition of 16 Arabic metres and, in its classical form, is characterised by the closed semantic unity of the verse and a mono-rhyme that is maintained throughout the poem.

Before the colonial era, poetry was also a main medium of a tradition of cultivating a refined habitus known as *adab*. Armando Salvatore (Salvatore 2019, in this special issue; 2009, 198-200; 2016, 30, 123-125) argues that before its 19th-century reinterpretation as literature on the one hand, and civilised habitus on the other, *adab* was a tradition of ethical cultivation that was distinct and, to a degree, independent of the tradition of *shari'a*. Working on reading practices in early 20th-century Egypt, Michael Allan (2016) argues that *adab* was secularised in this period when powerful critics and readers divided its two inherent dimensions – the content and practice of cultivation; and its medium: poems and stories – into two distinct categories, which made it possible for the second dimension of *adab* to become a translation of the French *littérature*. In line with both Salvatore and Allan's positions, it would thus seem that poetry, as part of *adab* (in both its classical and modern sense), has been prone to become a site of language and imagination that is secular in at least two senses: first, in the sense that it produces a differentiation between divine and human powers as well as between religion and its other; and second, in the sense that it is established as an autonomous institutional field (Bourdieu 1998; Jacquemond 2008). Contemporary Arabic literature, especially its internationally prominent cosmopolitan niches, is in fact a rare stronghold of both political and life-worldly secularism in an otherwise very God-fearing part of the globe.

But this has never been uncontested, and the literary field's autonomy has been partial ever since its emergence in the early 20th century (Klemm 1998; Jacquemond 2008). Even the literary avant-gardes – not to mention the mainstream – have not always been as straightforwardly secular as they are commonly depicted to be (Šabasevičiūtė 2018). The two dimensions of *adab* also continue to live on in contemporary Arabic literature, especially in more con-

servative literary scenes, but also among literary avant-gardes (Pepe 2015). Also, after the establishment of literature as a partially autonomous institutional field, poetry and literature continued to go hand in hand with a cultivated disposition that is partially congruent with *adab* in the wider sense. And just as there are different styles and approaches to poetry, so also different attitudes may be cultivated. The cultivation of literature/*adab* can encourage the crafting of a conservative, pious, and authority-oriented attitude, but also an attitude that goes against the grain of conservative moral and religious sensibilities.

In regard to poetry, a key historical turning point was the innovations introduced mainly by Iraqi and Levantine poets in the mid-20th century, which resulted in a new genre of metred free verse, today alternatively known as *taf'ila* (literally, poetic foot) or *al-shi'r al-hurr* (free poetry or free verse) (Moreh 1976; Jayyusi 1977). *Taf'ila* poetry has a structure of single verses of variable lengths and a rhythm based on verse feet which can be repeated or varied. It can be composed with a mono-rhyme, variable rhymes, or without rhyme. This gives it a wider scope of formal variation than is possible in *'amudi* poetry, and yet at the same time it remains recognisably poetry for non-expert audiences because of the maintenance of the verse foot. Some consider *taf'ila* and free verse different names for the same genre, reflecting mid-20th century free verse that relies on a variable metre (e.g., Abdel Sabour 1972; Dunqul 2005). Others count as free verse only poetry that dispenses with recognisable rhythm but maintains a verse structure.

Taf'ila/free verse was scandalous when it emerged. From the 1960s, conservative Egyptian critics were offended by some emerging poets' use of the new technique together with symbolism derived from the Qur'an and pre-Islamic mythology (Moussa-Mahmoud 1996; Toorawa 2004). From the conservative critics' point of view, such poetic innovation threatened both Arabic language and Muslim faith. It was thus not form alone that caused debate; rather, specific poetic forms were associated with specific politics and ethics. However, this association only lasted until the once experimental form became established and popularised. Today, *taf'ila*/free verse with metre has become the mainstream form of poetry in Egypt. It is no longer clearly associated with any political or ethical stance in particular. Authors of free verse who once were controversial – such as Salah Abdel Sabour (1931-1981) and Amal Dunqul (1940-1983) – have been included in most (but not all, especially not schoolbook) versions of the Egyptian national canon of poetry. But the accusation lives on, now attached to prose poetry.

Prose poetry (*qasidat al-nathr*) became increasingly popular in literary circles in Egypt in the 1980s and 1990s, and yet it remains a distinctly highbrow poetic form in comparison to the mainstream canonical understanding of poetry as "measured and rhymed speech that points at a meaning" (Furani 2012, 4). Among Arabic poets and critics, there is little agreement about what constitutes prose poetry proper. A more common view defines prose poetry as all poetry

that dispenses with a recognisable verse foot or rhythm (e.g., Furani 2012, 34, 212-3). Others propose a stricter definition in line with international usage of the term. According to the introduction to an anthology of translated and Arabic prose poetry (Al-Janabi 2015, X, referring to Bernard 1959), prose poetry is based on a prose paragraph that is brief, required for itself, and does not refer to what is outside it. In practice, however, few prose poems meet these strict criteria – including works by poets who subscribe to this definition.[2]

Whatever the definition, prose poetry remains the most controversial poetic form today. Not only do non-specialist audiences often not recognise it as poetry, in many dedicated literary circles it is considered not proper poetry. Whenever authors of prose poetry venture to symposia and circles dominated by conservative tastes, this commonly results in heated debates, literary nationalist arguments about the unique character of Arabic language for which music and rhythm are indispensable, and claims such as that "prose poetry is a conspiracy against the Noble Qur'an" – a claim Mukhtar and I witnessed being made at a symposium at the Alexandria branch of the Egyptian Writers' Union in 2014. It is a travelling trope and has been around for some time. Khaled Furani cites a Palestinian poet who argued that an attack on traditional poetic forms was an attack on "Arab *thawabit* (certainties)": "You can destroy a people in one of two ways: its religion or its poetry" (Furani 2012, 86-7).

It thus appears that there is much at stake. This is also evident in Egypt's prominent history, since at least the mid-20th century, of "culture wars" in which Islamist movements and the state-sponsored al-Azhar University have been pitted against secular intelligentsias. Among early notable incidents was the scandal about Naguib Mahfouz's novel *Awlad Haratina* (*The Children of the Alley*: Mahfouz 1996; for context, see Shoair 2017) in 1959. It has been followed by numerous other prominent cases (Mehrez 2010). The state has played an ambiguous role, co-opting those same secularist intelligentsias in the name of "enlightenment," presenting itself as a guardian of conservative values and faith and exercising censorship and political oppression in a number of areas (Abaza 2010). Over the past years, there have been many media scandals, censorship cases, and lawsuits over "defamation of religions" (*izdira' al-adyan*).[3] Literary writing has been further politicised in the context of the Janu-

[2] Montaser Abdel Mawgoud, whose work I discuss in this article, subscribes to this strict definition of prose poetry. His third volume of poetry – the one that got him into trouble – consists of prose paragraphs that few Egyptian readers would recognise as poetry, but which according to Montaser (author interview 23 February 2017) do not qualify as prose poetry proper because when read together they create a narrative whole and because they are full of intertextual references to religious scripture.

[3] Egyptian Penal Code § 98.I criminalises defaming or showing contempt (*izdira'*) for "heavenly religions", i.e., Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Often dubbed a "blasphemy law" in English-language media, it sanctions public acts and expressions that offend religious sentiments and disturb social peace. With very few exceptions, sentences based on the law have

ary 25 Revolution and its aftermath. If literature initially appeared a natural ally of rebellion (Schanda 2013), its ideological and institutional foundations became more evident after 2013, when prominent authors in the nationalist-secular tradition sided with the new paranoid nationalist regime of Abdelfattah El-Sisi and emphatically opposed the Muslim Brotherhood.

Poetry in particular and literary writing in general have a history that resonates with key contested issues of societal values, faith, and political power in a way that is linked with the "problem-space" (Agrama 2012) of secularism and secularity. But what exactly is this link and is the secularity of poetry and literature really the main factor behind their propensity to instigate scandals and conflicts?

3. A Bubble of World Literature

At the end of October 2015, the Tanta International Poetry Festival was held for the first time, bringing together poets from Egypt, other Arab countries, Europe, and Latin America. An initiative of the poets Mahmoud Sharaf from Tanta and Montaser Abdel Mawgoud from Alexandria, the festival followed a new format for literature festivals where readings are not held in dedicated cultural spaces but instead go "to the people" in schools, universities, cafés, and streets.

The organisers' aim of reaching a non-specialist audience was not easily accomplished. Few events had a substantial general audience. The Arabic poets in attendance all wrote either free verse or prose poetry. A poet from Cairo told me that in one of the better attended lectures at Tanta University, a student sitting next to him in the audience commented to him: "But what they're saying is not poetry, right?" The city's literary circles were largely absent. Controversy had preceded the festival because some local poets had complained about being excluded from the festival. As a compromise, an event dedicated to young local poets was held on the last day of the festival, and it was well attended by the young poets and their friends.

Later editions of the festival have been more successful in bringing together different audiences and involving local literary circles. But in the first edition in 2015, the attempt to bring avant-garde poetry into contact with a provincial city, left the milieus involved largely intact. The invited guests from Egypt and abroad had a good time together and crafted networks and friendships. The Ministry of Culture had its representative event with pompous opening and closing ceremonies. Young local poets had their dedicated symposium. Senior

been handed for expressions that offend Muslim sensibilities (Eshhad 2016). The law is a good case of a secular legal norm that in practice guards the sensitivities of the followers of the majority faith (Mahmood 2009).

local poets who were not invited to the festival could feel safely confirmed that the organisers did not value really good poetry. Few inhabitants of the city came into contact with the festival at all.

Two themes were conspicuously absent at the festival. The first was politics. Egyptian poets at the festival were divided into supporters and critics of the regime, and especially the latter avoided talking about politics. Another absence was more consensual. The poets at the festival largely shared a secular approach, be it in regard to their lifestyles, their politics, or the kind of poetry they produced. They employed poetic language in experimental ways that highlighted human innovation, transformation, and uncertainty. Their poetry differed greatly from what Khaled Furani (2012, 66) has described as the traditional discipline of classicist *'amudi* poetry – traditional not simply in the sense of sticking to old ways, but in the sense of a moral commitment to an assemblage of language, aesthetics, and divine power. This is not to say that prose poetry cannot be spiritual, even pious. The work of Montaser Abdel Mawgoud to which I devote more attention below, certainly is. But the milieu of world literature that came together in an international poetry festival carefully dealt with religion as a non-issue.

Michael Allan (2016) argues that despite its striving to unite humanity, world literature is a limited space, guarded by a fundamentally secular understanding of what counts as literature. According to Allan, the unmarked category of "literature" is secular not simply because literates are not very religious (although in the literary avant-gardes of Egypt, this is also often the case), but because what gets recognised as world literature involves forms of reading and writing based on a this-worldly understanding of humanity – to the exclusion of reading and writing in a religious framework. While this may be true of Egypt's cosmopolitan literary avant-garde, it is not generally true of literature in Egypt. At literary events in more conservative scenes (highbrow and popular alike), an understanding of literature limited and/or guided by faith is common, even prevalent – remember that the claim that prose poetry is a conspiracy against the Qur'an was made at a symposium of the Writers' Union by a member of the latter. This understanding can gain international and financial success as well, mainly thanks to highly remunerated poetry competitions and prizes in the Arab Gulf states that often promote classicist and mainstream poetic tastes.

"Literature" in the sense reproduced by international literature festivals and avant-garde milieus can most successfully maintain the illusion of its unmarked normality when its communicative bubble remains intact, protected from conversations and claims that may challenge or reject it. The perils that may result when communicative bubbles burst became evident on one occasion during the festival.

At a workshop where Montaser was among the panelists, two professors of the al-Mansura branch of the Islamic al-Azhar University joined the audience. They intervened in a discussion that until then had circled around critical justi-

fication of prose poetry, the transformation and openness central to literary writing, and the tension between highbrow and popular literary tastes. One of the professors questioned the principle of openness which he equated with "the overthrowing of identity" – meaning Islamic identity. A heated debate about identity followed. One of the panelists replied with an Egyptian nationalist identitarian stance. Two others, among them Montaser, argued for an open-ended plurality of identitites, while a member of the audience from the local literary scene of Tanta argued in favour of reconciling literary innovation with God-given certainties. No conclusion was reached, and afterwards the panelists considered the workshop a failure. The intervention of the Azhari scholars with their identitarian stances and pedagogical conservative aesthetics in a conversation about prose poetry and authorship made a meaningful, constructive discussion impossible.

The selectiveness and exclusiveness of literary milieus evidently cast a shadow of doubt on the aspirations of postmodern avant-gardes for openness and communication with a generic humanity – aspirations which were clearly stated in the workshop. In that regard, I fully agree with Allan. But the Azhari professors did not challenge prose poetry because of its secular provinciality (Allan 2016, 130). They took the demand for openness and open-endedness seriously, and rejected it because it would leave vice unchallenged and relativise the firm grounds of their project of revitalising and purifying Islamic identity.

4. "More Dangerous Than Those Who Call for Unbelief"

Why would two professors of al-Azhar travel from a different city to an otherwise poorly attended literary workshop? They had come with the specific intention to meet Montaser. During a break in the workshop, they spoke with him and pressed him about his third poetry volume, which in their view was opposed to the Qur'an. They demanded that he withdraw the work in a manner that he understood as a threat. He was so frightened by the encounter that he did not attend any public literary events for nearly two years.

Born in 1973, Montaser Abdel Mawgoud has been active in the literary scene since the early nineties, and while his work is not known to wider audiences, he has gained recognition in the avant-garde literary milieus of Cairo and Alexandria and has been invited to some literature festivals in Europe and Latin America. Until 2016, he worked as a teacher of Arabic and Islam in a government school[4] and lived with his family in a low-income informal area in Alex-

[4] Arabic teachers are always also Islamic religion teachers in Egyptian government schools, which is telling of the intimate link of faith, doctrine, and language.

andria. Writing has been his passion since his youth and he has actively cultivated and developed his writing skills since his school years.

In 2012, Montaser released his third volume (diwan) of prose poetry titled *Thammat ashya' lan yujarribaha* (*There Are Things He Will Not Try*, Abdel Mawgoud 2012). Written in a dense, poetic prose without a verse structure, the volume offers an imaginative retelling of key events from the Qur'an and the Bible, featuring the interactions and (inner) struggles of heroes and anti-heroes of the scripture, starting with God, Satan, and Adam and continuing to include many more in a poetic account of the relationship between humans, prophets, and the Creator.

The poems are accessible to readers with knowledge of the events and characters of the Bible and the Qur'an. Some poems contain direct intertextual references to the Qur'an, such as the following poem about the encounter between Moses and al-Khidr (a source of inspiration for other writers too; see Toorawa 2014). In the Qur'an (Qur. 18: 65-82), God sends Moses (Musa) to meet a servant of God more knowledgeable than Moses.[5] Although he is told to ask no questions, Moses keeps asking about and questioning al-Khidr's acts that seem unjustified and unreasonable to him until al-Khidr reveals to Moses the hidden reasons that prove his acts righteous and says that "this is the parting between me and you" (Qur. 18:78). The poem tells a slightly altered version. (Qur'anic phrases in the poem are in italics in the translation; they are not marked in the Arabic original):

عندما تلقى رجلا أوتي من العلم ما لا تستطيع عليه صبرا، فلا تسأله أن يعلمك، بل لا تسأله عن أي شيء... فقط اتبعه محافظا على مسافة تسمح لك بتنسم عبير رقته وهو يخرق السفينة، والانتباه لآلية الموحى إليه بقتل صبي كان سيرهق أبويه كفرا، فإذا ما استنرت بنور تلخيص الأعمال بمسبباتها الأولى؛ سبقته يداك إلى إقامة جدار كان نقضه هزيمتك وفوز قرية من اللئام، فيبس في وجهك ثم يخبرك معتذرا:.... وهذا أيضا فراق بيني وبينك....

ثم يمضي بعباءة خضراء تزحم خيالك كلما تذكرت أرض مصر.

When you meet a man blessed with knowledge *for which you could not hold patience*, do not ask him to teach you, and do not ask him about anything... only follow him, maintaining a distance that allows you to inhale the scent of his graciousness while he makes a hole in the ship, and pay attention to the technique of the one inspired by revelation to kill a boy who w*ould have oppressed his parents with unbelief*; and once you gained insight into the light that justifies the acts through their original causes, your hands preceded his in building up a wall[6] the collapse of which would be your defeat and the victory

[5] The servant of God is not named in the Qur'an but is identified as al-Khidr in Muslim traditions.

[6] This refers to the third strange act of al-Khidr. When he and Moses arrive in a village where the inhabitants refuse to offer them hospitality, al-Khidr goes and restores a wall that is about to collapse and does not ask the villagers for a wage. In the Qur'anic text (Qur.18:82), he explains his act to Moses: "And as for the wall, it belonged to two orphan boys in the town; and there was under it a treasure belonging to them; and their father was a righteous

> of a village of lowly folks; and so he smiles cheerfully into your face and tells you excusingly: … *This*, too, *is the parting between me and you...*
>
> Then he passes in a green turban that besets your imagination every time you remember the land of Egypt. (Abdel Mawgoud 2012, 69)

Montaser told me in an interview on 23 February 2017[7] that his aim in the book was "neither to sacralise the sacred, nor to defame it, but rather to act upon the principle of […] an aesthetic exploration of the religious heritage." His aesthetic search turned out to be much more controversial than he anticipated, however.

Contemporary Arabic poets have often been drawn to Qur'anic themes, forms, and phrases. When they have done so in ways that are not clearly devotional and reverent, this has repeatedly resulted in scandals. There is a widespread sensibility in Egypt and elsewhere in the Muslim world against any sort of playful or creative retelling of the Qur'an, and an even stronger antipathy towards changing parts of it and attributing words to God (see, e.g., Toorawa 2004; Wild 2001). This sensibility is also shared by many Egyptian Muslims who are not supporters of Islamist movements; and yet the latter have been more vocal about it in the course of Egypt's recent "culture wars" which have involved many prominent lawsuits and censorship cases. The most effective form of censorship is societal pressure. With the exception of members of the upper classes who can enjoy the luxury of seclusion and mobility, most Egyptians whose acts or writings are interpreted by others as heretical or as unbelief must continue to cope with conservative views within their family, at work, when they interact with their neighbours, when doing business, and when they take their children to school.

Because the distribution of contemporary experimental poetry is very limited in Egypt, the volume did not generate public controversy. It received positive critiques in avant-garde literary circles, which usually encourage such imaginative explorations and experimental aesthetics. However, the volume did not stay inside this bubble.[8]

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man, and your Lord intended that they should attain their age of full strength and take out their treasure as a mercy from your Lord [which is why the wall should be restored to stand until then]. And I did it not of my own accord. That is the interpretation of that for which you could not hold patience." (Translation freely after Mohsin 1996; for the original verse and other possible translations, see The Qur'anic Arabic Corpus, <http://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=18&verse=82>.)

[7] All interview passages with Montaser Abdel Mawgoud cited in the following are from the same interview.

[8] I know the following events from Montaser's account of them. Aside of my short encounter with the two Azhari professors in Tanta, I have not been in contact with his detractors because doing so might cause him additional harm. Until his departure from Egypt, Montaser consciously avoided making the issue public because doing so might result in a lawsuit for defamation of religions against him.

Montaser had been criticised for his poetry before by colleagues at the school who were close to the Muslim Brotherhood. They had taken issue with a reference to masturbation in his first volume and Christian imagery in his second volume. He told me that he anticipated similar critiques from them with regard to his third volume, but expected no further consequences. However, after reading his third volume, the same colleagues accused him of distorting the word of God. They also submitted a complaint to the school administration, stating that his poetry offended God, angels, and prophets and that his work as a teacher of Arabic and Islam therefore constituted a threat to children's minds. They must have also passed on the news about his poetry to others for, after a while, Montaser began to receive threatening phone calls from withheld numbers. His wife received phone calls and was approached by people in the market who told her that her husband was an infidel (and thus, by Islamic law, not her husband) and that she should leave him or accept the consequences. In the neighbourhood where he lived, Montaser was once stopped by two men who told him that he should renounce his book, that it would be permissible to kill him as an infidel, and that he should consider this the final warning. After that, he did not leave or enter his home in the company of his wife and children, used detours to enter and leave, and sometimes slept at work. He reported the threats to the police, but the officers in the station showed no interest in protecting him. In summer 2014, he managed to get transferred to another school, but the phone calls continued. In 2016, a new complaint was filed against him. Reacting to the pressure, he took unpaid leave from his work in 2016.

Montaser's situation was aggravated by the fact that he does not belong to Egypt's well-connected bourgeoisie and could not afford to relocate to a more secluded neighbourhood or to find different work. He had important allies however: an international secularist community of world literature with which he was connected through literary festivals to which he had previously been invited. Through these connections, he received a small scholarship that allowed him to temporarily relocate to an anonymous middle-class neighbourhood and, in December 2017, he was able to emigrate from Egypt to Norway with the help of a programme that supports writers and artists at risk.

These events began to unfold in summer 2013, a period in which the civilian government of the Muslim Brotherhood was overthrown by a military counter-revolution. Something about his book was so disagreeable to supporters of Islamist movements that, in the middle of a military coup against an Islamist president, they channelled some of their efforts towards trying to persuade and intimidate the author of a volume of highbrow poetry. Montaser was not even a supporter of the military rule.

Montaser recounted the accusations he had faced to me:

> There were accusations, for example: "Why do you rewrite the contents of the holy Scripture? Don't you like the original text? Do you want to offer an alternative text?" I told them: "Not at all." Other people said: "You attribute

fabricated words (*tataqawwal*) to God, that's wrong". […] Others said: "There are certain passages where you differ from the text of the Qur'an in an evident manner." I told them: "That's true, I differed from it in a clear manner but I didn't contradict it in a manner concerning the the Sharia (*fî amr shar'i*)."[9] I differed from it in the depiction of a historical event, which is the encounter of al-Khidr with Moses (Musa), peace be upon him. I employed an artistic technique in my poem with al-Khidr. You know the idea of the mirror in which you see things inverted. So in the text I constantly imagine that Moses does the opposite of what he did in the Qur'an. I imagine that he didn't ask, I imagine that he acted before al-Khidr when building the wall. In the end they still come to the same conclusion. You did all you should, but still it ends with "the parting between me and you", because that is the nature of things. If you want to learn, you will learn from more than one field. And I left the circle open.

[…]

Unfortunately, most accusations come from people who are not professionals in dealing with an artistic work, they are just teachers. So they believe that what is taught in prep and secondary schools is the peak of literary creativity, and that [what I write] is opposed to it. These are the same milieus that circulate the lie that prose poetry is a conspiracy against the Noble Qur'an. When I asked a group of those people: "Why do you say so?" - what was their interpretation? One of them offered a very strange argument. He said that the preservation of the *'amudi* (columnic) form in old Arabic poetry was intended by imams and scholars of Law for centuries to avoid confusing poetry with the text of the Qur'an which is written in the shape of a prose paragraph (*kutla nathriya*). I of course said to them that the Andalusian poets who produced the muwashahat[10] disjointed the structure of those poetic columns. He said: "No, there you are talking about something else, those are all virtuous imams like Ibn Hazm."[11]

In the accusations paraphrased here by Montaser, issues of form and content are closely intertwined. But form alone would not have caused scandal. Prose poetry appeared to confuse and threaten the distinction between poetry and revelation only when it involved a retelling of passages from the Scripture and showing angels, prophets, and God as complex characters. A less explicit but important contributing factor was the medium of a book that gave the poetry gravity and importance that the spoken word may not have (this was why Mon-

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[9] *Shar'* , synonym of *shari'a*, is used by Montaser here in the wider sense of normative practice, including worship and ritual as well as norms of human interaction that may be translated as "law".

[10] *Muwashahat* (sg. *muwashah*) is a style of poetry developed in mediaeval Muslim Spain. It uses changing rhythms and rhymes, combines classical and dialectal Arabic, and does not rely on the double verse and the canonical 16 Arabic metres. Because of their formal variation and flexibility, Andalusian muwashahat have been drawn upon as inspiration and tradition by experimental Arabic poets of the 20th and 21st centuries.

[11] Abu Muhammad Ali Ibn Ahmad Ibn Sa'id Ibn Hazm (994-1064 C.E.), author of the famous treatise on love *The Ring of Dove* (*Tawq al-hamama*, Ibn Hazm 1953).

taser was criticised by his colleagues for mentioning masturbation in his first volume, although he used words that were far less explicit than those that might be used, for example, in a men's gathering in a café).

Importantly, although the accusation later escalated to that of unbelief, his colleagues initially accused him of subverting faith from within – which in their view was possibly even worse than unbelief:

> Montaser Abdel Mawgoud: One of the fundamentalists who gave the book a thorough reading said to me: "The title itself is problematic. […] 'There are things he will not try' – […] do you mean the angel?"[12] I said: "That's right." He said: "So you alter the word of our Lord and you want to say that the angels who are created from light can't do something and humans can do it?" I told him that I'm not altering the word of our Lord and that's really how it is, an angel can't do things a human can do, and vice versa. He told me: "Like this, you are more dangerous than those who call for unbelief […], because you try to destroy religion from within and with its own language." I asked him: "Are you serious?". He said: "Yes indeed, and if you didn't realise this, you should ask our Lord for forgiveness [...], you are a sinner inadvertently, so withdraw the copies and burn them and forget that book."
>
> Samuli: I really feel that that's what makes the poem so controversial, because it doesn't enter religion from outside; it takes the religious scriptures and stories and lives with them.
>
> Montaser: Yes, lives with them.
>
> Samuli: And when you look at the history of the Christian and Islamic religions, you always find the heretic (zindiq) more dangerous than the infidel (kafir).
>
> Montaser: That's right, although he [the heretic] is not an infidel.
>
> Samuli: Although he's not an infidel. That's because he's close to you and can confuse you and your certainty (yaqin) in a way an infidel can't.
>
> Montaser: That's right, and because he uses the same means (asalib) and language as you do. And that's what caused the problem.

In contrast to secularism (*'almaniya*), which is a way to restrict or evade the social and political power of God-oriented faith, and also in contrast to (accused or actual) unbelief (*kufr*) or atheism (*ilhad*), heresy (*zandaqa* or also *bid'a,* heretic innovation) means expressing or practising a faith in a way that others sharing the same faith find misguided, wrong, and dangerous. The bubble of world literature as it came together at the Tanta International Poetry Festival was secular in a safe and evasive manner: It marginalised religion as a field distinct from literature and avoided themes and discussions that might

[12] The volume concludes with a narrative sequel of poems about an angel who is commanded by God to send a series of dreams to a human, whereby the human is eventually confirmed in his faith but the angel is left longing for the human's friendship. "There are things he will not try" is the angel's recognition that there is a sphere of human freedom which he as an angel cannot share (M.A. 2012: 93).

jeopardise that safe distinction. However, also more controversial and offensive forms of secularism do not necessarily constitute heresy. In Saba Mahmood's (2016) reading, Youssef Ziedan's controversial bestselling novel *Azazeel* not only depicts Jesus as human, but also God as a human creation. This would make the novel (and its author) not only secular, but also outright atheist, although Mahmood for some reason abstains from making that point. But the novel was not heretical and its author not very exposed. The Coptic Church saw the novel as an attack not from within, but from outside. And it had no power over a Muslim author. The novel resulted in public debate but no adverse consequences for Ziedan – who notably presented the Christian debate about Jesus in a way that ends up safely confirming the Islamic image of Jesus as a human prophet. *There Are Things He Will Not Try*, in contrast, is an explicitly pious work written by a Muslim who explores the divine revelation recognised by Muslims. This is why it was understood as a heretical attack from within by some of its readers, which is a more offensive and exposed position.

5. A Postmodern Heresy

In the interview, Montaser Abdel Mawgoud reiterated the common claim in avant-garde circles that most Egyptians do not know how to read literary works the right way (echoing Allan 2016). But his detractors did read his volume – in a way which they understood to be the right one.

There Are Things He Will Not Try offers a poetic reimagination of the human-God relationship that unsettles sensitively guarded spiritual and societal certainties (thawabit) about how humans should relate to God – and by extension, to other humans.

Those certainties are not restricted to the existence of God and the truth of His message – Montaser and his poetry share those certainties and do not question them. The certainties his work infringed on are more expansive, involving the linguistic and moral underpinnings of how humans should relate to God and His message. These include the respect and awe for God's absolute authority over humans; a corresponding respect for divinely legitimated human authorities; a proper emotional state of gratitude, trust, and fear which humans should express to God; moral norms and aspirations regarding sexuality, gender, societal reproduction, rights and obligations, community, and the relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims. This is what Muslim Egyptians usually mean when they speak about certainties (*thawabit*). Importantly, *thawabit* do not refer to subjective certainty (*yaqin*). *Thawabit* is the plural form of *thabit*, which means firm, fixed, and unchanging. *Thawabit* are objective certainties outside of and independent of human deliberation. From a conservative or committedly pious Muslim point of view, subjective certainty (*yaqin*) relies on

the undoubtability of God's objective certainties (*thawabit*), and is guaranteed and realised by humans' active submission to the power of God. This vision is not the prerogative of Islamist and piety activists. It is a vast conservative societal mainstream that can go hand in hand with militarist nationalism, and it saturates most state institutions even when those institutions and their employees are simultaneously involved in the secular practice of subjecting religion to the primacy of the nation state.

Montaser's third volume of poetry imaginatively adjusts and rethinks the way in which humans communicate with God: it transforms an authoritarian relationship of revelation between God, the speaker, and human, the listener, into a dialogical relationship where humans have the power to influence the line of revelatory communication by means of their imagination. This is why one reader told him that his work was more dangerous than unbelief.

Furthermore, Montaser's poetry also confuses lines of division that guard the special position of the word of God as compared to all other forms of text, especially poetry. This is not a modern division: it goes back to the age of revelation itself. This division and the special status of the Qur'an are echoed both in the accusations of altering the scripture Montaser faced as well as in his colleague's claim that poetry needed to be clearly marked as different from the Qur'an.

Following Talal Asad (1986, 15), orthodoxy is not a given position, but a relationship of power where one side in a debate is able to establish its way to relate with God as correct, accepted, and authoritative. Consequently, heresy is an unauthorised way to relate to God. Montaser's work is heretical (or heterodox) in the sense that it produces a poetic imagination of the human-God relationship that differs from societally orthodox and doxic understandings of that relationship and its aesthetic dimensions. It is also heretical in the sense that it does not respect the hegemonic lines of division that are produced by both secular institutions and God-fearing traditions of reading and writing.

Heretical Islamic ideas about humans, God, and prophecy have a history almost as old as Islam itself (Jumá 2007; al-Ma'arri 2016). Montaser's poetry carries echoes of that tradition, but it is more explicitly grounded in an international literary genre that was first developed by francophone authors in the 19th century and that spread through the network of secular world literature in the 20th century (al-Janabi 2015). This is reflected in the names he referred to during the interview, which include internationally known authors of prose poetry in Arabic and foreign languages.[13] The heretical potential of his poetry is situated in a distinctly postmodern and cosmopolitan tradition. But unlike some other poets in this tradition, Montaser does not strive to marginalise reli-

[13] He mentioned, among others, Yaser Abdel-Latif, Charles Baudelaire, Suzanne Bernard, Jorge Luis Borges, Max Jacob, Abdul Kader al-Janabi, Iman Mersal, Mohamed Metwalli, Abdel-Moneim Ramadan, Arthur Rimbaud, and Rifaat Sallam.

gious scriptures and the power of God over humans in his writing. Instead, he connects a cosmopolitan postmodern tradition along with romantic and modernist elements with an Islamic one and comes up with an altered mode of communication between humans and God.

Montaser told me that in his youth he began writing classicist *'amudi* poetry but did not feel at ease with the genre: "I always felt that there was a distance between me and it; this is not what I want to bring out from inside myself." In the early 1990s, he discovered prose, free verse, and especially prose poetry as forms in which he could express himself better:

> I believe that prose poetry is connected with something important in the life of the modern human. In light of the explosion of knowledge and the communication revolution, who among us can count the things that are certain (*yaqiniya*) in our lives? You will find out that they are very few. And the more you read, the fewer the certainties (*al-ashya' al-yaqiniya*) become; until you discover that this is the nature of the matters (*tabi'at al-umur*); that the transient has become the constant now. It's natural that I know nothing. This is unlike in the old, classical eras when the world was clear and things were simple. [...] So prose poetry gives you the power or the virtue of dealing as a researcher with [your] creative work and the topics you speak about. In *taf'ila* and *'amudi* poetry, this is not the case. [In those genres] you have to have that firm (*thabit*) stock of certainty (*yaqin*) on which you build your poem. So prose poetry is always the child of doubt, the child of uninhabited territories; and over time, you discover that it's closer to our spirit and that our spirit really does not have that clarity.

Montaser turns uncertainty into a virtue in a distinctly postmodern gesture that he links with his argument that metric styles (classicist and modernist ones alike) are part of an either solid or unidirectional world and therefore require a "stock of certainty." For him, these genres "have come to a dead end" because the world is changing in a way that requires different means to write. He does not, however, subscribe to a postmodern abandonment of authorship. On the contrary, he expresses a romantic idea of literature as an expression of the author's self (which is commonplace in contemporary Egyptian literature). He also expresses a vision of a qualitative progression from past to present that is modernist rather than postmodern. What does distinguish him from Egyptian and Arabic literary and political modernists, however, is his decidedly relativist affirmation of uncertainty as a positive condition.

Contrary to some other poets in his circles, faith in God is a matter of great importance for Montaser, but he emphasises that faith, too, is open-ended and subject to transformation:

> [I believe] that faith is a personal matter, that I craft it and it develops together with my consciousness, and it is not a constant (*thabit*) dogma. My faith grows up with me and changes with me. Because of that, even these certainties (*thawabit*) [of faith] are in a continuing state of change.

Montaser seeks to explore without judgement the condition of uncertainty by means of aesthetics that are grounded in an ethos of constant renewal and innovation. But the idea of embracing uncertainty and exploring without judgement already carries a certainty and a judgement in it. First and explicit is an underlying trust in the human capacity to adapt, adjust and change the known good, and a positive moral valuation of change, uncertainty, and open-endedness. Second and less explicit is the global context of the rapid growth of human economic activity that has provided material resources, technologies, and organisational forms that result in rapid diversification, transformation, sophistication, but also destruction of human ways of life – a process that also provides the political and economic resources which international literary avant-gardes require in order to exist and thrive. Third and least explicit is the institutional trust invested in the cosmopolitan avant-garde milieu of world literature that provides Montaser with the means and resources to develop his poetry in a way that gains support and feedback from significant others within the milieu.[14]

The historical narrative of movement from a certain to an uncertain world that informs Montaser's search for new means of expression in a changing world echoes Khaled Furani's argument about prose poetry in Palestine. According to Furani, the secular-modernist imperative to look forward and leave behind the old marginalises traditional poetic techniques and their ethical and spiritual grounding in the "oneness of human action" (Furani 2012, 15). Furani paraphrases the secular-modernist stance:

> To be a citizen of the secular state of the world it is necessary to question the concept of meter and the practice of sound measurement that it enables. To persist in working with meter is to be enslaved by the past, to refuse to develop, and to refuse to be a poet of secular modernity. (Furani 2012, 80)

An important outcome of this move is the increasing divide between literary specialists and wider audiences (Furani 2012, 168). While a more traditional understanding of authorship linked with classical forms places poets above their audience as a source of inspiration, critique, and moral guidance, a modernist, secular understanding places poets ahead of their audiences in time (as is made explicit in the word *avant-garde*), making communication between poets and wider audiences not only more difficult, but also less relevant from the avant-garde poets' point of view.

Furani's analysis resonates with Montaser's claim that the open-endedness and uncertainty of the contemporary world requires appropriate literary means, which classical aesthetics do not provide. Furani also helps to understand Montaser's relative lack of concern about reaching wider audiences. However, Furani's approach does not account for Montaser's precarious position in the

[14] For the way doubt and questioning are grounded in taken-for-granted certainties, see Wittgenstein 1969.

face of accusations of unbelief. It also does not help us understand why Montaser's third volume of poetry was so fiercely rejected by some readers.

There Are Things He Will Not Try is not simply secular; it is heretical, which is a more exposed position. If it were only secular in the way the Tanta International Poetry Festival was, it would either evade the word of God, or restrict its relevance to a separate field of religion that can be made a source of symbolic inspiration without becoming the main framework of literary writing (see Furani 2012), or explore Christianity and avoid Islamic themes (Mahmood 2016). Doing something along these lines would have likely kept Montaser away from trouble.

That said, the heretical potential of Montaser's poetry is grounded in secular, postmodern forms of trust, some of which he states, while others are implicit. However, these forms of trust are more precarious and limited in scope than the overarching context of secularity Furani depicts. In Furani's ethnography, the literary avant-garde and prose poetry "have become regnant" as part of "the secular as a dominant presence" (Furani 2012, 13); they command hegemony to define what counts as poetry, thereby "silencing the sea" of traditional metres (the Arabic word for poetic metre, bahr, also means "sea"). Prose poetry thus becomes a case study of an omnipresent secular hegemony imposing itself on the world (Furani 2012, 13). In regard to Egypt, however, claims about "the secular" being dominant and naturalised to the degree that it is silent, natural, and inevitable do not match with reality. Some forms of secularity have arguably become successfully naturalised in Egypt, most importantly the nation state. But the partial and contested nature of secular institutions, not to mention the precariousness of secular faiths and life-worlds, is a far cry from silent domination. This is also true of poetry. In Egypt, unlike in Furani's fieldwork in Palestine, "the sea" of rhythmic, rhyming poetry and its accompanying spiritual foundations is far from silenced. It roars loud and remains the regnant form of poetry, except on a few avant-garde islands that only make up one part of what Furani calls "the poetic scene" (Furani 2012, 87).

Michael Allan's (2016, 130) argument about the provinciality of the secular "world" of world literature offers a more nuanced vision. Allan locates the power to define "literature" in one specific milieu, which may be true of Egyptian upper classes in the colonial era. In 21st-century Egypt, "the secular state of the world" (Furani 2012, 80) is a minoritarian niche that enjoys the privilege of symbolic power and international connectedness but does not command cultural hegemony. In the Egyptian Writers' Union, in most events of the Ministry of Culture, and in commercially successful colloquial poetry, literature remains connected with the ethical underpinnings of the classical concept of *adab* (Jacquemond 2008; Pepe 2015), and poetry is, and remains, intimately linked with "meter and the practice of sound measurement" (Furani 2012, 80).

The way metre is used has arguably changed. Today, the flexible and accessible genre of *taf'ila* dominates over the arduous mastery of classicist prosody

with its formal constraints that require a longer process of learning and apprenticeship. It is also more widely appreciated by non-expert audiences that may find classicist poems too heavy for their tastes. Furani describes *taf'ila* free verse as an intermediate form between the classicist and prose poetry in Palestine (Furani 2012, 168). In Egypt, in contrast, *taf'ila* is not an intermediate; rather, it firmly and clearly occupies the centre. *Taf'ila* is the new dominant form of poetry in a society committed to nationalist progress, the commands of God, and a globally circulated popular culture at the same time. It comes in popular and highbrow varieties, in classical and colloquial Arabic, it is good for recital and reading alike, and it is recognised as poetry by almost everybody.

Consequently, although Montaser is well-connected in the cosmopolitan scene, he explicitly describes himself as a marginal writer, not only in regard to mainstream tastes and social mores, but also in regard to the mainstream of Arabic modernism, which in his view continues to search for certainties – nationalist and developmental rather than religious perhaps, but certainties all the same.

Early 21th-century Egypt is witnessing a progressive erosion of hierarchies and centre-periphery relations between high and popular culture.[15] Both the standards for good literature as well as the borders of literature and non-literature have become less institutionalised and clear than they were in the 20th century. There is ample space for a plurality of genres, including prose poetry, both highbrow and popular colloquial free verse, classicist *'amudi* poems, songs and rap, slogans and chants, jokes, aphorism, social media posts, blogs, novels, short stories, journalism, sermons, self-help courses, film and telenovela scripts, talk shows, comedy, and more. This plurality (but not pluralism) of cultural productions and styles has been accompanied by an increasing plurality of expressions of Muslim faith, especially in urban bourgeois milieus after 2011. Political, militant, and Sunni scripturalist piety movements that dominated the first decades of the Islamic revival now mingle with a variety of competitors: neoliberal self-help-cum-piety media formats that make eclectic and effective use of commercial popular culture (Moll 2018); Sufi spiritualities of both traditional and eclectic kind – partly mediated by novels like Elif Shafak's 40 Rules of Love (Shafak 2012; Sedgwick 2017); rejection of the Sunni tradition by those who embrace Shia Islam; liberal hermeneutics; irreverent speech about God and faith; and also outright atheism or non-religiosity. Many other genres resist categorisation – among them Montaser's poetry which resonates with Sufi spiritualities, liberal hermeneutics, and Sunni scripturalism alike. Some of these currents do not unsettle conservative mores and understandings of humans and God (Sufism in particular is embedded in the clientelist structures of conservative Egyptian society and has enjoyed regime pro-

[15] In fact, this began in the late 20th century; see Armbrust 1996.

tection since 2013). Others do – most importantly Shi‘a Islam and atheism, but also some postmodern attempts to reimagine the human-God relationship such as that by Montaser Abdel Mawgoud.

6. Conclusion: Secular Evasion and Heretical Imagination

In the conversation we had in February 2017, Montaser spoke much about poetics, certainty, uncertainty, and faith. He also made some claims that are commonly put forward by proponents of political secularism, but he did not mention "secularism" or "secular." How then, if at all, does the concept of the secular contribute to our understanding of his poetry and predicament?

Drawing inspiration from Talal Asad (2003), Khaled Furani defines the secular as a peculiar quality of modern states, power, and language which has less to do with how religious people are and what lifestyles they have and more to do with the kind of position religion is relegated to in a world structured by ideas such as progress and freedom.

> The secularity of these shifts resides in what poets do with words […], which profoundly resonates with the modern and contingent career of the secular as an ontology and epistemology of distancing from what or whom it anoints as 'religious.'
>
> […] T]he secular lives in the grammar of our modern being and forms, not only beliefs (theistic or otherwise), but also in conditions in which […] experiences of the oneness of human action splinters into autonomous realms. (Furani 2012, 14-5)

This definition resonates with the concept of secularity as a principle of differentiation proposed in this special issue. It differs, however, from vernacular definitions of secularism, which in Egypt oscillate between secularism as the separation of religion and the common good on the one hand, and being secular as being "far from God" (ba‘id ‘an rabbina) on the other. These vernacular definitions, in turn, find an echo in Abdelwahhab El-Messiri's concepts of partial and comprehensive secularity (El-Messiri 2002; Kinitz 2016, 160-87) where the former is about differentiating between religious and other spheres, while the latter means a general absence of God and an otherworldly horizon of hope and morality.

Whichever of these definitions we may subscribe to, the Tanta International Festival of Poetry was secular indeed. Montaser's third volume of poetry, in contrast, is something more on all counts. Rather than being "far from God", every page deals intimately with God, creation, and revelation. It also does not promote separation of religion and the common good. The volume clearly does not distance itself "from what it anoints as 'religious'" (Furani 2012, 14). It deals with divine revelation head-on and, rather than splintering human action

into autonomous realms, the volume connects the conventionally separate realms of divine speech, human poetry, and prose.

Rather than oneness versus splintering, different ways to unite and divide are at work in Montaser's poetry, at the Tanta poetry festival, in the intervention of the Azhari professors, in the reactions of Montaser's colleagues to his work, and in the support he received through his international network.

The idea that there once existed a "oneness of human action" (Furani 2012, 15) of which classical poetry was an expression is somewhat nostalgic to start with and may not withstand closer historical inquiry (see Salvatore 2019, in this issue). Unity has been a major striving of movements of religious reform and nationalist modernity alike, and yet their strivings have in fact ended up enforcing divisions and autonomous realms (Schielke 2012a; Mahmood 2016). One of the resulting fragmentary bubbles of universalism is that which Furani analyses in terms of "the secular."

I agree with Allan and Furani that it is helpful to think about these developments as secular in the specific sense of the creation of autonomous realms and of relegating religion to the subordinated position of one such realm. I would however like to propose some additions and adjustments.

First, some of the scholarship inspired by Asad has transformed "the secular" from a concept with a history to a historical force, with the result that people who may not think of what they do as secular nevertheless come to exemplify the workings of "the secular" (e.g., Furani 2012, 13; Agrama 2012). Sometimes, this may be justified. But when "the secular" becomes an intentional subject that acts, works, and makes claims (e.g., Furani 2012, 16, 20, 247), caution is needed. It is helpful to remember Gregory Starrett's (2010, 635) point that the secular and secularism are "essentially contested concepts," inseparable from the conflicts in which they are being shaped and used. Asad's theory of the secular is more helpful to understand the world we live in, if we think of "secular" not as an independent force, but as an attribute which humans attach to various practices or issues for specific reasons in the context of specific conflicts.

Second, in consequence, it is useful to be analytically open to multiple secularities, or in other words, different senses of being secular. Sometimes it is helpful to address the underlying logics of differentiation and unspoken exclusions at work in projects of modernity and the making of nation states. In other cases, it is helpful to take an approach that is less restricted to this-worldly realm, and involves other-worldly and after-worldly horizons. It is therefore useful to pay attention to the relationship and communication between humans and God, and the resulting relationships between humans (among them, state power). In yet other cases, it is good to take seriously the vernacular theory of secularity as "being far from God" because some (but only some) outspoken secularism actually is a cover for humans having less faith in God and more in themselves (Schielke 2012b; see also Mahmood 2016: 204-205).

Third, the exposed and offensive nature of heresy contrasts with the evasiveness of "the secular" as understood by Asad, Allan, and Furani. Dividing incommensurable ways of living, acting, and speaking into autonomous realms is a good way to evade dangerous conflicts between them. A key evasion involved in making things secular concerns God. The secularist claim that faith should be a private matter (which is reiterated by Montaser) means that God's power over humans should not extend to political and societal relations between humans. For the worshippers of God among the secularists, this claim legitimises the ambivalent middle ground of having faith in an omnipotent God and claiming humans' autonomy over their own affairs at the same time. And it also provides a comparably safe cover against the accusations of heresy and unbelief that, rightly or wrongly, may be directed at those who claim human mastery in the face of the power of God (see also Asad 2003, 23).

Fourth, many of the most important disagreements about faith are not grounded in a religious-secular distinction to start with. The most immediate opponents of Islamic revivalist movements are often supporters of other Islamic revivalist movements (Moll 2018). Much talk about secularism in Egypt is actually about empowering Christians in their precarious position vis-a-vis the Muslim majority. Some ways to combine aesthetics, faith, and a general vision about existence are better understood in terms of doxa, competing orthodoxies, and heresy – that is, implicit and explicit, authorised and unauthorised ways of imagining and practising the relationship between humans, God, scripture, language, values, and authorities. Heresy and orthodoxy are of course relative, contextual categories. Montaser's poetry is heretical in the milieu of his work and neighbourhood in Alexandria, but it is well within the hegemonic mainstream in other contexts, such as European literary festivals.

Underneath the evasive and therefore puzzling and contradictory surface of calling things secular run different dynamics (which are sometimes linked, and sometimes separate): state power nationalist identities, global networks and class distinctions, manifold forms of heretical faith, and also unbelief. Some of these dynamics unsettle and threaten powerful God-centred certainties of a good life in this world and salvation in the hereafter, while others mix and mingle with them more easily. Therefore, the accusation that prose poetry is a conspiracy against the noble Qur'an, is grounded in a suspicion that underneath the seemingly inoffensive secularity of the prose poem looms an abyss of heretical imagination.

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Historical Social Research
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doi: 10.12759/hsr.44.2019.3.7-34

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doi: 10.12759/hsr.44.2019.3.35-51

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