

ISLAM AND POPULAR CULTURE

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CHAPTER 6

CAN POETRY CHANGE THE WORLD?

READING AMAL DUNQUL IN EGYPT IN 2011

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WHAT A SILLY QUESTION . . . Of course poetry cannot change the world. Poetry is about the work of metaphors and symbols, the rhythm and music of language, and the play of mind, moods, and meanings. How could it possibly make any difference in a world where the power of the strongest prevails, where guns and drones speak loudest, and where brainwash by mass media and blackmail by secret police are the most compelling forms of spoken and written word?

In 1975, the Egyptian poet Amal Dunqul (1940–1983)—a communist, militant nationalist, and drunken Bohemian who cultivated the attitude of principled opposition in his life and literary work (Elreweny 1992)—published the poem *From the papers of Abu Nuwas* (*Min awraq Abi Nuwas*) in which he lets the medieval Arab poet Abu Nuwas (see Kennedy 2007) speak about the asymmetry between the power of the word and the power of money and violence. In one part of the long poem Dunqul, who was famous for his use of Arabic, Islamic, Roman, and Hellenic history and myths, relates to Islam's most powerful story of martyrdom: The massacre of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson al-Husayn and his followers in an ambush by the Omayyad caliph Yazid ibn Mu'awiya:

I was in Karbala

*The old man told me: al-Husayn
died for the sake of a mouthful of water*

...

*I asked how the swords could prey on the noblest family
The one whom heaven had gifted with sight answered
that it was the gold that glittered in every eye*

...

If the words of al-Husayn

and the swords of al-Husayn

and the majesty of al-Husayn

fell without saving the truth from the gold of the princes

How could the truth be saved by the babbling of poets?

*While the Euphrat is a tongue of blood that does not find the lips!*¹

كنت في كربلاء

قال لي الشيخ : إن الحسين

مات من أجل جرعة ماء

.....

وتساءلت كيف السيف استباح بني الأكرمين

فأجاب الذي بصرته السماء

إنه الذهب المتلألئ في كل عين

.....

إن تكن كلمات الحسين

وسيف الحسين

وجلال الحسين

سقطت دون أن تُنقذ الحق من ذهب الأمراء

أفتقدر أن تنقذ الحق ثرثرة الشعراء؟

والفراخ لسان من الدم لا يجد الشفتين!

And yet Amal Dunqul was not deterred from writing poetry that was strongly committed to ideals of national and revolutionary struggle. He left behind a powerful and innovative oeuvre that glorifies uncompromising struggle and combines it with a deep pessimism. In 1962, in the early years of his career, his poem *Spartacus' Last Words* (*Kalimat Sbatakus al-akhira*) caught the tragedy of revolutionary struggle in a way that has lost nothing of its validity today. Its opening lines take up the Biblical and Qur'anic story of Satan's fall from grace, and turn it into a symbol of tragic heroism:

*Glory to Satan, god of the winds
Who said "no" to the face of those who said "yes"
who taught Man to tear apart nothingness
He who said no, thus did not die
And remained a soul eternally in pain²*

المجد للشيطان .. معبود الرياح
من قال "لا" في وجه من قالوا "نعم"
من علم الإنسان تمزيق العدم
من قال "لا" .. فلم يمت،
وظل روحاً أبدية الألم!

In 1976, not long before Sadat's famous visit to Jerusalem and the Camp David treaties, Amal Dunqul took the murder of the pre-Islamic Arabian tribal leader Kulayb in 494 CE, which resulted in the forty-years-long Basus War (see Hoyland 2001) as the foil for *Don't Reconcile (La tusalih)*, one of the most powerful anti-peace poems ever written. This is its beginning:

*Don't reconcile
... even if they granted you gold
What if I gouged out your eyes
and replaced them by jewels ...
Will you see?
These things cannot be bought ...³*

لا ثمن

.. ولو منحوك الذهب

تري حين أفتق عينيك،

ثم أثبت جوهرتين مكانها ..

هل ترى ..؟

هي أشياء لا تشتري ..

For a long time, Dunqul's work was appreciated only in small leftist and intellectual circles. His poems were too avant-gardistic in style to be sung and

memorized the way more popular genres of poetry are. Strongly oppositional in content, they were also a thorn in the eye of the Egyptian authorities. They were not forbidden, but they rarely got reviews or other mention in state-controlled media. The situation changed quite suddenly with the outbreak of the 25 January revolution that was accompanied by a revival of politically committed leftist poetry from the 1960s and 1970s. Especially Ahmed Fouad Negm's (1929–2013) witty and rude colloquial poems and songs gained enormous popularity and circulation, but also many of Amal Dunqul's verses entered the corpus of revolutionary citations. However, while Ahmed Fouad Negm's poetry with its commitment to colloquial orality was more suitable for songs and slogans, Dunqul's poetry was more likely to find its ways to graffiti, discussion circles, and quotes on social media (for graffiti, see images 6.1 to 6.3; see also Nicoarea 2013; Roters 2011).

Already in autumn 2010, a graffiti artist sprayed a passage from *Spartacus' Last Words* on the seafront boulevard in Alexandria in protest against the expectation that Hosni Mubarak's son Gamal would soon follow in his footsteps:

*Do not dream of a happy world
Behind every Caesar who dies, there is a new Caesar⁴*

لا تحلموا بعالم سعيد

فخلف كل قيصر يموت: قيصر جديد!

As citations from Dunqul's works circulated, they also gained independence from their original political context. In 2011 and 2012, especially the line "Don't reconcile"—originally written in anticipation of a peace treaty with Israel—became a widely cited expression of determined struggle against the first period of military rule by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (see images 6.2 and 6.3), and was sprayed on many walls as a call to not give in and to make no compromises. "We are those who said no" became the title of a social media group⁵ established in 2011 in reference to the constitutional referendum of March 2011. The opening lines of *Spartacus' Last Words* were sometimes cited (although often without mentioning Satan) by proponents of a no-vote in the constitutional referendum in December 2012. In November 2011, I encountered a group of young men with literary interests who were having a tea break on the lawn of one of the green spaces of Tahrir Square late one evening, in the aftermath of the street battles of Mohamed Mahmoud Street. They had one book with them: the collected works of Amal Dunqul



6.1. Graffiti in downtown Cairo depicting Rami al-Sharqawi, who was killed by security forces during demonstrations at the Council of Ministers on 17 December 2011, with a passage from *Spartacus' Last Words*: "I hang from the morning's gallows / My forehead lowered by death / Because alive, I did not lower it!" (Translation by Suneela Mubayi 2012). Photo by Shady Basiony Marei, April 2012.

(Dunqul 2005), which they were reciting and discussing. It was as if some of those poems had been written just for that moment.

Of course poetry does not change the world, and yet the sudden popularity and timeliness of Amal Dunqul's work in 2011 show that the question about poetry and change needs to be asked—the more so since many Egyptian poets and writers have been asking the same question. And they have some quite interesting answers to offer.

WHAT THIS CHAPTER IS ABOUT AND WHAT IT IS NOT ABOUT

This chapter looks at the relationship of poetry with social and political change in Egypt during the stormy season⁶ of the nation's most recent revolution. It is not an attempt to give a general overview of the tremendous amount of important poetry and literature involved, nor can it account for the important and ambiguous role of intellectuals and writers in Egypt's politics and



6.2. Graffiti at Tahrir Square in Cairo with the line "Don't reconcile" surrounded by portraits of martyrs of the revolution (in light colors) as well as both revolutionary and counterrevolutionary figures (in dark colors). Photo by Shady Basiony Marei, December 2011.



6.3. Graffiti outside Alexandria University, showing a portrait of field marshal Hussein Tantawi and the lines "Don't reconcile" (below the portrait in the middle) and "Down with military rule" (on the left). Signed (on the right) by "the We Must campaign" (Hamlat Lazem), a small leftist/liberal group. Photo by Samuli Schielke, October 2012.

society. Those themes are dealt with in very good and useful manner by, for example, Lewis Sanders IV and Mark Visoná (2012), Richard Jacquemond (2008), Elisabeth Kendall (2006), and Mounah A. Khouri (1971). In this chapter I take up a different set of questions: What power could the poet's words actually have in social and political conflicts and transformations? Are they actually effective in planting visions and stances in people's minds? Or are they merely the soundtrack of history? And does it make sense anyway to think about poetry as something that is separate from the world?

These questions do not only concern Egypt's and other Arab countries' revolutionary experience. The same questions have arisen on other occasions in, for example, Europe and Latin America and probably in every other part of the world as well. And they will rise again and again because in certain moments in history, the link between literary fantasy and political struggles becomes tangible and urgent. The experience of Egyptian poets is important beyond the country and the time in which they live.

These questions were asked and discussed by a group of writers and literature enthusiasts gathered in a café in the eastern outskirts of Alexandria, and it was Amal Dunqul in particular whose work they frequently mentioned in the course of this discussion. In this chapter, I do not try to provide an overview of different theoretical approaches in the international academia to these questions. Instead, I try to make use of the theories offered by the people involved: a group of living poets from Egypt in the middle of a revolution. They have a specific perspective that is due to their role as writers and readers of poetry that have a history of experience and reflection on the relation of literature and life. Their perspective also represents a much wider section of the society that played a key role in the revolutionary process: a vast social class of urban inhabitants who are excluded from the comfort of the bourgeois classes (often misleadingly described as "middle classes") but who by the means of their education and their work as civil servants or salaried workers nevertheless manage to aspire, work, and live above the poverty line.

Another thing that I will not do is make a distinction between religious and secular poetry or poets. Although a distinction between religious and secular ideology and politics does indeed mark one of the many social conflicts in Egypt, it would not do justice to the poets discussed here (it might still do justice to others, of course—see Furani 2012). There are three reasons for that.

The first reason is that the creed, language, and symbolism of Islam are present in Arabic poetry regardless of the poets' personal religious stances. One cannot think about eloquence in Arabic language without reference to the Qur'an. And no matter what one's personal religious commitments may be, the topic of martyrdom and heroic defeat invites the analogy with the

martyrdom of al-Husayn. Amal Dunqul's poem cited above, in which Abu Nuwas reflects how the swords could prey upon the majesty of al-Husayn, is a case in point. More recently, the colloquial poet Mustafa Ibrahim transferred the tragedy of al-Karbala to the clashes of Mohamed Mahmoud Street that shook Egypt in November 2011 in his poem *I saw today* (Inni ra'ayt al-yom), written as a film script that concludes:

I saw today—the image from outside

I said: Al-Husayn still—once again will die

I saw today—as a revolutionary sees

that over al-Husain's body—soldiers gathered

thrashing him with sticks—every time he stood up

and that people stood by the side—crying instead of helping

and that the flag was turned into a sieve—by bayonets and birdshot

and that the path was laid out—with blood all the way

I saw today—blood on the soldier's belts

I saw that al-Husayn is us—

However much he's killed—he lives?

إنني رأيت اليوم .. الصورة من بَرّه

وقلت الحسين لِسَه .. هيموت كمان مرّة

إنني رأيت اليوم .. فيما يرى الثائر

إن الحسين مَلُوم .. فوق جُثته عساكر

بيدغدغوه بالشوم .. كُل أَمّا يجي يقوم

وإن البشر واقفة .. تبكي يذال ما تحوش

وإن العلم مصفاة .. م السونكي والخرطوش

وإن الطريق مفروش .. بالدم لآخر

إنني رأيت اليوم .. الُم ع الآيش

وإن الحسين إحنا ..

مهما اتقتل .. عايش

The second reason might seem counterintuitive in light of the first but in fact flows directly from it: there is a separation between revelation and poetry that was established in the first years of Islam. The Qur'an in clear terms states that it is not poetry. God's message and poetry belong to two different genres of speech even if they overlap in terms of form and grammar. Although Islam inspires poets and their words, and although there are venerable genres of explicitly religious devotional poetry, there is also a long-standing Arabic tradition of poetic licence—probably as old as Arabic poetry itself. The language of revelation is a language of ultimate truth, while the language of poetry is marked by a scope of relativity, explorative freedom, and, indeed, licence. And it is worth remembering that Arabic poetry is also written by poets of Christian and other faiths, some of it devotional and committed, and some of it not. In a sense, poetry has no religion.

The third reason is that in Egypt today, there exists a tangible split between two takes on literary production: one committed to a tradition of *adab* (meaning both the cultivation of fine manners as well as literature in general) according to which good literature must go hand in hand with good purpose, a didactic unity of aesthetic pleasure and ethical learning (Jacquemond 2008: 10); and another committed to the tradition of poetic licence, a vision of poetry and literary imagination as a site of exploration and experimentation (see, e.g., Kennedy 2007). Importantly, this split does not follow political or religious divides. Straightforward didactic or propagandistic poems are written by leftists, Islamists, and old regime loyalists alike, by Muslims and Christians, by pious and impious writers—and so are experimental, daring, and even potentially blasphemous ones.

Literary aesthetics does have a political dimension to which I return in the next section. And yet in the circles where I do research, I have found revolutionary leftists, Muslim Brotherhood sympathizers, and Salafis alike emphasize that good poetry must be free from the didactical restrictions of immediate purpose. On one occasion in autumn 2012, I was invited to a gathering of poets in a café in Victoria, a district in eastern Alexandria, where friendly exchange about poetry turned into a heated political debate. Some of the poets in attendance were Islamists of either Salafi or Muslim Brotherhood orientation, while others saw themselves as leftists or liberals. This was a time of increasing polarization between supporters and opponents of political Islam, and the debate rapidly turned into an angry exchange of mutual accusations, with no possibility to reach an agreement. Eventually, one of the poets (recognizable as a Salafi by the fashion of his beard) replied to the accusation that Islamists considered their opponents as infidels (*kuffar*) by pointing out that he himself had written a poem that according to Salafi doctrine would constitute

unbelief (*kufra*), featuring the gods of Olympe and telling about inner struggle and ambivalence. Others asked him to recite it, and as the tempers calmed somewhat, he and others began to recite their poems. As suddenly as it had begun, the heated political tension disappeared, and instead the poets were reciting, listening, enjoying, and praising each other's work. Regardless of their irreconcilable political differences, they took pleasure in the aesthetic quality and the existential and subjective take of each other's poems—an accomplishment in its own right at a time when Egyptians often found it very difficult to find any sort of shared language. Poetry with a clear didactical message would hardly be able to accomplish that.

Regardless of their take on commitment and poetic licence, however, poets (except those who only write for themselves) all hope that their works are heard and are capable of affecting their audiences. So while they may have misgivings about clear statements of didactic purpose, in the ongoing revolutionary situation that they found themselves since spring 2011, they were compelled to reflect on the relationship poetry may have with conflicts and transformations, be they political, social, spiritual, or intimate.

A VERY COMPACT OVERVIEW OF ARABIC POETRY AND EGYPT TODAY

Poetry is the most popular genre of literature in the Arabic-speaking world. People who may never have read a novel in their life, nevertheless often memorize poetry and may have written some themselves. While the market and readership of books of fiction and poetry is extremely low, Arabic poetry enjoys wider circulation because, unlike in Europe and North America, it remains strongly grounded in the spoken word—and therefore is also often circulated through audiovisual media (see, e.g., Miller 2007). This is reflected also in the way most Arabic poetry currently in circulation continues to rely on rhyme and meter. More experimental styles of free-rhyme poetry exist and are produced and consumed in more dedicated literary circles, but poetry as a popular art remains strongly committed to a recognizable rhythm and a musical quality of language. Obviously, poetry has a strong link with music. In pre-Islamic poetry, poetry and song were inseparable (Adonis 1990). Today, there are no clear borders between poetry and song. But there is, of course, a material difference between the written and the spoken word, and some poems are better for singing, while others are better suited for reading and graffiti.

Poetry in Arabic language has a long and magnificent history (see, e.g., Kennedy 2007; Adonis 1990; Jayyusi 1977; Badawi 1975; Khouri 1971; Furani 2012). The oldest known Arabic poetry was in circulation long before the

rise of Islam and was collected in written form in the first centuries of Islam. This “poetry of the age of ignorance” (*al-shiʿr al-jahili*) remains the ultimate standard of Arabic poetic expression until today, and an Arabic literary education invariably must begin with those first poets, and then proceeds through the establishment of meters and genres, theories of rhetorics and poetics, the works of classical poets across centuries—and finally perhaps contemporary poetry. The poetry that is written or spoken in a place such as Egypt today, however, is different from that heritage. Contemporary poems seldom use the double verse of classical Arabic poetry. They have a narrative unity that encompasses the entire poem—unlike in classical Arabic poetry where there is a narrative unity of the verse but not of the poem. Contemporary poems are also often strongly subjective, spirited by a romantic theory of the author expressing her or his authentic self—in contrast to ancient Arabic poetry in which eloquence of expression was crucial while originality of meaning was not. An ever-larger part of contemporary poetry is written or spoken in colloquial Egyptian Arabic, which differs from classical Arabic in morphology and syntax, and also in rhetorical registers. As a result, there has emerged a divide between classical Arabic as the language for more highbrow, more serious, and either decidedly conservative or decidedly avant-gardistic poetry, and Egyptian Arabic as the language of more popular, more humorous, and more down-to-earth poetry. There are interesting exceptions to this distinction—for example, free-rhyme poetry in Egyptian Arabic, which was launched by a group of young writers in the 1990s and is associated with avant-gardist literary aesthetics.

Literary aesthetics often has a political resonance. The classicist style of *ʿamudi* (“columnic”) poetry has today become associated with either a socially conservative stance or conservative uses such as devotional poetry. “Prose poetry” (*qasidat al-nathr*), that is, poetry that does not rely on meter or rhythm, is often associated with leftist or liberal stances and bohemian lifestyles and not recognized as proper poetry by more conservative audiences. The currently most proliferated poetic styles of free-verse poetry in meter (*tafʿila*) and of colloquial poetry influenced by *zagal* (traditional, often improvised colloquial poetry close to song) are not as clearly marked in political terms and have been used to express fundamental discontent sometimes, and to praise presidents at other times.⁸

The politics of poetic aesthetics is not a straightforward ideological matter, however. Rather, the politics involved is better understood as a general attitude to existence whereby affirmation of authority (be it religious, national, or other) resonates better with a conservative style, while a critical attitude of

nonconformity goes along with a search for new ways of expression. For example, the Alexandrian poet Shaymaa Bakr, whose poetry I quote at the end of this chapter, identifies herself as a Salafist and a pan-Islamist, but her personal attitude to life is one of nonconformity and rebellion. Her verses are a free variety of *tafʿila* that builds on the innovations in poetry established by the generation of Amal Dunqul. Her poems develop themes of desire and discontent. Her ideological stance notwithstanding, her literary aesthetics and her attitude to poetry and life appear much closer to leftist avant-gardism than to the classicist *ʿamudi* poetry of romantic heroism that is written and circulated by Jihadists in Iraq and Syria today (see Creswell and Haykel 2015). Their poetry, in turn, is much closer in style (though not in message) to the socially and aesthetically conservative poetry that is promoted by television shows and literature prizes in the Arab Gulf states.

In any case, poetry has a strong presence in life, and many people quote poetry to express their feelings, to argue for a point, and to make sense of a situation. And most visibly in the last few years, poetry has become intertwined with the language of political conflict and dissent.

In winter 2010–2011 and during the following spring and summer, a series of revolutionary uprisings shook the Arab world. They marked the beginning of a stormy season of political confrontations, chaotic shifts of mood and coalitions, and general societal turmoil. The enthusiastic days in the beginning were a poetic moment in two senses. First, poetic verses turned into chants and slogans were an important way to mobilize for the uprisings and to express their demands (Colla 2012). Second, there was a poetic quality to the moment of uprising itself:

A revolution is in itself a poetic event insofar as it is about taking the ordinary things, otherwise evident and transparent like the words of prose, and playing with them, wondering about them, not taking them for granted, putting them together in a new configuration. . . . If in ordinary days the work of fantasy precedes action by opening the space to think of alternatives, in the time of a revolution, action runs ahead of imagination and forms it. This was the original revolutionary moment: the birth of a sense that something to date unimaginable is in the process of being realised.” (Schielke 2015: 180)

It all turned unimaginably more complicated, frustrating, and violent in the course of the following years. As this chapter goes to press in summer 2015, the catastrophic failure of almost all those revolutions (with the potential exception of Tunisia) is now evident. The fantastic quality of those days seems, in

hindsight, to belong to the field of fantasy. Or—a more disturbing thought—the fantastic quality of those days may in some way have contributed to the bloody mess that followed.

Writing about the poetry that was recited and produced during the first days of the Egyptian Revolution, Lewis Sanders IV and Mark Visonà (2012) describe poetry as “the soul of Tahrir” and grant it the power to give shape and name to what was emerging in that moment. They also point out that the nation and the body of “the people” (*al-sha'b*) were at the heart of those poems that reflected and gave direction to a vision of the uprising in terms of national liberation and unity. It was an ambiguous direction though, and the openness of the claim to speak in the name of “the people” makes it available for revolutionary and counterrevolutionary slogans alike (Colla 2012). This nationalist grounding of the uprising—and its ambiguity—went at first unnoticed by many academics and media observers, who were paying perhaps too much attention to the Islamists, who at the time appeared to be the main winners of the uprising. But religious politics, rather than being able to unite Egyptians, turned out to be so extremely divisive that it provided the occasion for a counterrevolution in 2013 that was emphatically and explicitly framed in nationalist terms as “the people” against “the terrorists.” The spirit of heightened nationalism and patriotic unity that was shaped in Tahrir 2011, became, in 2013, the ground of faith for a new military regime that entered an extremely violent confrontation to eradicate its Islamist contenders.

Many of the prominent literates of the capital emphatically sided with this nationalist turn, and in different nuances supported the new military leadership and the brutal suppression of its opponents in the name of a “war against terror.” Novelists such as Alaa El-Aswany and Sonallah Ibrahim and poets such as Abdel Rahman el-Abnudi and Ahmed Fouad Negm, who in 2011 had spoken out loud for the revolution, after summer 2013 spoke out for what they believed was a revolutionary cleansing of Egypt from antipatriotic terrorist elements (Azimi 2014; el-Abnudi 2014; Lindsey 2013; *CNN Arabic* 2013; Negm 2013). On the other side of the struggle, less prominent poets sympathetic to the cause of the Muslim Brotherhood have produced texts that give words to their struggle, and sometimes also expressed their frustration about so many people turning into what they see as “slaves of the military boot” (see, e.g., Mossa 2013). Yet others have taken an outsider position, supporting neither military rule nor the Muslim Brotherhood, frustrated and marginalized in the face of an extremely destructive circle of confrontation and violence (see, e.g., Shehata 2013). Many poets who are associated with such a third stance—notably so the above-mentioned Mustafa Ibrahim—fell into a lengthy period of silence or stopped addressing political topics, leaving the

stage of critical commentary to comedians like Bassem Youssef and satirical writers like Belal Fadel.⁹

So when we ask whether poetry can change the world, it is a question that concerns an ambiguous change. There is no escape to the arrogant certainty of Jean-Paul Sartre (1949: 63–64) who in his call for engaged literature claimed that of course good literature and good cause were united. The question needs to be asked in a different way: What kind of relationship could the poetic word have with this world we live in?

A DISCUSSION WITH POETS, WHERE AN ANSWER BEGINS TO TAKE SHAPE

Since 2010, I have been doing ethnographic fieldwork together with the novelist Mukhtar Shehata¹⁰ about people who write poetry, short stories, and novels in different literary and social milieus in Alexandria, Egypt's second-largest city. In autumn 2011, I started meeting with a circle of friends from a low-class informal settlement in the east of Alexandria, all of them male schoolteachers in their late thirties or in their forties. In those days, they used to gather in the small garden of a café at the outskirts of the neighborhood to discuss politics, poetry, and life. Most of them are active writers, and some of them can claim a name in the literary circles of the city. Literature is for them not a profession but a passion that they pursue as a sort of parallel life next to their ordinary lives as schoolteachers and family fathers.

One of our meetings with this circle took place in October 2011 in the presence of the poets Kamal Ali Mahdy, Muhammad Mahmoud Mousa, Ashraf Dossouki Ali, and Hamdy Mosa, as well as Nazih (who describes himself as a passionate reader but not as a writer), Mukhtar, and myself.¹¹ This was a time when the future course of the Egyptian Revolution was still unclear, when continued optimism was becoming mixed with increasing frustration and pessimism, and when many of the political divisions that later would pit people against each other had not yet taken full shape. All the men in the circle were staunch supporters of the revolution, but in the following years they have taken different paths in political matters.

The original topic of the discussion was poets' search for fame and immortality, but the topic shifted when the effect of two poets on the Egyptian Revolution was mentioned, one of them Amal Dunqul, the other the Tunisian Aboul-Qacem Echebbi (Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi, 1909–1934), whose poem, *The Will to Live* (*Iradat al-hayah*), originally written against French colonialism, had become something of a refrain of the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt.

In a previous meeting a week earlier, the poet Kamal Ali Mahdy had mentioned that Amal Dunqul had "shaken up" the society with his poetry and with provocative verses such as "Glory to Satan" and "Don't Reconcile." Now, Kamal took up Amal Dunqul's poetry again to point out that good poetry can gain new life and relevance decades after it was written. This resulted in a discussion about poetry's capacity to move people and to change the world.

It was a long discussion, and I quote it in almost full length. The reason is I want to give the poets a space to develop their ideas so that you can think together with them and also make up your own mind about their arguments. Anthropologists often translate their ethnographic data into the academic jargon that is in fashion, and explain it by theories that are in use in their academic institutions. This is often the most boring part of anthropological writing. We usually owe the best of our ideas not to the theories we read elsewhere, but to encounters in the field with people that have good theories of their own about their own situation. That evening in the café was one such encounter of inspiring conversation and generous sharing of ideas. And now, the poets in the café wish to share the following with you:

KAMAL: The lasting genius of Amal Dunqul is that he shook up the society and made a change in it. That is the genius that gave his work permanence. It is the genius of something nobody else had done, shaking up Egyptian society. . . .

MUHAMMAD: I believe that poetry is like different seeds. Every seed sprouts and grows, flourishes and thrives in a specific soil. So when a poem finds specific conditions that suit it, it flourishes. When did the poetry of Amal Dunqul become famous? In the January 25 Revolution, because he was a revolutionary. And a strong romantic poem can become famous if the society comes to a rest and the material conditions of life improve, then the poems in circulation will be romantic poems. Why is Amal Dunqul famous now? Why not five or six years ago? Why do we talk about him now? Because of the January 25 Revolution.

NAZIH: When Aboul-Qacem Echebbi said:

*If one day the people will to live / Then Fate must an answer give . . .*¹²

إذا الشعب يوماً أراد الحياة فلا بد أن يستجيب القدر

In the period of the French occupation [of Tunisia], that verse fitted very well. Then a period followed when it didn't fit. In the current period it fits

very well again. So there does not need to be permanence, it depends on its period. Look and you see: the verse changes the world. Why? In this atmosphere, people are effected by it. They want change. They find this verse and are affected by it.

MUHAMMAD: If the necessary conditions are there and the society rises up in revolution, then you will find the poetry of Amal Dunqul revived.

SAMULI: Do you mean that the revolution is an occasion to read Amal Dunqul, but that Amal Dunqul did not cause the revolution?

MUHAMMAD: No, he is not a cause of the revolution. But his poems were written in a revolutionary state of mind. So everytime the people rise up in revolt, they will find a poem by Amal Dunqul that suits them. Otherwise, where was Amal Dunqul for the last thirty years when Hosni Mubarak ruled and there was no revolution? Nobody mentioned Amal Dunqul then.

KAMAL: I mean that Amal Dunqul as a contemporary of the defeat of 1967¹³ said something that shook up the society. He refused the reality. I don't mean that he was only protesting against the defeat of 1967 . . . If he had lived in the days of the revolution [of the Free Officers] in 1952, he might have been against the revolution itself. And if he had lived before 1952 [during the monarchy] he might have been a revolutionary against the king, and so on. . . . His genius is in the way he takes up rejection, and convinces us to join him in rejection, to go along with him in that direction.

HAMDY: I support what Kamal said, but I want to take it to another direction. The poet is an anarchist and a buffoon. He strives to establish himself and his character through difference and opposition. Amal did that. He demolished the traditional structure of poems and strove for a different vision altogether, new idea and new technique. Through difference and opposition he wants to say: "I'm ingeniously different from the others." With his genius he reached a different level and delighted the reader with his stance of difference. . . . But poetry does not change the reality of society. I even say that the Qur'an itself does not make a change. The Sublime and Exalted God is the one who makes a change. Let me tell you something. When I sit in a cafe and they play recitation of the Qur'an on the loudspeakers, I'm well aware of the meaning of the verses, and I'm aware of commanding the right and forbidding the wrong—yet despite knowing all that I continue doing whatever I'm doing. Therefore the noble Qur'an did not change me because the will to change by the Sublime and Exalted God was not there. And that is the highest book of all.

NAZIH: That you didn't change is not the Qur'an's fault. But it does change others.

HAMDY: It changes others because it is accordance with the will of God.

NAZIH: But everything is in accordance with the will of God.¹⁴ If a car would hit me now, would it not be in accordance with His will?

HAMDY: Look, maybe Aboul-Qacem Echebbi didn't originally speak out his verse as a political protest like we imagine. Maybe he was addressing a particular issue of social injustice. But when a revolution occurs, there is what rhetoric calls speech in accordance with the circumstance. In the circumstances of a specific time, that verse is in accordance with a specific mental state. Therefore it gained a dimension that wasn't imagined by Aboul-Qacem Echebbi.

NAZIH: A question if I may: Why did the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, include one like Hassan ibn Thabit¹⁵ to the work of *da'wa*? Hassan was just a poet, what did he change in the Islamic society so that the Prophet included him?

At this point, Nazih and Hamdy entered a detailed debate about what the role of poets was for spreading Islam in the age of the Prophet. Hamdy maintained that it was merely to react to poetic insults (*hija'*) against the Prophet, while Nazih detailed examples in which poets had compelled polytheists to recognize the supremacy of Islam. This prompted Hamdy to clarify his argument:

I say that something changes when it is in accordance to the will of God. I did not rule out the role of poetry in shaping life. But in light of the current culture of the society, it is a relative change in the relation of one to a million.

NAZIH: Currently or generally?

HAMDY: Since a very long time. I gave you an example: The most eloquent books in existence are the Qur'an and the Bible, that is, the divinely revealed books. They are the highest in poetic expression and wisdom. But the increase of the numbers of Muslims, Christians, and Jews is only proportional to the increase of the population of the world.

ASHRAE DOSSOUKY ALI: Maybe Hamdy entered an issue that belongs to the invisible realm [*ghayb*], which is beyond my power, and it is a different topic. But to get back to the discussion about *ibda'* [creative practice, creation of literature, art, or music], one of the elements of *ibda'* is *asala* [originality, authenticity], and the other is fluency and skill. . . . If you are an original [*asil*] poet or writer and you master your technique and your talent, and possess a vision, then you can initiate a change, and you can do it across time and space. There is a poet whose capacity is limited to making a change in the framework of his tribe, or his nation in the modern era; and there is another poet who can claim to be universal, or global, and who can change others in

a radical way. A radical change does not mean that it involves everybody. We say that the Egyptian people all went out in the January 25 Revolution. But that does not mean 80 million Egyptians did it. Those who had a concern for the problem of change did. . . . If you are an authentic poet or writer, you are capable of addressing the supreme shared grounds of humanity. When I write a poem and it reaches a greater number of people, when it reaches the Egyptian, the European, the American, this means that I have been able to touch a shared human element that we all have, because we all descend from Adam.

. . . As for a poet who does not initiate a change, he is one who only expresses his own self, his internal problems. But when he speaks about a problem that touches others, this means that he is capable of reaching the shared ground of humanity.

NAZIH: That's the question I want to ask: Why are poets right now unable to change anything? Is it the poetry's fault? Or is it the poets' fault?

MUHAMMAD: It's the society's fault, a society that does not enable people to read. And politics has participated in alienating the society from reading. The poet has ended up writing for himself.

NAZIH: Our society is useless. How else could have someone like Hisham Al-Gakh¹⁶ made it to fame?

MUKHTAR: Hisham Al-Gakh is merely a vocal phenomenon, nothing more.

NAZIH: But he made it.

I have given this discussion so much space because the four poets provide key theoretical answers to the question that frames this chapter. The discussion boils down to essentially two theoretical answers. According to one theory, which is argued for in different nuances by Muhammad Mousa and Hamdy Mosa, we take recourse to words and ideas that convey the situation in which we are. If there is a revolution, then people revive revolutionary poetry to express their situation, but poetry itself had no power to initiate a revolution. Hamdy goes even so far as to deny that divine revelations have the power to change people's minds. Such power, he argues, is God's alone and therefore beyond any worldly causality. Later the same evening, he added that poetry can affect individuals through the power of aesthetic pleasure but that whatever change this may involve remains entirely on the individual level.

According to the other theory, which is argued more cautiously by Kamal Ali Mahdy and more strongly by Nazih and Ashraf Dossouki Ali, poetry does have the power to provide people with models for emotions and actions. According to Kamal, Amal Dunqul's poetry has unsettled values that have been taken for granted and has also helped establishing the attitude of rejection as an affect and a moral virtue—something that has been instrumental for the

revolutionary process (see Schielke 2015, chapter 9). Nazih and Ashraf go further and argue that poetry can have the power to enter the minds and hearts of people, to persuade and to provide inspiration for solutions—a view that is also echoed in many chapters in this book (for example in Bryan Reynolds' and Mark LeVine's point about "open power" and Deborah Kapchan's analysis of the affective effect of listening).

While the poets in the gathering disagreed about the theoretical problem of the power and powerlessness of words, they unanimously agreed that in practice, poetry has less power than it should because people do not read and because only second-rate crap (such as the poetry of Hisham Al-Gakh) gains wide popular appeal. This is a characteristic predicament of all artistic and creative production: the more nuanced and sophisticated the creative production, the more it becomes a distinctive property of a dedicated and cultivated few and the less likely can it reach wider audiences. Especially in Egypt, there is a stunning gap between the social and moral authority writers claim (and sometimes gain), and the actual readership of literary works (Jacquemond 2008: 6). Poetry that can shake up that which is taken for granted, can only do so among those whom it reaches in the first place and who are interested in such play of mind—which is mostly identical with dedicated literary circles. There are exceptions, however—rare occurrences like the January 25 revolution when the avant-gardistic work of Amal Dunqul suddenly gained a wider audience. But even then, what reached public consciousness were one-liners and not full-length poems.

THE QUESTION NEEDS TO BE REPHRASED, AND THE ANSWER IS PARADOXICAL

Inspired by this discussion, Mukhtar Shehata developed during the following days a theory to unite the two theories and to show how literary fantasy might indeed make a difference, and why that power was always limited. The outcome was what he describes as a dialectical triangle of fantasy, dreams, and choices. Fantasy (*khayal*, here in the sense of an imagination that is conscious about the nonreality of the imagined), in this theory, is a space of freedom where one can imagine and explore ideas without having to consider their practical possibility or feasibility. One is not, however, free to have an unlimited scope of fantasies. So this is not a liberal theory according to which people just need to dare to imagine something and to pursue it. On the contrary, the scope of the imaginary is a scarce resource that is available to different people in different degrees. Fantasy, Mukhtar argues, is in turn linked with dreams (*ahlam*, here in the sense of imaginations that are linked with the

expectation that they can and need to be realized). What on the level of fantasy was a play of mind, can as a dream be a pursuit and a plan. Such dreams, finally, can be the ground of choices people make, concrete actions that have a material effect, change the reality in one way or another. And that reality, in turn, is the ground that determines the scope of dreams and fantasies. But it is an unpredictable process, Mukhtar points out: the revolution was in part marked by the way some people were able to turn impossible fantasies into concrete actions, but these actions are not finite. They initiate a new circle of choices, dreams, and fantasy, and as long as the circle is not complete, we lack the scope of imagination to anticipate its consequences.

In light of this theory, it becomes clear that the question whether poetry can change the world was posed in a misleading way for two reasons. First, poetry is not separate from the world to start with, and therefore cannot have external causality. Instead, poetry is part of the world as it changes, with fantasies becoming the ground of dreams and actions, and actions and experiences feeding and limiting the scope of the imaginable. Fantasy, too, is a scarce resource. Second, the question has been posed in a too megalomaniac fashion, as if only great and dramatic events were important. Such megalomania was compelling in Egypt in 2011. Talk about "change" (*taghyir*) was in the air, and it did not mean just any change. It meant sweeping, fundamental, holistic transformation of humanity, politics, and society. This grand vision of change neglects processes where some things change but only for a handful of people. And it also neglects the possibility of change going wrong.

More often than not, the productive relationship of fantasies, dreams, and actions is limited to intimate, personal change and makes little or no difference in regard to wider relations of power. As Amal Dunqul reminded us in *From the Papers of Abu Nuwas*, the gold of princes remains far more powerful than the babbling of poets. This is how Mukhtar saw the situation more than two years later when he shared with me his bitter frustration about the course of the events:

Poets only make a change in their imaginary world that is parallel to the real world of frustration. There is no real change happening. If anything changes it is through force, deception, and manipulation. The dreamers and poets are simply used, their sweet words are spread to beautify the picture. Change is made by those with realistic interests. The poets and dreamers spearhead the change in a dream world that has no relationship with the real world, but they are being used [by the powerful for political ends]. The Muslim Brotherhood never liked Amal Dunqul. The revolutionaries never stopped dreaming. In no country has the military ever understood poetry and dreams.

This is the gist of Mukhtar's sceptical revision of his theory in January 2014: Those who actually have the power to make a difference do not care about poetry, but they do know how to exploit sweet words to beautify their crimes. The original, authentic change that is involved in poetry only reaches few crazy dreamers and remains in a parallel world.

This is a widespread view among poets and writers I have spoken with, many of whom always have been highly sceptical about the idea that their writing could make a difference in society. However, they do think that writing can make a difference—for the writer. The only ones who are tangibly changed by literature are the literates themselves—and perhaps also some of their close friends, family, and some people who search for their company because they are drawn to the different world they embody.

In this vein, the Alexandrian poet Shaymaa Bakr contested the very idea of an anthropological study of writers and poets:

Why do you as an anthropologist study poets? Anthropology should be about the whole of society. Poets are outsiders, they are exceptional and disconnected, they do not express or represent the society.

She is right, of course. Poets are among the most unrepresentative people an anthropologist can study. She is the living proof of her own argument, uniting in her person some extraordinary ideological and religious contradictions in a decidedly idiosyncratic manner.¹⁷

However, it is precisely her idiosyncrasy—and the idiosyncrasy of so many other writers—that raises interesting questions about poetry as a part of the world. As with many other poets, Shaymaa thinks of herself as too exceptional to be of any sociological relevance, but at the same time she has the urge and the skill to speak about issues that need to be said and heard. The question about poetry's place in the world, in this sense, is one about the role of idiosyncratic and strange people and ideas in the making of a society.

The answer can only be paradoxical. Between 2011 and 2012, Shaymaa Bakr recorded her sceptical vision of the revolutionary dream of change in her poem *I Say (Aqul ana)*, which she describes as a "rebellion against rebellion." The following is my translation of a short passage from her much longer poem:

*We had to grab for the wind
The sheep had to reject being skinned
after it was slaughtered
Brothers of ours had to die ...*

*so that the open graves ...
can promise to us that we haven't died yet
that there is a killing that does not kill us
But we should not have
raised our ambition so that it can devour us
We had to set fire
into all the dry wood
without afterward demanding from time
that it may turn the earth green again
Who would trust his feet if he staggered
if one step
tried to change its pace
on the same futile road*

كان لابد أن نقبض الريخ

لا بد للشاة أن ترفض السلخ

من بعد أن ذبحت

أن يموت لنا إخوة ..

فالقبور التي فُتحت ..

سوف تُنبؤنا أننا لم نمت بعد

ومن القتل ما ليس يقتلنا

إنما لم يكن ينبغي

أن نربي الطموح ليأكلنا

كان لابد أن نشعل النار

في كل هذا الهشيم

ثم لا نسأل الوقت

أن يُرجع الأرض خضراء

من ذا يصدق أقدامه لو ترنخ ..

لو جُزيت خطوة

أن تغير إيقاعها

فوق نفس الطريق العقيم .

I Say is an interesting vision of the dilemma of those Egyptian revolutionaries who according to Mukhtar “never stopped dreaming,” who spearheaded the idea of change, contributed to a political rupture, but failed to realize any of their aims and ends. Shaymaa Bakr points out that the problem is not just that they were defeated. More gravely, she tells us, their vision of radical change created a struggle that is structured so that it cannot be won. We set the dry wood on fire and expect earth to turn green again. We try to change the pace of our steps, but we are still on the same road. The revolutionary dreamers, who indeed were spirited by crazy fantasies and unlikely dreams, transported some of those dreams from the closed circles of the dedicated few to the streets of Egypt. They failed, and yet they left their mark on history. Their struggle was effective but not liberating.

This is why I think that it would be too optimistic to think of poetry and poets, literates, artists, and other dreamers and misfits as simply powerless when they face the sturdy power of oppression. It might even be too optimistic to think of them as useful idiots who unwittingly provide the powerful with an ideological cover. There is a third, more disturbing possible consequence.

Kamal Ali Mahdy argued that Amal Dunqul taught Egyptians to consider rejection a virtue, a value in its own right in spite of likely or certain defeat. Only very few Egyptians actually were affected, and the part played by Amal Dunqul’s poetry may not have been particularly great. But those very few belong to a radical political minority that, since 2011, has indeed fashioned rejection as a political principle with important practical consequences. Their stance of a principled “no” comes with a radical vision of change as a value in itself, and implies a claim for uncompromising purity and struggle. They are by all counts far too weak to ever gain power, but they have been over and again able to stir the political situation and to disrupt the foreseen path of events. And more than once they have—sometimes unwittingly, sometimes quite willingly—aided more powerful forces to seize the day.

This is by no means unique to Egypt. Poetry, along with songs and slogans derived from poems, has been strongly present in probably all the recent Arab uprisings. Some poetry—especially Aboul-Qacem Echebbi’s *The Will to Live*—has traveled across the Arab world and become ingrained in the language of protest and revolt (see Colla 2012). At the same time, revolt has proven to have ambiguous consequences. It may be liberating. It is very likely to be destructive. This is not a new insight, of course. Albert Camus argued in 1951 that philosophical rebellion is a fundamental human trait that over time results in real revolutions. But, Camus adds, the problem is that revolutions are, by definition, murderous.

Amal Dunqul promised eternal torment to those who say no. But it is not

only the torment of futility and defeat that Mukhtar expressed. It is the torment of consequences. Not without a reason did Dunqul set “Don’t Reconcile” in the historical event of a murder that unleashed a war of vendetta so deep and bitter that it continued for forty years. As the principle of rejection has entered the daily life of Egypt, it has also become part of a world where compromises are considered treason and where confrontation appears as the only moral choice. Poetry, too, is part of the vicious circle of polarization that haunts Egypt since spring 2011.

NOTES

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Note on transliteration: There are numerous ways to transcribe Arabic with Latin letters, and all of them are inadequate in one way or another. In this chapter, poetry is cited in the Arabic original, accompanied by English translation. For proper names, the spelling used by the persons themselves is used. Otherwise, simplified Arabic transcription rules of the International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies are used.

1. Dunqul 2005, 334 (my translation). Recital by the author: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tf9inqeTevU>. Most of Dunqul’s poetry is also freely available online as are many original recitations by the author.

2. Dunqul 2005, 91; English translation by Suneela Mubayi 2012. Recital by the author, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YuInA7MCLq4>.

3. Dunqul 2005, 347 (my translation; for other translations, see, e.g., Roters 2011, Hegazy 2007). Recital by the author: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uF5OHwLqOhg>.

4. Dunqul 2005, 93 (my translation).

5. *Ihna illi qulna la*, <https://www.facebook.com/No4everythingisWrong>.

6. I find “the Arab Spring” a highly misleading seasonal metaphor for the events that began in 2011. If one wants to use a seasonal metaphor for the years of revolutions and counterrevolutions, then the Coptic month of Amshir (8 February to 9 March) that in Egypt is characterized by stormy, unpredictable weather, is definitely more fitting than “spring.”

7. Ibrahim 2013, 138 (my translation).

8. Classical and classicist Arabic poetry has a characteristic verse structure where a pair of half-verses together forms the narrative and structural unit of the verse (*bayt*). Poetry with this structure is known as *amudi*, i.e., “columnic” because in written form, poems made up of double verses appear as two columns. For example, the verse “If one day the people will to live / Then Fate must an answer give” by Aboul-Qacem Echebbi, cited on page 137, is a classicist double verse. In contemporary poetry, single verses have become the norm. Of the poems quoted in this chapter, Mustafa Ibrahim’s poetry represents colloquial rhymed poetry influenced by the modernist *tafiila* and the traditional *zajal* alike. The poetry of Amal Dunqul (as well as that of Shaymaa Bakr) represents a more experimental form of *tafiila* that has a complex and free structure of verses and that is built on a rhythmic structure on changing meters and sometimes rhyme. On classic and modern poetics see Furani 2012.

9. Pioneer of a style of satirical writing that became extremely popular in a short time

before 2011 (see, e.g., Fadl 2005), Belal Fadl became an important third-current voice until January 2014 through his column in the daily newspaper *Shorouk*, although his influence was of course far more limited than that of the TV comedian Bassem Youssef. See Fadl 2014; *Mada Masr* 2014. For an overview of Belal Fadl's columns in Arabic, see <http://www.shorouknews.com/columns/BilalFadl>.

10. See Shehata 2010, 2014. For an overview of his essayistic work online, see <http://www.ahewar.org/m.asp?i=6026>.

11. For their published works, see Ali 2007, 2008; Mahdy 2005; 2007; Mossa 2012a, 2012b, 2013.

12. Aboul-Qacem Echebbi, *Iradat al-hayah* (The Will to Live), English translation by Sanders and Visonà 2012: 229. This poem is also the source of the slogan, "The people want the toppling of the regime."

(الشعب يريد إسقاط النظام)

That was originally coined in Tunisia in December 2010 and has been repeated in all uprisings in the Arab world since 2011. For a history of the poem's different readings and uses, see Colla 2012.

13. In 1967, the Arab armies of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan were defeated by Israel in a humiliating manner in the Six-Day War. This event became central to much of Amal Dunqul's literary work.

14. Ashraf is making implicit use here of an Islamic theology of freedom and destiny according to which humans are free to act, but they act out the predestined will of God. According to this theology, human intention, cause, and effect are real, but they only take place in accordance with the will of God, as Hamdy agrees in the following course of the discussion.

15. For his biography and poetry, see Hassan ibn Thabit 1994.

16. Some years before 2011, Hisham Al-Gakh had made it to considerable fame with very straightforward colloquial poetry that addressed the worries and frustrations of ordinary Egyptians. Poets who move in dedicated literary circles commonly love to hate Hisham al-Gakh's populist style. For a translation of one of his poems, see Sanders and Visonà 2012, 227–228.

17. Since she keeps her writings and her private life strictly apart, I cannot get into the details.

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PART III

ISLAM: RELIGIOUS DISCOURSES
AND PIOUS ETHICS

THIS SECTION ELABORATES the Islamic discursive tradition—both Sunni and Shi'a—with regard to popular culture in general and music in particular. In addition, it illustrates how contemporary pious discourses have developed among artists and have been translated into ethical practices and aesthetic forms.

Jonas Otterbeck's chapter presents the complex relation of Sunni Islamic discourse to the practice of music making and listening. The chapter illustrates how a multitude of voices compete about formulating the Islamic answer to the key issue of its permissibility. By first dealing with the issue "what is music" and next by analysing the concept of "authority in Islam," Otterbeck is able to provide a contextualized approach to the contestations that have been ongoing since the earliest days of Islam and have been particularly intense during the last decades. Otterbeck distinguishes between prominent trends such as the moderate position, the liberal position, and the hardliners and he sketches the proponents' main arguments and social settings. The chapter thus offers a contextualized explanation why a certain idea might seem plausible at a time or in a place when other ideas might circulate and be seen as heretic or simply wrong. Otterbeck examines the complexity and contradictions inherent in Islamic discourse and shows that interpretations relate to discursive power and are not a-historically givens.

Joseph Alagha's chapter focuses on Shi'a debates on Islam and performing arts. Like Otterbeck, this chapter also shows that Islamic law (*shari'a*) is a socially constructed phenomenon and "Islam" is a social practice that is constantly undergoing revision. Alagha highlights the differences between classical and contemporary methods of reasoning on the performing arts between Shi'a and Sunni sources and scholars. It particularly examines the preponderance of moderate views surrounding music within the contemporary Shi'ite tradition. This is related to a specific method of reasoning based on the juris-