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Article *in* boundary 2 · March 2012

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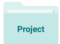

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A Revolution of Dignity and Poetry

Mohamed-Salah Omri

The late playwright Saadallah Wannous (1941–1997) once said, "I used to dream of a poem which ends in a street demonstration." This is indeed what happened in the course of the so-called Arab Spring, although Wannous was no longer there to witness it, despite his heroic work toward Syria's freedom.[1] Yet the main poem in question was not new. Indeed, the most famous slogan, chanted in Tunisia in January, then in Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and Syria, is a reincarnation of lines written on September 16, 1933, exactly seventy-eight years ago, by the Tunisian poet Abou el-Kasem Chebbi (1909–1934):

> If one day a people desires to live,
> Then fate will answer their call.
> And their night will then begin to fade
> And their chains break and fall.[2]

1. For a brief overview, see Saadallah Wannous's obituary: http://www.nytimes.com/1997/05/17/arts/saadallah-wannous-56-arab-playwright.html.
2. For an extended biography of the poet, see Mohamed-Salah Omri, "Abou el-Kasem Chebbi," in *Essays in Arabic Literary Biography, 1850–1950*, ed. Roger Allen (Wiesbaden:

boundary 2 39: 1 (2012) DOI 10.1215/01903659-1506283 © 2012 by Mohamed-Salah Omri

These opening lines of the poem "The Will to Live" now form the closing part of Tunisia's national anthem and adorn an archway in the poet's native city, Tozeur. They have been, since the 1930s, on the tip of millions of tongues, taught in schools from Morocco to Yemen, sung by some of the most influential Arab stars, written on protest banners, shouted by students in the face of French and English occupiers and their own governments. The couplet even entered the folklore of global protest music and poetry and was adopted by the International Solidarity Movement. On January 14, 2011, in front of the forbidding Ministry of the Interior in Tunis, crowds shouted their version of the poem—"The people want [*al-Shaab yurid*] to bring down the regime [*isqat al-nidham*]"—and fate responded. We were witnessing what the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish—he, too, is no longer here to see it—called the retreat of the right of force in front of the advancing might of truth and justice.[3] And at its beginning, as at its height, the revolution was expressed in poetry. As this essay will attempt to show, one key feature of the system during Ben Ali's rule was a duality or parallel existence of two opposing systems of values and cultural production. But they by no means coexisted. One was dominant while the other was repressed but survived in various forms and in uneven ways. The present essay is, in part, the story of that survival and eventual victory. It must be noted that such a story has passed entirely under the radar of research. The reasons for this are too complex to explain here, but a combination of discourse of acquiescence in the media, academic research obsessed with what I call elsewhere "terrorology," and lack of interest in the humanities explains this gap. I draw on printed material, extensive field work, and personal observation in Tunisia and Egypt, personal recordings, interviews, the media, and Internet sites in an attempt to provide a more complex story of culture during and before the wave of revolts, particularly in Tunisia.

After reviewing changes in cultural production since January 14 and accounting for its history and the condition under which protest and

Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010), 292–303. The translation is from ABC's *World News with Diane Sawyer* program, available at http://www.facebook.com/video/video.php?v=1885645624659&oid=128469903882430&comments.

3. Mahmoud Darwish, *Fi hadhrat al-ghiyab* [In the presence of absence] (Beirut: Riad al-Rayyes Books, 2006), 125. The present essay is dedicated to those Arab poets and writers who dedicated themselves to bringing about the Arab revolutions but did not live long enough to see the vision unfold: Darwish, Wannous, Belgacem Yacoubi, Shaykh Imam . . .

resistance operated before that date, I zero in on one key figure of both moments, the poet Mohamed Sgaier Awlad Ahmed. Indeed, although there was a multitude of poems and poets for and about the revolution, Awlad Ahmed remains unique in maintaining his poetic momentum and public presence through the times and spaces of expression. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that in his itinerary, his talent, and his transformations and trajectory, from the late 1970s until January 14 and its still-unfolding aftermath, Awlad Ahmed has been an accurate index of resistance culture in Tunisia during the past three decades. He also illustrates the failings and limitations of intellectuals under two consecutive autocratic rules in a postcolonial society. Commemorated by the voices of protest, banned by the political and religious authorities, rebel, official, bohemian, but always talented, Awlad Ahmed is, without doubt, the Tunisian poet most recognized as such since Abou el-Kacem Chebbi. Some say he is the most gifted; others claim he is the most dangerous because of his sharp and unpredictable pen, his ideological line, or his widely known polemics. He won surprising consensus: he elicited censorship from the state, the rage of religious orthodoxy, and the anger of progressives. He was the voice of the “bread riots” in January 1984; the founder of the House of Poetry (a state institution); won the praise of Mahmoud Darwish; filed a lawsuit against al-Shaykh al-Qaradawi, who accused him of apostasy; caused headaches for several newspapers where he published his critical essays; mourned Mohamed Bouazizi; and was the only poet appointed to the body whose objective is to enshrine the aims of the revolution in legal texts. In short, Awlad Ahmed has been an unavoidable figure in the history of Tunisian culture—particularly the culture of protest and resistance—for the last thirty years. His work will allow me to make important linkages between it and Arabic poetry more widely, particularly that of Mahmoud Darwish.

Contested Legitimacies in the Cultural Field

Perhaps, due to failure of analysis, what took place in Tunisia was, initially at least, grasped through metaphor. In the West, the term *Jasmine Revolution* quickly took hold on an imagination accustomed to the exotic East. Locally, the term was derided and quickly dismissed. This was not due to lack of poetic character or laziness of imagination; rather, we witness in this very labeling a contested image of what was going on: two very different ways of imagining—and of poeticizing—the same event. Jasmine is

a national obsession in Tunisia. Songs linking Tunisia and jasmine, by the legendary Hedi Jouini, for instance, are part of the collective memory:

> The smell of my country
> Is roses and jasmine.
> It pleases the eye.

But the creative youth of the Tunisian Revolution immediately changed the song to express the moment:

> The smell of my country
> Is tear gas and gunpowder.
> It burns the eye.

Jasmine, sun, and beaches are images that managed to enter the marketing machine of mass tourism and set the country apart. The term *Jasmine Revolution*, reassuring and soft, may be good for business, but it does not capture what this revolt means or the way it came about. Analysts now realize that this is a rejection of business as usual, of a dictatorship that had been internationally propped up for decades.[4]

Likewise, local expression of newly regained pride and dignity were cast in images and metaphors. In one of the main bedrocks of the revolution, Kasserine, nothing encapsulates this more than the slogan sprayed in black paint across white walls in the city's center: "Raise your head up, you are in Kasserine." This was a defiant reversal of "Smile, you are in Tunisia," so much propagated around the world by tourism posters, often featuring a boy in traditional Tunisian dress, offering a bouquet of jasmine. This is a local imagining of dignity.

Poetry or poetic acts were everywhere in this revolution. All of it is worth recording, regardless of aesthetic judgment. For this has been a remarkable moment for poetry and a triumph of a new way of formulating demands and aspirations. A lot of this poetry was made up on the spur of

4. See Nicolas Beau and Jean-Pierre Tuquoi, *Notre Ami Ben Ali: l'envers du miracle tunisien* (Paris: La découverte, 1999), which famously revealed French propping of Ben Ali and the latter's rampant corruption. For local as well as outside critical views of the "Tunisian miracle," see Olfa Lamloum and Bernard Ravenel, *La Tunisie de Ben Ali: la société contre le régime* (Paris: L'Haramattan, 2002). The book is a critical collection of essays and interviews with key opposition leaders of Ben Ali (Marzouki, etc.). See also Michel Camau and Vincent Giesser, *Le syndrome autoritaire: politique en Tunisie de Bourguiba à Ben Ali* (Paris: Presse de la fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 2003).

the moment. But a lot was also already there, underground, repressed, and censored.

It is clear, for example, that what came to be known as "The song of the revolution" (*ughniyat al-thawrah*), memorized by children and adults alike, titled "Raji' libladi" (Returning to my country), owes a lot to Palestinian songs in tune and in words.

How beautiful is sitting by the water
How beautiful is Spring [*rabi'*]
How beautiful is Tunisian revolution
It includes everyone [*jami'*].
I'm returning to my country
Across mountains,
Where I will meet my peers,
The brave men on the battlefield.[5]

Yet not all poetry was effective. The main presence and popularity have been colloquial poetry, songs, slogans, and rap music, all of which rely on local dialect first and foremost. In fact, in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and Syria, there has been a remarkable absence of traditional rhetoric, eloquence, and old forms of charisma and public address. (There are, of course, imams and the ritualized Fridays of this and that, but in demonstrations, sit-ins, and even in the local media, dialect became the register of choice.) Even more remarkable have been political speeches. It seems that this time is not a Nasser-eloquence moment, where Fusha was the mode of rhetoric, and one leader occupied all stages. During visits to Tunisia after January 14, I witnessed a change almost overnight in public speech in the media, among politicians, and in the street in favor of a regional dialect hitherto stigmatized as a marker of low social status and country background. The drive behind the change was a certain populism and appeal to the regions where the revolution started and where repression was most lethal (Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine, in particular). This was an unprecedented form of code switching, not triggered by the usual social or cultural changes and adjustments to urban or higher classes' speech but as a result of a deliberate attempt to adjust down, rather than up.[6]

In fact, the climate of delegitimization of the old order prevailed

5. For the song, performed during the Qasba sit-in, see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i6VkDn8YRJM.

6. Personal observations during visits to Tunisia in January, March, and July 2011.

across sectors, from public discourse to politics, administration, and culture, as "revolutionary legitimacy" targeted those legitimized by commercial success or state backing. In addition, like many others before it, this revolution reawakened the spirit and culture of protest. For while this movement appeared surprising and new, it vindicated the decades-long culture of resistance, protest, and rebellion. By the time the revolution broke out, several actors had already acquired such legitimacy and credibility among students, trade unions, and former political opposition that their return to the scene was almost natural. Continuities and interruptions combined to give the rising culture of revolution its hybrid character: it recalled alternative, marginalized, and repressed voices; gave rise to completely new voices; made others change course; and forced yet a third group to don the garb of revolution because it simply became the dominant discourse.

A quick comparison between two years of the most prominent cultural event in the country, the Carthage Summer Festival, illustrates this point. It must be noted that to perform at the Carthage Roman Theater has been, over many years, the ultimate prize for Tunisian as well as Arab artists. Closely monitored and heavily subsidized by the government, but also usually well attended by the public, the festival was a projection to the outside world of a Tunisia buzzing with good life and cultural activity. But it also showcased a deliberate emphasis on the culture of exhibition and consumption, liberal but not critical. The program of the 2010 festival reads like the hall of fame of Arab popular culture: Latifa Arfawi, Sabir Riba'i, Majda al-Rumi, Samira Said, Raghib Alama, Sabah Fakhri, Lotfi Bouchnaq . . . For the 2011 program, the new minister of culture pushed to schedule local Arab star Lotfi Bouchnaq for the opening night. This turned out to be a big mistake.

The rejuvenated Union of Artists mounted a vigorous campaign against a singer whose talent was recognized but who was accused of being a palace entertainer and of signing a petition asking Ben Ali to run for the 2014 elections. The minister gave in. The 2011 festival became the stage of the marginalized, the censored, and emerging talent. The opening show was given to Ridha Shmak, a leftist singer who presented "Songs of Life," a show inspired by the poet Chebbi, while the closing was turned over to the poet Awlad Ahmed and his cast of poets from the "Arab Spring." (This was the first time poetry was scheduled at Carthage since a visit by Nizar Qabbani in the early 1980s.) The program reads like a who's who in alternative, committed, and new music and theater: Umayma al-Khalil, Marcel Khalifeh's former singing partner; Hedi Guella; Bendir Man; Amel

Mathlouthi; Adel Bouallag; the French-Algerian singer Suad Massi, in addition to Awlad al Manajim; several new plays; and an evening devoted to rap music.[7]

There was enough "alternative" music, theater, and poetry to fill the schedule, as well as the airwaves. For by January 2011, some local protest bands and singers had been in action for over thirty years. The group Al-Bahth al Musiqi bi Gabis (Gabes Music Research Group), who sang with the father of the Arab protest song, the Egytian al-Shaykh Imam, during his visit in 1985, was founded in 1979 and is still going strong today, with over nine thousand fans on its Facebook page.[8] The singers Hedi Guella, Mohamed Bhar, and Zin al-Safi, and the groups Awlad al Manajim and al-Hama'im al-bidh have all been active in the 1980s and continued to perform their songs about the working class, peasants, repression, and freedom, underground, low key, and in restricted settings. Over the last couple of years, new voices joined them: Amel Mathlouthi; Bendir Man; rap stars El Général (Hamid Ben Amor), Omar Beni, and MehdiR2M, and others.[9]

I would argue that the pervasive presence of serious or alternative culture after January 14 cannot be understood without an account of the continuities and ruptures of Tunisian protest and resistance culture over the last thirty years and even earlier. It has been multiple in its genres, spread out geographically, and quite resilient in the face of serious repression of dissent. Committed music (*al-ughniya al-multazimah*); protest poetry in Fusha and the dialect; critical fiction; theater; cinema—all have managed to coexist parallel to their state-dominated and commercial versions, often within structures of resistance such as unions and universities. It is remark-

7. For the full program of the Carthage Festival 2011, see http://www.festival-carthage.com.tn/. For the 2010 program, see http://www.tunivisions.net/programme-du-festival-de-carthage-2010,367.html.

8. See http://www.facebook.com/pages/EL-BAHTH-EL-MOUSSIKI-DE-GABES/54224317152.

9. El Général's famous song "Rais Lebled," issued on January 10, resulted in his imprisonment throughout the crucial days of the revolution. See full article and interview by Laura Bohn of this figure, selected by *Time Magazine* as one of the "2011 Time 100" most influential people, http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/07/22/rapping_the_revolution. MehdiR2M's hits include the song "ana tounsi" (I'm Tunisian). On Bendir Man see http://jamiatalhurriyat.org/ar/liberte/presentation.php?IDfiche=49. The name itself, modeled after Superman, Batman, etc., refers to *bandir* or drum, and *tbandir* or drumming. Tunisians use this term to refer to singing the praises of and entertaining the powers that be, a sarcastic take on music and culture of those that supported and propagated the life of the regime.

able that resistance culture is perhaps the only sphere where we witness a reversal, reordering, and equality among forms and languages of expression. A revealing example is oral poetry, where even ardent Arab nationalists drop their guard when it comes to expressions of protest. In Tunisia, local political poets Belgacem Ya'qubi, Lazhar Dahawi, and the Egyptian Ahmad Fuad Nigm, have been iconic and influential perhaps no less than Chebbi, Nizar Qabbani, or Muzaffar al-Nawab.

The survival of this culture of resistance and protest needs explanation at more than one level. For the extent of polarization, suspicion, and fear engineered by the state apparatus and kept alive for decades was no more visible than in the cultural field and among intellectuals. The prominent actor and playwright, Tawfik Jbali, who remained consistent in his opposition to the former regime for decades, goes so far as asserting that the double discourse created by the regime became part of the Tunisian's personality. At the cultural level, everything was double, and just as there was thriving parallel commerce, run largely by the ruling family, as we found out after Ben Ali ran away, there was "the theater of parallel commerce," as Jbali put it, where commercial gain was the main drive.[10] The same goes for poetry, fiction, music, and cinema. To better account for this situation and the survival of resistance culture, I will start with the overarching condition within which intellectuals worked and circulated their production, namely repression, commodification, and re-Islamization of culture.

Repression, Commodification, and Re-Islamization of Culture

Repression, commodification, and re-Islamization of culture have been dominant features across the Arab regions for several decades now. And it is specifically this shared state of affairs that is behind the moving tide of revolts there. Processes of revolutions and their patterns are different, but the grievances are shared, and so has been the momentum, although outcomes are likely to be different in light of the particular histories and situations in each country. These three elements must be seen, as they are in reality, as simultaneous but not mutually exclusive phenomena, as may immediately come to mind. But while repression of dissent and restriction on free production of culture need no elaboration, the other two

10. Tawfik Jbali, interview with al-Hurra TV, available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2hHnfqjix1k&feature=share.

issues warrant some remarks. Re-Islamization needs no evidence; the process of investing "various domains of social life" "with signs and symbols associated with Islamic cultural traditions" presents points of convergence as well as divergence with Islamist politics.[11] But local situations are by no means the same. As far as culture is concerned, pressures have been transnational as well as local in the sense that centers of control and authority in Saudi Arabia or Qatar, for instance, could affect local culture in Tunisia, Egypt, or Morocco. Statements by the Egyptian Shaykh Yusuf Qaradawi, who is based in Qatar, accusing the Tunisian poet Awlad Ahmed of atheism, as I will explain below, are a case in point.

For an illustration of commodification and the pressures the market exercised on oppositional cultural producers, one could take any Arab country, really. In Syria, for example, Anissa Abboud's novel *Wild Mint* (*al-Na'na' al-Barri*), winner of the first edition of the Arabic Novel Award in 2004, tells the story of Ali, a famous poet whose career mirrors the plight and itinerary of free expression and thought across the region before revolutions.[12] Ali was the voice of student revolt, a fighter in the 1973 war against Israel, who gained fame as a resistance poet and was hired by a local newspaper to write a column for a living. Ali sums up the condition of failure and despondency of his generation thus: "We are the generation that tried to realize the project of its being, but the dream was aborted before completion, before villages headed to the city and before the city welcomed the flying dishes. The dream was aborted before I could take off my mother's scarf and my father's gown" (224). Ali is concerned with the quality of his art, the integrity of his pen, and the rootedness in the people and the land. But he loses fame and clout after repeatedly declining suspect prizes and invitations paid for by petrodollars (384). Through corruption and censorship, Ali, in other words, loses not only his present and his future but also his past, his name, his memory, and his identity. What is under threat is not only art but also humanity as such.[13]

11. See Salwa Ismail, "Islamism, Re-Islamization and the Fashioning of Muslim Selves: Refiguring the Public Sphere," *Muslim World Journal of Human Rights* 4, no. 1 (2007): 1–21, esp. 2.

12. Anissa Abboud, *Al-Na'na' al-Barri* [Wild mint] (Damascus: dar al-Sawsan, 2004). Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically by page number.

13. This is not a unique theme for the novel: there is an abundance of works that look at the state of intellectual freedom and humanist ideals in a changing Arab society. Examples include Nouri Bouzid's film *Sfayih min dhahad* [Golden horseshoes] (1989) for Tunisia, and Ahlam Mosteghanemi's novel *Dakirat al-Jasad* [Memory in the flesh] (1993) for Algeria.

In Abboud's novel, Ali is struck by a new logic: "You've got a pound, you're worth a pound." The proverb did not say "a diploma = being human"; it says "a pound = being human" (426). The poet is under threat from the market economy, ruling authorities, and orthodox values. In Tunisia, Awlad Ahmed expresses this situation thus: "I summarize the Arab politicians' relationship to poetry in two attitudes: if he [the poet] comes, kill him or give him a thousand Euros."[14] This is a clever recasting of an old formula. It recalls the relationship of patronage and fear that governed the rapport of classical Arab poets with their sponsors and patrons.

In a situation where commodification, the triumph of economic liberalism, the market, consumption, and privatization of what had been heavily state-run or even nationalized economies, repression took its main form in the establishment of a security state. These two elements work in collaboration, which explains a number of phenomena. Most important of these has been corruption and impunity from accountability (locally and internationally), and the rise of the new rich.[15] On a global level, these regimes were supported under the excuse of an "Islamist threat," and business interests and relations, which all led to a security approach to these states, one that favored security over democracy and thus revealing the duplicity and self-interest of the official West.

In this context, where can/could contestation come from? And how has it been articulated? It is crucial to note, from the outset, that there was no revolutionary culture, in the sense of a culture that could have produced an alternative world or one that guided the people. This is the case of all the countries undergoing revolutions in the region. But that does not mean the absence of resistance and protest cultures and traditions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, or Yemen, as I mentioned above.

For the sake of overview, the general features of such responses could be summarized in six categories. These are: individualization of dissent, due to decimation of institutions and collectivities of dissent; introversion, leading to entrenchment into ideology or opinion; instability, or oscillation between power forces, for example, aligning with the state against

14. See Awlad Ahmed's essay, "al-laylah al-khamisah wa al-'ishrun wa qad abta'a Mahmud Darwish" [The twenty-fifth night and Mahmoud Darwish was late], September 26, 2009, http://www.alawan.org/spip.php?page=forum&id_article=2777, in which he mourns Darwish, who had died a month earlier.

15. On corruption in Egypt, see Salwa Ismail, "A Private Estate Called Egypt," *Guardian*, February 26, 2011, http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/feb/06/private-estate-egypt-mubarak-cronies.

Islamists, or the other way around; *irtijaliyya* (improvisation), or the absence of programs and projects, and reliance on contingent and responsive dissent, which gave rise to the culture of occasion, often linked to uprisings, incidents, or commemoration of dates; nostalgia, in styles and/or in worldview, harkening back to a golden age of freedom; self-reflexivity (usually observed in focus on the poet, the act of poetry, the written word, etc.). Needless to say, each of these comes with an attendant aesthetic. And while I cannot get into all of these in detail, the extensive study of one poet will make the picture clearer.

Awlad Ahmed

Between Awlad Ahmed and the Tunisian Revolution there is an intimate relationship: he called it a poem and it, to a significant extent, called him its poet.[16] Let us start with the first part; the second needs to be demonstrated. Awlad Ahmed speaks of a poetic revolution, or rather a revolution-poem. He likes to say, as he did during my interview with him on July 22, 2011, that the Tunisian Revolution is a work of poetry. He explained that the modern poem is a work of construction. From an image, a word, a rhythm, the poet constructs his poem. In contrast to the classic poet, he does not plan or have a prepared structure in advance. Thus emerged the Tunisian Revolution, a process, with no political leadership or ideological framework, even without a clearly defined social force. From a spark in the real as well as figurative senses—the self-immolation of the young Mohamed Bouazizi, commemorated by Awlad Ahmed in the poem "Butterfly," which I analyze below—was born a revolution that sparked the "Arab Spring." These ashes have created a form of social and historical phoenix without script or precedent.

The poeticity of other slogans, songs, and rap music is remarkable for its consistency and verbal genius. This is why Awlad Ahmed had established, well before January 14, what he called "the Poetic Central Command of the Tunisian Revolution," while noting that the opposite, namely,

16. Awlad Ahmed has published six books, in addition to several essays and poems published in magazines, newspapers, and online. His books include: *Nashid al-ayam al-sittah* [Hymn of the six days] (Tunis: Dimitir, 1984); *Tafasil* [Details] (Tunis: Bayram Publications, 1989); *Laysa li mushkilah* [I have no problem] (Tunis: Awlad Ahmed Publications, n.d. [1st ed. Tunis: Dar Siras, 1988]); *Al-Wasiyya* [The will] (Tunis: Awlad Ahmed Publications, 2002); *Janub al-Ma'* [South of the water] (Tunis: Awlad Ahmed Publications, 2002); *Wa lakinnani Ahmed* [But I am Ahmed] (Paris: Association of Tunisians in France, 1989).

the Tunisian Central Command of the Poetic Revolution, was also true. From there, he launched slogans, opinions, and poems. In a text written on January 13 on his Facebook Wall, he says, “Write and translate immediately in your language, because we may be killed even before completing this text, or we may lose life in peace should they remain in power,” before going on to explain the possible scenarios and the hidden face of a revolt in progress.

He ends this Facebook note with the harangue, “Poetry till victory,” substituting the term *poetry* for the expected term *revolution*:

The wind is coming
And their houses are of straw [*qashshu*].
The hand is high
But their glass is fragile [*hashshu*].
Never worry,
My brothers.
Never.
If they chase away a bird
Its nest will follow it [*al-‘ushshu*].
Long live Tunisia,
Who is all of us.

“Butterfly,” the famous poem where he follows the events from Bouazizi’s self-immolation to his death and its aftermath, is typical. It records a moment, follows it through, and interprets it, all in images and a rhythm familiar to Awlad Ahmed’s readers. The poem records, like a narrative in three movements, the crucial phases of the revolution. In the first section, written on December 28 after the grotesque hospital visit by Ben Ali to a dying Bouazizi, he describes the fragility, beauty, and creativity of this act. The section is said through the voice of Tunisia (feminine noun in Arabic):

As you peered into the ashes,
You saw me.
Black, like your shining shoes.
I can’t bear to stare at you.
I am Tunisia, my brother.
Burnt.
I have no hair
No eyes
No ears
No lips

And as you can see, I may not return to life.
And I may return,
Frank, like a rooster's crow.
Don't give me a pen
My fingers ascended to the sky with the awesome fire.
Can you smell the burning flesh?
What will you tell your friends?
And who are they?
Did they not realize that winter was at autumn's door?
I am Middle Tunisia,
I live off contentment and rain.
I am Greater Tunisia
A destiny.
I am the Other Tunisia,
From my ashes, I create.

When Bouzizi died on January 4, the poet added the second section. Here, the effect on the poet and poetry becomes clear:

On the day you died . . .
I content myself with my poem and my cigarettes.
I let grow my hair
And my nails.
I weep and punctuate the poem with my tears.
The poem may be weeping with me,
Anguished,
Burning.

And on January 14, as defiant crowds stood chanting in front of the forbidding Ministry of the Interior, and news broke with Ben Ali's flight, Awlad Ahmed adds the third movement. This time, it is Bouazizi who is speaking:

In every season, red freedom grows.
I have nothing to lose but this system and its company.
If I were not alive [formulation intended], I would have burnt the
same ministry
To lighten up your revolution.
. . . .
Darkness in Saudi Arabia.

Awlad Ahmed continues to write on his Facebook Wall, in the newspapers, and is involved in the High Commission for the Realization of the

Goals of the Revolution, Political Reform, and Democratic Transition. (It should be noted that he was selected as national figure, specifically as a poet.) In July, he put together a festival, “Tunisia Poetry,” erecting a poetic parallel to the revolutionary movement by inviting Arab poets from Libya, Yemen, Syria, Egypt, and Palestine to tour, like rebellious *griots*, or troubadours, the notable places of the revolution in Tunisia: Sidi Bouzid, Kasserine, Sfax, and to end their journey at the iconic Carthage Festival. The festival brochure bears the words of the poet Mounaouar Smadeh:

> If you live amongst them, live for words.
> You are their witness and your words will testify for you.

It is clear, then, that Awlad Ahmed poeticized the revolution in a number of ways. But why has he positioned himself at the head of this “poetic event”? And to what extent can he be said to be Tunisia’s poet?

He likes to say that independent Tunisia is his little sister. Indeed, he was born in 1955, a year before the country’s independence on March 20, 1956. On this he says:

> This is me:
> I came to life early morning on a Saturday.
> The Franks were leaving and waving an incomplete victory sign.
> And I was a butterfly fluttering in poppy fields.
> After a year, Tunisia, the green from the North, became
> independent.
> Whose mother is she?
> I am her brother in milk, freedom and questioning.[17]

Yet while he may have meant he has no lessons to learn from the Tunisian state, he remains the product of the successes and failures of that same state. He was the product of the educational system set up, three years after his birth, by a writer he admires, Mahmud al-Mas‘adi.[18] His movement from Sidi Bouzid, his native region, to the capital for university studies, was crucial to his political education, his introduction to the Left, Tunisia’s vibrant student movement, and the literary scene. Like the café Tahta la-Sur for Al Douaji and the 1930s rebellious culture, Chez les Nègres

17. Awlad Ahmed, “Tilka la-tariqa al-tunisiayyya fi taqassi al-haqai’q,” statement delivered at the Arabic Poetry Colloquium in Sharja, United Arab Emirates, January 2005.
18. For an extended account of al-Mas‘adi’s work and influence, see Mohamed-Salah Omri, *Nationalism, Islam and World Literature: Sites of Confluence in the Writings of Mahmud al-Mas‘adi* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

was his training ground and main intellectual influence. There he met the Nietzsche enthusiast Salim Dawlat and the very popular poet Moncef Mezghenni, among others.[19] An accidental poet, he was. He came to poetry as if by a whim at the age of twenty-five, he jokes, “when Chebbi was already dead” after a career as a columnist in newspapers and magazines.[20] He spoke of his Bedouin roots, which deprived him of a childhood and prevented him from engaging in organized protest and resistance, such as unions and political parties.[21] He is a post-Messadian figure, one who was inspired by the founding figures (Chebbi and al-Mas‘adi, different as they are). Yet, he stood against the purism and discipline of both. He is, in a way, more like Al Douaji, raw talent and rebellious spirit, who lacked disciplined intellectual training but did not lack depth and rootedness.[22] In this sense, he marks continuity of both traditions, and it is in this that he represents a specifically Tunisian outlook/configuration of culture, of literature. All three converge in him.

Awlad Ahmed’s poem “Hymn of the Six Days,” recited in cafés, bars, homes, and universities, is dedicated to the events of 1984, and was banned and earned him a brief stay in prison under Bourguiba’s rule. At the beginning of Ben Ali’s reign, he published a collection of poems and two other books, and had even gained the trust of the authorities to found the “House of Poetry [*bayt al-shi’r*]” in 1993, a unique institution in the Arab World at the time. Yet, this move continues to plague his reputation. This was not an isolated behavior among intellectuals, however. In fact, it was part of initial rallying behind the emerging regime and its promises of opening up social and political life. Many, like Awlad Ahmed, were ready to align themselves with Ben Ali at first. This climate did not last very long. Things turned for the worse, and he found himself marginalized again and targeted by all types of censorship, to the point he described Ben Ali’s era as a world of “constitutional waste and democratic lies.”[23] Ben Ali, indeed, played with the constitution at will while building a democratic facade through the media machine and with the approval of his allies in Europe and the United States.[24]

19. See Awlad Ahmed’s poem, “Al-Khuruj min maqha al-zunuj” [Leaving Chez les Nègres], April, 1988.
20. Awlad Ahmed, interview with Jami’at al-hurriyat, July 20, 2010, available at http://jamiatalhurriyat.org/ar/figures/presentation.php?IDfiche=7.
21. Awlad Ahmed, interview with Jami’at al-hurriyat, July 20, 2010.
22. Granara, “Ali al-Du’aji,” in *Essays in Arabic Literary Biography, 1850–1950*, 79–85.
23. Awlad Ahmed, interview with Jami’at al-hurriyat, July 20, 2010.
24. For more, see Beau and Tuquoi, *Notre Ami Ben Ali*.

In what follows, I will zero in on Awlad Ahmed's work in an attempt to account for the culture of protest and resistance before and during the January 14 revolution. By establishing links between his work and that of others, locally and within the Arab World, I draw attention to points of convergence as well as differences in protest poetry (and in conceptions of poetry more widely), as well as the role of a particular kind of intellectual. A wider point, resulting from an incursion into the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish in relation to Awlad Ahmed, is to highlight the tight link between conceptions of poetry and poetry's status in revolutionary change more widely. Why, indeed, do Darwish and Awlad Ahmed speak to the moment, whereas Adonis and al-Wahaybi, for example, do not, or do less? Can we learn something about modernism in Arabic poetry and about poetry as communal expression in the light of the ongoing revolution? In other words, what do these revolutions tell us about Arabic poetry, and the other way around?

I will be suggesting that Awlad Ahmed's poetry—and that of Darwish—can be understood as poetic parallels to these revolutions, particularly in the case of Tunisia and Awlad Ahmed.

***L'esprit du lieu*: A *Tunisian* Poet**

Call this the Arab Spring, as one might do, and justifiably so, but these remain strictly nation-state revolutions in conception, process, and immediate horizon. This is particularly true of the Tunisian Revolution, because there was nothing in the Arab region to emulate or be inspired by before it occurred. The implications are, of course, much wider, certainly in the Arab World but global, even. For such a local revolution, imagination had to be local. And it is here, I think, where local poetic sensibility, imaginary, and track record would prove most crucial, on the ground, so to speak. Any serious understanding of the revolution should bear that in mind. Awlad Ahmed is fiercely, even militantly, Tunisian in his references, language, and preoccupations. He has been so since the 1970s and has made only rare incursions into the Arab scene (a poem about Palestinian movements, occasioned by the 1988 intifadha, for example). His work has been a record of local history, especially its political side, ever since his famous "Hymn of the Six Days," to which I will return.

Awlad Ahmed is aware of this and, in fact, has tirelessly tried to maintain that he is Tunisia's poet. He told a journalist in 2005, "They [Tunisian people] continue to call me their poet. And I continue to call them my people who are impossible by day and accessible by night." He explains,

"At the darkest moments—when the state rewards its army with an armed stroll in the streets, factories, homes, and universities with the intention to remind us of its [*haybah*] prestige (and this happens approximately once every decade)—they [Tunisian people] find me on their side, injecting rhythm in their slogans, publicizing their surprising victories, then counting their dead and raising them to the position of martyrs and saints. I do so without paying attention to accusations of exaggeration or provincialism."[25] Unlike Chebbi, he did not have the chance to defend his country during colonialism, but the government of the independent state gave him a "burden heavier than under an occupied one."[26]

He feels vindicated by the January 14 revolution. In an open letter to the members of the interim government dated February 6, 2011, he writes, "The Tunisian Revolution has demonstrated that all my writings, from 1984 until today, have been right in mocking the rule of one man and of one party. . . . They are writings, which will continue in the same pace if in future a minister or a head of government wanted to play the role of a vertical god on this horizontal land."[27] When Bourguiba brutally repressed those who demonstrated against the rise in bread prices in January 1984, Awlad Ahmed captured the moment in his "Hymn," which was written in January–February 1984 and immediately banned. In the following lines, he refers to the two statues on the main street of Tunis, where the fourteenth-century historian Ibn Khaldoun, claimed by Tunisians as theirs, stands near the gate to the old city, while that of Bourguiba is located at the opposite end, toward the sea.

> Dear Ibn Khaldun!
> The City is too narrow for your stride.
> How often I have passed by your cloak of steel!
> And loathed my time!
> Shed the new idol!
> And write to the opposite idol what he is worth!
> Say what you please:
> "Your horse has stopped
> But your arm continues to welcome strangers."

25. Awlad Ahmed, "That Tunisian Way of Investigating a Person," statement delivered at the Sharja Poetry Festival, 2005.
26. Personal interview with Awlad Ahmed, Tunis, July 22, 2011.
27. See Awlad Ahmed's Facebook page, available at http://www.facebook.com/awlad.ahmed.

Say what you please.
For we are destined to last
And he is doomed to rust.[28]

The poem foretold Bourguiba's demise but also drew a strikingly uncanny picture of Ben Ali's flight under people pressure, more than thirty years later. It ends with a visionary oracle:

Run so that I will not kill you!
For today is mine
And yesterday is yours.
Run so that I will not kill you!
For the land is mine
And the sea is yours.
Run so that I will not kill you!
For the land is mine,
The sea is mine.
And God is yours.
Run so that I will not kill you!
For the land is mine,
The sea is mine,
God is mine.
And the grave is yours.

At the time, people's anger was channeled, even initiated sometimes, by powerful institutions and activists. Awlad Ahmed was one of those who stood against the state and close to such institutions, most prominently the UGTT, the formidable trade union, founded by Farhat Hached on January 20, 1946, which has played a crucial role as locus of resistance and refuge for activists of all orientations, down to the present time. Awlad Ahmed's "The Trade Union General Manifesto" tells of his intertwined history with militants from UGTT and his time in jail in their company in 1985:

I toured all your prisons
And now I must stand up and confess:
I am the quality wine on your table
The flowers
The porcelain.
The prison walls are my mirror

28. Awlad Ahmed, *Hymn of the Six Days*, 40.

The movement of shade my watch.
When my brothers speak up
The journey and the goals draw nearer.
A trade unionist
I confess.
Disciplined
And different.
Dawn light is upon me
And this night is waning.

He continues recording the simple pleasures of a prisoner, baskets of food from relatives, and the poet's own special needs:

The first basket came
But my pen was not there.
Poetry was pulled out like a sword . . .
So I went home,
To my dream.
I opened the other basket
My son wasn't there.
Warm tears welled up in my eyes . . .
So I kissed the ground of my country.[29]

The poem closes with a cheer and a celebration of imminent victory:

Enough!
It's enough!
I toured all your prisons,
And now I must stand up and confess:
I am the recorded victories in your defeats.
I am the seashells.
The creaking of the door is my clock,
The face of water my mirror.
And when my brothers take a stand,
"Honorables" and honor come tumbling.
(Tunis—Gourjani Prison, November 1985)[30]

29. The refrain is repeated: "A trade unionist / I confess. / Disciplined. / And different. / Dawn light is upon me / And this night is waning."
30. Awlad Ahmed, *Laysa li mushkilah*, 27. "Honorable" (*al-shurafa'*) is a self-designation of dissident trade unionists who betrayed their union and comrades in the UGTT in the early 1980s and set up a pro-government union afterwards.

Many trade unionists will recognize their plight here. But the poem is important in another respect as well. It reveals one characteristic of Awlad Ahmed's poetry, namely narrativity. Ali Abbasi links it to the political nature of Awlad Ahmed's poetry and its effect on Tunisian readers.[31] Abbasi shows how Awlad Ahmed's poetry is hybrid, combining elements of the epic and the lyric, using narration or narrativization to increase the readability of his work. Abbasi concludes that the main objective of narrative hybridization is located, in Awlad Ahmed, less at the level of expressivity as it is at the level of reception. "The image is often motivated by its communicative performance" (120). One element of this readability is intertextuality. For example, the title "Hymn of the Six Days" references the Quranic six days of creation but also recalls the six-day war or the six days of repression and uprising, known as the Bread Revolt of January 1984, mentioned above. Awlad Ahmed uses an intertextuality that guarantees a certain aesthetic transgressive beauty (at the generic and ideological levels) and declines the desire to be read in relation to the Quran, for example. The use of narrative discourse within the poetic discourse is itself an ideological act. It is also an aesthetic capable of giving back to literature a certain human potency without diminishing its literariness. In addition, poetry, or literature in general, remains (tributary to) part of a historicity (133–34). Awlad Ahmed's poetry is "a writing that is committed to the here and now" (129). It is committed to Tunisia and its present. Through narrative, one detects stories, allusions to historical events, and linkages that root the poem to local history. The roots of this method, I argue, run across modern Arabic poetry as a whole. As we will see, Mahmoud Darwish, under whose influence Awlad Ahmed fell early on, uses a similar technique, and is motivated by similar aims, with a focus on Palestine, of course.

Performing the Political

The key to the popularity of Awlad Ahmed's poetry is its performability. And key to its popularity and performability are its orality and rhythm. Both features come from a conception of poetry and its role in history that Awlad Ahmed shares with Darwish. Both poets have been, in turn, affected by their practice of poetry and politics alike, or rather their understanding of poetry as a political practice, and of politics as both a field of poetry and a danger to it. I will explain this point by an incursion into Darwish first.

31. Ali Abbasi, *Littératures tunisiennes, vers le renouvellement* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006); see the chap. "Poésie engagée: narrativation du poème!," 109–34. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically.

Mahmoud Darwish, iconic figure in poetry and resistance alike, emulated by countless poets, including Awlad Ahmed, has perhaps described best how poetry resists violence and war.[32] He says in a 2003 interview, "I discovered, rather late, that poetry cannot resist or oppose war using the latter's weapons or its language. It can do so only with the opposite of war, its fragile opposite. It fights war with human fragility; with the stare of the victim in the eyes of his persecutor, without the latter understanding what the victim is saying; with grass scattered by the roadside; with children playing in the snow. . . ."[33] Darwish, who continually tried to renew his poetic art with every new collection, came to the conclusion that the distinctiveness of poetry resides in the lyric. "We have an enduring longing for the beginning of poetry, which is the lyric, recitation, dance, and the desolation of space or its quietness. We always want something heard. For this reason, I still cannot understand the modern Arab anger against lyricism [*ghina'iyyah*]."[34] Darwish is alluding to a specifically Arab debate about modernism in poetry that started in the 1950s and continues today. He adds, "I don't understand the definition of lyric in Arabic poetry. In other cultures, the lyric is neither the dramatic nor the epic. For us, the lyric is linked automatically with romanticism; we link the lyric to singing and *tatrib* [pleasurable music and song]. Music is a pillar of poetry. We like to hear. Touching a text with our eyes is not sufficient. Modernist Arabic poetry also excludes feelings. I accept all open experiments in poetry. But in the end when we read poetry at night, we don't look at these books. We, like the rest of the world, do not like a poetry we can't hear" (73).

Darwish explains his art: "It is not the idea or the image that makes me write. When the idea and the image take their rhythm, I know that I am able to write" (68). He then works this rhythm into an "architectural" form. He usually starts with a line and writes the poem, then rewrites it several times into a structure. (For this reason, he says, he destroys his manuscripts [93–94]). "Language, the unconscious, and the intersection of tem-

32. Awlad Ahmed wrote in praise of Darwish in 1993: "My love for you is an instinct. . . . / I will happily praise you for free / And ridicule your enemies for a fee" (from "Hama'im ila Mahmoud Darwish," in *Al-Wasiyyah*, 89).

33. Awlad Ahmed, interview with Abbas Bidhoun, *al-Safir*, November 12, 2003. See *Mahmoud Darwish: We Will Be What We Want*, ed. Muhannad Abdelhamid (Ramallah: Ministry of Culture, 2008), 77. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically.

34. For a detailed account of the development of modern Arabic poetry, see Salma Khadra Jayyusi, *Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry*, 2 vols. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977). See also her *Modern Arabic Poetry: An Anthology* (New York: Columbia University, 1987).

poralities produce a better poem than one planned in advance" (68). Part of this mix, a necessary part, for Darwish, is history, particularly lived history. In an interview with Abdu Mazin in *al-Hayat* on December 14, 2004, he says, "I try to alleviate the pressure of the historical moment on the aesthetics of poetry [*jamaliyyat al-shi'r*], without discarding the historical condition" (87). "The best part of the struggle between life and death is to side with life" (100). One way of recording history is narration, mentioned above in the case of Awlad Ahmed. "My poetic work is to write meter as if it is narrated and to write prose as if it is sung" (91). "This is the equation, indeed this is the dialogue between poetry and prose" (91). In sum, Darwish asserts that modernity should be linked to the liberationist project, on the one hand; and to the aesthetics of Arabic poetic tradition, without which there can be no real Arab poetic modernity (102).

These ideas bear striking presence in Awlad Ahmed's poetry as well is his pronouncements on the art of poetry. The poem "I'qa'" (Rhythm) encapsulates his understanding of poetic composition, poetry's relationship to politics and to the poetic past, all in one:

> With what did the ancestors write their poems?
> With carrot roots.
> With which branch of the tree did the prophets copy the scriptures?
> With the feathers of dead birds.
> And how do you write?
> With my toes . . .
> With my toes, I tap on the soft earth
> Without a prior rhythm,
> Like a wild horse.
> As soon as a rhythm is formed
> or the wings of an image grow,
> letters drop on the page
> and scatter on its white
> the way ignorant soldiers
> spread across the deserts of the Middle East.[35]
> (*Al-Wasiyya*, 8)

35. The poem continues: "Do you punctuate your letters and sentences? / Never. / Punctuation is the movement of a falcon from top to bottom. / And I have a fear of falling down after each dot. / And I fear even more rising after each fall and finding out that I have nothing to do. / I am the horizontal / Happy with the multitude of dead horses which lie in front of me."

While the first two lines celebrate rootedness of ancient poets, the subsequent ones deride prophets for being mere copyists of a claimed divine inspiration, using dead birds. The poet's association with life (wild horses, flying wings) links him with the ancestors' raw poeticity (carrot roots). Politics and satirical allusion are never far, even as he discusses the art of poetry, as demonstrated by the reference to soldiers in the desert. Through the collection (*Al-Wasiyya* [2002]), it becomes clear that the five pillars of poetry for him are: rhythm, which he sees as primary, spontaneous, and close to life; being quarrelsome, by resisting the pleasure of the text and the pleasure of the reader; open space; mood: to be free to the point of sadism; and lying in language but seizing the moment of truth. He sums all this up in "By Way of Keeping Spirits Up" (June 1990):

> What is poetry, in the end?
> Let us say . . .
> It is a linguistic speculation
> Whose aim is to assist power in its downfall.
> (*Al-Wasiyya*, 20)

Like Darwish, but operating within a much more divided and divisive cultural environment, fed by the climate of suspicion and minor cultural wars between state writers and opposition ones, and the latter among themselves, Awlad Ahmed, often opened fire against his fellow poets and their understanding of poetry. In the poem "We Are Happy" ("su'ada"), written in 1997–1998, he condemns censorship and takes a dig at "Sufi," or metaphysical poets. The poem itself records its historical moment (end of 1990s Tunisia) and comments on it in an ironic and playful tone, using dense imagery and a striking rhythm.

> We are happy with our rulers:
> They return words to our throat
> So that we choke.
> . . . .
> Happy with people of culture:
> They repair shrines
> And photocopy Sufi orders.[36]

One category of poets, in particular, earns the poet's scorn and biting humor. In "The Greatest Poet," he writes,

36. Mohamed Sgaier Awlad Ahmed, *Muswaddat watarn: mukhtarat shi 'riyyah* [A nation in draft form: Selected poems], unpublished manuscript.

Before joining the Party, the Greatest Poet
Shaved his beard, cut his hair and visited the saints.
He wished, naked, and in a cloud of incense
That the elephant dies at dawn, then the rest of the poets followed.
He had entered the Party, like an ant, through a tiny hole.
And as he walked, a gigantic shoe walked above his head.
After he was repeatedly trampled in alleyways, and died,
The ant wrote poetry . . . in praise of the Greatest Poet.
(*Al-Wasiyyah*, 97)

Yet, the rhythm, performativity, and closeness to the rhythms of daily language in Awlad Ahmed's poetry are due to more than a method of composition. They can be understood with reference to orality. In fact, Awlad Ahmed is a rare poet whose poetry is easily read, sung, and memorized by even low-educated audiences. This latter quality relates, I venture to say, to its very composition: it is an oral composition based on repetition, rhythm, fragments, formulas, without being formulaic. It often uses simple language, strikingly memorable phrases and utterances, close to the rhythm of daily language, without being colloquial.[37] The title of the poem "Laysa li mushkila," for example, is a standardized phrase whose roots remain visible to the Tunisian speaker. An example of oral composition governs the poem "Butterfly," mentioned above. The poem is a construction to which one might add at will, bearing in mind parallel phrases:

I am Middle Tunisia,
I live off contentment and rain.
I am Greater Tunisia
A destiny.
I am the Other Tunisia,
From my ashes, I create.

37. Awlad Ahmed is not unique in the context of Tunisian poetry. Poet and academic Tahar Hammami and others were extremely influential in the culture of the protest movement. Wahaybi comes down hard on this orality and links it to the past, rather than to modernity, going so far as rejecting its poeticity altogether. See "Shu'ara' tunis al-muhdathun fi dhakirat al-mustaqbal" [Tunisian modern poets in the memory of the future], *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, February 27, 2002. Wahaybi does not put Awlad Ahmed in this category. See Al-Tahir al-Hammami, *Al-Hisar* [Siege] (Tunis: al-dar al-tunisiya li al-nashr, 1972); *Al-shams tala'at al-kohubza* [The sun rises like a loaf of bread] (Tunis: al-matba'ah al-sari'a, 1973); Munsif Al-Mizghinni, *'ayyash* [Ayyash] (Tunis: Dimitir, 1982). The term *ayyash* also designates someone who is trying to make ends meet. For the so-called universalist trend, see Munsif al-Wahaybi, *Alwah* [Tablets] (Tunis: Dimitir, 1982).

In Arabic, the terms *Middle*, *Greater*, and *Other* (*Wusta*, *Kubra*, *Ukhra*, respectively) are effective repetitions of one structure with minor differences in letters but vast differences in meaning. Likewise, he tends to use refrains, as in the poem "General Unionist Manifesto," mentioned above, as well as in many others. In this, Awlad Ahmed is popular in the basic sense. His text, situated between the two—oral colloquial poetry and written modern poetry, recalling the two registers and the two poeticities simultaneously—disturbs the purity of both cultural practices but also inserts itself in their two audiences. While this guarantees wide readability and performance (witness how many of his poems have been performed by singers!), it makes a strong political case for the relevance of poetry, even its potency, when crowds need pithy expression of demands, poetic articulation of desires, or memorable lines. His 1988 poem, "Nuhibbu al-bilad," has a rap quality to it and did not feel alien to the rising rap generation of Tunisia, prior to and in the aftermath of the revolution.

No poem, other than Chebbi's "Will to Live," has had more popular success and become part of the language of the country than "Nuhibbu al-bilad," written on April 4, 1988 (published in *South of the Water*). So proverbial it has become that it would be difficult for non-Tunisians to realize it is even being used. The poem was made even more famous by singers, from Hedi Guella in 1988 to Mohamed Bhar and others, and emulated by many.[38] Like a nursery rhyme in its simple rhythm, it is easily memorized but remains difficult to capture in translation. I chose the term *land* for *balad*, which also means "country," to keep the shared sounds *l* and *d* in both words in an attempt to transfer the drum beat rhythm of the original.

We love the land
As no one loves the land.
Morning
Evening,
Before morning,
After evening,
And on Sunday.
And if they kill us,
The way they killed us
and if they scatter us,

38. On pastiches of "Nuhibbu al-bilad," see http://majdah.maktoob.com/vb/majdah189248/. As a song by Muhamad Bhar, see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xcc8FCOhMPQ; for Hedi Guella's version, see http://www.facebook.com/#!/profile.php?id=100000670533616. Used as a forum, see http://youtube.com/watch?v=TlJ6kPE1Gko.

The way they scattered us
We will return as invaders to this land.
Trees will return to our fields
The moon will return to our nights
Martyrs will cry out:
Peace!
Peace!
upon those who took a stand.
We love the land
So that no one else loves the land.
And if they kill us
And if they scatter us,
We will return as invaders . . . to this very land.

This love of country and call for reclaiming it explains why January 14 was seen as a liberation. Yet, in other writings, Awlad Ahmed links this liberation with a specific view of society and way of life. And it is here that his other lifelong battle is seen. Awlad Ahmed has had a troubled relationship with Islamists, ever since they started gaining social ground in Tunisia in the late 1970s. One example of this is his magazine article, "al-idyulujiya wa al-tiknulujiya" (Ideology and technology), in *al-Mawqif* (September 4, 1984), which continues to infuriate his enemies. In it he rails against loudspeakers and technology in the call for prayer, which "disturbs the sleep of children, the sick, seculars, tourists, and Muslims who don't pray." But the poet's famous encounter with religious restriction prompted accusations of heresy by Shaykh al-Qaradawi, mentioned above. Awlad Ahmed responded with the well-known poem "Prayers," in which he uses idiomatic phrases from legal Islamic literature, references to the Quran, and the prayer format to mock his accusers. The poem starts with a mock supplication:

Dear God, help me against them.
They wounded my camel
And allowed my blood to be shed
In houses on whose carpets you forbid blood to be shed.

The phrase "they wounded my camel" recalls the verse in which the prophet Salih's people killed his camel because he opposed their beliefs. The poem ends with a satirical parable:

I threw a book at them
It turned into a snake

Bit them all
And turned into a book again.
God most high!
Is it not possible to say I am a prophet?

More recent encounters between the poet and polemicist Awlad Ahmed and Islamists have become more frequent since January 14. He perceives both the Salafi and the Nahdha Parties as forces of counterrevolution. A prominent argument is made in his long newspaper article, “The Three Snakes of the Revolution,” meaning the media, the former ruling party RCD, and the Nahda party (*al-Sabah*, April 26, 2011). Hizb al-Tahrir responded to him in “The Seven Viruses” (*al-Sabah*, May 1, 2011), and another response came from an Islamist academic under the title “The Snakes of Awlad Ahmed” (*al-Sabah*, May 17, 2011). His pronouncements against what he perceived as a key danger to the revolution—Islamist rule—continue almost daily on his website and elsewhere.

Conclusion

Awlad Ahmed and Darwish approach poetry and politics in comparable ways. Yet, Awlad Ahmed is certainly no Darwish. His poetry lacks the extent and range, depth and diversity, of the Palestinian poet. While Darwish, through experimentation and wide reading, expresses shades of meaning in unmatched intimacy with the Arabic language, Awlad Ahmed translates for his people what they want, or need, to say in a poetic idiom they can recognize, remember, and use. In this sense, he represents but does not guide. And here is perhaps why he is a resistance poet, not a revolutionary one. Awlad Ahmed worked within a situation that he has accurately diagnosed as a time when “intellectuals ran away from their roles to business; others grew old and tired; perspectives were closed; individualism encouraged; constitutional lies and democratic waste in the form of drowning the country with false institutions were legion.”[39] This explains, taken more widely, why the Tunisian Revolution and the others that followed were not led by intellectuals. But without looking at the preceding culture of resistance and protest, we will not be able to accurately understand the process that unfolded or the debates now under way in this transitional phase about the imagined future society.

One could say that poetry, in the early 1980s, was witnessing a diver-

39. Awlad Ahmed, interview with Jami’at al-hurriyat, July 20, 2010.

gence between two main tendencies. The poet and critic Munsif Al-Wahayibi calls these the written mode and the oral one. In terms of content, poets engaged in a universalist, and often Sufi, trend, or a realist one. The first drew its inspiration from the written cultural heritage (*turath*) while the other engaged with daily life. Poets of the second trend aimed at reaching the public, hence their focus on reading and performance (Moncef Mezghenni is a good example of this, and his collection *'Ayyash* [1982] remains one of the most influential works in the post-Chebbi era). The forerunner of what might be termed "realist" poetry was the movement al-Tali'a (Vanguard) and its main protagonists (Tahar al-Hammami), who aimed to "Tunisify" poetry in its language and subjects. This was part of a wider local focus on territorial nationalism in Tunisia, whose main advocates included former prime minister Muhammad Mzali and former culture minister and novelist Bashir Ben Slama. Awlad Ahmed was witness to the debates in the early 1980s and was clearly affected by them.

This seeming Tunisian debate on poetry was part of a wider Arab one, whose main protagonists would largely cluster around Adonis, on the one hand, and a group of other poets, whose most prominent representative was perhaps Mahmoud Darwish, in broad terms. This argument is rather sketchy and general, but it constitutes a necessary step in any analysis of how poetry and resistance are related. It also alerts us to the broader implications of such a debate on both poetry and resistance. One layer of this is the issue of modernity in Arabic poetry, which is not my main concern here. I am interested, rather, in how conceptions of poetry relate to conceptions of justice and freedom, and from there to art and life in the Arab World. Indeed, how are we to understand the fact that Darwish and Awlad Ahmed insist that, if they had to choose between life and poetry, they would choose life? In reality, of course, they did not see the two—poetry and life—as irreconcilable entities. They simply saw poetry as a living being and life as a poetic project. Their projects, different as their situations have been, are articulations of a poetic nation and a national poetics at the same time. And there is a difference between the two. Darwish saw in Palestine's struggle and resistance a poetic act. On his part, Awlad Ahmed refers to "Tunisia-poetry" and to "revolution-poem." Darwish also set out to establish a specifically Palestinian poetry, a poetry that inscribes the journey of Palestine, its mythology, disasters, and victories, even when, or perhaps I should say, specifically when, he draws on global mythology, symbols, and poetry. These are always determined by their relevance and proximity to Palestine. Awlad Ahmed turns daily life, proverbs, local concepts, into

poetry, embeds them in it, poetizes them. Yet, neither poet can be seen as nationalist in the strict sense. Their horizons remain the human at large. Their work does not aim to render what it means to be human in Palestinian or Tunisian terms, but rather to defend, celebrate, or bring about, as the case may be, the humanity of their fellow Palestinians and Tunisians. One explanation of this could be their shared roots in the Arab left, broadly speaking, which kept in its sight global dimensions of local issues. Another is their understanding of the role of poetry in the process of human freedom. And it is here where the humanist and global significance of the Tunisian and Arab revolutions resides.

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