



Chanting Tahreer and Compassion: People as Poetry

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Abstract

The contention of this essay is that the current Arab revolutions of the so-called Arab Spring must be seen in the context of broader resistance in the colonized Muslim world to global political modernity. This essay focuses especially on the constitutive role that poetry plays in resistance to colonialism and violence. After situating this general phenomenon of poetic resistance in a global context with reference to Abdelrahman Munif, Mahmoud Darwish and Langston Hughes, I examine the deep constitutive role of poetry in the revolutions of Tunisia and Egypt in 2010-11. I illuminate the beauty and meaningfulness of the poetry in the quotidian experience of those peoples making revolutions. Poetry runs through the lives, the feelings, and, importantly, the politics of their world, a world that includes pride in Arab values and solidarity against the ongoing violence and injustices of authoritarianism and occupation. My dwelling and meditation on poetry helps elaborate a vision of the new Arab revolts.

So take my mother's land by sword, I won't sign my name to the
peace treaty between the murdered and his killer.

Mahmoud Darwish

People who shut their eyes to reality simply invite their own destruction, and anyone who insists on remaining in a state of innocence long after that innocence is dead turns himself into a monster.

James Baldwin

[1] In the waves of the current protests and revolts sweeping the Arab world, it is not only people who are flooding the streets but also poetry, songs, prayers and stories transmitted over generations. In the following, I want to dwell on the fusion between *a-shari'* (the street) and *a-sha'ir* (the poet), for the poets' visions have unquestionably played a constitutive role in resistance. After all, poetry belongs to the streets, teahouses, and living rooms, rather than only lecture halls and libraries. Its beauty endlessly adorns our conversations and our political dissent, and its ethical calls set the rhythm of our arguments. It is so common throughout the Arab world to hear people close their line of thought by stating: "as the poet says..." Often the name of the quoted poet is not even mentioned, as the source of the quote is not as important as the fact that the cited verses constitute moral references. Drawing on Mahmoud Darwish's words, our poets grumble, ask questions, and rub one phrase against another to ignite a rhythm to help us walk at our pace (2009a: 25). This walking pace of poetry, the origin of meter, interweaves with our daily-walking and talking meters and is

constitutive of our way of life. The ubiquitous presence of poetry in the current uprisings—wherein even dissenting ministers and diplomats respond to journalists’ questions by quoting long poems—testifies to its vital role in critical times. So what stories does this poetry narrate that makes it as necessary as air, as joyful as women’s ululation, as magical as jumping into fire and rising up like a phoenix?ⁱ What open secrets has it named? And what concept of the human has it insistently dragged from our guts, making it part of a future that we ache to have and to be?

Predecessors to Arab Revolutions and the Global Condition of Coloniality

Abdelrahman Munif’s *Cities of Salt*, a monumental novel that deals with the Oil Encounter, recounts the violent advent of global political and economic modernity to the Arabian Peninsula.ⁱⁱ Munif describes in many moving passages how people had to watch the wheels of giant bulldozers uproot their trees, oases, and a whole way of being in the world. The movements of the machines translated the will and intentions of American politicians, Orientalists, geologists, engineers, oil businessmen etc. While these newcomers did not think much about what they considered to be a temporary, necessary violence (since they were after all going to erect a modern nation-state and, in the long run, equip people with the gift of citizenship), the local people, forced recipients of these gifts, were outraged

and speechless. Najma al-Mithqal, a healer and fortuneteller, one of the many baffled by the new destructive forces, uttered the following prophecies:

From Wadi al-Jenah to al-Dalle' and from al-Sariha to al-Mataleq, the world will not be the world. In the desert people will look for the stars but the stars will not rise. They will look for a caravan but the caravan will not come back. They will cry out but no one will answer them or hear them ... Roads will be as hard as hearts, feeling and knowing nothing.

From Wadi al-Jenah to al-Dalle' and from al-Sariha to al-Mataleq, and far beyond, the honorable man will be weak and lose his rights and the bastard will eat his portion and those of others but not out of hunger ... and the liar's voice will fill the roads and travel from town to town....

At the end of that time the people will arise, and oppression will not last, and there will be tales and tales that people will tell their children's children (1987: 164-65).

Najma's words reflect a consciousness that is at once shocked and awed by the new changes that portend a huge campaign of violence and theft and yet stands resistant to them. She and millions of oppressed people in her part of the world have always had their own readings of the modern state and the relations of power. However, unlike Najma, the foreseer, the people she

warns here have come to know—through shared memories and painful experiences—what perhaps marks the history of modernity everywhere. As Dipesh Chakrabarty has put it: “shadows fall between the abstract values of modernity and the historical process through which the institutions of modernization come to be built” (2002: 80). No wonder that both in the fictional world of *Cities of Salt* as well as in so many real Arab villages, cities and camps, people have been resisting (neo)-colonialism, dispossession, and authoritarianism, even as their resistance might take forms that are not always recognizable through the norms set by the dominant (Nandy, 1988: 96-112).

[3] Resistance to the ever-swelling avalanches of injustices is one simple reason why millions of Tunisian and Egyptian peoples, now followed by so many others in several Arab countries, have taken to their streets. Their aim is no less than freedom from their corrupt and unjust regimes, whose enlistment in the service of transnational imperialism led by the United States includes keeping peoples considered to be surplus births under control. Millions of people who have been demonstrating for weeks in *Maidan at-Tahreer* (Liberation Square) in Cairo and in so many other places in Egypt and beyond are all plainly demanding “*irhal*” (leave).ⁱⁱⁱ What is being asked to go is not only a tyrant President, his corrupt regime and his police state, but a whole *Kali Yuga* in which a reign of imperial terror and unspeakable

violence have been committed, in which peoples' dignities have been butchered and the earth savaged.

[4] Amid all this violence coursing throughout the Arab world, poets have been in the forefront. They have not only been articulating cries of revolt against global political modernity's shadows, but they have also been shedding light on and celebrating millions of ordinary people's traditions and beliefs embedded in their ways of being and moral selves. Poet, which in Arabic means s/he who knows, senses and feels, chronicles the grievances, nurses the wounds and nourishes the soul. The poet is the *Ummah's* conscience, we say. His or her words are therefore deeply constitutive of political dissent and resistance, *Muqawamat*. Undoubtedly, one of the poems that has inflected the Arab quotidian experience, is Darwish's "*jawaz as-safar*" (Passport, 1970) set to music and sung by Lebanese Marcel Khalife in 1976.^{iv} I remember passionately singing that poem as a child in Rabat, Morocco, before I knew even what a passport was and who Darwish and Khalife were. "*Jawaz as-safar*" attends to some of the deeper wounds, namely the occupation of Palestine, the institutionalization of borders/barbed boundaries, passports and the culture of museums that shamelessly exhibit what it considers its victory on dying and defeated life practices and relations. The poem says:

They did not recognize me in the shadows

That suck away my color in this passport
And to them my wound was an exhibit
For a tourist who loves to collect photographs

...

All the birds that followed my palm
To the door of the distant airport
All the wheat fields
All the prisons

All the white tombstones
All the barbed boundaries
All the waving handkerchiefs
All the eyes

Were with me,

But they dropped them from my passport.^v

Since what is dropped from the poet's passport, what is dropped on his environment, and what is put on display in exhibitions (and libraries and museums) brazenly convey the technologies of modern violence that are global in their outreach, Darwish, like so many other Arab poets, easily crosses boundaries to address the global condition of coloniality. In his "The 'Red Indian's' Penultimate Speech to the White Man," Darwish says, through a Native American, what nearly every colonized knows: power is obscene

and it is nothing but violence. It is the establishment of the self through the complete eradication of the other. This is the founding violence of colonialism and dispossession (see epigraph). In keeping with the fanatic spirit of colonial practices, the killers shamelessly ask the murdered to consider this founding violence as an act of nature, with which they need to come to terms. Hence the use of the category “peace treaty” instead of “justice treaty!”

[5] Poets defiantly expose the local powerful forces and their violence. Many are the poems that disclose the sultans’ excesses and their police states’ creativity in controlling the surplus births. Right after the 1967 war, Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani composed twenty verses entitled “Footnotes to the Book of Setback,” in which he castigated the sultan’s abuses and his police state. An excerpt of this poem that travelled like wind throughout the Arab world, by means of the word of the mouth, says:

If I knew I’d come to no harm,
 And could see the Sultan,
 This is what I would say:
 “Sultan,
 Your wild dogs have torn my clothes
 Your spies hound me
 Their eyes hound me

Their noses hound me
Their feet hound me
They hound me like Fate
Interrogate my wife
And take down the name of my friends.
Sultan,
When I came close to your walls
And talked about my pains,
Your soldiers beat me with their boots,
Forced me to eat my shoes.
Sultan,
You lost two wars.
Sultan,
Half of our people are without tongues,
What's the use of a people without tongues?
Half of our people
Are trapped like ants and rats
Between walls."
If I knew I'd come to no harm
I'd tell him:
"you lost two wars
you lost touch with children."

...

We want an angry generation

To plough the sky

To blow up history

To blow up our thoughts.

We want a new generation

That does not forgive mistakes

That does not bend.

We want a generation of giants (1986: 120-21).

From a thematic point of view, such poetry is not the monopoly of Arab poets. Here is African-American poet Langston Hughes talking about his own empress whose obscenities have reached far and wide. Hughes notes in "Columbia" (1920):

Columbia

My dear girl,

You really haven't been a virgin for so long

It's ludicrous to keep up the pretext.

You're terribly involved in world assignments

And everybody knows it.

... You have taken the sweet life

Of all little brown fellows

In loin cloths and cotton trousers.

When they've resisted,
you've yelled, "Rape,"
At the top of your voice
And called for the middies
To beat them up for not being gentlemen
And liking your crooked painted mouth (2001: 230-31).

[6] If one puts Hughes in conversation with Darwish, one can read "Columbia" as expressing a grasp of the global condition of coloniality that can see, understand and expect Darwish's act of resistance through a Native American's declaration, "I won't sign my name to the peace treaty between the murdered and his killer." Hughes acknowledges that power is met with resistance (and I would add that the push back happens right from the very beginning); however, as everybody knows, a crucial part of the functioning of power is to manage the coding of that resistance and produce it as immoral, fanatic, and extremist. "Columbia yells" through its loud categories that construct threat as what the other does to the self, "rape!" and calls for more violence: beating, burning and bombing... A very familiar, pathological scenario that has nauseated so many protestors in Arab streets. "Columbia" recently doesn't even bother to put the painting on her mouth: it is glaringly dripping blood...

Poet/a-Sha'ir and the Street/a-Shari': Arms in Arms with Poetry

During the siege of Beirut in 1982, as shells fell through the sky, on the sea and pine mountains around him, Darwish spoke of a desire to sing, to find the language that can bear witness to the power there is in "us," the besieged and the bombed, to retain our humanness, our souls even as we are bombed by the technologies of modern violence. He wrote:

What am I searching for? A fullness of gunpowder and an indigestion of the soul's anger. The rockets penetrate my pores and come out safe... Yet I want to break into song. *Yes, I want to sing to this burning day.* I do want to sing. I want to find a language that transforms itself into steel for the spirit—a language to use against these sparkling silver insects, these jets. I want to sing. I want a language that I can lean on and that can lean on me, that asks me to bear witness and that I can ask to bear witness, to what *power there is in us to overcome this cosmic isolation.*

And I walk on (1995: 51-52, emphasis mine).

As Tunisians walked on, as they sang through the streets at the end of December 2010-January 2011, it was so fitting to see thousands of people marching "arms in arms with poetry." People and poetry together generated force and beauty. As Tunisians walked on, they chanted Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi's "The Will of Life," written in 1929 and published posthumously in

1955. "The Will of Life" belongs to the poems that bear witness to what desire and spirit there are in people to overcome the injustices heaped on them by France, which at that time called its power to inflict violence on the people it subjugated *la mission civilisatrice*. One of the widely chanted verses of this poem is:

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.
 For he who is not embraced by a passion for life
 will dissipate into thin air,
 At least that is what all creation has told me
 and what its hidden spirits declare.^{vi}

The Tunisian people's chant of their quintessential, anti-colonial poem, composed for their grandparents to resist "the nights" and "chains" of (French) colonialism, suggests that the fight against anti-life forces is not over yet. The culture of colonialism structured through the logic of few masters and masses of slaves has never vanished but mutated into a new form: vassal states, or what sociologist Fatima Mernissi calls "initiative-deprived states," serving an imperial order now led by the United States. Al-Shabbi's poem centered on people and their will-to-life blessed by all creation—except perhaps those who cannot relieve themselves from the

burden-to-subjugate—beautifully and powerfully captures what Tunisians were about to achieve: the ousting of a local dictator, who had the support of France and the United States, and the inspiration of a whole region to pour into the streets to end oppression. It is important to note that, like Darwish’s poetico-political quest during the siege of Beirut, al Shabbi does not claim to be the one who knows and therefore teaches what oppressed people should do to end the “nights” and break the “chains.” He simply uses the materiality of language to express and bear witness to what “all creation” has told him. It is in this sense that the poet names the open secret: after all the hidden spirits do not hide, but declare their desires and aspirations, which the poet defiantly captures and disseminate in poetic form.

[8] Similarly, in Cairo eighty year-old poet Ahmed Fouad Najm, better known as ‘*am* (uncle) Ahmed and the poet of the people, joined his fellow protestors in *Maidan a-Tahreer* who were already chanting his poetry. ‘*Am* Ahmed’s poetry had for decades not only tirelessly documented the obscenities of despotism, state violence and transnational relations of imperial power, but also prophesied its inevitable failure. ‘*Am* Ahmed is truly a family member to so many Arabs: I heard one of his poems sung by Shaikh Imam in early 1990s in Casablanca. I was impressed by his simple and rich language, which always produces the Arab common person as a

defiant subject, who will “determine where true morning lies.” Indeed, the very multitude of protestors throughout Egypt embodied his “I am the people.”

I am the people, marching, and I know my way
My struggle is my weapon, my determination my friend
I fight the nights and with my hopes’ eyes
I determine where true morning lies
I am the people, marching, and I know my way.
...
No matter how many prisons they build
No matter how much their dogs try to betray
My day will break and my fire will destroy
Seas of dogs and prisons out of my way.^{vii}

'Am Ahmed's words recall Darwish's last couplet of his popular "Identity Card" (1963), "Beware, beware of my hunger/And my anger" which adorned several banners and spoke the subtext for the unanimous demand: "The people want the regime to fall" (Darwish 1980: 21).

[9] Another poem performed in *Maidan a-Tahreer* was Hisham al-Jakh's "Joha" which spells out Arab governments' main function: overseeing (the smooth working of) the colonial project in accord with the requirements of the current world economy, which decrees that the masses of the

underemployed, unemployed, destitute young Arabs come to terms with their total insignificance in the world, starting in their own homeland. This is what the twenty-six-year old Mohamed Bouazizi, who set himself on fire, could not accept. What forgiveness is possible, when this total disdain of their humanity hits these young people's consciousness, probably when they are in their teens? Here are some of al-Jakh's words that have brought tears to so many of his listeners:

It is a ridiculous feeling

To feel that your *watan* is something weak

Your voice is weak

Your opinion is weak

...

And it is a ridiculous feeling

To be a symbol of beggary

...

I am the owner of the house

I live without reason

...

Our dignity is insulted

And the bite comes with humiliation

What does this mean... when I husk rice, a treasure being
burned

And when the *Ummah's* oil, a treasure being looted

... when your executioner crushes his own children,

And when your knowledge doesn't find anything to eat and flees,

What does it mean to raise our hands in peace for the sake of
the invaders?

...

What does it mean to be jailed for four years as a preventive
measure?

...

Tell me, why don't you feel our being and its preciousness?

I was going to gift you its sweetness.^{viii}

How can people be expected to accept these obscenities of dictators and imperialists! The listeners' sighs and tears indicate that "Joha's" woes have been the lot of so many generations. Written nearly forty years after Qabbani's "Footnotes to the Book of Setback," "Joha" laments that Egypt, a synecdoche for all Arab lands, has excellent expertise in terrorizing its people. School education is the first medium to instill fear in her children and produce "people without tongues" and later state violence watches over that "people [are] trapped like ants and rats between walls." Yet, even as "Joha" is a painful poem, its very utterances, that are swiftly memorized and recited

by people (including children), defiantly affirm the failure of the colonial project: people still have tongues and they are human. The ugliness and obscenities belong to power.

[10] Tamim al-Barghouti, a young, revered poet and political science professor, who was in Georgetown University at the time of the uprising, faxed to an Egyptian newspaper a poem with the title "O, Egypt, It is so Close!" This was during the days when the Egyptian government shut down the internet at the end of January-early February 2011. His poem was immediately photocopied and distributed in *Maidan a-Tahreer*. When the protestors managed to put two huge, makeshift screens to project al-Jazeera's live broadcast, Tamim was "asked to read the poem like almost every two hours."^{ix} Inspired by the events in Egypt, the poem aimed to do what poetry always does in this world: insist on *sumud* and *muqawamat*, steadfastness and resistance. His poem in vernacular Egyptian, immediately set to music and sung by artist Mustapha Said in *Maidan a-Tahreer* says:

O Egypt, it's so close

...

Nothing remains of power but a few batons

If you don't believe it, come down to the square and see

The tyrant only exists in the imagination of his subject

Everyone who stays at home after this will be a traitor.^x

[11] If al-Barghouti has repeated an idea in his many interviews, articles and poems I have heard or read, it is “the tyrant only exists in the imagination of his subject.” In an article entitled “A Nation of Ululation” (*Ashuruq*, January 18, 2011) al-Barghouti thanks Tunisia for its priceless gifts to all who live under tyranny and reiterates that “the dominant exists only in the imagination of the dominated and that some dominant are a burden even on one’s imagination.” One of the gifts of the Tunisian revolution, according to al-Barghouti, is proving the fragility and precariousness of the tyrant. The poet draws our attention to the obvious: the Tunisian people were able to oust Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali by (merely) rejecting the intended message of the violence unleashed by his forces. His batons, bullets, prisons and death sentences loudly declared that people refused the intended message of the violence unleashed by the ruler: “Go back home and submit to my will for I am too powerful and invincible. I can break you: I did it many times!” The dominant’s application of causality discloses an interesting twist: even as it exudes self-confidence and resoluteness, it desperately appeals to the oppressed to stretch their imagination and validate the shameless expectation to surrender to the dominant’s will.

[12] Certainly Tunisians, and oppressed peoples in general, have complied several times, by dint of fear, but this January they did not go home. They

stayed firm and chanted "If, one day, a people desires to live," they must need undo the bloody ugliness of the causality that power hopes to maintain.^{xi} However, can one easily condemn/critique people, whose bodies have been beaten, crushed and penetrated by the tyrant's batons and bullets, if they end up sharing the imagination that validates his pathological wishes? Is it treason to obey him, as al-Barghouti says in his poem above? What has stopped the Damascene and Aleppine from taking to their streets immediately in large numbers? Is it treason, or the indiscriminate violence unleashed by the Syrian government?

[13] Al-Barghouti fully recognizes the unbearable messages the language of tyranny prints on the bodies it seeks to dominate. Moreover, he points out in his popular poem "Obvious Matter" that the language of tyranny is used not only by the master but also by the slave, a fact that complicates the obviousness of resistance and admits that not all subaltern subjects will necessarily oppose tyranny. However, he insists:

My Ummah I am not blind to the fracture in the gazelle
 She is lame, I know
 She is confused, I know
 She suffers all the aches of the time and she is
 Dismissed, whipped from every slave and master

I know, but I still don't see in all of this any excuse for your retirement.^{xii}

Al-Barghouti's verses acknowledge the scars, the wounds, the history of subjugation by slave and master but refuses, as he always does in his writings, to turn them into a list of weaknesses that set up the fatality of reconciling oneself to injustices. Even as al-Barghouti presents the gazelle's confusion as natural and understandable, he also posits *sumud* and *muqawamat* as natural and doable. Such a vision certainly reassures and mobilizes the *Ummah* whose very scars attest to its already defying acts, or at least attempts at defiance. No wonder the so-called Youth of the Revolution in Egypt, *Shabab a-Thawrat*, most of whom probably know al-Barghouti's poetry by heart, needed in such critical times his vision that has persistently foretold the victory of those who stand up to the unjust powers. Al-Barghouti felt their need, enthusiastically obliged and wrote "O, Egypt, It is so Close!"

[14] These poems that I got to see thanks to al-Jazeera's rolling cameras in both Tunisia and Egypt are by no means exceptional utterances. They represent a solid poetic tradition that has always chronicled the violence inflicted on Arabs' bodies and nurtured "the wound that does not bargain" (Darwish 1980: xi). Writing in 1979, Iraqi poet Saadi Youssef says in his poem "Friendship":

The police of Damascus kick us
And the Police of Iraq
And the Arabs' American police
And the English
And the French
And the Persian
And the Ottoman police
And the police of the Fatimid Caliphs...
Our families
Kick us,
Our naïve, good-hearted families,
Our murderous families.
We are the children of this madness.
Let's be whatever we wish (2002: 105-06).

[15] No wonder that it is common for so many Arabs, including myself, to ask our family, friends and neighbors whether they heard the latest poem released by our favorite poets. We know they are fearless: they will narrate the madness of the global and local beating, bulldozing, burning and bombing, even as this usually costs them a life-in-exile or frequent prison sentences. All the Arab poets I have mentioned so far have experienced one or the other, if not both, except, I believe, young al-Jakh.

[16] Moreover, besides holding the torch for social justice and dignity in the midst of the most violent and repressive regimes, these poets extend the invitation and articulate the vision “to be whatever we wish” in a language deeply constitutive of our unbargainable subjectivities. Darwish tells us:

Our poems are without colour,
 Without bite, without sound.
 If you do not carry the lamp from house to house,
 And if simple people understand not their meaning,
 It were best we scatter them to the winds
 And abide forever in silence (1980: xii).

And we memorize, chant, and are enchanted by, his poetry. Large is the number of the people who hold Darwish’s poem “Identity Card” as the one worthy of allegiance. This poem also popularly known with its first verse: “Write down! I am an Arab” sheds light on the non-negotiable in their being: pride, roots that took hold before the birth of time, descent from a family of the plow, patience amidst violence, the towering of the soul (*shumukha a-Nnafss*), not initiating attacks on others. The address on this ID is: “a village, remote, forgotten whose men are in the fields and quarry.” “Identity Card” ends with a warning to those who dare humiliate such people or make them angry... These certainly sound like fancy identity arrangements in comparison to the IDs that seal the social contract between a name with a

birth date, address and a state either armed to the teeth or on its knees. In the Arab world, Darwish's "Identity Card" has not only been popular throughout generations but it has also spawned several versions and rewritings made by other poets. Even as the immediate context of "Identity Card" is the Israeli occupation, the poem's lasting meaningfulness, for instance, to Egyptian protestors in 2011 attests to its expression of collective identity and politics of *sumud* and *muqawamat*.

[17] Zooming in on the nature of the poetry's voice, it clearly speaks with a sense of urgency. As "the time is night, the space seas of dogs and prisons" and the powers ceaselessly hurl their chains, poetry "carries the lamp from house to house," from soul to soul. Watch, for instance, on youtube al-Jakh's reading of "a-Ta'shirat" (The Visa) during his participation in January 2011 in *Prince of Poets* (similar in format to reality television shows such as *American Idol*), and see the beaming faces of his listeners, as if his poetic condemnation of the Arab leaders, colonial legacies, occupations, borders between Arab lands already frees them from these debilitating realities and paints tomorrow's political and cultural horizons.

[18] And poetry's vision doesn't stop there. In an interview by Najat Rahman, Darwish responds to her question about the role of poetry by pointing out: "Poetry might transform the reader's relation to his

surroundings.... Its role is to resist that which is an obstacle to the reader's humanity, to his being. Its role is to deepen the idea of beauty in human beings" (Nassar and Rahman 2008: 322). According to Darwish, the obstacle is a certain way of thinking and acting that resist seeing the ugliness and the barbarity of power. Certainly the oppressors' very devotion to power, which has plagued them with the pathology of "giv[ing] man a label and turn[ing] a gun barrel on him," cannot see the self-evidence of this proposition (Thich Nhat Hanh 1999:21). Those who have faith in applying power until the breaking point must have a different understanding of obstacles, which they think their power/violence can help them destroy, even as these implicate an incredible number of lives and ways of being. Hence, poetry, as politics of resistance to obstacles to our humanity, includes the oppressors in its call for liberation.

[19] Here is, for instance, al-Barghouti's thoughts about the colonizers' absolute faith in the modern technologies of violence: they come, he says in "Obvious Matter," "with planes carrying an army of idiots to steal from your goods, and believe that with one or two invasions, the feast of your fruits on your hills will be over!" He then prays, "Consider our death (s)! May your God heal you from your delusion!" In the eyes of the poet, the colonizers' bulldozing with their advanced technologies of violence to efficaciously communicate their will to exterminate a way of life and impose their own

map of the world, in fact, communicates one message: "their advanced stage of psychological decay." How does one unsettle this delusion, what Nandy calls the "dehumanized self" and that which Thich Nhat Hanh sees as "the beast in man" (Nandy 1988: xvi; and Thich Nhat Hanh 1999: 18)? Probably, as al-Barghouti does, only divine intervention can make the dehumanized self see that its position is morally uninhabitable and unacceptable.

[20] Similarly, in a poem that displays the achievements of power and its advanced technologies, Darwish pursues the question of who and what exactly dies in our modern age. He writes in "The 'Red Indian's' Penultimate Speech:"

There are dead and settlements, dead and bulldozers, dead
 and hospitals, dead and radar screens that capture the dead
 who die more than once in life, screens that capture the dead
 who live after death, and the dead who breed the beast of
 civilization as death,
 and the dead who die to carry the earth after the relics...

Where, master of white ones, do you take my people ... and your
 people?

To what abyss does this robot loaded with planes and plane
 carriers

Take the earth, to what spacious abyss do you ascend?
You have what you desire: the new Rome, the Sparta of
technology
and the ideology
of madness,
But for us, we will escape from an age we haven't yet prepared
our anxieties for (2009b: 76).

In this poem, where Darwish draws on the collective memory of oppressed and dispossessed peoples, the killers' trophies—the settlements, the bulldozers, the New Rome, the Sparta of technology that stand on a sea of buried bodies—do not attest to humanity but rather expose an ideology of madness and death. In his elegy to Edward Said, Darwish expands on the bonds between the killed, their ghosts, and those hunted by the ideology of madness and death to this day:

I don't recall that we [Said and Darwish] went to the movies
That evening, but I heard ancient Indians calling me:
Trust neither the horse nor modernity.
... progress might be the bridge of return to barbarity (2009b:
183-84).

Because (or perhaps despite the fact that) Darwish did not go to the (American) movies, wherein one celebrates, or at least watches the celebration of the horse, modernity and progress, he heard the ancient

Indians' call. But then, is it that difficult to hear the warnings of those killed presumably twice, in real life by power's arms and again in reel world by power's charms? The Native Americans' warnings are our warnings today. How can Darwish and the millions of his Arab readers, swamped with US bombs and then mvies, in some of which they have been cast as the savages of this terrorism era, miss the poignancy of that call? Some American people may cling to a willed innocence "long after that innocence is dead" (James Baldwin 1998:135). Some Americans may think that such warnings are pretentious and bear no connection to them. This connection, however, reveals a culture that prides itself on destroying the other and even celebrating the work of destruction as the epitome of civilization and humanness! Their connection might reveal that mass destruction is what the self does to the other. All should take a good note of why the so-called Revolution Youth Coalition refused to meet with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton upon her visit to Egypt in March 2011. Did she really think that the millions who took to the street to end their enslavement to a tyrant regime that was seen as '*amil*' (agent/mercenary) for the US, would act as if the connections were never there? Children know of these connections, they read the address, for instance, "Combined System International of Jamestown, Pennsylvania, USA" on the tear gas canisters that were fired by the so-called riot police.^{xiii} Egyptians know that the weapons that have sought appetizing human flesh for decades make up a substantial portion of

the \$1.3 billion provided to Mubarak's regime by the US annually. Clinton knows that as well, but she calls it military aid to keep up peace and stability, to fight terrorism, etc. even as her countryman's poet, Langston Hughes, spelled it out almost hundred years ago: "It's ludicrous to keep up the pretext/ You're terribly involved in world assignments/ And everybody knows it" ("Columbia" 1920: 230-31). But then, if the obstacles to one's humanity, to one's being are too solid, what does it matter whether everybody knows or not. These obstacles have dictated that what matters is to be dominant, and dominant only.

[21] There is one more thing. Even if Clinton had been received by these revolutionaries, this would not mean their caving in to the violence of power, or maybe even cutting a deal for themselves as the new overseers. Sometimes when victims recognize the fundamental link between the epistemology of colonialism and the degradation of the colonizers, they turn to generosity and hospitality. Poetry, whose theories of salvation sometimes call upon the victim to save also the oppressors, again provides an ethical reference. There is something moving about being dispossessed, crushed, feeling anger, fighting for one's dignity and yet extending an invitation to the very source of one's plight. This invitation is not extended out of weakness but out of a deep understanding that "[i]n looking at the faces of soldiers,

one inevitably sees their humanity, a humanity that implements terrible and destructive politics” (Darwish in Nassar and Rahman 2008: 322-23).

[22] Looking another Palestinian death in the eye, and living another siege (this is 2002), Darwish observes that the besieger, “measure[s] the distance between being/and nonbeing/with a tank’s scope” and the besieged “measure[s] the distance between our bodies/ and mortar shells ... with the sixth sense” (2007: 125). Both are caught in the culture of the siege and its lethal arithmetic. Freedom is in this sense indivisible: it has to involve both oppressed and oppressor. All it takes to undo the siege is Darwish’s deeply political invitation (and note that this is no invitation to sign a “peace treaty” to seal the defeat of anyone):

You standing at the doorsteps, enter
and drink Arabic coffee with us
(you might sense you’re human like us)
you standing at the doorsteps of houses,
get out of our mornings,
we need reassurance that we
are human like you!
...
O you sleepless! have you not tired
from watching the light in our salt?

And from the incandescence of roses in our wounds
have you not tired, O sleepless? ...

(To a guard:) I'll teach you waiting
at my postponed death's door
be patient, be patient
maybe you'll get bored with me
and lift your shadow off me
and enter your night free
without my ghost!

(To another guard:) I'll teach you waiting
at a café entrance
for you to hear your heart slow down, speed up
you might know shuddering as I do
be patient,
and you might whistle as I do a migrant tune
Andalusian in sorrow, Persian in orbit
then the jasmine hurts you, and you leave.

(To a third guard:) I'll teach you waiting
on a stone bench, perhaps

we would exchange our names. You might see
an urgent simile between us:
you have a mother
and I have a mother
and we have one rain
and we have one moon
and a brief absence from the dining table (2007: 125-159).

Darwish's invitation to the besiegers to enter the house (of the besieged), the world as guests, which we all are always anyway, may be difficult to translate to those who imagine the world to be their property and "measure the distance between being/and nonbeing/with a tank's scope!" Yet, even as the guard looks at the besieged through a definition's muzzle, which projects the other as absolute evil whose elimination becomes self-evident, the poet under siege patiently safeguards the enemy's humanity. How can he do otherwise in defiance of the urgent simile and the faces of the soldiers? His killer is not fully other. His (im)patience is messed up: by impatiently and tirelessly applying himself/herself to the task of liquidating enemies, they diligently deepen the obstacles to their humanity and afflict their being by entering the nights with haunting ghosts, or what is commonly called today Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.

[23] Why have Arab leaders missed the visions of their own poets, and suffocated generations for so many of whom such poetry was the air they breathed and enabled them to feel human, patient, and at the same time resist injustices? For what have colonizers burdened themselves with the imagination that implements destructive politics if all it takes to liquidate the imperial consciousness is for one to become disgusted or, at least, bored with it? Could it be that this invitation is also for the besieged to be generous and grant the besiegers some time to grasp the epistemological depth of the invitation, even as hundred millions might perish in the meantime? Does this poetic vision reveal why the Egyptian revolution, even as the millions of protestors were never sure whether they would remain alive or not, almost looked like a huge celebration? To understand this, one must see the fusion of the street and the defiant, resistant and compassionate *qasida*—poetry.

[24] If al-Barghouti said, in reference to the Arab governments' ritual of imprisoning or exiling their poets, "as long as poetry frightens the oppressors, all is well with us," Darwish might respond "as long as we make poetry, all is well with us." I think these two remarks capture what poetry constitutes for us: it is our defiance, our only language for the wound that does not bargain. At the same time, it is our compassion and generosity in the face of the enemy, whether within or without.

[25] On February 11, 2011, right after Mubarak's abdication was announced, al Jazeera's news anchor was put through to *Maidan a-Tahreer*. He got hold of 'Am Ahmed celebrating with the masses of people and asked him to describe, preferably by means of a poem, what Egyptians achieved that day. 'Am Ahmed, who often said that he bet on the rising generations and that he had no fear for the Arab people, responded in a husky voice: "People today are writing the poem!" I wonder whether this poem (*Qasida*)—whose words, lines, and cadence are the Egyptian people themselves—was a rendering of Abu al-Qasim a-Shabbi's "To The Tyrant of the World."

Imperious despot, insolent in strife,

Lover of ruin, enemy of life!

...Patience! Let not the Spring delude you now...

Tunisians and Egyptians stayed in the streets and squares because they knew that tyranny's "Spring" is not a true Spring. Those who read their tyranny and love of ruin as the manifestation of Spring, well-doing and innocence are understandably unable to correctly read and feel the seasons. They have flown into a state of illusion. The Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions showed that such a delusion is bound to crumble, which is a good riddance for it might open the eyes of the deluded to their monstrous taste and be a beginning towards reducing the suffering of the oppressed.

[26] Or was the fusion *sha'ir* and *shari'* a version of al-Jakh's "Panoramic View From *Maidan a-Tahreer*," which he read a few days before February 11th?

Put aside all your old poems

Put aside all your old books

And write for Egypt poetry worthy of her!

[27] In peoples' struggles against authoritarianism, and imperialism, it is frequently poetry, and songs that have allowed us to retrieve for us a subject position from which to address the injustices. Poetry has produced the defiant subject and theorized salvation, sometimes for both oppressed and oppressors. It seems now that the people—those who chant their poets' words while they are making new realities that live up to the beauty and politics of their beloved poetry—have surpassed the poets and *become al-Qasida*. In their marching, they have become poetry in motion. It is not far-fetched to think that such a people-poem might now make their politics poetically. For example, they could envision a *qasida* as their future constitution. As its preamble, the verses that end Darwish's "*Jawaz as-Safar*" would serve very well; "All the hearts of the people are my nationality/So take away my passport!"^{xiv}

*I'd like to dedicate this essay to my brother Abdelfattah Salama. I am deeply grateful to him for the many conversations about Egyptian poetry and the many poems he introduced me to. I am also grateful to Fatima Zahra Boudnibi, Andy Bush, Andy Davison, Tom

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ⁱ I am thankful to Mie Omori for sharing with me her interview with Lois-Ann Yamanaka, from which I drew the beautiful advise and inspiring image of jumping into fire to tell one's story. Mie interviewed Yamanaka on January 7th, 2011.

ⁱⁱ See Amitav Ghosh, "Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel," *The Imam and the Indian. Prose Pieces*, Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 2002: 75-89.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Irhah" is the very title of a poem by popular poet and activist Abdelrahman Youssef who "dedicated" it to the then President Husni Mubarak. See *A Toast to the Homeland*, 2004.

^{iv} While *Jawaz as-safar* is the term Arabs use for passport, the words' literal translation is the permission to travel, which, I think, preserves what passports are about: Since there is permission to travel, then not everyone will qualify to do so. Some people can enjoy mobility while others cannot even go to their neighboring villages as is still the case in Palestine.

^v <http://www.festivaldepoesiademedellin.org/pub.php/en/Diario/04.html>

^{vi} This is Elliott Colla's translation of Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi's "The Will to Life."

<http://arablit.wordpress.com/2011/01/16/two-translations-of-abu-al-qasim-al-shabis-if-the-people-wanted-life-one-day/>

^{vii} The translation is Sinan Anton's. See his "Singing For the Revolution," *Jadaliyya*. <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/508/singing-for-the-revolution>.

^{viii} Hisham al-Jakh composed "Joha" in the Egyptian Vernacular probably in 2009 or beginning of 2010. Al-Jakh refuses to publish his very popular poetry, and prefers instead to read it and perform it in large gatherings. The translation of "Joha" is mine.

^{ix} <http://www.pri.org/business/social-entrepreneurs/poetry-and-the-egyptian-revolution-tamim-al-barghouti2606.html>

^x This is al-Barghouti's own translation of "*Ya Masr, Hanit wi Banit*," which he read on PRI. See link above.

^{xi} I am working here with a line of thought developed by Quynh Pham and Himadeep Mupiddi in "Colonial Wars, Postcolonial Spectres: The Anxiety of Domination."

^{xii} Al-Barghouti, "*Amr Tabi'i*" (Obvious Matter), 2007. The translation is mine.

^{xiii} During the Egyptian uprisings, some protestors have even shown the canisters they recovered from the streets to ABC News correspondents.

http://current.com/news/92948153_egyptian-police-using-u-s-made-tear-gas-against-demonstrators.htm.

^{xiv} This is not a simple fantasy as poetry is permanent in the political consciousness. Before the coming of Islam, Arabs used to hang their best and most renowned poems in the Kaaba, Mecca, hence their name "the Hanging Poems" *Mu'allaqat*. It is said that they were called the hanging poems for as precious necklaces they should adorn the minds and hearts of people.

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