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## Chapter Six

### The Poetics of *Karama* or Why the Egyptian Revolution was a Poem

When Mubarak was deposed, one of the after-effects was that on the interior walls of public buildings you could notice these differently coloured rectangular shapes—blank bits of wall not of the same colour as the wall surrounding them—that constituted the traces of the official portraits of the leader that had previously been hung up everywhere. Thus, there was this oddity of so many markedly unmarked spaces where once images of the leader's face had been. What is thought provoking about this visualization of the absence of the portrait is that it serves to bring into consciousness both its original ghostliness and how the image of Mubarak may have been a kind of cloning effect that the revolution had seemingly managed to erase or displace.

The cloning effect to which I refer may be thought of in terms of commodity fetishism, and there is a passage in *Hamlet* that reflects on kingship in these terms. It occurs when Hamlet is considering how boy actors are all the popular rage; usurping the place of adult actors when paradoxically the boy actors will themselves be usurped by their own popularity (as boys) when they become adults. Hamlet then reflects that this might not be so strange if one considers how the images of leaders are worshipped. He states:

It is not very strange. For my uncle is King of Denmark, and those that would make mouths at him while my father lived give twenty, forty, fifty, a hundred ducats apiece for his picture in little. 'Sblood, there is something in this more than natural, if philosophy could find it out. (*Hamlet*, 2. 2. 300-305)

Thus, the people bad-mouth Claudius when he is not the king, and then when he becomes the

king, although he remains the same flawed person as he was before, the people inconsistently yet devotedly worship his serially produced picture. What exactly is being worshipped? As Marx says of commodities, the illusion would seem to be one of auto-origination, a self-conjuring act. The king-position is thus always the *usurpation* of the origin whereby it takes the form of an authorial or dictatorial template for infinite copies of the usurper (the one who claims the king-position). In patriarchal terms, it is the case of a father-god apparently able to reproduce himself or to act as the sole source of reproduction. In this, idolatry, capitalism and dictatorship are linked by a performative logic of mechanical or mimetic reproduction. Regarding Mubarak's portrait, it is a case of the dictator as an imposter god so that what the revolution unmask in removing the portrait is that the king's a thing and ultimately nothing (a blank space).

### **Revolutionary Currency**

The first part of this chapter is structured according to a juxtaposition of two visual summaries of the Egyptian revolution in order to address its dynamics with reference to an aesthetic understanding of such. Once this has been put forward, I will discuss why the Egypt revolution has been considered to be a dignity revolution. The first visual summary has already been put forward: the taking down of Mubarak's portrait. The second visual summary is a case of selecting from one of the many images of Midan Tahrir. Amongst the many images that could be discussed here, the one that I have chosen is the photograph reproduced here by Omar Robert Hamilton of Tahrir Square cinema. **(Figure one)** What we see in this image is a crowd watching a film with the Mogamma building, built in 1949, behind them. The films screened in Tahrir were of the revolution itself, a citizen journalism displacing the cinema of movie star celebrities. The reason that I have chosen this particular image is

because it evokes an essay I now wish to turn to, namely, Walter Benjamin's 'The Work of Art in the Mechanical Age of Reproduction.' (Benjamin [1936] 2008)

The argument of Benjamin's essay is that the mechanical reproduction of art, in particular, photography and film, may serve to advance an anti-fascist revolutionary consciousness, one implied to be Marxist. Benjamin maintains that while fascism aestheticizes politics, using mystique and distraction to disguise the actual workings of oppression, the mechanical reproduction of art militates against this in a number of ways. The two most relevant points made by Benjamin for the purposes of this analysis are as follows.

Firstly, Benjamin considers that the mass reproduction of the artwork destroys its aura, where for Benjamin this magical aura is accounted for in terms of the artwork's origination in religious ritual and its subsequent repositioning as an object of veneration in terms of its exhibition value. The exhibited artwork may be said to constitute the repression and forgetting of art's origins in religion, while the original spiritual significance is transferred to the artwork itself. Improvising with Benjamin's ideas, we would say that the artwork instead of pointing to a sacred source of origination points to its source in a gifted human originator. Benjamin suggests that exhibition value confers uniqueness on the artwork, that is, it is as if it were a one-off work of genius and as such not reproducible or transferable. Therefore, the mechanical reproduction of art destroys its aura in asserting the reproducible over the unique.

Secondly, the revolutionary significance of this for Benjamin is the way in which this frees the masses from assuming the role of mystified worshippers. He maintains that the viewer is afforded critical agency and moreover that any viewer may assume the place of the maker of the work of art. Whereas Roland Barthes' position is that the death of the author is the birth of the reader, for Benjamin the death of the author releases us from being merely readers in that for him, the death of the author as a function of singularity leads to the birth of multiple authors not governed by any logic of singularity. Benjamin does not use the term

‘singularity’ but it is strongly implied that it is this that is being overthrown in the democratization of art for revolutionary purposes. Walid El Hamamsy and Mounira Soliman quote Tahrir-based engineer-turned-artist Hatem Abdel Razak as declaring, ““this revolution made artists out of all of us.”” (El Hamamsy and Soliman 2013, 251).

I think that Benjamin’s theory has much significance for the Arab Spring that brought to the fore a multiplicity of grassroots activist artists, ordinary people as such, but I would also suggest that his reasoning is not quite adequate to the Egyptian revolution. If we look at Omar Robert Hamilton’s photograph, I think we could say that it conveys to us precisely *the aura of the revolution*, as opposed to the eclipse of the aura. In fact, there are many images of the revolution that are notable in conveying this aura. Before considering this more fully, it is worth giving some consideration to Adorno’s critique of Benjamin’s thought-provoking essay.

In brief, Adorno takes issue with Benjamin over whether capitalist modes of production can be used to revolutionary ends, where he has more faith in the high art work, as singular or autonomous in its lofty alienation from the collective. (Adorno 2007) Adorno’s position is implicitly Kantian in that for him it is particularly individual autonomy that can be pitted against submission to authorities.

At this point, there are three interpretations of Hamilton’s photograph that may be advanced: a Benjaminian one, an Adornoan one and one other, beyond these two positions. Firstly, from Benjamin’s assumed perspective, we would see an audience of revolutionary activists watching film clips, made by anyone who has a camera to hand, these clips being the current trawling of the revolution in the process of its collective making, being thus able to assess the progress, as well as setbacks, of the day or the times. What this audience would presumably be absorbing and reflecting on is the critical revelation that it is not rulers who make history but the people who do so. The aura of Mubarak as leader of the nation would

disappear in the light of the labouring masses and activists as the dynamic forces of history.

Secondly, from Adorno's assumed perspective, an ever-cynical one, what we would be seeing in this photograph are the ineluctable processes of commodification. No sooner is the revolution under way than it is being recycled: history as mere entertainment, the revolutionary actors being turned into celebrities. For Adorno, it would be a case of the revolution being digitized so as to be fetishized as part of a new culture industry.

What I would like to say is that there are no doubt aspects of both of these visions variously entailed in the Egyptian revolution and beyond. That is, the revolution has exposed the aura of the dictator as a sham, as mere glamour, and has revealed the historical dynamism of the people themselves. Equally, there has been a certain culture industry serving to commodify and cash in on the coolness and the pathos of the revolution. More broadly, this is a case of claiming the Arab Spring for the agendas of the secular West, critiqued as mistranslation by Sarah Hawas. Hawas states: 'In the case of Egypt, US and other western media, along with academics and civil society at large, entertained the performance of this particular revolt and engaged in their own particular translations, employing a politics of the intelligible to translate and in doing so, domesticate or adopt the revolution.' (Hawas 2012, 283)

A third reading of the photograph is one that would not deny its magic. While a Benjaminian reading of the photograph would entail mere de-mystification and an Adornoan one entail a re-positing of the power of commodity fetishism, there is a genuine aura, precisely an aura of what is genuine or for real, still to be accounted for even as you cannot quite account for the effect in that I think one of the interesting things about this photograph is that you cannot actually locate the aura it conveys.

The aura is not just in the crowd of onlookers, faces aglow as if from a strangely shared moment of miraculously timed personal illuminations. Illumination takes place in the

onlookers, we can see that in their expressions, but it is with reference to an external source of illumination that we take to be the cinema screen showing scenes of the revolution. And yet, as viewers of the photograph, we cannot ourselves see the screen, while we can see what the viewers in the photograph cannot see because they have their back to it, namely, the brightly lit Mogamma building of the earlier revolutionary moment, 1952.

The point to be made is that the non-locatable aura, made evident by the photograph but in ways that escape its framing, is utopian. The utopian is precisely that which does not take place, so that you could locate it here or there. It concerns *what cannot be contained*. That is, a possible message of this photo is that the spirit of the revolution, both specific to it and not specific to it, cannot be located through being framed. Its currency overflows any bank or embankment, or else it constantly flows onwards. In fact, revolutions are likened to rivers, poetically speaking. Jacqueline Rose points out that Rosa Luxemburg speaks of revolution in these terms: “‘It flows now like a broad billow over the whole kingdom, and now divides into a gigantic network of narrow streams; now it bubbles forth from under the ground like a fresh spring and now is completely lost under the earth.’” (Rose 2011a) In his story concerning the Syrian uprising, ‘The Thieves’ Market’, Ossama Mohammed offers the refrain: “Oh river, do not flow away, wait for me to follow you.’ (Mohammed 2014, 18) This also pertains to Auden’s riverine view of the poetic, discussed in Chapter one. However, it is a matter of what is too oceanic to be merely canalized as the ‘overflowing’ imagery of Luxemburg makes clear.

When the revolution started to unfold in Cairo, I wanted very much to be there in its midst, but since this was not practical (while I also believed that this was Egypt’s moment), the one thing that made me feel a part of it from a distance was writing a poem about the momentous happenings where the impulse was both one of avowing the revolutionary dynamics and of hoping to communicate their inspiration further. In short, it was a case of:

this is something that has to be carried on, to be relayed, to be kept going. Obviously, lots and lots of people felt the same way, given the many poems, the many songs, the many paintings, and so on, that bear witness to the revolution across all kinds of borders. The poem I wrote ends with the lines ‘To wrong-foot the rigid with rhythm, / To become a living human poem’ (Rooney 2013a, 199), because I wished to say that the real poem is the revolution, but where also, if the revolution is the gigantic poem, anyone can connect with it wherever they are through their much littler poems.

Returning to the photograph, what I think that the Tahrir cinema audience may be registering is the seeing of themselves as a living human poem: we see they see themselves as the artwork being screened. That is, beyond seeing themselves as historical actors, they may be seeing that the division between art and life is artificial; such divisions as but framing effects, it being rare for such moments of illumination to occur. For Benjamin, the aura of the artwork is a matter of its fixed location—it is unique in that it can only be found in one place, the place in which it is exhibited. But the aura that interests me is of that which cannot be fixed in location nor fixed in time. For this reason, it would be possible to make the strange statement that the Egyptian revolution has not taken place. If that were a statement offered by a postmodernist it would mean that the revolution constituted purely a spectacle, an illusion of digital media, a trick of the virtual: however, something else is intended by such a statement in this context. Attempting a clarification, it may be proposed that utopia is not a vision of the future so much as the persistence of something we take to be surpassed when, in actually, it has not been surpassed because it has never taken place in the sense of an accomplished event that can therefore enter the past. It concerns the existence of that which cannot simply present itself objectively which in affective terms may be said to concern a faith in the feeling that we can always be together, we can always be together, even when we seem to be separate and divided. Or what is ongoing is a collective consciousness that



escapes the logic of finitude and of singularity.

So, here, the removals of Mubarak's portrait do concern the marking or noticing of a particular *unmarked* space: lots of little reminders of utopian windows, as if you could see through walls. However, there is one particular occasion of a portrait removal ceremony in post-revolutionary Cairo that is rather disconcerting. It concerned the removal of a very large portrait of Mubarak that presided over the Egyptian cabinet office that was followed by the erection of the framed presentation of the name Allah in Arabic. Where Mubarak was, now Allah will reign? One problem with this takes us in the direction of Salafi and Wahhabi Islam, where the *shahada* is re-interpreted along the lines of: there is no earthly leader, God is the only leader. Additionally, however, to position God as the successor to Mubarak demotes God to being a head of state whose authority is unchallenged. The incident of which I speak was filmed and put on YouTube, but it has now been edited so that the YouTube version shows the removal of the portrait without the framed name of Allah being put in its place. Presumably, this is because the problematic implications of the substitution were realized.

Benjamin's argument, while seeming original because of its fresh and urgent engagement, is actually part of a long philosophical tradition that can be traced back to Plato at least, a lineage of debate concerning the very relation between origin and copy. In fact, this may even be considered in terms of philosophy's origins as the displacement of religious communal practice. In brief, this philosophical tradition of origin and copy, cause and effect, genius and imitation, is not the only possible one, and Tahrir Square has seemed more intelligible to me in terms of non-Western philosophies that are aware of what I call the lateral dimension or horizontal axis, as discussed in earlier works of mine on liberation struggles. (Rooney 2000; 2007) In brief, in liberation struggles it is clear that hierarchical relations are challenged by side-by-side relations of solidarity, sometimes spoken of in terms

of a brother-sister struggle against oppressors. Furthermore, the coming to the fore of this lateral or horizontal front entails a collective consciousness that is experienced as reality. That is, the consideration is that this collective awareness concerns what reality is, given that it is ultimately the unity of being that is real. As discussed in my earlier works, the form of expression that is particularly apt for this sense of reality is poetic so that the literature of liberation struggles is expressed in animist (non-dualist) or poetic realism. I will go on to explain this in more detail while first providing some philosophical orientation of a basic nature.

Firstly, the revolution greatly problematizes the cause and effect logic of temporal determinism. More suitable for its dynamics is a notion of dependent co-arising. In Buddhism, this is the concept of *pratītyasamutpāda*, particularly as explicated by Nāgārjuna. In Nāgārjuna's arguments, cause and effect cannot be posited discretely where not only does a cause give rise to an effect but the effect gives rise to the cause *at the same time*. (Nāgārjuna 2013)

Regarding the Egyptian Revolution, it has widely been noted that it was a leaderless revolution, in that sense, anarchic. However, as Jack Shenker (2017, 252) and others note, that does not mean it had no leaders and no organization. Indeed, there were activists who took various initiatives from Wael Ghonim's 'We Are All Khaled Said' campaign to Asmaa Mahfouz's video blog rallying cry, amongst many other mobilizations. Thus, in some respects, the co-dependent arising was a matter of discrete initiatives joining up to ever-greater co-operation, operating in concert (to use Arendt's phrase). However, this is an inadequate understanding of the concept dependent co-arising for it would merely imply a group of actors causing the revolution. More radically, the question would be: did the revolutionaries give rise to the revolution or did the revolution give rise to them? In Chapter three, attention was drawn to how the revolution utterly transformed Egyptians according to

their own accounts. In that respect, the revolution gave rise to the revolutionaries. The point is that with the logic of dependent co-arising there is no temporal duality of cause and effect, just the mutual arising of the two: revolutionaries gave rise to the revolution at the same time that it gave rise to them.

In Buddhist terms, those of the Middle Way, the principle of dependent co-arising entails *sunyata* (emptiness) through the insight that phenomena have no independent inherence and are thus 'empty' (not exactly non-existent but without any essence that would grant them the status of being phenomena), this also bearing on the concept of *anatman*, the self as no-self. However, this is not the direction that I wish to take this discussion in. Rather, sticking to the experience of the Egyptian revolution, in the dependent co-arising there was certainly selflessness to be observed. For instance, revolutionaries put others first in their attentions and also bravely risked their own lives for the sake of the revolution and of Egyptian people as a whole. However, strikingly, the revolutionaries did not thereby feel themselves to be nothing (empty) but on the contrary had the sense of finding who they truly were, the unique value of each one affirmed, these dynamics being those of *karama*, dignity. I would say that this was because individuals are nothing in themselves *only as individuals* but acquire their unique value through the wider whole, meaning through their co-arising. The African concepts of *unhu* and *ubuntu* are of relevance to this where a person is a person because of other people. This is of crucial significance to understanding the revolutionary concept of *karama* (dignity) in an Egyptian context, as I'll come to, through first elaborating poetic structuration.

Before I discuss the poetic, two further considerations concerning the horizontal unity of being need to be mentioned. Philosophically speaking, if revolution is an overturning, in my view what it overturns is the subjection of being to time. Secular post-metaphysical thinking in the West always posits being in terms of time, but this is by no means a necessity.

The horizontal axis of co-existence is not temporally diachronic and can, for example, be thought of in terms of an horizon of perpetual anticipation and possibility: what of the past does not become past. As collective co-existence, this is a matter of consciousness or awareness. Where Freud posited individual consciousness accompanied by the unconscious, my argument is that the unconscious is but the repression of collective consciousness. I do not mean by this the Jungian collective unconscious (an irrational concept in my view). Rather, either you have individual consciousness as the denial of collective consciousness, or you have collective consciousness as an awareness of the unity of being that is irreducible to temporality. Just as Freud said there's no time in the unconscious, the collective consciousness is timeless too. What I am saying is that there is not just one axis, one of time, that somehow contains being as but spectral in that you cannot say time 'is' (as confirmed by Einstein and widely argued by Derrida). Instead, there are two axes, the temporal one of deferral, and the horizontal one of unity of being, and it is these two axes on which the poetic (in my sense) depends, though which it is woven.

### **The Revolution-Poem**

There are very different conceptions of what constitutes poetic expression, and it should be pointed out that the Egyptian revolution was not poetic in the predominant terms of the Western postmodernist conception of poetry. In order to clarify this, I will offer a consideration of Roman Jakobson's account of the poetic function. Famously, Jakobson's definition is as follows: '*The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination.*' (emphasis in original, Jakobson 1960, 358) For Jakobson, the poetic function is offset against other functions of language pertaining to the addressee, addressor, the message, the context, the contact (channel of communication) and

code (system of communication).

In order to explain Jakobson's definition, I will improvise with a rough example, based on long ago structuralist discussions of his work. That is, I am simplifying the technicalities of Jakobson's essay to communicate an overview. Let us say then that the axis of selection consists of a menu offering the following options:

Starters: hummus; taramasalata; gazpacho

Mains: moussaka; salmon; nut roast

Deserts: mousse; baklava; strawberries

Now let's say that the selected meal from the menu corresponds to the message composed on the axis of combination. If the context determines the message and the context of the meal is given as summer, the combined dishes of the menu might be: gazpacho, salmon, strawberries (as a suitable meal for a hot day). If the emphasis is on the addressee whom you are choosing a meal for and whom you know is vegan, you might come up with the following selection and combination: hummus, nut roast, strawberries (a meal fit for my friend the vegan).

However, if you wanted to propose a 'poetic' combination you might go for: taramasalata, moussaka, baklava. That is, the rhythmic and rhyme equivalence between these words would determine their selection for combination. Or you might choose hummus; moussaka and mousse as an alternative poetic message based on the assonance and alliteration. That is to say, for a poetic message in Jakobson's sense, the selected words are combined according to sonic and rhythmic equivalences that may be found amongst them as words.

Jakobson's basic point is that with the poetic function the message draws attention to itself through being particularly self-referential so that the linguistic medium assumes a primacy over the other functions. The emphasis on the very language of the message tends to

obscure the other functions so they might seem vague or ambiguous. Jakobson's definition appears extremely influential in a Western modernist and postmodernist context where the linguistic self-referentiality of poetry is prized greatly over the poet-addressor (the lyric/emotive 'I'), the poetic context (its scene of reference) and its audience. With the postmodernist scene of language poetry (in the broad sense), language is seen to generate its own meanings, although this rather blocks communication in the normal sense producing an opaque kind of poetry. For example, this is the start of a poem by Keston Sutherland:

The new fathom item A-Z mercy spree unsmothers afresh  
re donkey spirit sprezzatura fit or agog for a relapse, a slipped pin  
up assent to purpose marked down see hence vertical  
shark loans in purveyance-arrest...(Sutherland 1998)

Although the language of the poem is very self-referential and draws attention to itself in the absence of other functions (a sense of who is addressing whom about what), the language is not a musical one as regards the rhythmic and sound patterning referred to previously for reasons I will explain. My point for the moment is that the linguistic self-referentiality of Western experimentalism tends to be very different from the popular avant-garde expression of the Arab Spring. I would like to suggest that Jakobson's formal and formulaic approach to the poetic serves to *linguistify the poetic*, as I spoke earlier of a linguistification of the sacred with respect to Heidegger and Arendt. (Chapter one) This is because his two axes of selection and combination are indeed linguistic where I wish to suggest that this serves to dismiss and replace the priority of the horizontal axis (being) and the temporal axis (time) that I spoke of earlier.

The kind of poetry of significance to my concerns attempts to put into words what is

*not yet* in words as concerns the collective consciousness and unity of being, or holistic awareness, that I have suggested the horizontal axis pertains to. This is a case of voicing the timeless in the temporal medium of poetry. Moreover, Jakobson's substitution of linguistic axes serves to *invert* the axis of synchronic being (the horizontal) and the axis of diachronic temporality. That is, the *temporal* medium of the poetic message is rendered by him as a *synchronous* space of combination, as opposed to temporal deferral. Given that the horizontal axis concerns the sacred, the effect of this is a fetishistic worship of words or language. That is, instead of poetry as praise of the real—life, creation, the divine (depending on the context)—poetry becomes worshipful of itself.

With poetry of the real, as opposed to language poetry, you begin with a sense of the 'all at once' but obviously you cannot express the 'all at once', the lateral simultaneity, all at once. So, you begin with a chord-phrase (or a note or an image) that immediately suggests a chord-phrase (etcetera) that goes with it and these two (chord-phrases) suggest a third, these three, a fourth and so on. The poem is an accretive creature though is always attuned across itself to what connects with what according to a sense of the underlying unity, its anticipatory source and its palpable silence. The musicality of the poem lies in the relation of its staggered parts to the all at once. One part calls forth all the others. I am in agreement with Daniel Barenboim when he states of the playing of a piece of music:

I believe that when all things are right on the stage—when the playing, the expression, everything becomes permanently, constantly interdependent—it becomes indivisible. And this is the mystical, because this is the same idea of religion, of God: that there's suddenly something you cannot divide any more. (Barenboim and Said 2003, 156)

In the kind of poetry being considered, there is the holistic desire to produce a connection on

a subjective level between addressor and addressee with reference to a context, existential or metaphysical. (For Jakobson's formalist poetic function it is the message that counts, rather than addressee, addressor and context, whereby the message is somewhat emptied of meaning becoming words as words). In his book *Poetry and Politics in the Modern Arab World*, Atef Alshaer introduces his subject with the observation that:

Poetry has been a force of timeless and universal value...Through it and with it, religions are founded and constituted; truths discovered; entire edifices of visual and psychological perceptions formed, with consequences ranging from peace to war to truce to love to inner euphoria to infinite serenity. One fundamental value of poetry is that it renders visibly alive both the silent and the unconscious alongside the spoken and the conscious. It brings to life an entire picture or perception of human reality, even if an ephemeral one. (Alshaer 2016, 1)

Alshaer's book shows how in an Arab context, 'the silent and unconscious' may pertain to a sense of collective destiny, where the poet has an important role with respect to calls for resistance, resilience and renewal. What is at stake in this is not that poetry can act as a substitute for the political but that it can act as a mode of guidance concerning what the political may lose sight of. It is like the relationship of Tiresias, the seer, to Oedipus or to Creon: the vertical position of the leader has its blind spots that the horizontally aware visionary can awaken us to. More broadly, poetry in this aspect is able to look out for the well-being of the collective (tribe, nation, humanity at large) through modes of address such as warnings, rallying cries, prophesies, and so on. In Arab culture, poetry has long had this role of historically and ethically attuned guidance of the community.

Coming back to Ayman El-Desouky's concept of *amāra* discussed in Chapter three, he



writes, ‘The question of *amāra* is a question of the production of signs, verbal and visual, and of narratives that originate in a deeply shared social condition, signalling shared destiny, and speaking to that condition, not representing it, with both speaker and addressee fully present.’ (El-Desouky 2014, 107) In the light of Jakobson, what matters here is the simultaneity of speaker and addressee and their shared context. Instead of focusing merely on the linguistic medium, what distinguishes the poetic here is that it aims not to privilege a single function of communication but to keep all the functions in play. Regarding how speaker and addressee may be present to each other, this can be through a live gathering, say in the city’s *midan*. However, this is not necessarily so, in that it is also that poetry has the magical ability to make present again (like Proust’s madeleine). For example, a poet can put into a poem a state of feeling so that whenever and wherever the poem is read, the original state of feeling is released from it. Regarding a prime instance of this in the context of the Arab uprising, Abou el-Kasem Chebbi’s poem *The Will to Live* while composed in 1933 was yet felt to be fully present to the re-awakened revolutionary spirit of 2010-11 in Tunisia, also leaping across borders to Egypt and beyond. In Egypt, earlier popular songs, such as those by Sayyed Darwish, became fully present again in Midan Tahrir with bands such as Eskenderella bringing back the work of earlier vernacular poets (Valassopoulos and Mostafa 2014, 652).

In an article on the Tunisian revolution aptly entitled ‘A Revolution of Dignity and Poetry’, Mohamed-Salah Omri begins by drawing attention to a statement made by Syrian playwright Saadallah Wannous, as follows “‘I used to dream of a poem which ends in a street demonstration.’” (Omri 2012, 137) (The poem I wrote around the Egyptian revolution mentioned earlier actually begins with ‘To gather with poets in Qasr El Nil/ To compose the coming of revolution’, before going on with ‘To take to the streets/ To take the streets/’, although I did not know of the statement by Wannous). Omri goes on to discuss Tunisian poet Mohamed Sgaier Awlad Ahmed, ‘an unavoidable figure in the history of Tunisian

culture—particularly the culture of protest and resistance—for the last 30 years.’ (139)

Awlad Ahmed is a radical poet, both opposed to authoritarian (neoliberal) rule and to Islamism, for he constantly mocked what he saw as the false pieties of the Islamists in Tunisia. When the Tunisian revolution broke out, he established the Poetic Central Command of the Revolution, for he believed ‘the Tunisian revolution is a work of poetry.’ (Omri 2012, 147) In *Al-Wasiyya* (2002) he offers an indication of his own poetics:

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 (Quoted by Omri 2012, 158)

As indicated previously, the poem begins with anticipation (like a horse pawing the ground) as suggests a rhythmic phrase or an image that serves to generate the whole of the poem. The concluding line of this poem is: ‘I am the horizontal.’ The poem defies the verticality of line breaks as if it could be spread out on a lateral plane. In a 2011 interview Awlad Ahmed states: “‘They are writings which will continue in the same pace if in future a minister or head of government wanted to play the role of a vertical god on this horizontal land.’” (Omri 2012,153) Omri observes very aptly that Awlad Ahmed, as well as Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, ‘saw poetry as a living being and life as a poetic project.’ (164)

As I suggested earlier of the Egyptian revolution, the dividing line between art and life

is erased. It is necessary to explain that this is not at all in the sense of the poetic utterance serving to bring about or enact what it is says. This would constitute a self-reflexive auto-literalization of language performing itself. Rather, poetic composition and life in its creative aspect are one in that they partake of the same dynamic of registering both the horizontal axis of unity of being or collective consciousness and the temporal axis of existence. I would add that when it comes to mystical consciousness all time consciousness evaporates so that you only have an awareness of the unity of being, hence mysticism as a state of awareness that is timeless and mute. However, the poetic consciousness weaves between the sacred dimension and the temporal one. Even so, one of the things that can happen to you when you are creating something (be it a piece of music, a poem, an art work) is that you lose all sense of time, and also the same thing can happen to you when you receive the art piece in question. The mode of this is perhaps pure anticipation. (Listen, for example, to Michael Nyman's 'Time Lapse').

Regarding the Egyptian revolution, I asked revolutionary artists whether they saw the revolution as a poem to crosscheck my perception with theirs. In particular, I put this question to Ahdaf Soueif and to Ahmed Haddād, and both affirmed that the revolution was a poem for them too. This was not just because many revolutionaries expressed themselves through creative compositions—not only poems but songs and murals, and strikingly inventive posters, aphorisms and jokes—but also because the whole of the revolution with its freeing up of collective consciousness was a poem. It was because it was a poem that it generated poems.

This collective consciousness replaces subject-object relationships with the lateral relationship of equal subjects (actually subjectivities, or living spirits) standing side by side: I and other I; I and all the other I's. This is not the face-to-face relationship of Levinas' ethics with its emphasis on the otherness of the other, though it certainly does entail recognition of

the soul of the other. In the side-by-side relation is something that Levinas does not seem to address, namely the shared feeling of solidarity. What constitutes unity of being is not just the sum total of entities brought together. It is what psycho-affectively binds one to another, the invisible feeling of connection. This is a matter of the transformative dignity of revolution that Egyptians speak of, and I wish therefore now to advance a poetic theory of dignity.

### ***Karama***

As discussed in the introduction, dignity for Kant is a matter of individual autonomy whereby you emerge from childish dependence on others. As also discussed, for Qutub dignity is freedom from master/ slave relationships, where for the religious Qutub this means there is only submission to God. However, revolutionary dignity may be said to be predicated neither on purely individual autonomy nor on submission to an absolute, vertically transcendental Other but rather on the basis of dependent co-arising.

The psycho-affective states that bind the poetic collective may be ultimately a shared sense of the sacred, yet more indirectly (or, if you prefer, more directly) and mundanely it concerns freedom from humiliation through mutual acknowledgment, mutual trust and mutual care. Reem Abou-El-Fadl writes the following of the dynamics of dignity: ‘the celebrations of human solidarity rather than competition...changed the self-image of many...As the popular chant *irfa ask fo, inta masri* (“raise your head up high, you are Egyptian”) indicated a rush of self-assurance and self-worth accompanied January’s protests. So did a rush of creativity.’ (Aboul-El-Fadl 2015, 9) This was the antidote to the humiliation of the people through the authoritarianism of neoliberalism.

Evelin Linder, Linda Hartling and Ulrich Spalthoff write:

Until 1757, the verb 'to humiliate' had no negative connotations, as it simply indicated that someone showed underlings their correct place within an accepted social order, based on honour and rank (W.I. Miller, 1993). The year 1757 marked the transition of the meaning of the verb 'to humiliate' in the English language from prosocial humbling to the antisocial violation of dignity (Lindner, 2009). The old meaning of the verb 'to humiliate' was replaced by a new, much more negative meaning. Interestingly, this occurred just prior to the American Declaration of Independence (4 July 1776), the French Revolution (4 August 1789), the emergence of the individuated self, and the birth of a growing awareness that the planet Earth is the home of one humankind. (Lindner 2011, 67)

With these interesting observations, the assumption is that the emergent emphasis on the rights of the individual is progressively tied up with democratic secularism. Yet I wish to challenge this through raising the question of the *doppelgänger* formation of the subject that also arose at this time, in the eighteenth century. As considered in the introduction, what this formation displaces is the notion of the subject as a self with a soul. Instead, in the analytic of finitude, the will-to-singularity of the secular self produces the shadowy mortal accompaniment of the double: the self and its death. That is to say, the secular individual emerges as always shadowed by the mortification of its downfall in death. What is humiliating is the loss of the immortal soul, and thus the modern negativity of the verb 'to humiliate' might have arisen in this context of being stripped of soul. Capitalism, especially neoliberalism, offers us no progress in this regard.

The Western Enlightenment ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity are inevitably betrayed by secular capitalism. This is because liberty is interpreted in terms of autonomy and self-sufficiency; equality becomes merely a matter of exchange value, the equivalence of

units that can be substituted for other units; and fraternity becomes the identity politics of group narcissism (meaning that the collective is predicated on the principle of the ego ideal). The main reason for this state of affairs is the denial of horizontal collectivity in favour of the total subjection of being to time. I suggested earlier that the Egyptian revolution overturned this (at least, for its duration) in that the humiliation that the people had been subject to in being treated as mere mortal bodies or labouring bodies was cast off with the people getting back their souls: the leaders became the unworthy or precarious ones, not the people. I will now explain what this creative turn means for radical values.

Liberty, equality and solidarity (a better term than 'fraternity') are not discrete conditions but actually co-conditions for each other. If liberty is liberation from the oppression of masters this is automatically a question of master-free equality. Liberty and equality further depend on solidarity where each one is not just in favour of their own freedom but the freedom of all. In a way, liberty, equality and solidarity are different designations of the same aspiration or expectation. What that means is that they are in a metaphoric relation to each other through dependent co-arising. The dependent co-arising may be instanced, as often is the case in liberation struggles, as follows: I am not free if you are not free; I'm not equal to others if you are not equal to others; I am not sustained if you are not sustained. It may also be proposed that liberty, equality and solidarity have a metonymic relation to the lateral unity of being. Finally, the condition of dignity may be said to issue from the co-arising of liberty, equality and solidarity. It is perhaps the term for that co-arising.

Although I have drawn on the Buddhist notion of dependent co-arising, I wish now to consider dignity in terms of the uniqueness of each soul, as opposed to *sunyata* and *anatman* (while not going into the complexities of Buddhist philosophy). In *this* analysis, it is the exchange logic of capitalism that serves to posit beings as substitutable entities, as makes of

them empty things. The Egyptian revolution (and the Tunisian one) served to posit leadership as the position of the exchangeable with the people as not exchangeable. The axis of substitution may be said to be the diachronic axis: for instance, one generation replacing another. However, the synchronic or horizontal axis is not one of substitution. On this axis, each can be placed alongside each (with no usurpation), with a potentially infinite accretion. It is thus this alongside dimension that allows for each-ness or uniqueness at the same time that this living alongside is what constitutes the undivided (all together) unity. Moreover, the attempt to possess and enclose being in a singularity is an emptying gesture in that any being cannot be separated from the whole and still continue to be. In addition, the *doppelgänger* dynamic of usurpation is a death drive in that the attempt to claim the place of another cuts the usurper off from the indivisible life of the whole at their own expense.

The word for dignity in Arabic is *karama* and it is imbued with a sense of the sacred. Bani-Sadr and Shroeder write: ‘According to the Koran, everything created is noble and dignified (Koran 17:70; 42:7; 31:10). The dignity of each and every living phenomenon emanates from and is connected to intelligent life itself (Koran 21:26–27; 49:13).’ (Shroeder and Bani-Sadr 2017, 69) They also state:

[I]n Islam, human dignity increases as we honour each individual and encourage them to increase their own dignity. For this reason, it is stated in the Koran that there is no compulsion in religion. Religion is a method of ‘de-violentisation’, a way of removing the role of force from society and replacing humiliation with dignity. (69-70)

Furthermore, they assert: ‘Before human beings assume any belief (religious or otherwise), they have rights and a responsibility to defend those rights, as well as those of any other person irrespective of belief, race, nationality, ethnicity and so on. In other words rights are

not given to other people through agreement among humans; we are born with them.’ (73)

Dignity is thus a matter of our natality, given to us through birth, and not a manmade political construct. In fact, it is other to systems of power reliant on force and coercion. Significantly, a person who does not respect the dignity of others is the one who lacks dignity. Thus, dignity arises when you act for the equal liberty of others, supporting their freedom of spirit. This is what the Egyptian revolution was deeply about, as the Tunisian revolution had been before it. I would also add that this interpretation of natality differs from Arendt’s since natality is for her a matter displaying your uniqueness to others in the form of personal glory as opposed to acknowledging the sacredness of each life (that for the religious would be God given).

In discussing the dignity of the Egyptian revolution, Farhad Khosrokhavar writes: ‘Opting for dignity involves another type of recognition: the Hegelian logic of master and slave [...] is replaced with one based on distanciation and peaceful reflexivity, putting into question the idea that the only way to save one’s honour is through the enemy.’ (67) In Chapter three, I speak of how the Egyptian revolution did not depend on hegemonic interpellation and instead on other forms of horizontal hailing and Khosrokhavar’s statement accords with that. Moreover, whereas the politics of pride entail being drawn into Hegelian circuits of recognition, recognition through dignity provides alternatives outside of this entrapment. Khosrokhavar’s emphasis is on how dignity is aligned with peace, thus with the non-coercion and ‘de-violentisation’ raised earlier. He specifically draws a distinction between the logic of honour that resorts to blood-letting to avenge humiliation and the way that the new social movements consciously reject such to base themselves peacefully on dignity. (66) Also, while in the previous chapter I speak of humiliation in terms of the obscene disregard of distance, dignity entails the distancing that Khosrokhavar mentions. A way of understanding this is through letting (allowing) the other to be: the opposite of



possessing them, erasing them, ignoring them or crowding them out.

Khosrokhavar, noting that dignity is bestowed by God, also points out that, 'karamah in the singular form means generosity, in particular towards guests and towards the poor.' (65) It is thus very giving, and 'fore-giving' in the sense raised at the end of the first chapter. That is, it is a giving that is in advance of any getting while it is also forgiveness as distancing yourself from being drawn into an abusive or coercive structure, another's structure of forgetting. This generosity is further a question of mercy, as Portia defines it in *The Merchant of Venice*:

The quality of mercy is not strained.

It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven

Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:

It blesseth him that gives and him that takes. (4. 1. 190-193)

Similarly, to accord dignity to others blesses the giver with dignity.

The Egyptian revolution was a very generous one in terms of how people treated each other. (Prince 2014, 161) It was not just that they shared food and other resources but that this has been a much wider matter of the ethics of the newly improvised civil society. Reem Abou-El-Fadl speaks of 'the powerful notion of the "manners of the Square" (*akhlaq al-midan*), which were never laid out explicitly, but were widely understood to include mutual respect, freedom from harassment, egalitarian co-operation, and self-sacrifice.' (Abou-El-Fadl 2015, 10) This is what makes for dignity, and I will now summarize its creative aspects.

Firstly, I have spoken about the indivisible relatedness of liberty, equality, solidarity, dignity, peacefulness, generosity and mercy (and this is by no means a complete series). This is a poetic way of seeing things because these various qualities are manifestations of an

underlying unity and emerge as figures of it that are thus connected to each other. Thus, it is: liberty as equality as solidarity as dignity, and so on. This is how we can see the world through the aspect of *tawhid*. For instance, what here appears as ‘generosity’, there appears as ‘peacefulness’.

Secondly, ‘the manners of the Square’ were not scripted, as Abou-El-Fadl says, they were not set down. This is because they were creatively spontaneous and what is creatively spontaneous comes from the real or the for real (*al-haqq*). That is to say, people were genuinely in touch with collective consciousness and it is this that can make spontaneous artists of us all in that creativity arises from co-arising and collective consciousness that yet honours each as each.

Thirdly, the whole of the revolution was an ostensive sign. That is to say it indicated the kind of society that it would like to lead us towards. It was as if it flashed up from the future like a beacon and as if its beckoning was to say: this is what we would like to be heading towards (importantly without representing a final destination). The revolution had the aspect of utopian realism as opposed to utopian idealism. The latter offers an idealistic blueprint for a new society (often disastrous) while the former dictates nothing in opening up new possibilities of creativity through freedom of spirit, anticipation and hope.

While I speak of creativity, this borders as indicated on the sacred, and there are revolutionaries that address the revolution as feeling sacred (as widely indicated in previous chapters). For example, Mona Prince writes: ‘Everyone chanted “Bless my homeland” from the depths of their hearts. Amen. There was a feeling of love and purity that reigned over the midan. The priest announced that there would be another sermon at 1p.m. and invited us all to pray once more.’ (Prince 2014, 155)

In an Arab context, it is sometimes said that it is not possible to bracket off religion the way that happens in a secular Western context. This is because religion concerns a way of

life, a way of being in the world. However, this does not mean that politics should coincide with religion. Rather, I think that the Egyptian revolution, while of course political resistance in some ways, further showed that the political has its limits and has to be answerable to what is not only political. Omar Robert Hamilton says, ‘To be in opposition is the fate of the dissenter. To be in compassion. We would not, or at least *I* would not, hold on to power were it taken.’ (244) A dignity revolution is about undoing coercive structures, and instead of being about taking, claiming and grasping power or sovereignty, it is about giving, receiving and acknowledging others; living generously. As Bahraini revolutionary poet Ayat Kormuzi states in a poem: ‘We don’t want to live in a castle, we don’t aspire to the presidency/ We kill humiliation and assassinate misery.’ (Maarouf 2012)

There is a particular kind of poetry and art that is especially relevant to the revolution. It concerns what in this book that I have called the darwish avant-garde and in poetic terms pertains specifically to *sh’ir al-‘āmmiyya*.

### ***Sh’ir al-‘Āmmiyya***

Noha Radwan writes: ‘*Shi’r al-āmmiyya*, a form of modern Arabic poetry written in colloquial Egyptian Arabic, (*āmmiyya*), is a poetic movement that began in the early 1950s.’ (Radwan 2012, 1) Radwan’s book provides an in depth consideration of three of the leading figures of this movement, Fu’ād Haddād, Salāh Jāhin and ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Abnūdi. What I wish to do here is draw attention to certain definitive aspects of the poetics at stake in keeping with the concerns of this chapter.

What is striking about the colloquial poetry in question is how non-dualist it is in spirit, this being a question of the musical indivisibility discussed earlier. While the movement is popular and folkloric in its orientation it is also experimental and innovative. While it is oral

in its delivery it is also literary in its sensibility. It can combine an affirmation of the sacred with irreverence, especially directed at false pieties. Often the speakers of the poems put themselves forward as unafraid to do so and stand out while at the same time they speak as one of the people: the address manages to be individual and collective at once. In his poem, ‘Dīwān al-arāgūz,’ Fu’ād Haddād speaks as an everyman comprised of the differing personae of the people:

I am a newly hatched shaykh

an Abu Zayd clown

And a Guha muscleman

I am an Egyptian who with brains has conquered brawn (Radwan 2012, 87)

According to Radwan, Abu Zayd refers to an epic hero and Guha to a folkloric figure. At the same time, this literary heritage remains a living revolutionary potential. Salāh Jāhin (considered the poet of the 1952 revolution and beyond) speaks in ‘The Defence Speech’, as an everyman figure who defends himself from the hegemonic forces of society that are automatically poised to judge him without him being aware of any specific charges. Jāhin writes:

My words are neither deep nor foolish.

Simple

Simple, like the clothes of the helpless barefoot poor

Simple, like the friend’s name on the lips of a friend. (Quoted by Radwan, 148)

The speaker of the poem goes on to state that although his words are simple, they are also

powerful: 'Powerful, like the cry of a drowning man'; 'Powerful, like a threatening glare.'

The basic, workaday consciousness yet has the poetic as its mode of consciousness and the poem is also in the 'defence of poetry' genre. Significantly, the scene of judgment in the poem is within a dream so it is the dream (the unconscious as collective consciousness) that speaks out and evades its oppression on the part of the superego forces of society.

In *al-āmmiyya* poetry, the distinction between art and life is challenged. This is notable in a poem entitled 'From the Notebook of an Unknown Man' by Fu'ād Qa'ud. The poem begins:

Yesterday before I slept  
my father's portrait left its frame  
and walked along the wall

While the speaker tells the image to go to its place, it leaps about the room before flying away through an open window. The speaker closes his eyes to this and goes to sleep and the poem ends with the following lines:

and when I  
woke in the morning  
I sold the  
empty frame  
to the rag-and-bone man (Quoted by Booth 2001, 261)

As Marilyn Booth suggests (261), we could see the poem as referring to a presidential portrait (arguably Nasser, or if not, Sadat, since the poem was written between 1962 and

1976). It is thus a subtly revolutionary poem, one that correlates with the taking down of Mubarak's portrait discussed at the outset of this chapter. Although it also implies that the leader is tired of being cut off from life as a figurehead, challenging the art/ life distinction. This is similar to Iraqi poet Adnan al-Sayegh's poem 'An Episode from the Homeland' (1999) which begins: 'The statue of the president was really rather bored/ and so it climbed down from its golden pedestal.' (Milich 2012, n.p.) The humour in both poems offsets their serious challenges to state authority while the topsy-turvy and gentle logic of the poems is that the freedom sought will release authorities from their own confinement in the fixity of the idol.

While poems challenge masculine authority figures, femininity is often affirmed. This is notable in the poems of Ahmad Haddād (son of poet Amin Haddād whose father is Fu'ād Haddād). Both Amin Haddād and Ahmed Haddād participated in the 2011 revolution, and here are some lines from Ahmed Haddād's 'The March':

May I love you,  
You Egyptian woman walking amidst the march,  
Dark or fair, you are the colour of the revolution:  
Ahead of you are green and enlightened pathways.

Vicious with the enemy,  
Soothing the angry,  
Amidst the danger you chant  
'peaceful, peaceful.'

You, kind and stubborn,

You, free as a martyr,  
Your anger is a new poem,  
Your laughter is a song. (Haddād 2012, 42)

This is the revolution-poem with men and women as its poets. Dignity is a frequent theme of the revolution's poetry and its songs. Hamza Namira's song 'Insan' (Human) addresses human dignity, *karama insaniyah*, in the terms discussed in this chapter, in particular, the giving, generous, bestowing sense of dignity. The lyrics are:

When he laughs all of God's creation laughs  
When he's happy he makes everyone else happy  
A human being who has a dream and an aim  
He's always giving away everything he has  
And he doesn't own even his own spirit  
Inside his heart and in the depths of his eyes  
He carries hope, sunrise and life (Namira 2012)

The Egyptian revolution, simple and profound, humorous and serious, aesthetic and very real, down-to-earth and spiritual, was and will always be a beautiful revolution. As Mazan Maarouf states: 'even the death of a poet cannot silence his throat, as his words jump from mouth to mouth, floating on the breath of the protestors...how can they stop a poem?' (Maarouf 2012)

Since the revolution, the counter-revolutionary forces have attempted to re-assert their immortality as invincibility and to make the people superfluous again. Thus, Mona Abaza asks 'How long can disposable humanity remain disposable?' (2016, 236) At the same time,

she also draws attention to how those who support the military government do so out of fear that what happened to Libya or Syria could happen to Egypt. If Egypt had successfully established an anti-authoritarian, anti-neoliberal, feminist and pro-Palestinian democracy, what would have been the reaction of very right-wing states such as Israel or Saudi Arabia? The fear is understandable.

One of the big businesses of the Egyptian army is real estate, and the world of the rich is the gated community world. Abaza quotes the following advertisement for 'La Vie en Vert' compound in New Cairo:

'In Palm Hills we dream of the return of love and beauty... and clear enjoyment... and the return of mercy to our heart... and the dream of the return of culture and the arts.... And enlightened thought.... Palm Hills for construction... the return of the Egyptian spirit.' (Abaza 2016, 234)

This is a shameless, obscene neoliberal appropriation of the revolution, one that claims for gated communities themselves the retrievals of creative radicalism. That is, the decolonization of the sacred effected by the revolution is re-colonized. Abaza quotes other advertisements that gush, "Pay a seven years installment to be in paradise... Choose a worthy life in a gated compound... You deserve a more beautiful life..." and "You deserve a decent life." (236) This is part of the capitalist 'linguistification of the sacred' and the colonizing of radicalism in 'discourses of authenticity' that this book has examined and contested. Of course, there is nothing spiritual, ethical, creative or radical about the upscale gated community world. It consists of merely the faked authenticity of what may be termed 'emulate pride' (the spirit of the ghost in *Hamlet*) that can but be kitsch in a depressing drained-of-life manner. Abaza writes:



These horrific grotesque larger-than-life villas of the nouveaux riches, glued next to each other, filled with fake quasi-Roman columns, and—noblesse oblige—jammed with flowered wrought iron gates, replicating everywhere, make me say time and again melancholic. It is a sin that these villas fill up all the space that could have surrounded them with gardens or greenery. Then, just a few kilometers before I reach the campus, there is the surreal Future University with its kitsch pseudo-Roman construction. Kitsch following more kitsch seems to be the destiny of so called ‘modern’ New Cairo. (241)

As Richard Jacquemond has observed, much post-revolutionary art in Egypt is highly satirical, Jacquemond noting that satire is a moral genre. (Jacquemond 2016) The gated community paradise of ‘decency’, ‘beauty’, ‘art’, stands to be sarcastically shown up as vulgar, ugly, culture-less. While creative radicalism continues to flourish in Egypt, along with this there is a growing interest in Sufism that I have both witnessed in Egypt at gatherings and heard about from friends. Revolutionary aesthetics demonstrate in a burlesque manner that the purchased paradises of the indecent ones are a joke, while they are able to do so out of the very sense of what is true and real. While neoliberalism will no doubt continue to produce and rely on extremism as its other, attempting to deflect blame from itself, it is necessary to stand by creative radicalism as the truly viable alternative in terms of political critiques that demand accountability, the upholding of social solidarity (not based on identity politics) and the support of creative cultural expression that affirms the values of universal decency and dignity.

