modern arabic poetry

Revolution and Conflict

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Introduction

Since the eruption of the Arab Uprising in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria, scholars and students of Middle Eastern studies have been drawn to the politics and poetics of the Arab world. Poetry in the Arab world in particular and the Middle East in general has a great impact on people’s lives. Arabs consider Arabic poetry one of their supreme cultural accomplishments. The Arab public has been inspired and influenced by poetry for centuries. Great poets are hailed as prophets for the key role they play in politics and society. When Arab poets express views that oppose the state, they are often dismissed from official positions, detained, or exiled.

Although many scholarly works have examined the poetry and politics of the Arab world before the 1967 Arab–Israeli war and shortly after the Arab defeat, few works have concerned themselves with the major literary directions in modern Arabic poetry beyond commitment to Nasser, Arab nationalism, and the question of Palestine in the 1950s and 1960s. This book fills that gap by exploring the development and achievement of Arabic poetry since the 1960s and the interplay between politics and poetry in the modern Arab world. After the Arab defeat in the 1967 war, the poets who stood behind Nasser’s project of Arab nationalism began to question their own poetry and to see themselves as poets of a bygone era. The reason is clear: Arab poets were disappointed by the constant defeat and humiliation of their people, not only by external enemies but also by their own regimes. Modern Arab poets have tried for decades to incite their people to fight their tyrants and address their social and economic ills. Therefore, a major change took place in poetry when these poets saw no sign of revolution.
In *Modern Arabic Poetry: Revolution and Conflict* I argue that radical political changes in the Arab world inspired major transitions and new directions in the works of three prominent, modern twentieth-century Arab poets: the Iraqi ʿ Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayātī (1926–1999), the Egyptian Aḥmad ʿ Abd al-Muʿṭī Ḥijāzī (b. 1935), and the Palestinian Maḥmūd Darwīsh (1941–2008). In a comprehensive and critical reading of the poetry of these three poets, the book examines the dialectical link between politics and poetry in the modern Arab world. Among the major political upheavals the book explores are the 1967 war and the fall of Nasserism, the ongoing Israeli–Palestinian conflict, and the Arab Uprising and its aftermath. *Modern Arabic Poetry* addresses enduring questions and issues from the 1950s to the present and investigates the impact of the region’s past and present politics on its poetry. Enhanced by my original translations of some of the Arabic texts discussed, as well as translations published previously, this work brings twentieth- and twenty-first-century Arabic poetry fully into the purview of contemporary literary, political, and critical discourse.

Most scholars who have studied modern Arabic poetry, such as Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Mohammad Mustafa Badawi, Issa J. Boullata, Salma Khadra Jayyusi, and Shmuel Moreh, have focused on trends and movements in Arabic literature from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s. In this book I unveil the new directions and major transitions in Arabic poetry represented by al-Bayātī, Ḥijāzī, and Darwīsh. By examining the role of modern and contemporary Arab politics in the poetry of these three poets, I address such pressing questions as these: To what extent did the political and literary culture of the 1950s’ ʿ itizām (an adaptation of Sartrean “engagement”) impact Arabic poetry? What happens to poets and their poetry when the regime they endorsed and praised collapses or when the regime they opposed and criticized is overthrown? How has a revolution such as the Arab Uprising influenced poetry? *Modern Arabic Poetry* answers these questions and engages the reader in its discussion and analysis of Arabic poetry in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and its contribution to the literary canon.

This book consists of five chapters, including the conclusion. Though each of the three central chapters deals with a particular poet, the book’s themes are deployed across all chapters and tie them together.
Attention to the major twentieth-century and contemporary sociopolitical events and literary movements that influenced the three poets provides further narrative coherence. The first chapter surveys the development of Arabic poetry and investigates its role in politics and society, and vice versa. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 study the lives and works of the three poets and identify new directions in their poetry in relation to key political events, revolutions, and conflicts in the Arab world. The conclusion brings the chapters together and comments on the culture of the Arab Uprising and its aftermath.

Chapter 1 introduces the politics of the modern Arab world and their impact on Arabic poetry. It introduces the book’s three main theoretical concepts: commitment (iltizām), metapoetry (poetry about poetry), and coexistence in the Palestinian–Israeli conflict. This chapter pays close attention to the social, political, literary, and cultural movements and theories that influenced modern Arab thought, such as Marxism, socialism, Nasserism, commitment, and the free verse movement, and their roles in shaping Arabic poetry. This chapter situates the works of these three poets in the political and literary context of their time and offers an overview of the development of form and content in Arabic poetry. Understanding the key role poetry plays in the Arab world helps us understand the roots of current political events, such as the Arab Uprising, and their treatment in poetry. For example, the revolution in Tunisia was ignited by Moḥammad Bouʿazīzī, a Tunisian street vendor who was thrown into the street after his cart was taken from him, after which a verse of poetry by the Tunisian poet Abū al-Qāsim al-Shābbī (1909–1934) was chanted by demonstrators across the Arab world. In translation the verse says, “If people want to live, destiny will respond.” The oppressed demonstrators and protesters found their long-awaited victory in the words of al-Shābbī. This verse united the Arab multitude around the globe and drew attention to the power of the Arab people, something they had not read or heard about since the 1967 defeat.

Chapter 2 studies the works of the Iraqi poet ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Bayātī and traces the transition in his works from commitment to metapoetry. I argue that al-Bayātī, one of the greatest supporters of Nasser and the 1967 war, moved beyond the commitment of the 1950s. This transition is by no means a direct one; it takes place gradually. Like his
Iraqi peer, Sa‘dī Yūsuf (b. 1934), al-Bayātī did not let the political failure of Arabs in 1967 paralyze his poetry or put an end to his poetic career. Unlike other remarkable poets, such as Ḥijāzī, whose publication of poetry collections was halted by the 1967 defeat, al-Bayātī continued to look for inspiration beyond politics, which is key to his uniqueness as a poet. He experimented with free verse poetry in an attempt to disassociate himself from the language, diction, and form of 1950s commitment and its jargon.

The chapter concludes with the discussion of major poems by al-Bayātī that concern themselves with metapoetry. Al-Bayātī celebrates the unorthodox role of the Arab poet in the twentieth century as a terrorist. For al-Bayātī poetry becomes an act of terrorism and the poet a terrorist who has to find a loving home for himself in an arena of terror. The poet succeeds in finding such a loving home when he becomes a heroic terrorist, haunted by forces of change and weapons of destruction. Al-Bayātī’s metapoetic work introduces a revolutionary stance to the role of the poet and poetry. The poet becomes a terrorist in defense of his poetry, language, and metapoetic concerns.

Chapter 3 turns to the works of Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Muʿṭī Ḥijāzī. I argue that although Ḥijāzī resembles al-Bayātī in many ways, particularly in his commitment to Nasser, Ḥijāzī’s poetry displays a transition different from al-Bayātī’s.

In his first three collections, City without a Heart (1959), Aurès (1959), and Nothing Remains but Confession (1965), Ḥijāzī tackled various topics such as his nostalgia for the Egyptian countryside, his support of Nasser, and the question of Palestine. After the fall of Nasserism and the 1967 defeat, Ḥijāzī attempted to move beyond this stage. Leaving Cairo and settling in Paris in 1974, Ḥijāzī continued to write poetry that was critical of Anwar Sadat’s regime (Creatures of the Night Kingdom, 1978) and later of Hosni Mubarak’s (Cement Trees, 1989). Then, after years of trying to incite his people to rise against their dictators and seeing no sign of resistance against Mubarak’s regime, Ḥijāzī published no poetry collections for the next twenty-two years.

However, after the eruption of the January revolution in Egypt in 2011, Ḥijāzī made a comeback that year with The Standing Ruins of Time, a response to great literary figures of the earlier twentieth century,
such as ʿAbbās Maḥmūd al-ʿAqqād and Ṭāha Ḥusayn, as though coming to terms with them, and in support of the January revolution. This turn in Ḥijāzī’s poetics is highly politicized and marks a turning point in the trajectory of his poetry. Ḥijāzī found in the revolution a perfect time to publish his collection, an attempt to contribute poetically to the people’s revolution. Here we see an example of revolutions inspiring poets rather than poets inspiring revolutions.

Ḥijāzī represents many modern Arab poets who were disappointed by their defeated people, who refused to rise and revolt against oppressive regimes. The Arab Uprising inspired many of these poets to resume writing committed poetry. It has resulted in the rebirth of literary commitment in Arabic poetry. Ḥijāzī, like many other poets, had been waiting for such a revolution for decades. The revolution inspired poets, writers, and artists to support it in their works and renewed their faith in the people and their right to fight dictatorships. With the revolution spreading to many countries in the Arab world, we are witnessing a great rise of literary production.

Chapter 4 examines the impact of the ongoing Israeli–Palestinian conflict on the works of Maḥmūd Darwīsh, the national Palestinian “poet of resistance.” Like al-Bayātī and Ḥijāzī, Darwīsh supported Nasser, Arab nationalism, and the Palestinian cause. However, Palestine was a personal issue for him because it was his homeland. This chapter investigates the shift in the representation of the Palestinian self and the Israeli other in early and late works by Darwīsh. I argue that, in the 2003 collection Do Not Apologize for What You Did, Darwīsh starts to move from his earlier, more extroverted political poetry to a poetry that closely interrogates identity, in which the distinction between self and other begins to collapse. I compare major confrontational poems of resistance published between the 1960s and 2002 to poems published since 2003 and examine the politics of Darwīsh’s poetics. Darwīsh’s treatment of the self and the other tells the story of a young poet who resists his enemy through his poetry for decades. However, this treatment witnesses a shift toward a humanist look at the conflict and the parties involved.

In the conclusion I reflect on the literary responses of these poets to major political changes and their unique contributions to Arabic poetry. This conclusion demonstrates and confirms the argument of the book:
that major political changes in the modern Arab world have prompted significant new directions and transitions in the poetry of three important Arab poets. Their individual responses suggest three representative models in modern Arabic poetry. In the first of these, the metapoetic, the poet deviates completely from direct engagement with politics to find inspiration in stable and artistic resources. In the second, the recommitted, major political revolutions inspire the poet to resume writing and publishing collections of poetry. The third is the model of poets of ongoing conflicts who are born and die before such conflicts reach a resolution. This poetry is that of coexistence: it moves from militant to humanist.

Although all three poets began writing in the twentieth century, the trajectories of their careers present us with varying notions of the vocation of the poet in the modern world. In the conclusion I comment on the impact of the Arab Uprising on the reception of poetry and on the role of the poet in society, particularly in the Arab world. I explore the newly evolving meanings and connotations of “committed” poetry of the Arab Uprising. Finally, I discuss the challenges posed by audience, society, and language to the modern Arab poet.