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Poetics of the Virtual: Technology and Revolution in the Poetry of Sghaier Ouled Ahmed

Hager Ben Driss

*I was about to write a new poem,
I found Mohamed Bouazizi's funeral.
As I followed the procession,
I realized I was participating in the creation of a whole Revolution.*

—Sghaier Ouled Ahmed, *The Poetic Leadership*¹

Sghaier Ouled Ahmed (1955–2016) posted this graffiti-like text, which operates on the frontiers of poetry and prose, on his Facebook wall on January 15, 2011.² The words “poem” and “revolution,” which close the first and the last lines of the text, define Ouled Ahmed’s belief in a poetic agency capable of leading revolutions. Poetry, which maneuvers as a revolutionary act, has also accommodated to a new space: the internet. The Tunisian uprising has enacted a spatial revolution that accommodates hitherto incongruent geographies, namely the virtual space of social media and the real space of the street. Poetry, revolution, and technology lace together and negotiate a new aesthetics wherein poetics and politics engage a dialogue in a porous virtual space.

Dubbed the “Revolution of shabab al-Facebook” (the youth of Facebook), the political uprisings of the Middle East and North Africa region have taken the world aback. These revolutions have forged a new spatial continuum wherein the virtual spaces of social networks and the contested space of the street meet in leaky boundaries. The first sparkle of the so-called Arab Spring took place in the street. On December 17, 2010, the young Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street fruit vendor, immolated himself in front of the municipal headquarters in Sidi Bouzid, a socially and politically marginalized region in the south of the country. It was a desperate act of protest against confiscating his merchandise by a municipal official. Soon, the incident set the social network ablaze, and Bouazizi became the symbol of social and economic injustice in Tunisia.

Facebook in particular played a significant part in awakening a dormant discontent, inflaming feelings of spurned dignity and spreading dissent. The ripple of protest that mounted on Facebook culminated in a wave of angry people flooding Habib

Bourguiba Avenue in Tunis on January 14, 2011, and asking for justice, freedom, and dignity. Social networks mediated between two seminal moments in the modern history of Tunisia: Bouazizi's self-immolation and thousands of people occupying the street. Asef Bayat's theorization of "street politics" can be recuperated in the case of "online politics." Indeed, "streets serve as a medium through which strangers or casual passersby are able to establish latent communication with one another by recognizing their mutual interests and shared sentiments. This is how a small demonstration may grow into a massive exhibition of solidarity." Such "an epidemic potential of street politics" (2010, 12) reverberates in social networks, albeit in more rapid and escalating proportions. The anonymity and ubiquity of online street users facilitate subversion and transgression.

The conjunction between the virtual (social networks) and the real (the street) is at the heart of the story of the Arab Spring. The "most consistent narratives," claim Philip Howard and Muzammil Hussain, ascribe to the internet and social media a fundamental, active role in these uprisings. Indeed, "digital media helped turn individualized, localized, and community-specific dissent into a structured movement with a collective consciousness about both shared plights and opportunities" (2013, 25). The technical side of these revolutions has been addressed in a plethora of studies looking mainly into their sociopolitical aspects (Salvatore 2011, Howard and Hussain 2013, Amira 2014, Jamshidi 2014, Jamoussi 2016).

The artistic facet of the Arab revolutions, however, remains underresearched and still needs a more profound examination. Samia Mehrez's edited anthology *Translating Egypt's Revolution: The Language of Tahrir* (2012) offers a pertinent research of the textual side of Egypt's revolution. Within the same vein, Anna M. Agathangelou's "Making Anew an Arab Regional Order" (2013) examines the "poetics-agonistiki," or struggle poetry (31), of the Arab Spring and claims that these revolutions were invigorated by an artistic *energeia*. Mohamed Salah Omri's "A Revolution of Dignity and Poetry" (2012) is the first, and so far the most pertinent, essay cogently relating the Tunisian Revolution to poetic expression. His comparative reading of Ouled Ahmed's and Palestinian Mahmoud Darwish's texts explores the poetics of resistance in their writings. Other studies focused on the ascent of hitherto marginalized or underground artistic forms such as rap music (Gonzalez-Quijano 2013) or the emergence of new artistic expressions like slogans (Colla 2012).

This chapter looks into the spatial continuum created by the Tunisian Revolution and examines the poetics of the virtual. It addresses the work of the late Tunisian poet Sghaier Ouled Ahmed, who offered a fascinating case of using Facebook as a poetical platform of resistance. The tension between the literati and the digerati complicates the interface between literature and the internet. Accordingly, literary writers who make use of social networks are often accused of self-aggrandizement and egocentrism. The case of Ouled Ahmed provides a counterexample, for his use of the social network circumvents the personal and the private to encompass the political and the collective. More than a mere Facebook user, he engaged in political cyber-activism, addressing a transnational online community. His awareness of a global readership is clear in his attempt at interrogating and rectifying the Western grammar of revolutions. The porous space of the internet engenders further spatial leakages, this time between the

national and the transnational. Based in Tunisia, Ouled Ahmed's politicized poetry posted on Facebook offers a pertinent case of border-crossing activity. Facebook is a subversive site that fuses and confuses the poetry of revolution and the revolution of poetry, yielding thus new poetics of the virtual.

Literature and Social Networks

As several writers have indulged in an intensive use of social networks, a camp of literati has raised angry, often reprimanding, voices against the use and abuse of Facebook and Twitter. In her essay review of *The Social Network* (2010), a film that charts the story of Facebook and its creator Mark Zuckerberg, Zadie Smith launches a harsh attack on digital life. She describes this social network as a reductive space wherein "everything shrinks. Individual character. Friendship. Language. Sensibility. In a way it is a transcendent experience: we lose our bodies, our messy feelings, our desires, our fears." She also cautions that "our denuded networked selves don't look more free, they just look more owned" (Smith 2010). Within the same vein, Pulitzer Prize winner Jennifer Egan believes that social networks have transformed people's lives into "a huge apartment block, [in] which everyone's cell looks exactly the same" (qtd. in Schuessler 2013). Such discontent is also directed to famous novelists and poets who use social networks as a podium for self-publicity.

A new type of literary feud has emerged between "disconnected" literati and "connected" ones. A notorious example is offered by American novelist Jonathan Franzen, a fierce opponent of the internet. In his essay "What's Wrong with the Modern World?," he speaks about his "disappointment when a novelist who ought to have known better, Salman Rushdie, succumbs to Twitter" (2013). Rushdie's retaliation on Twitter was as much acerbic as sarcastic: "Dear #Franzen, @MargaretAtwood @JoyceCarolOates @nycnovel @NathanEnglander @Shteyngart and I are fine with Twitter. Enjoy your ivory tower" (qtd. in Schuessler 2013). Rushdie's list of literary writers whom he tagged in his tweet could have been much longer, as a growing number of novelists and poets are using social networks and even making a case of it. Turkish writer Elif Shafak, for instance, has difficulties "understanding the widely held criticism among the literati that the Internet is a fake world which novelists and poets should refrain from if they want to preserve their intellectual depth, focus, and integrity." Shafak ends her essay, "Storytelling, Fake Worlds, and the Internet," by claiming social media to be an effective "political platform" (2015). Shafak's understanding of the subversive power of technology—that belonging to a country where the word becomes a weapon in the struggle against oppression and dictatorship—is quite similar to that of Sghaier Ouled Ahmed.

Ouled Ahmed's use of Facebook as a space of protest finds explanation in the long years of silencing and censorship that characterized the two governments of Habib Bourguiba (1956–87) and Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali (1987–2011). With a state-policed media, the freedom of expression was nullified in Tunisia. Ben Ali's policy of beautifying the country by circulating an image of an open modern society to attract foreign investments resulted in a growing rate of connectivity. The government encouraged

and even subsidized internet cafés, implemented the internet at universities, secondary schools, and primary schools, and enhanced the purchase of computers. In 2001, out of a population of 10.5 million, the estimated number of Tunisian internet users was around 4 million, with 2.5 million subscribers to Facebook (Amira 2014, 45). By 2010, Tunisia had the highest rate of connectivity among the Arab countries, with 34 percent of all internet users (Kallander 2013, 7).

The story of the internet in Tunisia was steeped in dramatic irony. While encouraging connectivity, the government prohibited and persecuted any type of digital dissent. More than six hundred cyber officers regulated internet traffic (Amira 2014, 45) and prohibited access to sites deemed dangerous to the national security. The situation, however, veered toward the farcical as the “father” of the nation, who bestowed knowledge upon his people, was not aware that he was to be ousted with that knowledge. Digital dissent generated a type of “Caliban digerati,” who circumvented the government’s tactics of internet censorship. The result was similar in its dramatic irony to Caliban’s use of Prospero’s language in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*: “You taught me language; and my profit on’t/Is I know how to curse” (1986, 33). In the Tunisian context, Caliban’s words would outline the addendum: “You gave me the internet, and my profit on it is to throw you outside the country.” My catachrestic use of Caliban’s subversive use of language and knowledge in a colonial situation finds resonance in Ouled Ahmed’s statement, “We are the victims of this independent colonization” (2013a, 10). The foreign colonization only ceded place to a local one. Indeed, Tunisia was colonized for over fifty years by two repressive governments.

It was within this Caliban-like digital performance that Ouled Ahmed launched his guerillas during and after the revolution. Contrary to Zadie Smith, who accused Zuckerberg of creating “something like a noosphere, an Internet with one mind” (2010), Ouled Ahmed praised the creator of Facebook for this technology, “a wonderful tool of communication that facilitated fast revolutions” (Ouled Ahmed 2014). In several interviews, he hailed social networks as new tools of dissent. “We have to understand that technological and digital development have by now the final word,” he stated in an interview. “This development has contributed in launching revolutions and changing regimes. What happened to Ben Ali is the best example. Before the digital turn, revolutions used to last for years; today, revolutions start and finish quickly” (Ouled Ahmed 2016). Ouled Ahmed found in Facebook a free and unrestrained space against censorship and regimented creativity.

Before the revolution, artistic creation in Tunisia was as restrained as freedom of speech. Ouled Ahmed had a long story of struggle against repression, which he described in a 2012 essay, “Waiting for the Second Round”:

I came to Tunis from Sidi Bouzid by the end of the last century, precisely in 1981. Since then, I have been fighting oppression with two weapons: pen and language. I used language, my unique weapon, to fight Bourguiba and Ben Ali as well as the one party, which became the only one. I also fought those who were once in the opposition and ended up in the oppressor’s camp. I fought legions of writers and intellectuals who were the police arm of the regime. And I am still fighting. (2013a, 115–16)

In 1984, *Nachid al-Ayyam al-Sitta* (Song of the Six Days), his poetic response to the violent events of the Bread Uprising in Tunisia, was immediately censored, and he was incarcerated. The poem is a long elegy to a nation betrayed by its rulers and to a population living under siege and perpetual surveillance:

They were behind the door,
in the train, inside the walls,
and the green blood cells.
They were transcribing
his words and his traits.
Stripped was he of secrets and underwear! (Ouled Ahmed 2015a, 310)

Ouled Ahmed was imprisoned twice and fired from work between 1987 and 1992. His poems were banned and he was prohibited from appearing in the media. His short truce with Ben Ali's regime resulted in the founding of the House of Poetry, an intellectual space for poets. He explains in *The Poetic Leadership* (2013a) that the government benefited from this short peaceful relationship: "My poems were allowed to be published, albeit in a mutilated way, so that the government could boast: 'the regime is democratic because Ouled Ahmed can write'" (162). Very quickly, he resumed his antagonist relationship with the state. His feelings of bitterness and frustration remained as acute as ever. He translated them in dark poems about censorship and death.

"The Mouse" is a short poem that illustrates Ouled Ahmed's ironic attitude toward a censorship apparatus that he continually challenged with a perseverant act of writing:

O homeless mouse:
be less greedy than the censor.
Nibble those books steeped in certainty,
and take care of my manuscripts. (2015a, 297)

The ironic image of the mouse, who becomes a more sensible figure than the censor, is Ouled Ahmed's way to lament a poetic wasteland where poetry piles in mountains of rubbish that is only good for feeding mice.

Death as related to poetry is a compulsive image in Ouled Ahmed's texts. The act of writing has an obituary quality, for the poem is doomed to death as soon as it is composed (Ben Driss 2016). In "Maqam al Wuquf" (Shrine for Standing), he bitterly mourns the death of his texts:

Standing up
and words,
like a coffin,
walking
to their grave
in
the
poem. (2015a, 295)

In this tomb-like land, the word is immediately executed, as he illustrates in "Uktub" (Write):

Write whatever you want.
 Get ready for the two angels
 and be a forgotten text
 under Gabriel's wings. (2015a, 152)

It is not surprising, therefore, that the revolution was Ouled Ahmed's long-awaited moment for poetic revenge. He found in Facebook a space of defiance and a means to curse the oppressor.

Poetry and Revolution

Ouled Ahmed started his Revolution on Facebook on December 17, 2010, the day Bouazizi immolated himself. In a small room in his apartment located in Rades, a southern suburb of Tunis, he created a virtual space of rebellious writing. He bestowed upon himself the title of the "poetic leader of the revolution," and he called this space the "poetic headquarters of the Tunisian Revolution," or, as he suggested, the "Tunisian headquarters of the poetic revolution." This way or the other, revolution and poetry lace together, exchange meaning, and negotiate agency. "All the political parties said they did not start the Revolution. Who did it then?" he wonders. "The answer: poetry and young people" (Ouled Ahmed 2013a, 278). Accordingly, he made it a point to obfuscate the lines between poeticizing politics and politicizing poetry.

Ouled Ahmed's poetry offers a terrain of entente to the edgy relationship between politics and poetics. "What's poetry in the end?" he asks in his poem "By Way of Keeping Spirits Up." His trenchant answer would become his motto in his poetic revolution: "It is a linguistic speculation/whose aim is to assist power in its downfall" (Trans. Omri 2012, 159). In his discussion of the role of writers and intellectuals, Edward Said astutely captures the paradox in the "unresolved tension" between politics and art. "We might as well ask," Said contends, "whether non-political writer or intellectual is a notion that has much content in it" (2002, 20). Said's theorization of the public role of the intellectual perfectly chimes with Ouled Ahmed's vision: "There are intellectuals who have not realized yet that we are living in a political stage *par excellence*, a stage that necessitates resistance and clear stands" (Ouled Ahmed 2016). On December 24, 2010, he took a rather precarious stand at that time: he openly and publicly sided with the burgeoning revolution, a position he defiantly posted on Facebook:

It is high time I chose between home [*mawtini*] and homeland [*watan*].
 The first, which is really the first, is Sidi Bouzid,
 the second, which could have been the first, is Tunisia.
 I start immediately my choice, leaving to the custodians of patriotism the pleasure
 to bark and the leftovers they gain from lavishing their flatteries on the regime via
 official TV channels. (2013a, 9)

Ouled Ahmed's use of Facebook provided him with a channel to emerge as a public intellectual whose role, according to Said, is "to challenge and defeat both an imposed

silence and the normalized quiet of unseen power wherever and whenever possible” (Said 2002, 31). Indeed, “those who keep silent, are not poets” (2016), Ouled Ahmed contends.

Poetry, the poet insists, is the ultimate legitimate leader of the revolution. “The label ‘poetic leadership,’” he explains, “is not a stylistic embellishment. It rather demonstrates that the Revolution was a poetic demand” (2013a, 47). Poetry was liberated from classrooms, literary salons, or official cultural spaces and brought to the street. It became a galvanizer of rebellion. Tunisian poet Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi’s poem “The Will to Life” (1955) offers the best example of the poetic impulse energizing Arab revolutions. Al-Shabbi’s “was perhaps the first poetry to be appropriated by protesters that infused the term *al-sha’b* with revolutionary connotations among the narratives of revolutions sweeping across the Arab world” (Sanders and Visona 2012, 229). The two famous opening lines of his poem, “If, one day, the people will to live/Then fate must obey,” were chanted not only during the Tunisian Revolution but during the Egyptian as well. The slogans derived from these two lines, like “the people want to collapse the regime,” testified to “the presence of poetry as well as the intimate relationship between people and poetry” (Ouled Ahmed 2015c).

The undecided relationship between politics and aesthetics still raises doubts over the agency of art. In his essay “Revolution, Transformation and Utopia: The Function of Literature,” Bill Ashcroft discusses the active role of literature in times of revolutions. He contends that literature has the important function of inspiring hope because it dwells in the realm of imagination and dreams: “Creative works confirm a fundamental truth of revolution; that no future is achieved unless it is first imagined” (2014, 24). That was exactly what Ouled Ahmed purported to achieve in his poetic leadership. “Poetry is in reality an ensemble of imagined images asking for liberty and trying to make life possible,” he declares in an interview, “like art, poetry operates on the frontiers of dreams. Revolution is a dream because it is based on cutting the ties with an oppressive past and heralding a better life. Revolution, therefore, is a poetic act” (Ouled Ahmed 2015c). Poetry and revolution exchange meaning and urgency in a process of mutual fertilization: the poetry of revolution is also a revolution of poetry.

Poetics of the Virtual

Ouled Ahmed’s anthology of collected texts, *Al-Qiyada al-Shi’riyya li al-Thawra al-Tunusiyya: Yawmiyyat* (The Poetic Leadership of the Tunisian Revolution: A Diary), affirms new aesthetics of the virtual. It especially upsets the dividing lines between online writings and printed works. The book assembles Ouled Ahmed’s posts on Facebook between 2010 and 2012. The elocutionary quality of his online texts, often midway between verse and prose, obfuscates another boundary, the one between the oral and the written. He infuses his texts with Tunisian dialect, the language of the marginalized grassroots who made the revolution. “Ya Sidi ‘Arfinik” (Sir, We Know You), a poem posted on Saturday January 8, 2010, is fully written in Tunisian dialect, something rather unusual for Ouled Ahmed, who had hitherto kept to standard Arabic:

Ya sidi we know you're a policeman
and we know those who know you're a policeman.

By God, we know you're a policeman,
even the director knows it.

Ya sidi we know you're a director
and we know those who know you're a director.

By God, we know you're a director,
even the minister knows it.

Ya Sidi we know you're a minister
and we know those who know you're a minister.

By God we know you're a minister,
even the President knows it.

Ya sidi we know you're a President
and we know those who know you're a President.

By God we know you're a President,
even the policeman knows.

The poem ironically enumerates in an ascending hierarchy the different agents of oppression in the country: the policeman, the director, the minister, and the president. The mounting irony in the poem culminates in amalgamating “president” and “policeman” in the fourth stanza to describe a police state. The exasperation and escalating anger of the speaking voice transpires through the reiteration of the phrase “*ya sidi*,” literally “my master.” The exact meaning of this phrase, however, depends on the tone of the speaker, as it can be used in a polite, friendly, or mocking way. The speaker’s annoyance is clear through the excessive repetition that governs each stanza, as well as the whole poem. The eloquence of the text is based on Tunisian idiomatic language. The ironic “*ya sidi*” is emphasized by the sarcastic “we know you,” which in Tunisian Arabic is an invitation to stop lies and hypocrisy.

The poem ends with a stanza midway between Tunisian dialect and standard Arabic, testifying to the linguistic continuum that characterizes social networks:

Ya sidi just let us
draw dots
on the letters,
in the middle of letters,
under the letters.

Ya sidi just let us
draw the wing of freedom. (2013a, 205–6)

The poem closes with the power of language to liberate people from an institutionalized oppression. Language, contends Ouled Ahmed, shows the aesthetic side of this technological revolution. Social media, he states, “has molded a telegraphic and communicative language anchored in immediacy. All these features convey the essence of poetry itself as it is a linguistic condensation attempting to seize a running and unruly moment” (Ouled Ahmed 2016). The linguistic negotiation between the

internet and poetry destabilizes an elite-regulated cultural life. It also liberates minds from ossified, often institutionalized, spaces of producing and consuming poetry.

Because it was initially produced online, the soft version of Ouled Ahmed's *Poetic Leadership* testifies that the virtual generates its proper aesthetics, which is capable to compete with traditional channels of literary productions. In his description of this work, Ouled Ahmed points out its new poetics:

I started writing a volume of poetry that will be published soon. It is a collection of revolutionary diaries entitled *The Poetic Leadership of the Revolution*. I was aware that it was the first postmodern Revolution in the twenty-first century; a savvy revolution that used new technology. The texts I wrote, diaries, poetry or prose, replicated the new forms of the revolution. Some poems took the shape of short Facebook posts, sometimes with a military-like headlines. In the absence of political leadership, poetry takes the lead. (Ouled Ahmed 2012)

Ouled Ahmed's book, which he insists on calling "a volume of poetry," is a potpourri, a textual space amalgamating poetry, prose, and journalism. He chronicles in this work the Tunisian everyday revolution, hence the subtitle "Yawmiyyat," a diary. It is divided into three parts: "Texts of the Revolution," "Poems of the Revolution," and "Telegrams and Letters from the General Headquarters." The book powerfully captures the revolutionary euphoria of the beginning and the subsequent disappointment and malaise after the first elections (October 23, 2011) won by the Islamist party, al-Nahda.

Ouled Ahmed's combination of wry humor and serious political activism is clearly manifest in his epigraphic introduction to the first part of his book: "With God's blessing, while benefiting from Satan's expertise, I give myself the license to publish this fifty-word daily newspaper whose public slogan is: 'Helping power to collapse'" (2013a, 13). Facebook offers a rebellious medium apt to deface power. The "carnavalesque" overtones of the virtual space supply "contested strategies through which space and time are inverted through parody and grotesque symbols, imageries and languages" (Rahimi 2011, 3). Masquerading as a military leader of the revolution provides Ouled Ahmed with a carnivalesque power to undermine the oppressive regime. The following excerpt from "A Free Speech to a Free People" offers a pertinent example of both the creative and the subversive gestures in such online politics:

The Headquarters of the Poetic Leadership of the Tunisian Revolution.

Wednesday 19 January, the fifth day of the Revolution.

Mr. Mohamed Bouazizi,

Young People,

Free people:

Now that we have liberated ourselves from the independent colonization and become the way we want: fully human beings, our duty is to lead a life worth of living ...

Now that the Dictator has run away, testifying once more, that any dictator will ineluctably run away to a tomb outside his country—he ran away leaving behind his party, gangs, and militias ..., we ought to cut the road before them.

Occupy the streets ...

The free people of the world lay heavy expectations on you. If we disappoint ourselves, we'll fail all of them.

Hail to the Revolution. (2013a, 32)

This parody of an inflaming speech proffered by a revolutionary leader obfuscates the lines between digital mutiny and street protest. People are encouraged to occupy public space while the poet himself is occupying an online street. Ouled Ahmed offers here a pertinent example of the fluid boundaries between street politics and online poetics.

The revolution invigorated Ouled Ahmed with a renewed hope in homeland and poetry. His 1984 lines "I'm still inhabiting a shroud/Still looking for a homeland" ("Song of Six Days") fade in front of an elated optimism like the one he chanted in both verse and prose a short time before the 2011 elections:

I'm writing a new poem. It seems to be a good one. I think that the people who are still continuing the revolution against the "ministers of God" will take one of its lines as a slogan to topple down oppression and backwardness. O Tunisian People, it seems that my life is still possible among you:

If you were a great people,

Vote for yourself in the nick of time.

If you still crave for humiliation after degradation,

Cheer up and prepare yourselves for the ultimate blow. (2013a, 285)

The virtual space of Facebook provides him with a strong sense of poetic justice: it is here that he, as well as his poems, can finally survive. The term "revolution" is the linking thread between Ouled Ahmed's online poetic rebellion and people's street mutiny. This is why he was adamant about using no other label but "revolution" to name what happened in Tunisia between December 17, 2010, and January 14, 2011. "Scribbling is written with ink; Revolution is written with blood," he admonishes his Facebook followers. "To those who circulate the label 'Jasmine revolution,' please get educated a little more during curfews. Lift your heads and say: the Tunisian Revolution" (2013a, 216). Such a reproof aims at claiming an authentic revolution made in Tunisia.

Ouled Ahmed's refusal of labels and coinages describing the Tunisian Revolution marks a transnational moment wherein he negotiates the Western grammar of revolutions. Tags such as "Arab Spring," "Arab Awakening," or "Arab Tsunami" are all steeped in "terminological schizophrenia" (Browlee and Ghiabi 2017) stemming from the perception of the Arab world as stagnant and unable to change. Arab exceptionalism, argues Asef Bayat, "informs the whole edifice of the 'democracy promotion industry' in the West, which pushes for instigating change through outside powers, one that does not exclude the use of force" (2010, 3). The label "jasmine revolution," first circulated by Western media, corroborates the exotic image of a country whose economy relied heavily on tourism. Mohamed Salah Omri believes that it is "a reassuringly safe way of referring to Tunisia's upheaval: it caters to the exotic imaginary, and invokes lab-incubated revolts" (Omri 2011). The word "revolution" destabilizes the occidental myth of the sleeping Mediterranean beauty waiting for the Western kiss.

Facebook, a transnational space par excellence, accommodated the poet's negotiation and retrieval of the Tunisian Revolution. While aware of its potential disfiguring, he continued to urge his online followers to translate his posts into all possible languages: "Read and translate simultaneously to your languages, for they are continuing their massacres ... out of cruelty?" (2013a, 17). This excerpt, taken from a long text titled "The Lesson of Tunisia," posted on January 12, 2011, is translated into both French and German (19–22). Translation inscribes the text into a transnational collective action, a "process through which individuals, nonstate groups, and/or organizations mobilize jointly around issues, goals, and targets that link the domestic and international arenas" (von Bulow 2010, 5). His detailed online transcription of the revolution offers not only a sense of immediacy but also a new mode of transnational poetics. His ability to capture every moment of the revolution and diffuse it online goes beyond Henri Lefebvre's "Let everyday life become a work of art" (1984, 204). Ouled Ahmed proposes, "Let every moment of the revolution become a work of art."

The term "revolution" in Ouled Ahmed's work has a spatial resonance; it is a rebellion that redefines spaces and makes places. Transforming the virtual space of Facebook into a poetic place cannot be severed from the geo-poetic concerns in his work wherein Tunisia is loved and celebrated. The virtual exudes a "sense of place" demonstrated, according to Yi Fu Tuan, when people "apply their moral and aesthetic discernment to sites and locations" (1979, 410). Even though disappointed, silenced, and ostracized, Ahmed kept a strong passion for a country he cherished the hope to liberate one day. In "Love of Country," he boasts his love for Tunisia:

We love this country
 As none has done.
 Morning
 Evening
 Before morning
 After evening
 On Sunday again.
 Should they kill us,
 As they have done;
 Should they expel us,
 As they have done,
 Conquerors to this country we shall return. (Trans. Khalifa 2015b, 55)

"Love of Country" is Ouled Ahmed's most famous poem. The simple rhythm and the proverbial quality of its style make it vie in popularity with al-Shabbi's "The Will to Life." This poem, as well as all Ahmed's poetic texts about Tunisia, are anchored in a strong topophilia.

The solid affective bonding to homeland is at the heart of Ouled Ahmed's poetic revolution. His love for the country tolerated no negotiations or concessions. In "Tunisian All at Once or Never," he writes:

I am writing my song with my blood
 To a martyr who was my mouth and voice,

To a future, O friend that has not come for centuries
 Tunisian once.
 Tunisian all at once or never shall I be. (Trans. Khalifa 2015b, 57)

Ouled Ahmed equates in these lines writing poetry and dying for one's country. Poetry in his revolutionary glossary is another word for homeland. "Write!," he braces himself in his poem "Write": "Write!/so that you prevent them/from destroying home [*beit*]" (2015a, 159). The word *beit* in Arabic has a double meaning: "home" and also "a line in a poem." The oppressive regime in Tunisia destroyed both—homeland and poetry. It is through a virtual home (social network) that Ahmed retrieved his country and his poetic power.

Technology versus Ideology

Ouled Ahmed rebelled against all types of political oppression and ideological regimentation. His war against what he called "the ministers of God" or the custodians of religion started long time ago with a 1988 poem, "Supplications," a poem that ignited the wrath of religious zealots:

O God,
 Help me against them.
 They gored my camel
 And sanctioned my blood
 In places where you bade no blood
 Be spilt on the prayer rag.
 O God
 I seek protection in you from my kinsmen.
 They sell cheap wine in day light,
 And ruin the drunk's innocent night!
 O God
 The tickets for the afterlife are sold out.
 But no money, no time, no reason could I afford.
 Please tear their tickets, O God,
 And let my heart rejoice.
 Did you not promise us your grace? (Trans. Khalifa 2015b, 59)

The poem, with its high insurgent overtones, mocks blind religiosity and its utilization to orchestrate people's lives. Because of this poem, Ouled Ahmed was accused of heresy and was pronounced an infidel.

His highly controversial article "Ideology and Technology," originally published in *al-Mawkif* (September 4, 1984), intensified his image as an opponent of religion. In this article, he ironically criticizes the use of loudspeakers to call for prayers. "Between the ideological enthusiasm and the technological stupidity," he states, "there is ample room to make of the muezzin a topic for modern writing." According to him, the ideological

enthusiasm starts with shouting “*la ilaha illa allah*” (there is only one God), which is a matter of fact for all Muslims and does not need to be proved. This enthusiasm, however, morphs into “stupidity” when the technology of the loudspeaker is used and abused to propagate a fundamental truth. His point against such use of this technology is that it disturbs the sleep “of children, ill people, seculars, tourists, and those who believe in God but do not pray” (2013b). Ouled Ahmed’s semiotic reading of the loudspeaker challenges the sacred and the taboo. This technology used in the call to prayer has become for many people a part of Islam that should not be criticized or questioned.

The poet’s war against the guardians of religion gained momentum before and after the elections of October 23, 2011. The internet became the poet’s savvy technology to fight a new way of life insidiously propagated by Islamists whose social agenda was based on “the regimentation of the ways of eating, drinking, dressing, and fornicating” (Ouled Ahmed 2013a, 59). Between March and October 2011, his posts on Facebook targeted mainly the Salafists. On March 10, for instance, he wrote, “Anyone who hasn’t read five different and contradictory writers has no right to create a political party. On the other hand, when we say ‘we refuse any foreign intervention in our affairs,’ we also mean the intervention of the sky!” (2013a, 226). On October 10, he posted eleven short messages, all of them criticizing al-Nahda’s politicization of religion and the Islamists’ aversion to art and freedom (250). In subsequent posts, a few days before the elections, he admonished Tunisians to remember that they made an ideology-free revolution and they should keep it free from all ideologies, including religion (251).

Ouled Ahmed was concerned not only with the Islamists’ infiltration in political life but also their attempt at changing the social model of Tunisia. “Those people who have never ever watched a film or a play, never wrote one single poem worthy to be chanted by revolutionary people” (Ouled Ahmed 2013a, 250) cannot be trusted with the future of the country. Women are often the first target of Salafist thinking, and Ouled Ahmed warned against this gender-oriented ideology. The poet’s celebration of women is articulated in one of his most famous and often quoted poems, “Women”:

I wrote
and wrote again
till I exhausted all letters.
I described
and described again
till I consumed all images.
I wrap it up, then,
and carry on:
women of my country
are truly women. (2015a, 180)

“*Nisau biladi/nisaun wa nisf*” became a feminist revolutionary slogan during and after elections. He believed that “women’s votes will be decisive in the elections because it simply means the choice of a social model. It is not a political question; it is rather a structural and strategic matter” (2013a, 247). Accordingly, he intensified

his Facebook guerillas against a social model in which women were nullified. In his poem “Qawsaqab,” wherein he juxtaposes the creative power of the pen (poetry) to the violent authority of the sword (ideology), he vents his apprehensions over a potential society shrouded in black: “Is that a woman or a female?/What’s her name?/A woman with a *niqab* is just nameless” (2015a, 83).

One day before the elections, Saturday, October 22, 2011, Ouled Ahmed posted a poem addressing Tunisian women voters: “A Last Letter to the Women of Tunisia”:

In the heart of time
 In the polling booth,
 Remember that men have ruled you for twenty centuries.
 You were their things,
 their shadows.
 Do not count on doubt despite your clear vision,
 But read the book of poetry before politics and religion. (Trans. Khalifa 2015b, 63)

It is significant that in this poem, too, Ouled Ahmed advances poetry as a tool of revolution, this time a revolution against patriarchy and misogyny. Because poetry comes before “politics and religion,” it acquires the legitimate role of the leader. Poetry, according to Ouled Ahmed, is a revolutionary medium to collapse ideology.

Conclusion

The Tunisian Revolution, as well as the other uprisings that swept the Arab world, offered new spatial parameters. The spatial turn, inaugurated by Michel Foucault and Henry Lefebvre in the 1970s, is defined by Edward Soja as a move to retrieve space from the Bergsonian time-oriented vision of human affairs (Soja 2009). The new spatial turn started up by *Shabab al-Facebook* in the beginning of the new millennium effaced the fissure between the virtual and the real. The overlapping boundaries between social networks and the street engendered a nomadic revolution transgressing the front lines of digital and physical topographies. It created in the process, to use Soja’s words, an “ontological parity ... with neither being extrinsically privileged” (2009, 18). The dialectical relationship between social media and physical spaces was crucial in enacting fast revolutions.

Social networks, offering new technological spaces of protest, were also an apt artistic medium. These revolutions were marked by one major feature: an energizing poetic strain. Sghaier Ouled Ahmed was the first poet to seize this opportunity and declare poetry as the leader of the Tunisian Revolution. In fact, Ouled Ahmed started his proper poetic revolution long time ago. His 2015 volume of poetry *Muswaddat Watan* (Draft of a Homeland) is a collection of pre- and post-revolution poems testifying to his own continuous rebellion. A great number of his old poems, like “Love of Country” (1988), which, significantly, opens the collection, or “Song of the Six Days” (1984) which records an important social upheaval in Tunisia, still sound fresh and timely.

The new and innovative turn in Ouled Ahmed's work, starting from December 17, 2010, and continuing until his death on April 5, 2016, was his unremitting use of Facebook as a channel of writing and protest. It was a space to write/right old and new wrongs. As he blurred the lines between the private and the public, the personal narratives about his oppression by the old regime became a testimony of a collective trauma. Facebook was his headquarters, a location of poetical and political activism. The term "headquarters" was not a mere metaphor, for he used it literally as it is clear in this statement posted on Facebook on January 16, 2011, addressing his followers: "Your private messages on Facebook hinder my work for the Revolution" (2013a, 214). In other words, Facebook was not a site to indulge in private socialization; it was an official place for militant activities.

As a place maker, Ouled Ahmed transformed the virtual space of social network into a place of poetry and revolution. As he complicated the lines between poeticizing the revolution and revolutionizing poetry, he created a poetics of the virtual, a new geo-poetics combining virtual geography with poetry. The result is a type of writing that trespasses across the traditional borders between prose and verse, online texts and printed ones.

Notes

- 1 Unless otherwise indicated, translations from Ouled Ahmed's texts and interviews are mine.
- 2 For a full biography of Sghaier Ouled Ahmed and a survey of his work, see Hager Ben Driss, "Mohamed Sghaier Ouled Ahmed," *The Literary Encyclopedia*, October 13, 2016, <https://www.litencyc.com/php/people.php?rec=true&UID=13853>.

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