

REVOLUTIONARY POETRY

Before Revolution:

The two poems below are written by the Tunisian poet Abul Qasim al-Shabi (1909-1934), in the late 1920s during which time the French still ruled Tunisia. These poems later inspired the revolution of 1956 that led to Tunisia's independence from the French and could also be heard in the streets of Tunisia during the protests that led to the 2011 Arab Spring.

To the Tyrants of the World

Abul Qasim al-Shabi

Imperious despot, insolent in strife,
Lover of ruin, enemy of life!
You mock the anguish of an impotent land
Whose people's blood has stained your tyrant hand,
And desecrate the magic of this earth,
sowing your thorns, to bring despair to birth,
Patience! Let not the Spring delude you now,
The morning light, the skies' unclouded brow;
Fear gathers in the broad horizon's murk
Where winds are rising, and deep thunders lurk;
When the weak weeps, receive him not with scorn
Who soweth thorns, shall not his flesh be torn?
Wait! Where you thought to reap the lives of men,
The flowers of hope, never to bloom again,
Where you have soaked the furrows' heart with blood,
Drenched them with tears, until they overflowed,
A gale of flame shall suddenly consume,
A bloody torrent sweep you to your doom!

Translated into English by AJ Arberry

Will to Live (excerpt)

Abul Qasim al-Shabi

If one day, a people desire to live,
then fate will answer their call
And their night will then begin to fade,
and their chains break and fall.

Translated into English by Elliot Colla

After Revolution:

The Egyptian poet Bayram al Tunisi (1893-1961) wrote this poem in the late 1920s or early 1930s, a few years after the Egyptian revolution of 1919 that led to independence from the British. In it, Bayram al Tunisi expresses his disappointment with the Wafd party (which he had originally supported) and attacks class differences between the haves and the have-nots in Egypt.

The Egyptian Worker

Bayram al-Tunisi

Why do I walk barefoot, while I sew your shoes?
Why is my bed bare, while I fluff your mattresses?
Why is my house a ruin, while I build your cupboards?
Is this my destiny?
God will settle accounts with you!
You live in houses on high.
I build them.
You sleep in brocaded sheets.
I weave them.
You own wheels of gold.
I make them run.
By God, it is not envy.
But I do remind you.
From dawn to dusk the hammer is in my hands.
I bear this burden all the same until my day of rest.
The son of the streets is clothed, while I dress in rags.
You shun my steps.
And I recoil from addressing you.
Why do you tear me down, when I build up your glory?
I clothe you in cotton and linen.
On my burial day my family finds no shroud for me,
Not even sympathy, as I leave you forever.

Translated by Joel Beinin in his article
“Writing Class: Workers and Modern Egyptian Colloquial Poetry (Zajal)”