INTRODUCTION

"I GIVE MY STEPS their form and tell the sea to follow me," wrote the Syrian-born poet known as Adonis.[1] Through these words, he sought four decades ago, as he still does today, to stir the still waters of poetic and political life throughout the Arab world. His words belong to a wave of remarkable endeavors by Arab poets to secure moorings for their tradition in the modern world. In culling the word "sea" (*baḥr*), Adonis indicates his own powerful location at the crest of that wave, whose tidemarks have reached many shores of Arabic poetry, including Palestinian, the focus of this book. Beyond naming a natural formation, in Arabic "the sea" also refers to poetic meter. Unlike his predecessors who composed Arabic poetry in traditional meters passed down over generations and centuries, Adonis creates his own poetic form and tells meter to follow him.

In the quest to modernize poetic forms, whereby Palestinian poets, and Arab poets generally, have radically transformed the sound structures of their poems, poets have adopted free verse and prose poems, forms in which poets, not "the sea," stand sovereign over rhythms. This substitution of sovereignties has emerged from a protean process in which modernizing poets have essentially rejected poetic meter and refused to measure sound in their compositions. Over the past seven decades, their rhythms have become ever more irregular and their poems ever more silent, more likely to be read quietly and privately than recited publicly, beckoning the eyes more than the ears. As an ethnography of "literary" transformation, this book investigates forms of

ethics, politics, epistemologies, and imaginaries, which have led to this prevailing silence in the contemporary poetry of Arab societies. It tunes in to the secular reverberations of these acoustic mutations, particularly within the Palestinian scene, which still struggles for sovereignty in the secular complex of nation-states as it does for a place in "world literature."

A primary goal of this book is to demonstrate ways in which poets' emerging "silence" bespeaks contradictions and ambiguities of secular formations in modernity as movements in the sounds of rhythms, but also beyond them. I advance three main arguments. First, I argue that poetic forms and forms of life are inseparable. Thus different sonic edifices are enactments or embodiments of forms of life and self, freedom and truth, knowledge and tradition that poets aspire to cultivate, expunge, or simply explore. Poets' sound techniques (e.g., rhyme, rhythm, and meter) invariably intermingle with sounds of living and knowing in their societies.

For example, one poet's defense of meter may elicit a critique of globalization, just as another poet's attack on meter's authority may inspire a critique of authority writ large in Arab or Muslim societies. Perhaps to Arab poets themselves and their public, this indivisibility between "the aesthetic" and "the political" is assumed because the oneness of the human word (and effort) has not experienced the steadily splintering sovereignties of human practice into recognizable, and respected, specializations and expertise as extensively as in the modern, secular West.

This dissociability between techniques of poetry and craftings of the self foreshadows my second argument: that the secular has been vital for poets in composing modern rhythms of life. In the seemingly inert and innocuous details of poetic form that carry the fullness and finitude of human practices and the unfolding of collective and personal histories, the secular lives various and distinct facets of its embattled presence. Being far greater than statements poets make about the place of Islam (or religion generally) as consigned to a private place within society and outside politics, the secular affects ways poets conceive their tradition; sustain, relinquish, or renovate its practices; and infuse their articulations of a relation with a public, revealing attendant notions about language, creativity, truth, tradition, freedom, submission, living, and dying in the era of modern specializations.

This second argument takes me to the third and final one: in its claims to self-sufficiency, the secular, in complex and contradictory ways, both denies and depends on an "other" it anoints as "the religious." Poets of secular moder-

nity vindicate in poetry what they repudiate in religion. With secular sensi-
bilities they simultaneously rupture and erect ramparts with which they en-
deavor to found an autonomous field of poetry. They march toward life, freed
from the miracles of a religiously persuaded world, only to reembrace them as
aesthetic epiphanies, as in Adonis's thaumaturgic command of the sea.

   To fashion an argument about secular poetic forms, I must first make a
number of assumptions about poetry, poets, and poetic form. I draw upon two
premodern conceptions of poetry as a body of knowledge (*ʿilm*) and as a histori-
cal repository (*diwān*).[2] With these conceptions as a basis for viewing modern
poetry, I have been able to see the poetic tradition as caught in the formation
and contestation of truth and subject formations in a particular society, rather
than as an insular unraveling of beauty and imagination. By extension, I ap-
proach poets as intellectuals whose work expresses, inquires, embodies, abdi-
cates, and contests certain traditions of truth-subject formations in their soci-
ety. Therefore poets are not merely expressive artists belonging to the "secular
cult of Beauty," as Walter Benjamin (1968, p. 224) would say, and as some poets
in this study might say about themselves.

   When I began my ethnographic fieldwork, I did not plan to study poetic
form. However, when speaking to poets I quickly learned that the topic that
most concerned them was the state of verse; it interested and stirred them pas-
sionately in all sorts of directions. The question that initially brought me to
the field related to a pervasive notion in Palestinian parlance after the collapse
of Palestinian society in 1948: *summoud*, meaning "persistence." I wanted to
understand why poets employed it so commonly, using it to evoke fortitude in
the occupied and frailty in the occupier. I was attracted by what appeared
both tragic and tragically distant about this sensibility that claims an ethical
form of power (and freedom) through powerlessness, once at home in a Sopho-
clean life, yet largely foreign to a modern life that equates the sovereignty of
the self with its power (*arche*).[3] Yet talking about *summoud* met only with poets'
disinterest. They informed me repeatedly that the best they had to say about it
they had already said in their poems. And so poets took me to my new topic,
insistently their topic: poetic form.

   The current Palestinian poetic scene is dominated by three forms: a tradi-
tional ode in use for over fifteen centuries, and two modern arrivals, both less
than a century old: free verse and prose poetry. The scene is characterized by
a plethora of exceedingly intricate power struggles among these forms, their
adherents, and the different worlds they advocate. Henceforth I also refer to

them by their common names in this scene: *al-ʿāmūdī* for the traditional, classical pre-Islamic ode; *tafʿīla* for the modern form of free verse; and *qaṣīdat al-nathr* for the widely debated form of the prose poem. I must stress that I have not attempted a history of these literary forms, nor do I imply a linear historical narration positing their sequential existence. All three forms coexist today, sometimes even among the works of a single poet, yet they do so in unequal conditions of power and prominence with particular consequences to their visibility.

One essential difference among these forms involves distinct ways in how poets employ them to handle that raw material from time immemorial: human sound. Rhyme, meter, and rhythm are essential components of poetic forms. At least in the Arab poetic tradition, *shiʿr* (poetry) has been defined canonically as "measured and rhyming utterance pointing to a meaning" (*qaulun mawzūnun muqaffā yadullu ʿalā maʿnā*).[4] I found a relationship between a growing desire in and among poets for the modern and an abating desire for adhering to the tradition. Sonic measuring has become irrelevant (even an impediment) to poets aspiring to modernity.[5]

Since I make an argument about poetic form, it is essential to identify the form of a given poem or that employed by a given poet at a given time. There are many ways to discern a poem's form. In this study two take precedence. First and primarily, I identify poetic form through poets' narratives, arguably "embedded philosophies" revealed in fieldwork interviews. Second, I identify form as it is visually manifest in two distinct but related registers: the typographic and the prosodic. The typographic register attends to the visual distribution of a poem's words on the printed page, that is, its format, whereas the prosodic register captures the measurement of sound in a poem. Prosodic measuring can be expressed in a scansion, a visual analytic rendition of the aural characteristics of composition. Thus the complex of the form's materiality (its immanence) is drawn from poets' descriptions and from a poem's visual and sonic layers as manifest on the page.

I conducted my fieldwork from July 2001 to June 2002, focusing on the Palestinian poetic scene in Palestine/Israel primarily in Nazareth, Haifa, al-Taybeh, and Ramallah. But I also ventured to neighboring capitals, namely, Amman and Cairo. I spent nearly a month in Cairo during the thirty-fourth International Book Fair held there. I went to other parts of the Arab world partly because the Arabic language does not and cannot abide by colonially inscribed borders of modern nation-states of the Middle East, and partly be-

cause Palestinian poets encouraged me not to segregate my study from the wider poetic scene of the Arab world, as their own lives have been under Israeli sovereignty. In Cairo I was able to observe and interview poets from Libya, Sudan, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, Syria, Lebanon, and even sealed-away Gaza. This range of interviews and observations made clear to me the extent to which the local pursuit of modernity through "the literary" comprises local expression of an otherwise broadly Arab and even global condition.

In pursuit of poets working in the three forms of literary Arabic poetry today, I conducted fifty-eight interviews with forty-seven poets, six of whom were women. Their ages ranged from eighteen to eighty-four. I also interviewed seven nonpoets: literary critics and poetry recipients. I attended twenty-four poetry events in the local Palestinian scene, mainly in Nazareth and in Tamra in the Galilee and in al-Taybeh in the center of the country. In the first two locales, I attended the second Palestinian Poetry Festival (Mihrajān al-Shiʿr al-Filastīni); in the latter, I attended regular meetings of the Cultural Association (al-Muntadā al-Thaqāfi). I also attended poetry events held during the thirty-fourth Cairo International Book Fair and a poetry evening in Amman.

My investigation additionally included examinations of daily press and archival accounts of activities in the poetic field. Whereas in the daily press I reviewed reports on poetic activities in the local Palestinian and wider Arab scene, my archival work attended to poetic content and context: published verse and political-literary criticism and coverage. The contemporary and historic press offered a map of the local literary terrain and its actors, present and past. One of my chief resources was al-Jadid (The New, 1951–91), a literary-political Arabic journal published by the Israeli Communist Party in Haifa. In the Public Library of Ramallah, I reviewed its holdings of al-Karmel (named after the Carmel mountain range). Published by Khalil Al-Sakakini Institute, this periodical was edited by the late Mahmoud Darwish from 1981 until his death in 2008, when it ceased publication. At the Palestinian House of Poetry in al-Bireh, West Bank, I reviewed two periodicals it has published, al-Shuʿarāʾ (The Poets, 1998–present) and Aqwas (Bows, 2001). I also reviewed newspapers of various political affiliations: al-Ittihad (The Union), the only Arabic daily within Israel, published by the Israeli Communist Party; al-Ayyam (The Days), a daily newspaper affiliated with the Palestinian National Authority on the West Bank; Fasl al-Maqal (The Discerning Speech) of the Nationalist Assembly Party; and Sawt al-Haq wal-Hurriya (Voice of Justice and Freedom) of the Islamic Movement. The latter two are Arabic weekly newspapers published in

Israel. I also followed the online literary section of the London-based *al-Quds al-ʿArabi*. Finally, I made it a habit to read works by the poets whom I met, whether appearing in collections or in the press.

Only at the risk of inviting misunderstanding could an introduction omit caveats, and I present quite a few. First, I explain why I focus primarily on poets and only marginally on their poetic works and clarify that this approach implies no statement on my part about the ontological primacy of the author. My study neither ascribes sovereignty to the author nor annuls poets' authorial agency promoted by notions about the "death of the author."[6] I believe this view can be profitably captured with the ambiguity deposited in the very term "subject." Approached as subjects of the secular, poets in this study constitute the secular as it constitutes them.

Second, on the selection of poets in this study a word is necessary. I was interested in poets as agents capable of articulating the practice of speaking and writing in society, irrespective of their standing in the literary establishment. Although all poets in the community in which I worked were invariably published in one or another literary outlet (and the younger ones increasingly posted on the Web), a majority of my informants were unadorned by the literary establishment and unheard of beyond it, living in obscurity and marginality.

This point may be trivial to an anthropologist whose discipline does not require studying primarily (if at all) the fortified and famous in their field. Yet the established poets and literary critics I encountered expected literary judgment in my work and assessed its merits accordingly. As with some I encountered in the field, certain readers of this book may be dismayed by my including nonacclaimed poets. Rather than sustaining some literary criterion, this work should be understood as an attempt by ethnographic means to dissociate from assumptions about the literary as a self-evident concept or self-sufficient realm. I set out in part to explore the different sensibilities, practices, conceptions, and traditions involved in legitimizing literary merit, not to demand them. An objective of this work is to demonstrate the extraliterary salience permeating this putative literary merit while refusing to sequester analysis to specialized prosodic, linguistic, and literary forms of expertise.

My third caveat relates to my giving preeminence to the materiality of form and therefore sound in poetry to the apparent exclusion of other poetic constituents, which may appear arbitrary at first. Only the conclusion of this book actually analyzes the semantic and figurative content of poetic writing.

Why should my investigation exclude other significant aspects of poetry, such as grammar, syntax, and style?

The contingencies of disciplinary training are again part of the answer. My goal as an anthropologist has been to learn from poets themselves aspects of their work that are unavailable in their written compositions alone. Another part of the answer has to do with the historically eminent position of sound (and sound measurement, to be precise) in making poetry and denoting its form, whether in Arabic or in any other poetic tradition. In other words, poems are classified as traditional, free verse, or prose based on their sonic architecture rather than tropes, although, of course, these two are always related in complex ways, a relation discussed directly in the book's conclusion.

My final caveat addresses my focus on three literary forms, which do not completely exhaust the field of contemporary Arabic poetry. I focus on them to the exclusion of other emergent and even still unidentifiable forms of poetic work. This work also excludes the immensely rich tradition of oral poetry while acknowledging that a total severance between oral and literary Arabic is unattainable. Also unattainable is a binary and irreversible distinction between audial and visual forms.[7]

The modern shifts at the center of this study and the debates among poets over the modernity of their tradition are quintessentially situated within the literary immanence of Arab poetic production. This means that the modern forms of free verse and prose poetry on which I focus are relevant to poets who compose in *fuṣḥā* (literary Arabic) and practically irrelevant to poets working in *ʿāmiyya* (demotic Arabic). It is this and only this kind of irrelevance of particular modern shifts to the world of colloquial Arabic poetry that accounts for my excluding it in this study. No normative reasoning about the legitimacy of one kind of poetry over the other should be ascribed to my attention to literary as opposed to colloquial poetry.[8]

And now some notes on the parts and chapters of this book. My story opens with three "Initiations." They aim to acquaint the reader with terms of reference necessary for comprehending the argument and the story through which it unfolds. The first, "Secular Bewilderment," develops the argument about secularizing poetic forms. It presents my sense of the relevance of secularism and secularization to this study, the notion of "the secular" I employ, and how I concretely register the secular in the world of modernizing poets.

The second and third initiations place the story I want to tell in axes of time and place, respectively. "Rhythms and Rulers" acquaints the nonspecialist

reader with knowledge of pivotal terms, techniques, and personae in the history of the Arabic poetic tradition, who are also evoked by poets in their narratives. To help graft this technical knowledge onto the fabric of life forms to which Arabic poetry belongs, I follow one prominent line of drama in the history of Arabic poetry: the encounter between the poet and political authority. I trace this drama through the work of three paradigmatic figures: the pre-Islamic al-Shanfarā, the twelfth-century al-Mutannabi, and the modern-era Syrian-born Adonis.

"The Land of the Poem" presents a particular poetic field and its political prominence: the scene of Palestinian poetry festivals under the first Israeli military regime (1948–66). This history provides an important setting for positioning the ethnographic narratives that follow. In this section, I observe the last days of a historically dominant, but now largely defunct, form of al-ʿāmūdī (the pillared) in the modernity of Arabic poetry. I also show the earliest cracks out of which free verse erupted onto and arose from this particular scene.

After "Initiations," the core ethnographic narration is organized into three parts, according to the three poetic forms inhabiting the literary scene. The first part is "The Song," dedicated to the traditional form of al-qaṣīda, more commonly known as al-ʿāmūdī, with its regularity of a single rhyme, rhythm, and meter throughout a given poem. "The Picture" is dedicated to free verse, commonly called tafʿīla. In free verse, the practice of measuring sound loses its preeminence as poets slacken meter's grip, but without entirely discarding it. "The Dream" is dedicated to the prose poem, qaṣīdat al-nathr, in which poets completely repudiate the traditional practice of sound measuring, thus "silencing the sea." In naming these parts, I point to the paradigmatic practice, "the grammar," as it were, in the sonic edifice of each form. While "The Song," "The Picture," and "The Dream" aim to delineate the retreat of sound and the ascendancy of visualization (and obscure visualization at that), in no way should the practices they represent be taken as mutually exclusive.

Within this tripartite discussion lives another one. Each ethnographic part consists of three chapters whose narratives each focus on one of three relations, which figured prominently in my conversations with poets: their relation to poetic tradition, to rhythm, and to a reading or listening public. These chapters are sequenced to express an escalating intensity in secularizing forms whereby poets view the measuring of sounds as increasingly obsolete and simultaneously express a greater mistrust of the audience.

This secularizing intensity culminates in the book's conclusion, "Secular Prayers." While the ethnographic narratives explore form, largely through what poets say about it and principally about its sound properties, the conclusion shifts to an analysis of content. It also deviates from ethnographic interviews and observations to pursue a close and critical reading of poetic selections. This analysis of actual poetic writing aims to show the reader what poets always insist upon: a change in sound structures ineluctably involves a change in the poem's structures of meanings. To effectively demonstrate this inseparability between form and content, I have chosen to focus on certain highly influential writings by Adonis (in free verse primarily and to a lesser extent in prose forms), who championed the cause of Arab modern secularity. Although Adonis is not Palestinian, his work has had a significant influence on the Palestinian and wider Arabic poetic scene.[9] But more relevant to my argument, analyzing Adonis's work enables me to probe a quandary that riddles the secular, demonstrating the ambiguities and contradictions in its modern workings through the ways it arranges its relation with the religious, in this case within a literary field.