



BRILL

Adonis and Muḥammad al-Māghūt: Two Voices in a Burning Land

Author(s): John Asfour

Source: *Journal of Arabic Literature*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Mar., 1989), pp. 20-30

Published by: Brill

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4183183>

Accessed: 27-02-2019 08:52 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Brill is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of Arabic Literature*

ADONIS AND MUḤAMMAD AL-MĀGHŪT:
TWO VOICES IN A BURNING LAND

In order to appreciate the disparity of forces behind contemporary Arabic poetry, it is interesting to focus on the contrasts between two pioneering modernists, Adonis (ʿAlī Aḥmad Saʿīd) and Muḥammad al-Māghūt. The juxtaposition may be unexpected, given the critical status accorded Adonis and the slighter body of criticism which al-Māghūt (better known, perhaps, as a playwright and screenwriter) has attracted as a poet. Nevertheless, I submit that the latter has been somewhat neglected, and that such a study proves rewarding from several viewpoints. The work of these two Syrian born poets, both self-exiled in Lebanon for long periods since the mid-fifties, represents two highly individual voices in modern Arabic poetry, subject to different influences, possessing different artistic aims, and expressing itself in different poetic forms and convictions about poetic language. To provide a focus for discussion of these contrasts, particular reference will be made to Adonis's "The Crow's Feather"¹ and al-Māghūt's "When the Words Burn,"² which appear in full English translation below.

In voice and tone, al-Māghūt's wry projection of the poet contrasts dramatically with that of Adonis, who habitually adopts the stance of poet-prophet and educator of the people. Adonis's pronouncements are delivered in a voice of oracular authority, and his rebellious and visionary persona is surrounded and distanced by mythological overtones. As Kamāl Abū-Deeb has observed, the "personal I" of Adonis's early work is supplanted by "the impersonal, cultural 'I' embodying a multiplicity of forces, dreams, hallucinations, and the will to transcend the stagnation and morbidity of culture".³ This can be apprehended in a brief excerpt from "A Vision":

And I saw—the clouds were a throat;
the waters, walls of flame;
I saw a sticky yellow thread—
a thread of history, that clung to me

¹ This, and subsequent poems referred to by Adonis, can be found in his *Dīwān*, Beirut: *Dār al-ʿAwdah* 1971.

² This, and subsequent poems referred to by al-Māghūt, can be found in his *Dīwān* Beirut: *Dār al-ʿAwdah* 1981. The version of "When the Words Burn" translated here is from *Majallat Shiʿr*, 2, Nos. 7-8 (1958), 40-43.

³ "The Perplexity of the All-Knowing: A Study of Adonis" in *Critical Perspectives on Modern Arabic Literature*, ed. Issa J. Boullata, Washington D.C.: Three Continents Press 1980, 309.

from a hand that has inherited a sex of dolls,
 an ancestry of rags.
 It chews, knots, and loosens my days.
 I entered the world in the womb of waters and virginity of trees
 I saw trees to tempt me,
 I saw rooms between their branches,
 beds and windows, set to resist me...⁴

Al-Māghūt, on the other hand, establishes a playful anti-hero as spokesman for his poems, the antithesis of the poet-prophet. Unusual in modern Arabic poetry, this roguish speaker compromises the figure of the poet—who, with relatively few exceptions since Abū Nuwās and al-Hutay'a, has retained a sober view of his artistic mission, little disturbed by self-directed irony. Parallel figures must, indeed, be found in the work of Western poets. Self-educated, al-Māghūt is familiar with some foreign literatures in translation, although less versed in Western poetic movements than is the erudite Adonis. However, if al-Māghūt could be said to subscribe to any particular poetic theory, it would undoubtedly have much in common with the American imagist poet William Carlos Williams' definition of the poetic task. In his long poem *Paterson*, Williams attempted

...to find an image large enough to embody the whole knowable world
 about me ... to write about the people close about me ... to the whites of
 their eyes, to their very smells.

That is the poet's business. Not to talk in vague categories but to write
 particularly, as a physician works, upon a patient, upon the thing before
 him, in the particular to discover the universal.⁵

In keeping with this realistic approach, al-Māghūt's speaker is no ivory-tower alter-ego, but a denizen of the streets, an artist of uncommon and incorrigibly low tastes who is guilty of a panoply of misdemeanours, and is an able witness to those of his neighbours. Equally vociferous in refusing to sublimate his desires or to accept starvation and destruction as a way of life, he is a rebel in quite another vein than, for instance, Adonis's Mihyār the Damascene. In "Autumn of Masks" he perceives himself as a monkey "plucking raw fruits / to pelt on the heads of passersby, / jumping from branch to branch / tittering and clapping". Even in the depths of bitterness he retains his offbeat sense of humour, which often runs black ("I think I talk more than all the other dead")⁶ and can be devastating in its indictment of society: "Time has defeated

⁴ All quotations and titles of poetry are the author's translations.

⁵ *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams*, New York: Random House 1951, 391.

⁶ "A Face Between Two Shoes".

crisis in 1956, and the senseless civil war raging in Lebanon in 1958, the year the poem was published.

Adonis is another poet who would sweep away irrelevant beliefs and traditions, but one whose rebellion is based on the insight that overthrowing the past is the first step towards fulfilling and extending it. From the heroic historical tradition Adonis believes that modern man may find inspiration to seek out new grounds for an assertion of greatness, the construction of a sublime “New Andalusia” in Arab culture, for instance, as “The Days of the Hawk” suggests. In “Elegy on the Days at Hand” he proclaims that it is possible to “wash” history—if need be, by means of “marrying the storm”—learn from the corruptions of the past, and “fill the earth with the screams of new things”.

As a *Tammūzī* poet, Adonis draws from the myth of his namesake a symbolic language for the insidious forces of decay and expectations of rebirth in his society. The sacrificial death, descent to the underworld, and restorative imagery of seasons and vegetation provide a submerged framework for “The Crow’s Feather”, thus lending mythological support to its claim that one must surrender to the destructive element in order to emerge revitalized. A recurrent theme in Adonis is that the path to abundant and creative life, the path to order itself, leads through chaos. The burning and dying of words in al-Māghūt’s poem, “When the Words Burn”, are tragic images, but in “The Crow’s Feather” such burning is an immolation, a purifying rite. In the third stanza the speaker arouses himself from the state of suffocation and despair induced by life in Beirut, and characterized by lounging in cafés while political upheaval brews. He cries out his desire to kneel and pray, albeit to strange gods: to a broken-winged owl (like the crow, a bird of ill omen), “To the embers, to the winds”,

to death and to disease—
and in my incense burn
my white days and my songs,
my notebook and the ink and inkwell.
I want to pray
to all beings ignorant of prayer.

Destruction, whether by water or by fire, is often seen as a catalyst in the birth of a new order in modern Arabic poetry. “Burn me, burn me so I may shine!” Samīḥ al-Qāsim demands of his grief upon the defeat of his native Palestine (“Come, Together We Shall Draw a Rainbow”).⁷ The “thunderbird” is al-Qāsim’s grim harbinger of change in a number of other poems, as the hawk, or the phoenix rising from its ashes, is in

⁷ *Dīwān*, Beirut: *Dār al-‘Awdah* 1973.

Adonis. "Marrying the storm" is another of Adonis's metaphors for sweeping away what is withered and decayed in tradition, and engendering lush new life. Other poets avail themselves of a similar symbolism. For instance, Jabrā Ibrāhīm Jabrā in "The City"⁸ and Maḥmūd Darwīsh in "Promises with the Storm"⁹ attribute the same ambivalent character of destroyer-preserver to the storm. Purification both by fire and water are central features of the imagery in 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayātī's poem, "Broken Urns".¹⁰ Here, broken urns are the decayed remains of an Arab world which forever busies itself in persecuting its outspoken poets and thinkers. When the oppressed revolt by means of a "violent love", a fearsome blaze and destructive flood anticipate rebirth.

As one might expect with Adonis, who pulls the world inside himself rather than standing back to examine it, this drastic cleansing process which precedes renewal is as likely to be identified with the self, and specifically the writer's self, as it is to manifest itself in the external world. Thus the act of writing is destructive as well as creative. "According to Adonis," 'Adnān Ḥaydar relates,

al-kitāba, or "écriture", as Roland Barthes calls it, is not language as we know it, but a displacement, a breaking away from the accepted and the known.... It is subversive, *fawḍawiyya*, because it seeks to destroy logical temporality and causality.¹¹

Quoting Adonis's remarks in a Lebanese newspaper in 1978, Ḥaydar stresses that *al-kitāba* may also lead to chaos, a prospect which does not disturb Adonis, for " 'it is chaos only with reference to the old predetermined method... It may lead to confusion, but it will also lead to freedom and creativity' ".¹²

There is no suggestion of renewal to follow upon sacrifice in "When the Words Burn". The title itself contains a yet more ominous image of the poetic act than "The Crow's Feather" does; for evidently in al-Māghūt's estimation the destruction of a nation outweighs the significance of a single man's artistic endeavour. The speaker of the poem is prepared to succumb to the surrounding devastation—not in hopes of purification, but because it renders hollow the poet's words, robbing him of his last illusions of serious accomplishment. These are insupportable terms for existence to an artist, left to jeer at his own diminished powers:

⁸ *Majallat Shi'r*, 2, No. 6 (1958), 17-24.

⁹ *Dīwān*, Beirut: *Dār al-'Awdah* 1979.

¹⁰ *Dīwān*, Beirut: *Dār al-'Awdah* 1979.

¹¹ "What is Modern about Modern Arabic Poetry?" in *Al-'Arabīyya* (Chicago: American Association of Teachers of Arabic), No. 14 (1981), 56.

¹² *Ibid.*

... follow me, the empty ship,
 the wind laden with bells.
 Over the faces of mothers and captive women,
 over the decaying verses and meters
 I will spurt fountains of honey
 I will write about trees or shoes, roses or boys.

Here, the lot of the dispossessed is artistic suicide. Poetry is, at once, virtually useless in the midst of widespread human suffering and political disaster, as insubstantial as “the wind laden with bells”—and yet sufficient reason to rekindle the will to live. The anguish of the poem is centred squarely on this paradox: the “immortal carcass” of poetry.

“The Crow’s Feather” has been chosen for comparison with “When the Words Burn” as it reflects the spiritual aridity of Beirut at the outbreak of civil war in 1958, and also poses the problem of artistic detachment from the infected life of city and nation. But it is as unlike al-Māghūt’s poem in its formal attributes as in attitude towards this problem.

In al-Māghūt, an informality of structure, the intimate and loquacious style preferred by the speaker, and lightning changes in subject, tone and emotional impact are well served by the flexible form of non-metrical free verse (*al-shi‘r al-manthūr*). But Adonis’s restless involvement with history is consonant with his celebrated talent for innovation in the field of metrical free verse (*al-shi‘r al-ḥurr*). Less daring than his later prosodic experiments, each line in “The Crow’s Feather” is loosely based on a single hemistich of *al-sari‘* meter, though it is frequently and effectively broken. A rhyme scheme is employed, but a very erratic one. As if to deliberately snap the spell when the speaker’s poetic vision threatens to cloud itself in romantic terminology, an incongruous rhyme is sometimes used to pair an abstract with a concrete, homely and mundane object. The rhyming of *ṣalāh* (prayer) with *dawāh* (inkwell) in Stanza III has this effect, as does the striking triple rhyme in Stanza II of *kursiy* (chair), *mar-miy* (thrown away; translated here as “dead” cigarette butt), and *mansiy* (forgotten)—a conspicuously romantic word in Arabic, much as the succeeding word, “rendez-vous”, sounds in English.

While rhymes have not been preserved in the present translations, and the Arabic poetic foot obviously cannot be reproduced in English, something of the essential difference between Arabic free verse with and without meter might be ascertained by the English speaking reader if the rhythmical qualities of the following translation of Adonis’s poem are compared with those of al-Māghūt’s. There is a balanced quality to the cadences of “The Crow’s Feather” even in English, controlled and hypnotic rhythms which have little in common with the sprawling, conversa-

tional rhythms I have attempted to recreate in translating “When the Words Burn”.

Finally and most importantly, these poems are offered as an indication of the variety of responses with which Arab poets challenge the perennial conundrum of this and other literary traditions: “What shall the artist do while Rome burns?”

JOHN ASFOUR

APPENDIX

THE CROW'S FEATHER

I

Coming without flowers or fields,
 coming without seasons,
 I possess nothing in the sand, nothing in the winds,
 nothing in the glory of the dawn...
 Only youthful blood
 that runs with the sky;
 and the earth in my prophetic forehead
 is an endless flock of birds.
 Coming without seasons,
 coming without flowers or fields,
 in my blood the dust streams:
 I live in my eyes,
 eat of my eyes.

Living, I spend life awaiting
 a ship that will circuit the universe
 and dive to the ocean floor,
 as though dreaming or confused
 as though parting, not to return.

II

In the cancer of silence, in isolation
 I write my poems on the soil
 with a crow's feather.
 I know no light on my eyelids—
 I know nothing but the wisdom of the dust.

All day in the café I sit
 with the wood of the chair
 and a dead cigarette butt,
 sit awaiting
 a forgotten rendez-vous.

III

I want to kneel, I want to pray
 to the owl with the broken wing,
 to the embers, to the winds.
 I want to pray to a perplexed star in the sky,
 to death and to disease—
 and in my incense burn
 my white days and my songs,
 my notebook and the ink and inkwell.
 I want to pray
 to all beings ignorant of prayer.

IV

Beirut does not appear on my road.
 Beirut does not bloom, though these are my fields.
 Beirut bears no fruit,
 yet here is the spring with grasshoppers and sand in my fields.
 Alone, without flowers or seasons,
 alone among the fruits
 from sunset to sunrise
 I cross Beirut and do not see it,
 I live in Beirut and do not see it.
 Alone among the fruits, with love
 I travel with the day
 to another city.

— by Adonis (ʿAlī Aḥmad Saʿīd)
 (1958)

* * *

WHEN THE WORDS BURN

Poetry, this immortal carcass, bores me.
 Lebanon is burning—
 it leaps, like a wounded horse, at the edge of the desert

and I am looking for a fat girl
 to rub myself against on the tram,
 for a Bedouin-looking man to knock down somewhere.
 My country is on the verge of collapse,
 shivering like a naked lioness
 and I am looking for two green eyes
 and a quaint cafe by the sea,
 looking for a disappointed village girl to deceive.

The goddess of poetry
 stabs my heart like a knife
 when I think I am singing poems to an unknown girl,
 to a voiceless motherland
 that eats and sleeps with everyone.
 I can laugh till the blood runs from my lips.
 I am the lethal flower,
 the eagle that swoops on his prey.
 Arabs—
 Floury mountains of passion,
 fields of blind bullets—
 Do you want a poem about Palestine, about blood and conquest?
 I am a strange man, I offer my chest to the rain
 and in my absent eyes
 are four injured nations searching for their dead.
 I was alone in my bed and hungry, tossing like a silkworm,
 listening to sad music,
 when the first shot was heard.

The desert deceives us!
 whose death is this purple death,
 and who tends the flower so carefully under the bridge?
 Whose are these graves bowing under the stars?
 Yesterday, a thin-lipped hero returned
 to these hoary breasts,
 these heaps of sand which give us
 a prison or a poem every year
 bringing the wind, and broken cannons,
 his long spear gleaming like naked daggers.
 Give him an old man, or a prostitute;
 give him these stars, and all the sands of Jewry
 where we weep over the mountains
 and yawn in bathrooms,

where I turn my treacherous eyes towards the sea.
 Here,
 in the centre of my forehead, where hundreds of words are dying
 I invite a final bullet.
 My brothers,
 I have forgotten your features.
 (Those seductive eyes!)
 Four wounded continents crowd in my breast.
 I expected to conquer the world
 with my poetic glances, and my green eyes.

Lebanon... white woman under the water;
 mountains of breasts and holy books.
 Scream, voiceless country!
 Raise your arm high till the shoulder splits
 and follow me, the empty ship,
 the wind laden with bells.
 Over the faces of mothers and captive women,
 over the decaying verses and meters
 I will spurt fountains of honey,
 I will write about trees or shoes, roses or boys.

Tell the misery to depart,
 tell the pretty hunchbacked boy
 that my fingers are long as needles,
 that my eyes are two wounded heroes,
 that this is the last day for verses.
 When Lebanon breaks, and the slow nights of poetry close
 I shall put a bullet in my throat.

— by MuḤammad al-Māghūt (1958)