

How Arabic Made It New

[Anna Della Subin](#) [November 7, 2019 Issue](#)

City of Beginnings: Poetic Modernism in Beirut

by Robyn Creswell

Princeton University Press, 259 pp., \$39.95



Saradar Collection Laure Ghorayeb: *Untitled*, 1968. Ghorayeb was a frequent contributor of poetry and translations to *Shi'r*, the magazine founded by Adonis and Yusuf al-Khal in 1957 in Beirut.

In the autumn of 1961 a delegation of poets arrived in Rome for a conference called “The Arab Writer and the Modern World.” It was sponsored by the

Congress for Cultural Freedom, the international arts organization that would be unmasked, five years later, as a façade for American intelligence as it waged war against the Soviets on the battlefield of culture. From London came Stephen Spender, from Paris John Hunt, a novelist covertly employed as a CIA officer. The Italian titan Ignazio Silone had invited the participants with a letter explaining they were to discuss Arabic literature's "awakening to modern life" and "its aspiration to communion" with what Goethe called *Weltliteratur*. It was to be a purely literary meeting of minds, Silone noted, free from politics. Among the emissaries of Arabic letters, unaware of the source of funding, were two Syrian poets from Beirut, Yusuf al-Khal and a young man who went by the name Adonis, cofounders of the avant-garde quarterly magazine *Shi'r* (Poetry).

"If we would live, we must connect," al-Khal passionately declared in his remarks at the conference. The poet argued that Arabic literature must break the chains of tradition preventing it from reaching the wider world, and transcend its parochialism—views with which Adonis concurred. Seeking liberation from old authorities and hierarchies, the Beirut poets drew inspiration from European and American writers such as T.S. Eliot, Saint-John Perse, and Ezra Pound, whom al-Khal imagined in a poem as Christ. They looked to a countercanon of medieval Muslim nonconformists, such as the heretic mystic al-Hallaj or the dissident poet al-Ma'arri, as well as to a literature more archaic than classical Arabic, that of Mesopotamian mythology.

Robyn Creswell's *City of Beginnings* is the story of how Arabic made it new. Beirut has been overlooked in classic histories of modernism, yet Creswell, a professor of comparative literature at Yale, translator, and frequent contributor to *The New York Review*, has remedied this with eloquence and erudition in his study of how a group of exiles, iconoclasts, and émigrés—al-Khal, Adonis, and the Lebanese poet Unsi al-Hajj foremost among them—

radically transformed Arabic poetry. In addition to abandoning traditional forms, the Beirut modernists sought to purify poetry of the politics that kept it mired in its own time and place. At a moment when intellectuals across the Middle East were divided along nationalist, Pan-Arabist, monarchist, and Marxist lines, *Shi'r* was avowedly nonpartisan, and talk of politics was discouraged at the magazine's weekly literary salons. The question of what it meant to write poetry without politics, and how one might achieve...

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