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Between Modernism and Tradition: Beirut's Poetry and Literature in Transformation

Abstract: This paper explores how literary modernism in Lebanon was shaped by poetry's response to socio-political changes. By examining historical events and socio-cultural contexts, the research provides insights into the origins and evolution of the Levant literary movement. The study focuses on mid-20th century Beirut, during the second phase of Levant literature, and considers how Lebanon's lenient censorship laws attracted radical writers. The migration of these writers to Beirut significantly impacted the modernization of Levantine literature and poetry. The paper also discusses how Lebanese individuals who travelled abroad were influenced by the contrast between Western affluence and perceived stagnation in their homeland. This "gap of success" inspired many European-educated journalists, authors, and revolutionaries to adopt new, contemporary perspectives.

Keywords: Levant; Modernism; Literature; Poetry; Arabic; Beirut.

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1. Introduction

In the 1960s, cities such as Baghdad, Cairo and Beirut were vibrant centres of modernist literature and poetry, complete with literary circles in local cafes, debating groups and dedicated magazines and publications. Brave adaptations in the field of poetry and the establishment of publications by writers were not limited by political and social inclinations. The freedom within the literary Levant at the time was much different from the broader culture which limited modernity. The paper therefore aims to examine this emergence of literary modernism in Beirut and its neighbouring areas as a response to socio-political transformations. To address this inquiry, the events that sparked literary modernism in the Levant, specifically focusing on the situation in the Middle East during the early 1900s, will be explored. The social and cultural impacts of migration on the development of a local modernism, and the influence of Lebanese artists who returned from time living in European centres of culture and Western expats living in Beirut will also be

addressed. As the paper will demonstrate, a key trigger which runs through pre-modern and modernist literature is nature, and the importance of the conceptualization and reconceptualization of nature to the emergence of Levant literary modernism will be derived. This will be taken from the analysis of the works of influential figures in the field.

The paper's focus are the years leading up and into the period known as the second phase of Levant literature, also known as literary "modernism" which, as described by the literature critic Khalidah Said, began in the mid-20th century, when Beirut, arguably more than any other Middle Eastern city, played a key role in the process¹.

2. Background

According to the writer Ali Zarei, the reception of modernisation changed over time in Beirut². The transition, according to Zarei, was from idolizing and mimicking Western paradigms to exploring their indigenous surroundings for sources of inspiration, and ultimately conceptualizing local aspects via modernist methodologies, in effect enhancing their understanding of their own cultures³. This approach which involved critically analyzing the native cultural stimulants, using internationally-developed methods, invoked fiery discussions amongst the freethinking intellectuals of the Arab world.

Adūnis (spelled Adonis or Adūnis), a pioneer of modernist literature in Beirut, argued that throughout the pre-Islamic period, poetry served as a significant medium of expression using the Arabic language⁴. Over time, he noted that religious involvements restricted the role of poetry

to merely serving as a means of promoting religious concepts. Consequently, the literary foundation for subsequent questioning by modernists such as Adūnis was built by traditional Arabic poets like Al Muttanabi, Abu Tammam, and Abu Nawwas⁵.

The disparity between the West's prosperity and the conditions of life in their home nations was another concern for the locals who migrated abroad. The recognition of such a gap of success invoked an aspiration for change in journalists, writers, reformers and revolutionaries who had studied in Europe. The first-hand experience of Western modernity caused some Middle Eastern writers and artists to embrace contemporary, social and political frameworks in their writing. After familiarizing themselves with changes that were occurring in the West, these intellectuals attempted to bring about similarly ranged radical shifts in their own country's social, political, and cultural climate. For instance, Persian intellectuals like Mirza Malkam Khan, and Iranian modernist and philosopher Fathali Akhundzadeh began publicly opposing the monarchy during this period. Mohammad Ali Pasha, the Governor and founder of modern Egypt, began a series of economic and cultural reforms aimed at modernization⁶. These demonstrate the impact of migration-associated socio-political changes on the artistic and literary worlds of the Levant, which is the setting that the paper interrogates.

2.1. Freedom from the Constraints of Censorship

In this section, the reason for Lebanon being the ideal nest for the nascent literary modernist movement would be

traced back to the relaxation on censorship within the country. Robyn Creswell explored Arabic modernism in its historical setting⁷, through the analysis of its genesis in mid-century Beirut as a poetry corpus, incorporating an intellectual attitude, that was also brewing in Egypt, Syria, and Damascus during the early 1900s. However, despite the comparable environments, modernist literature thrived more in Lebanon than in its counterparts, attracting intellectuals, making it the center for free expression. Scholars like Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi attributed to Lebanon's lack of censorship⁸. Therefore, from 1955 until the beginning of the civil war in 1975, Beirut was seen as a "sanctuary for disgruntled Arab intellectuals" who sought protection from nationalist and conservative attacks and oppressive state control⁹.

Lebanon's reputation as an intellectual retreat was also echoed by the writer and critic Khalidah Said, who identified Beirut of the 1920s as a 'lost ideal' when she wrote that

Between Lebanon's Declaration of Independence and the start of the Civil War, a number of cultural and artistic organisations were founded with goals that must sound like romantic pipe dreams to us now. What we can call the lettered city [*al-madina al-muthaqqafa*] was the result of their research and investigation; it was designed to be a place where thinking, the rule of law, knowledge, and the creative life might flourish¹⁰.

The modernist movement across the rest of the Middle East was shaped by the social and political agents who advocated

and used modernism as a tool to propagate their political inclinations and consequently brought about a counter-reaction in the form of restrictions on artistic freedom¹¹. This posed a challenge to Middle Eastern modernism, where the literary production was intrinsically linked to the process of political and social modernization. Consequently, the motivated influential political and social figures of the twenty-first century challenged the socio-politically established literary restrictions¹². On the other hand, the modernist writers in Beirut had already isolated literature from any political or social dependencies and direct intervention. This extensive freedom of thought that was available in Lebanon was what attracted Middle Eastern thinkers to find a haven in Beirut.

2.2 Cultural Sentiments

The Middle Eastern political climate in the first half of the 20th century was generally not favorable for modernism. While intellectuals in the Arab world had been preparing themselves to confront the philosophical concepts of modernity, they were hesitant to match modernistic literary expressions that were prevalent in Europe, owing to cultural sentiments. According to the author Fatemeh Keshavarz, such reluctance to accept the western modernity led to a crude reaction to new ideas. This created an ambivalence towards modernism, and thus led to the rejection of key ideas and concepts of modernity during the modernisation of Levant. This resulted in a constrained modernisation of the Levant, achievable only by the liberal groups and organizations which occupied a socially-centered role in Lebanon. Modernist

artists in the Middle East in the 1950s and 60s, such as Ahmad Shamloo and Gholam-Hossein Sa'edi, idealized radical, leftwing thinkers such as the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. These leftist and socially liberal individuals participated in literary discussions in the contemporary Levant, consequently heightening the Levant modernist writer's sense of their own intellectual authority. Such discussions involving both criticisms and appreciation for modernist works were a source of inspiration across the Levant¹³.

A pre-conceived notion among intellectuals such as Mohammed Abed al-Jabri, Mohammed Arkoun (the Maghreb), Sadiq Jalal al-Azm (Syria), Nasr Abu Zayd (Egypt), and Hisham Sharabi (Palestine) was that political issues can be critically addressed only through a historical lens. Therefore, as intellectuals, they critiqued their societies' historical, social, and political conditions using concepts from western philosophers, radical sociologists, and modernist thinkers. This aura of conflict and instability constantly hung over the process of modernization in the Arab world¹⁴. Amidst this, the role of a poet was to artistically engage with a world that lacks pre-established poetic subject matter. Christopher R. Fortune, recalled Dorothy Baker's argument that in contemporary poetry, the work often reflects *the function* of a poet¹⁵. By considering the poet as a functional component within a socio-political context, it is evident that Arabic modernists can only be understood when put against the prevailing archetype ideology, in which poetry was mostly religious and expected to conform to a pre-determined framework of modesty. Therefore, one of the key features of modernist

Arabic literature is the recognition that one is writing *contra* tradition. Modernism broke the established literary rules and established new standards for poetry in the Levant¹⁶. To fully comprehend the achievements of Arabic modernists, examining them within their historical context is essential because they were either reacting to, navigating through, or defying the unspoken limitations imposed by cultural attitudes.

3. Migration as an Instrument of Change

Migration-induced travel allowed exposure to varied cultures and scenes, that can deeply affect one's perceptions and positions and to expand consciousness and awareness, as in the case of a shift from traditional societies' reliance on customs to modernist preference of innovation. This is evident in the life of Forough Farrokhzad, a highly influential poet from Iran. She attended an art school where she received training in the art of painting and sewing. In 1957, she travelled Europe after publishing her first poetry book, *Captive*, in 1953¹⁷. Her travels across Europe gave her an understanding of the aesthetic and literary culture there, which ultimately led to a shift in her perspective, therefore making her adapt techniques of modernity from one creative medium into another¹⁸.

The intellectuals in Lebanon and Syria around the 1900s were more familiarized with forging connections via travel owing to the increase in the nations' trade and diplomatic ties with Europe. The right to travel to watch shows and attend important gatherings in France was granted by the French Government in the early

1930s, by the then Minister of Leisure Léo Lagrange. The exposure to western ideals, practices and institutions encouraged intellectuals who visited France to institute modifications in their countries¹⁹. These new reforms included the establishment of new schools and newspapers, and ultimately led to a change in attitude, ambition and practices, indirectly contributing to urbanization, and supported the diversification and expansion of the printing industry and media. Similarly, the establishment of new libraries as well as scientific and literary organizations were also a result of Lebanese engagement with the West. These developments indicated the embracement of modernity and opened the door to modernist art and culture²⁰.

The engagement of the literary community with Western art exposed it in the following years to Surrealism, which was particularly relatable to the Lebanese owing to its shared similarities to traditional Arabic poetry. In the late 1950s, the Lebanese poet Al-Hajj deviated from the conventional monorhyme poetry and began experimenting with the prose poem. During the 1960s, he translated André Breton's works into Arabic, thus introducing Surrealism to Lebanon. However, Breton himself asserted that the "Orient" serves as a genuine spark for the surrealist movement²¹. The poets al-Khal and Adūnīs created poetry in Shi'r that drew heavily on their exposure to modern Western poetry, especially Surrealism and Symbolism from France, as well as Arabic Romanticism and Sufi writers²². These mutual inspirations speeded the spread of modernist art forms and techniques.

4. The Groundwork for Modernist Literature in Beirut

4.1. Modernist Poetry and Lebanese Elites

As stated before, poetry in Lebanon had long been the leading art form, and had been termed "fashionable", in line with paintings, which according to critics were often "taking on an aggressive form when met with the public eye"²³. Lebanese literature and popular culture, according to the comparative literature scholar Ghewa Hayek, have by the twenty first century played significant parts in developing and disseminating the traditional attributes of Lebanese society; A taste in poetry was one of the defining elements of the high society in Beirut, which flaunted its social standings through their refined taste in art and literature. A critic of *L'Orient*, Michael Middleton discussed in 1954 Beirut's cosmopolitan culture and how elements of it, such as poetry and literature, were entangled with the lives of the elites²⁴. As a consequence of the French Mandate, the Levant was identified, according to Victor Hakim, as the "New space for French Literature"²⁵. French influence encouraged Lebanese elites to embrace modernist literature and poetry.

Creswell depicted the Beirut neighbourhood of Hamra as "a contact zone for artists and militants [...]. In this highly politicized bohemia, journals of ideas flourished, and each coterie had its own cafe"²⁶. There was no more diverse and multicultural neighbourhood in Beirut than Ras Beirut and Hamra before the Lebanese Civil War. The sociologist Samir Khalaf described Hamra of the 1950s as "the only really open society in the whole Arab world"²⁷.

Adūnīs, Cresswell suggests, attributed the openness of the Beirut society to the people's "neutralism" toward the past and their need to break free of the burdens of the past. Due to its inhabitants' insatiable appetite for all things contemporary, the city developed the reputation of an "intellectual estuary" into which "rivers of commodities of every type from all over the planet" pour²⁸. Thus, Beirut became the haven for intellectuals within the Middle East.

4.2. Caffeine Radicals

Cafés were the most convenient loci for intellectual exchanges during the early 1900s in Beirut. The Horseshoe was one such café, where one would frequently stumble upon the radical thinking and creative Lebanese who challenged existing conventions²⁹. The participants of these radical discussions were not limited to Lebanese-born residents. Ghassan Kana-fani, a Palestinian writer known for his modernist narration techniques, along with Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Tawfiq Sayigh, Anis Sayigh, and Walid Khalidi, represented the 'generations of intellectuals' who had fled Palestine for exile, established intellectual circles in cafés in Beirut³⁰.

Like cafés, art and culture institutes, associations and societies in Beirut contributed to the dissemination of modernism. The Instituto Italiano di Cultura, for example, founded in 1951, was described by the journalist Rue G. Picot from *L'Orient* as a meeting point of the intellectual elite of the city³¹. On rare occasions, the forum was home to art training by famous artists like Sonia Harris. The Dante Alighieri Society in Beirut

is another such example of civic space that participated in advancing modernist thinking. The Society allowed young scholars and artists to engage in intellectual activities through the grant of Fellowships in their respective centers³². The more intellectually exclusive groups dedicated a space for the purpose of encouraging dynamic, progressive views among the younger generation. The Cenacle of Zahle was one such club that has been supported by the elite to conduct conferences, exhibitions, and concerts, making it a cultural centre³³.

The local newspapers, argues Martine Antle, also played their part in exposing locals to foreign writers and poets, and introduced them to Surrealism and abstraction in poetry³⁴. *Le jour* was one of the newspapers which dedicated space regularly to literary modernism. For instance, the article by André Rolland de Renéville, the French poet and essayist proclaimed in 1950, on the pages of the newspaper, that Surrealism was the "poetry for the youth", shared the page-space with the announcement of literary awards, as a subtle encouragement to adopt modernism into literature³⁵. Placing related information adjacently to literature became more prominent in the 1950s and 60s. By 1950, *Le jour* had dedicated a whole section, *Les Lettres*, to discussing modernism, international literary news, awards in literature, and famous writers. Surrealism in poetry, just as it was resuscitated in Paris by the Lettrists, Isidore Isou and others, became a staple of Lebanese media³⁶. Cafés and media and cultural societies therefore provided the safe space for radical dialogue based in modernist prophesies.

5. External catalysts

5.1. Mutually Influencing Local Movements

Intellectual exchange occurred even across borders. Modernist movements at different parts of the Middle East had influenced each other in their nascent days in the early 1900s. Nimā Yushij, the father of modernist Persian poetry according to Terri DeYoung³⁷, introduced a new type of Persian poetry that was later known as *she'r-e now*, or New Poetry. Sadegh Hedayat, a pioneer in modern Iranian literature, worked on contemporary short stories and fictional pieces, gained popularity in Persian literature at the time. The emerging Iranian modernism influenced the Iraqi poet Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, who was among the first modernists to experiment with Arabic poetry. In parallel, the Syrian modernist poet Adūnīs began testing a new method of writing and innovating theater forms. *Majallat Shi'r*, a magazine dedicated to poetry, was founded in 1957 in Beirut by Adūnīs and the Lebanese poet Yusuf al-Khal³⁸. These events that were formed locally, forged a web of links that were consequential not only to Arab literature but also specifically to a key change in the Lebanese literature.

5.2. Geopolitics and the 'Literary Movement'

The researchers Ahmad Lamei Giv and Majid Shahbazi describe how in the nineteenth century, educated individuals from Lebanon and Syria relocated to Egypt. Intellectuals originally from the United States and Europe, as well as those who had attended Jesuit schools and

graduated from them, decided to leave the despotism of the Ottoman Empire, and this 'group of rebels' managed to live independently in Egypt. This move gave them the exposure to the literary movement that was prevalent in Egypt, which they joined. Although the movement began with a focus on European literature, it rapidly shifted its attention towards the literature from the West of Syria, as Lebanon was often identified. Some of the supporters of this literary movement were religious missionaries and related educational institutions, with the agenda of introducing young people to European ideas and encouraging them to read more from the Western canon, particularly from France³⁹. Similar support was received from the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), which was headquartered in Paris, established in 1950 by the CIA and received its funding secretly from the CIA, demonstrating the prevalence of a mix of geopolitical interests and colonial approaches to the Levant and its culture⁴⁰. The CCF established and supported a global network of literary publications as a cultural front and "soft power" during the Cold War, in reaction to the Soviet Cominform. Tawfiq Sāyigh, based in Beirut, edited the CCF's Arabic periodical *Hiwār* from 1962 to 1967, becoming entangled in the expanding network of CCF publications. The Arab avant-garde was a target of *Hiwār*'s secret CIA operation, which aimed to enlist their support by providing writers with financial rewards and the opportunity to express themselves creatively⁴¹. CCF promoted literary freedom to write about the most challenging topics, and thus contributed to the expansion of literary publication in Beirut, by bringing together a society of like-minded,

free-thinking intellectuals, supporting cultural modernisation and laying the groundwork for a Levant modernism⁴².

5.3. The French Mandate

Along with external political influences, there was also a push towards the emergence of modernist literature in Lebanon from the French Mandate (1923-46). The Mandate government established the cultural policy of Lebanon as well as the Law of Antiquities regarding cultural heritage. The French left their mark on the relationship between culture and government and on how Lebanese people understand and appreciate art and culture⁴³.

Around the year 1945, the international calls to end colonization intensified, and a retraction and reorganization of colonial states was put into motion⁴⁴. A 1937 article in *L'Orient* discussed the *foreign – French – interference with the Orient*, identifying a tension and dissatisfaction in Lebanon's colonial status⁴⁵. The colonisation of Lebanon, the article claimed, was a frontal assault on Lebanese cultural traditions. Scholarship and research in recent decades have highlighted France's continuous involvement in and impact on the cultural life of Lebanon⁴⁶.

6. Nature in Lebanese Poetry

This discussion points to the influence of nature in the modernisation of Lebanese literature. Such influence was reflected through nostalgia and travel-encounter. Adeiphe de Faigairelle proclaimed in *L'Orient* (1937), that for the poet, nature is not a show; it is shared life; The poet naturally lends a soul to all that lives,

participates in the fight of each being, who shares these difficulties⁴⁷.

Adūnīs said that when he was often tormented by suffering and hardships during his time in Damascus, the cityscape failed to inspire him, and he looked to nature for inspiration. He sought solace in nature, and resorted to it as a common theme in his poetry⁴⁸. He reacted to nature through abstractions; in effect, he claimed abstractions were more powerful than declarative 'truth telling' assertions⁴⁹. The poets Abd al-Wahhb al-Bayti, Badr Shkir al-Sayyib, Adns, and Yusuf al-Khal, amongst others, were credited with pioneering the modernist movement in Arabic poetry during the late 1940s, alongside Adūnīs; 'nature,' for them too, was a key characteristic of modernist poetry⁵⁰.

Technical modifications within the art of poetry helped incorporating nature and history into their works. The Arabic word for 'ode' is *qaṣīdah*, and a *qaṣīdah* always starts with the traditional prelude known as *nashb*, which may include a variety of motifs or subthemes. The modernist pioneers dismantled the *qaṣīdah* form by omitting the two hemistich verses and developed the poetry known as *qaṣīdat al-tafīlah*, which literally translates to "free verse". This was not just a change of format but also a change of ideology, as even the concepts used for such verses were new. Through *qaṣīdat al-tafīlah*, the poets explored different themes that allowed them to respond to a connection with a time that has passed away, which include depictions of nature or elements of nostalgia⁵¹.

An appreciation for Lebanese nature was also emphasised by the writer and critic Victor Hakim. In 1955, he dissected an article by Jean Moscatelli that

discusses the opinions of uprooted artists, including about 17 to 18 Lebanese immigrants⁵². Hakim believed that the French Language had great prospects in the Middle East, though the Middle Eastern work in French was not welcomed in the West in the same spirit as Canadian and Belgium poetry. Hakim discusses the capacity of these poets to mystify nature. French artists, according to Hakim, were drawn towards Oriental scenes and themes. He identified a trajectory that began with the French journalist Louis Fléri, who depicted the sublimity of Alexandria, followed by René Tasso and Joseph Pharrone, the authors of *Le livre de Goba le Simple*⁵³.

Hakim, in another instance, mentioned Henri Thuile (a French poet who was influenced by both French and Arabic aspects in literature) as another example of an individual who maintained a fascination with nature in North Africa. Thuile's choices in reworking eastern texts were as eclectic as his tastes in European authors. The results fused French culture with a mythical "Orient". There are recurring elements of wind, gloom, cyclones, and architecture, all of which serve to stimulate the senses and inspire thoughts of transience, fleetingness, and sorrow. Thuile's incessant need to communicate his emotions via the wistful qualities of landscape is demonstrated in the way he describes the lighting and the desert⁵⁴.

The study of the foreign influence on Levant modernist literature is incomplete without noting Greece, which has always been tied to some of the most prominent post-*Shi'r* émigré poets. The nature and climate of Greece has been mentioned in some of these poems. Greece, being the borderland that defies classification

between the two main continents, much like the Mediterranean Sea, which plays a crucial part, geographically facilitated the conjugation of intellectuals. The Iraqi poet and *Shi'r* contributor Sargon Boulus got his inspiration when he spent his time roaming the streets of Athens during the early 1960s; these walks in the Mediterranean city brought back memories of his home⁵⁵. The rustic vision of Greece, owing to the country's abundance of water, light, and serendipity were rediscovered by Boulus, who conjured personal memory-induced poetic images – for example, when he used an ex-Iraqi prisoner as a metaphor for the disorientation of the 1960s, or when he talked of vibrant Kurdish country weddings that were both beautiful and captivating in their striking beauty and moral depravity⁵⁶. The *Shi'r* poems of Lebanon therefore drew inspiration from nature, not just locally, but from Mediterranean landscapes and neighbouring regions.

Lebanon's natural landscapes have inspired European writers and poets as well. For example, more than half of the cycle *Impious Love*, by the Ukrainian early modernist Ahatanhel Kryms'kyi, was written in Beirut at the end of the 19th century. "Transitional zones", a phrase mentioned in the work, possibly refers to the place in the Middle East where Krymskyi lived and wrote⁵⁷. Beirut is where Krymskyi first became aware of the possibility of creating unique poetry about his own "impious love". In his letters, Krymskyi commented, referring to himself in the third person, that "Beirut's nature prompted the poet in January 1897 [...] to compose an elegy"⁵⁸. Krymskyi's work combined the *exoticism* of the setting with the lyrical intensity of the mood. For example, when he writes about

his excursion to the highlands of Lebanon, he discusses the wilderness as well as the shamanistic practises of the people who accompanied him on the expedition⁵⁹. Krymskiy is but one example of the impact of Lebanon's nature on literature poetry by Europeans; the significance of the landscape was even greater for local artists. The above interaction and reactions of modernist writers in the Levant with nature make it a triggering unit within the literary modernist movement of Lebanon.

7. The Roles of Adūnīs and *Shi'r*

7.1. Adūnīs

The Palestinian intellectual Edward Said has argued that Adūnīs was “the most eloquent spokesman and explorer of Arab modernity”⁶⁰. *The New York Times* suggested that “The Arab world’s greatest living poet [Adūnīs] has cultivated a garden of language”⁶¹.

Adūnīs’s introduction to poetry might have been conventional, inspired by the works of traditional Arabic poets like Al Muttanabi, Abu Tammam, and Abu Nawwas. Owing to the political changes in 1943, namely, Syria moving towards its independence, and Adūnīs’s amateur poetry gaining attention among political leaders, there was more lenience in terms of availing non-traditional or foreign education. Owing to this, he was granted the opportunity to attend a French school. Although during his childhood Adūnīs was exposed to poets with progressive ideologies, there were constraints placed by society, set by its religious prescriptions and conservatives’ prohibitions, on poetic expression and abstraction that inhibited his writing. Regardless, his time at a foreign curriculum

school opened up new possibilities to the young poet and led to the modernization of his concepts that would eventually revolutionize poetry in the Levant. One of the initial modifications that he adopted was of his name, as a reaction to numerous rejections for his original name - Ali Ahmad Said Esber. His new name was inspired by the mythical character Adūnīs and the River Adūnīs in Lebanon, both of which were associated with rebellious character. Literary freedom continued to be limited in Syria in those years, and he was detained in 1955, because of transgressing social norms and conventions. After leaving custody in 1956, Adunis relocated to Beirut, where he developed his main contributions to Arab poetry.

Beirut, by that time, had been known to accommodate radical intellectuals owing to its weak governance and relative freedoms, as outlined earlier. Adūnīs described his journey to Lebanon as one of rebirth⁶².

In his book *Sufism and Surrealism*, Adūnīs draws a comparison between the mystical Sufi Islam and Surrealism, through the lens of abstraction of living elements⁶³. The ability to reimagine Arab literature and belief that he could reform the Arabic culture through his poetry, compelled him to link subjects that were unrelated through the techniques of abstraction and personification. His dedication to this cause made him emphasize the creative role of a poet and gave it a higher podium than his duties to his religion, family, or society. Adūnīs was of the opinion that “[a] poet is always alienated only by his own language. A creative individual becomes an immigrant to the gap of inconsistency created between his aspirations and his work”⁶⁴.

As an advocate of free thinking in literature, Adūnīs identified the lack of a metaphysical component in Middle Eastern written work. He argued that free thinking in poetry got restricted by the autocracy of religion – that took away the freedom of thought from the poet – whose primary role is that of a thinker⁶⁵. The impact of his efforts to liberate Levant poetry from social and religious constraints cannot be overstated. Khalidah Said, Adūnīs' wife and an influential literature critic wrote that

In order for him [Adūnīs] to be original, while relying on tradition, he had to bridge the wide gap between the past and the future, and by means of this to transcend the broken present. He also had to exert great efforts to lay the conduit pipes between us and myths so as not to lose stability (balance) in the mental and cultural emptiness of his generation⁶⁶.

Adonis' poetry mixes the traditional mysticism that was prevalent in poetry with new techniques associated with modernist writing. He experimented with method and prediction. He gave voice to the sufferings of the nomadic Arab migrants, the world's metaphysical emptiness, the euphoria of lunacy and erotica, and an interrelation between the self and the other⁶⁷.

However, according to the journalist Adam Shatz, the "destructive power of creativity" is what truly shines in his writing⁶⁸. Adūnīs' work resonated across the Middle East and beyond. In 1984, his lectures given at College de France were collected and published under the title *In the Arabic Poeticism*⁶⁹. "I am a tree", he wrote, "and I created a forest around me", referring to the poets

and writers who inspired him⁷⁰. Adūnīs credits Gibran Khalil Gibran as a key the pioneer modernist writers for leading with ideals that were far from traditionality⁷¹.

Adūnīs drew similarities between Sufism, the mystical branch of Islam, and Surrealism. He argued that both involved free thinking, led to the rejection of extant methods of poetry, and to a quest for a harmony between the outer and inner worlds. Neither were driven by realism, and, to different degrees, both supported symbolism. Poetry in both constitutes 'metaphysical content', according to Adūnīs, and could be fully understood only through psychoanalysis⁷².

The Lebanese poet Unsi Al-Hajj, who explored the extents of poetry a little earlier, in the 1950s, was inspired by the Surrealist poetry. He interrupted the tradition of monorhyme poetry by translating the works of the French Surrealists Antonin Artaud and André Breton into Arabic, thereby introducing Middle Eastern readership to them. Surrealism's first generation, however, struggled to get a foothold in the literary communities of the French colonies and other overseas territories at that early moment⁷³. Adūnīs's contribution towards the modernisation of Lebanese poetry has been loud and effective both amongst literary enthusiasts and aspiring modernist writers in the Middle East.

7.2. *Shi'r*

As discussed earlier, modernist literature benefited from uncensored platforms in Lebanon vis-à-vis other Middle Eastern contexts. *Shi'r*, *Mawakif*, and other such initiatives, took advantage of these conditions to create fora that promoted

the work of modern writers, poets, and intellectuals, dedicated to spread modernism in the Arab world⁷⁴. *Shi'r* took its name from *Shi'r* poetry, or a poetic ensemble⁷⁵. The term "Shi'r", which referred to short poems, was later adopted as a title of the magazine which was published quarterly in Beirut. As a journal bearing the identical title, *Shi'r* published modernist work of poets from different Arab countries and beyond from 1957 onwards. The founders of this magazine were Yousef al-Khal and Adūnīs. As a native of Lebanon (born in 1917), Yousef al-Khal's literary role began with his teaching at the American University of Beirut in 1944 after studying literature and philosophy there. When he landed in Lebanon and participated in aiding the UN, he enrolled again at the American University of Beirut in 1955, after which he established along with Adūnīs the *Shi'r* magazine and the publishing house *Dar Majallat Shi'r*⁷⁶.



Fig. 1. *Shi'r*, number 21, volume 6 (winter 1962), detail of cover, 2011⁷⁷.

Dar Majallat Shi'r, established in 1958, was the main forum through which al-Khal circulated contemporary Arabic poems, collections of poems from abroad, and writings on poetry. *Adab*, a review founded by al Khal in 1962, expanded the ideals of *Shi'r* to various literary fields, and Gallery One, which he established in 1963, served as a vital link for Beirut's artistic circles⁷⁸. Al Khal's joined the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) after his education in Damascus and spent the next year in jail for his militant efforts on behalf of the party. That event coincided with the arrival of Adūnīs in Beirut in October of 1956 and led to the productive and influential collaboration of the two intellectuals. The significance of their journals, books and publishing house to Middle Eastern literature and poetry cannot be overstated.

The powerful impact of these magazines on literary modernism, however, was not confined to Lebanon, overcoming the disregard and paternalistic attitude in Europe towards Levant modernism. This disregard continued until the late 1970s, as shown by the omission of Beirut from the list of modernist cities in Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane's 1978 key collection of essays, *Modernism, 1890–1930*⁷⁹. According to Marshall Berman, Beirut remained an uncharted territory even when the new 'transnational trend' brought Rio de Janeiro, Shanghai, and Buenos Aires into the attention of experts⁸⁰. However, the efforts to dissolve this irrelevance of Levant literary modernism were noticeable from the works of the Magazine *Shi'r* that placed the cultural fusion of traditional poetry and free thinking on the global modernist map.

Along with this, the magazine associated the technical qualities of modernist

poetry as what would define 'Arab' or 'Arabic' poetry. Even amid the Cold War, Daniel Behar contends, *Shi'r's* impassioned internationalism was a remarkable representation of a globalized and institutionalized late-modernist international period that often portrayed liberalism⁸¹. *Shi'r* was therefore a platform set by the pioneers of the Levant Literary modernist movement to promote the modernisation of Levant poetry.

8. Conclusion

For modernist literature and poetry to take root in the Middle East, freedom from customs, and traditions as well as from political and religious dictates was necessary. Lebanon offered such a freedom in the 20th century, and its capital, Beirut, became the vibrant centre of a leftfield, radical and modernist culture, enriched through the in-migration of autonomy-seeking artists from elsewhere in the Middle East.

The pioneers of modernism in the Levant cherished the autonomy of their work from politics and social norms, turning a condition which enabled innovation, transgression and rule-breaking into an ideal, or even a norm, expecting art to be averse to politics and public opinion. Beyond the weak government and relative freedom, a

few other key factors converged to enable the adoption and spread of modernist literature and poetry in Beirut: the French Mandate and the exchanges it facilitated with Paris, the world's cultural capital at the time; the bidirectional migration of Lebanese artists who studied or worked in Paris and incoming migrants from more repressive societies in the vicinity; and the creation of particular institutions such as the journal *Shi'r* and literary societies.

Nature, as discussed earlier, proved to be a bridge facilitating passage from traditional to modernist forms of poetry, enabling modernist abstraction. Cafés like the Horseshoe were the most popular zones of colloquial modernism, equipped with a relaxed and unbridled environment to home the most radical thoughts. Radical intellectuals with anti-hegemonic political agendas found common cause with poets who cherished their field's autonomy in such circles, and ultimately helped develop the literary infrastructure in Lebanon. Despite lack of funding, Beirut's intellectuals benefited from all the support they could amass and consequently, the modernist literature in the Levant flourished under the aegis of figures such as Adūnis, Yusef al Khal, Khalil Gibrab Khalil, and Khalidah Said. Among the arts, literature and poetry were pioneers in adopting and propagating modernism.

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