

INTRODUCTION

Modernism in Translation

ARABIC MODERNISM was a literary movement of exiles and émigrés who planted their flag in West Beirut during the mid-1950s, when the Lebanese capital became a meeting ground for intellectuals from across the region. West Beirut, a neighborhood known as Hamra, was “the closest the Arab world could ever get to having its own Greenwich Village.” For a brief twenty-year period, until the outbreak of civil war in 1975, Hamra was a contact zone for artists and militants from the far left to the far right, nationalists and internationalists, experimentalists and traditionalists. In this highly politicized bohème, journals of ideas flourished and each coterie had its own café. Local banks were flush with deposits from the newly oil-rich states of the Gulf, helping to finance a construction boom that quadrupled the built area of the city in the decade following World War II. This intellectual and economic ferment turned Beirut into a magnet for disaffected thinkers from within Lebanon as well as from neighboring countries. It was a place with all the characteristics of what Roger Shattuck, in his study of the early Parisian avant-garde, has called “cosmopolitan provincialism”: an eclectic community of outsiders living on the margins and snitching tips on taste, style, and ideas from elsewhere.¹

The Arab modernists, like many artistic groups of the early and mid-twentieth century, gathered around a magazine that acted as the nerve center of their movement. *Shi‘r* [Poetry], a quarterly dedicated to poetry and poetry criticism, was founded in 1957 by Yusuf al-Khal, a Greek Orthodox Lebanese with shrewd editorial instincts, who lived in America from 1948 to 1955 and took the moniker for his new journal from Harriet Monroe’s famous “little magazine” of the same name. *Shi‘r* published forty-four issues over eleven years (1957–64; 1967–70), including manifestos, poems, criticism, and letters from abroad. Under al-Khal’s editorship, *Shi‘r* was an energetically internationalist organ; its openness to foreign literature was one of the ways it defined its “modernity.” The magazine had correspondents in Cairo, Baghdad, Berlin,

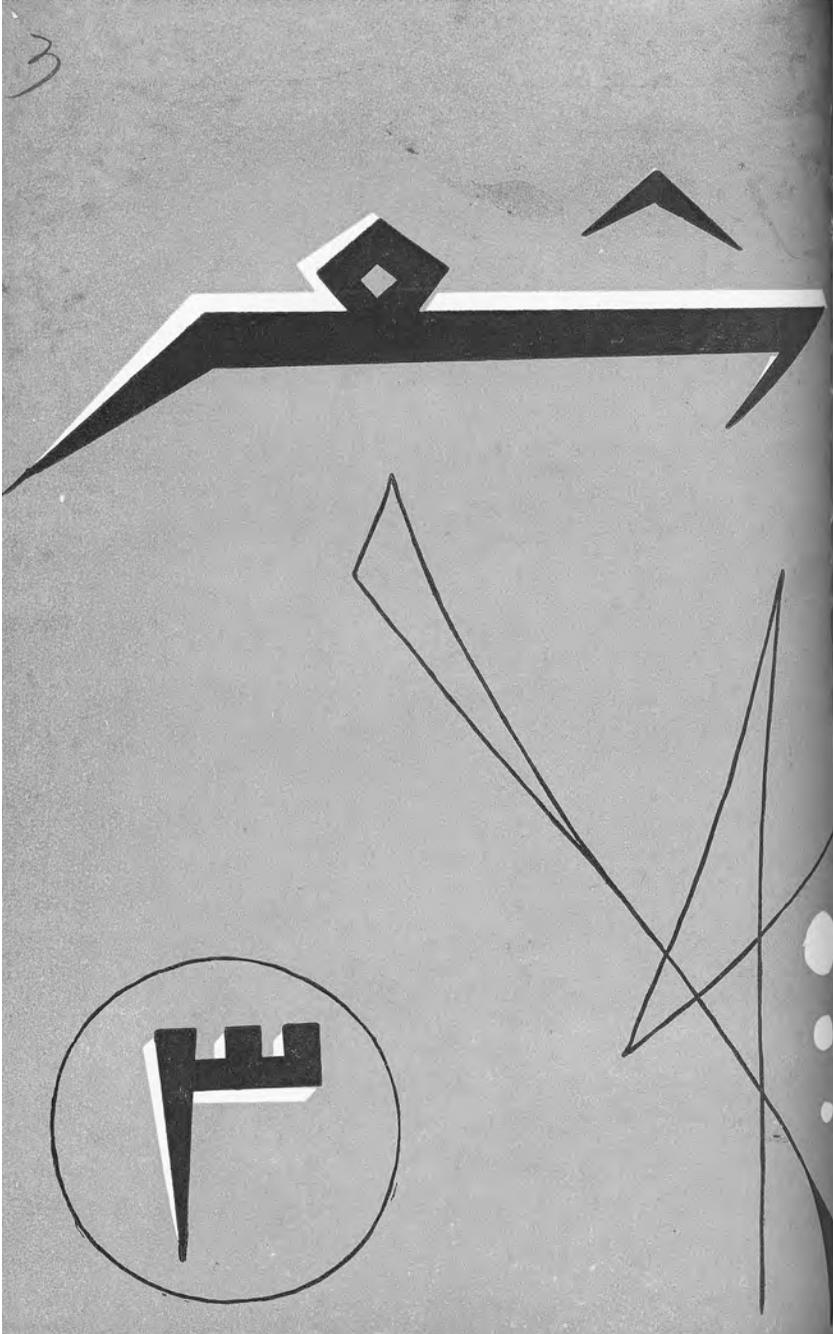


FIGURE 1A. *Shi'r* magazine, no. 3 (Summer 1958). The minimalist cover was consistent throughout the life of the magazine.

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صيف ١٩٥٧



٣	البعث والرماد	أدونيس
٢١	المسيح بعد الصاب	بدر شاكر السياب
٢٥	السفر	يوسف الخال
٢٩	معلق بسبب الافلاس	جورج شحاده
٣٤	نداء الى السعادة	فازك الملائكة
٤٠	طفولة	جورج غانم
٤٣	شيخوخة	بانند الحيدري
٤٥	هل كان صدفة	فدوى طوقان
٤٧	اللحم والسنايل	نذير العظمة
٥١	يوميات مقاتل	فؤاد رفقہ
٥٥	موقف الخوف	ابراهيم شكر الله
٥٩	من مونولوج لسيدة كسول	جبرا ابراهيم جبرا
٦٣	دار المدرسة	غولوي كينيل
٦٩	قصيدتان	ايدت ستويل
٧٣	رينه شار	الدكتور هنري القيم
٨٦	مادة الشعر	الدكتور ماجد فخري
٩١	قرارة الموجة لنازك الملائكة	خزاهي صبري
٩٧	الناس في بلادتي لصلاح عبد الصبور	أسعد رزوق
١٠١	رمال عطشي لسليمان العيسى	منير بشور
١٠٢	غيوم ظامئة لوديع ديب	
١٠٤	الطين والأظافر لمحبي الدين فارس	أنسي الحاج
١٠٥	أغاني افريقيا لفتح القيتوري	
١٠٧	عبير الارض لفوزي المعتيل	
١١١	اخبار وقضايا	
١١٧	المساهمون في هذا العدد	

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FIGURE 1B. Table of contents, Summer 1958. The issue included poems by Adonis ("Resurrection and Ashes") and Yusuf al-Khal ("The Voyage"), as well as works of criticism by Khalida Sa'id and Unsi al-Hajj.

Paris, London, and New York, and it published a range of verse in translation. The physical magazine was also a stylish object, printed in book-sized format with single columns of type and wide margins. The cover was minimalist, featuring only the title in austere and angular calligraphy. Particularly during the early years of *Shiʿr*, its design was remarkably consistent, elegant, and understated. In addition to the magazine, al-Khal established a publishing house, Dar Majallat Shiʿr, which printed criticism, original poetry, and anthologies of foreign verse. He and his wife, Helen, also founded a gallery for contemporary art, Gallery One, where the modernists often convened a literary salon, the so-called *jeudis de Shiʿr*, which hosted Stephen Spender and Yves Bonnefoy among other European luminaries.

In some respects, *Shiʿr* was a typical product of its time and place. Beirut's modernist moment (ca. 1955–1975) coincided with the rise of the Lebanese capital as the center of Arabic intellectual life, usurping the place hitherto held by Cairo. Lebanon's liberal censorship laws attracted writers and editors from across the region. Many of these immigrants were Palestinians fleeing north in the wake of the 1948 *Nakba*; subsequent waves were composed of Egyptians or Syrians escaping the increasingly monolithic regimes of Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Baʿth. As Franck Mermier writes in his study of Lebanon's print culture, "At the end of the 1950s, Lebanese publishing had managed to transform itself into the crossroads of Arabic intellectual production. Unlike its competitors elsewhere in the Arab world, Lebanese publishing enjoyed a striking degree of autonomy from the State and was held almost entirely in private hands." In Fuad Ajami's more skeptical view, "The city's large number of newspapers reflected the worldviews of their patrons, the rival embassies and foreign governments that paid and sustained them. But the press still played with ideas, pointed fingers, debated the issues of the region, and now and then appalled the conservative custodians of proper and improper things." In many histories, Lebanon in these two decades before the civil war was an oasis in the midst of an authoritarian wasteland, "a laboratory of numerous and conflicting tendencies," in the words of Adonis, a Syrian-Lebanese poet who was among West Beirut's immigrants and the preeminent figure of the modernist movement.²

This book is a study of that movement, the most significant literary grouping in the Arab world since World War II. It produced a body of work remarkable for its aesthetic ambition and rhetorical coherence. The *Shiʿr* poets' conceptualization of "modernity" or "modernism"—the Arabic word, *al-hadatha*, can be used for both English terms—was immensely influential. As the Syrian critic Muhammad Jamal Barut has written, *Shiʿr* magazine "imposed a specific understanding of the problematic of modernity, one that most closely approaches our own understanding of the word today."³ Many other literary movements in the region called their own work "modern" (*hadith*). They did this to signal a break with the conventions of classical or "traditional" verse, a willingness to borrow Western forms, or the inclusion of some obviously

contemporary aspect of modern life (new technologies, for instance, or radical politics). But these features can be found in virtually any significant poetry written in Arabic during the period.⁴ For the *Shiʿr* poets, however, *al-hadatha* was not merely an index of newness or contemporaneity but a tool to redefine poetry as such.⁵ “I wonder if they [i.e., the modernists] are ignorant of the limits of poetry?” Nazik al-Malaʿika, a rival Iraqi poet, worried in 1962.⁶ One reason for the modernists’ success in transforming the concept of poetry is their active supposition that there are no natural limits to this concept—that no one knows in any final sense what poetry is or what its sources of authority could be. “What we did with *Shiʿr* magazine has not been given, even now, its necessary critical reading,” Adonis has justifiably argued.

It had been studied, for the most part, antagonistically; or else it has been studied for what we did with form: the escape from meter, rhyme, inherited standards, etc. But these are surface readings. Our experience at the magazine, as an experience of poetic creativity, was essentially cultural and civilizational—one that transformed the concept of poetry itself as well as the way it is written.⁷

This book begins by tracing the historical and intellectual emergence of the modernist poetry movement. I emphasize the importance of Beirut in conditioning this emergence, not only because of the city’s suddenly central and yet anomalous place in the intellectual life of the Arab world, but also for its nodal position in the global history of modernism during the early Cold War. Lebanon’s long tradition of diasporic thinkers, along with its characteristic intellectual institutions (the American University of Beirut, the Cénacle libanais, and numerous organs of opinion), deeply affected the version of modernism espoused by the poets of *Shiʿr*. The poets’ shared political background in the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, discussed in chapter 2, was equally important in determining their peculiar understanding of modernism. And yet the *Shiʿr* poets’ conception of *al-hadatha* was in many ways typical of postwar modernism as an international phenomenon—a coincidence that also requires explanation. After setting out the intellectual and historical parameters of the movement, I analyze the two most aesthetically ambitious poetry collections it published, Adonis’s *Songs of Mihyar the Damascene* (1961) and Unsi al-Hajj’s *Lan* (1960). In both cases, I show how the intellectual and political history analyzed in the previous chapters affects the formal logic of the poems. The final two chapters focus on the work of Adonis, the signal poet and critic of the *Shiʿr* group, as well as the thinker who most creatively adapted the tenets of Arabic modernism to different historical circumstances. Although Adonis severed ties with *Shiʿr* in 1963, the principles that animated the movement remained crucial to his later writings, even as they addressed new subjects and took on novel forms. My book begins with the history of a literary collective and ends with the work of its most representative and controversial figure.



FIGURE 2. The Phoenicia Intercontinental Hotel, designed by Edward Durell Stone, opened 1961. Popperfoto, Getty Images.

For all its importance to poets writing in Arabic, the *Shi‘r* movement is essentially unknown to English-language readers, including scholars of modernist poetry. Beirut does not figure, for fathomable reasons, among the cities of modernism in Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane’s seminal collection of studies, *Modernism, 1890–1930*. Paris, London, Berlin, Vienna, St. Petersburg, and New York stake out the geography of the field as envisaged by these essays. Marshall Berman’s groundbreaking work, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, surveys a similar terrain. Even after the recent “transnational turn,” which has added Rio de Janeiro, Shanghai, and Buenos Aires to the purview of scholars, Beirut is still terra incognita.⁸ For this reason, the bulk of my book is addressed to the Beirut movement itself. I hope it may serve in part as an introduction to the work of these poets although it is not intended as a comprehensive survey.⁹ Indeed, my deeper ambition for this book is to suggest how much remains to be studied. While *City of Beginnings* is punctuated by close readings of literary and critical texts, it is guided throughout by an argument about Arabic

modernism's place in a wider intellectual landscape. Anyone who reads the criticism produced by the *Shi'r* group, or who examines the list of poets they translated, must be struck by their confident sense of what modernism is and who its major poets are. Sixty years on, with the spatial and temporal boundaries of modernism in constant flux, it is hard to share this confidence.¹⁰ But precisely that feeling of difference is useful in suggesting that the Beirut movement belongs to a distinct historical period—distinct from our own as well as from earlier eras—which I will call the period of late modernism.

Filling out this period concept is something I attempt in chapters 1 and 2. Here, I will simply suggest that late modernism is the historical moment—roughly, the quarter century following World War II, the earliest and most intense period of the Cold War—in which artistic modernism was formalized and made global. It is the moment when, as Gregory Barnhisel has written, “This formerly radical movement had become the preferred style of cultural elites and, increasingly, the business world in Europe, Latin America, and North America”—and, one might add, Lebanon.¹¹ A convenient local symbol for this story of formalization and global expansion is the opening in 1961 of Beirut's Phoenicia InterContinental Hotel, the chain's first hotel outside the Western Hemisphere, designed by Edward Durrell Stone, principal architect of New York's Museum of Modern Art. Stone's building, which coincided with his turn toward modernist regionalism, helped create the stereotype of Beirut as “the Paris of the Middle East”: a modern, cosmopolitan playground for European and Arab tourists as well as corporate elites. As Lebanese journalist and historian Samir Kassir writes of Stone's modernist icon:

The building itself was splendid to look at, for its white, delicately perforated façade, its unprecedented scale and height (twelve floors), and its oval swimming pool. But it was the sunken bar that perhaps most vividly captured the spirit of the place: incorporating a large glass wall that allowed guests to relax with a cocktail while contemplating the bikini-clad naiads gliding beneath the surface of the pool. . . . At long last Beirut had its own internationally recognizable building, henceforth a centerpiece of postcard views of the city.¹²

But late modernism as I intend it here is not primarily a period style (nor a lifestyle). It is instead a movement of artistic canonization and revision at a time when, as George Steiner writes, “The apparent iconoclasts have turned out to be more or less anguished custodians racing through the museum of civilization, seeking order and sanctuary for its treasures, before closing time.”¹³ One noteworthy feature of Arabic modernism is precisely its work of selective preservation, as we shall see in the final two chapters on Adonis's anthologies and elegies. This curatorial sensibility is typical of the period of late modernism, when literary texts and art objects from the first half of the twentieth century were organized into a firm if flexible canon and provided with an

ideological rationale, which is that of aesthetic autonomy or purity of medium. Rather than avant-gardist iconoclasm, with its irreverent attitude toward institutionalized art, the ethos of late modernism was one of professionalism or specialized competency. The most powerful account of this ethos remains that of Clement Greenberg, who championed modernist abstract painting for its “use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence.”¹⁴ By rooting each art’s “competence” in its particular medium—whether poetry, painting, or sculpture—late modernism reformulated art history into canons whose internal dynamics were safeguarded from extra-artistic interference. As Theodor Adorno, the most discerning but also ambivalent critic of late modernism, writes, this is the moment of “culture’s becoming self-consciously cultural.”¹⁵

The effort to wrest cultural objects free of their historical occasions results in a characteristically late modernist rhetoric of autonomy. This rhetoric is at the heart of the Arab modernists’ project. As Yusuf al-Khal writes, to cite one example among many by the *Shi‘r* poets: “The poem as a work of art looks no further than itself, it is an independent creation, sufficient unto itself [*muk-tafiya bi-dhatiha*].”¹⁶ The implicit sense of al-Khal’s name for his magazine is “*Poetry*—and only poetry.” In Lebanon, however, the autonomy of literature was not something that had already been “conquered,” to borrow Pierre Bourdieu’s useful formulation, but rather a rallying cry aimed at securing a margin of independence from the state—a goal that was more plausible in Lebanon than in surrounding countries, where cultural bureaucracies were largely successful in asserting their control over artistic production.¹⁷ The modernists’ project was strongly resisted by the region’s Marxist and nationalist intellectuals, for whom the separation of literature and politics was anathema. Indeed, the issue of literary autonomy was among the deepest fault lines in the cultural Cold War. Leftist thinkers, in the Arab world as elsewhere, formulated their own poetics and erected their own artistic canons, which emphasized the intrinsically political nature of literary activity. This helps explain why the tone of the Beirut modernists is so often embattled and even shrill. As opposed to their late modernist peers in Europe and America, the Arab poets could rarely afford the postures of polished certitude. Their anguish arose from the feeling that they had not only to preserve their museum of civilization but also to build one in the face of determined antagonists.

Another characteristic feature of late modernism is that whereas early twentieth-century movements—from Italian futurism and Anglo-American vorticism to French simultaneism and Latin American avant-gardism—were national or regional styles with international circulations, late modernism is the first truly global instance of aesthetic modernism. This difference has too often been ignored, rendering attempts to periodize the phenomenon more and more uncertain. As Franco Moretti has noted, “Until now we have been

searching for a non-existent unity—‘modernism’—instead of accepting the idea that in early twentieth century literature *there exists no common denominator*.¹⁸ But *late* modernism does have a common denominator, which is a shared ideology of literary autonomy propagated by a global network of institutions and individuals who served as its spokespeople and translators. The Arab poets at the heart of my study quickly grasped what the emerging canon and ideological strictures of late modernism were and injected themselves into its circulatory system (while encountering strong antibodies). They understood how an ostensibly apolitical internationalism combined with strategies of formal abstraction might give them leverage in local debates. The claim of poetic autonomy would help them radically alter the definition of Arabic poetry, in part by subjecting it to the standards of what the *Shi‘r* poets called “world literature.” Late modernism is thus a moment of contraction, in which modernism is narrowed by virtue of its formal and ideological specificity, but also of vertiginous expansion in geographical terms.

Most studies of late modernist culture during the Cold War focus on its institutional underpinnings.¹⁹ They are typically uninterested in formal or aesthetic questions—discussions of poetry are conspicuous by their absence—and their critical posture is one of exposure: once the curtain is drawn back on the artists’ political bias or institutional support—by the CIA, for example, or the US State Department—the argument is over. Less frequently, scholars have shown how some postwar art—American jazz, for instance, which was enthusiastically exported by the State Department—escaped the rationale of its backers, pursuing agendas that contradicted those of its institutional supporters. In this case, there is no explanatory relation, unless it is an ironic one, between the text or performance and its material conditions: the artists simply outwit their handlers.²⁰ Another limitation of such studies is that they have concentrated, for understandable reasons, almost exclusively on European and American artists and intellectuals. The North Atlantic was the main theater of Cold War culture, and much of its drama played out in that context. But the dynamics of intellectual exchange were significantly different in Afro-Asian countries, where the existence of national liberation movements (including pan-Arabism) complicated the relatively black-and-white picture that obtained inside Europe.²¹

In contrast with such analyses, this study tries to show how the strictures of late modernism were, in a non-European context, aesthetically productive rather than simply constraining. For the *Shi‘r* poets, the early Cold War is a moment when professionalization—the certification of oneself as a poet according to new global standards—is undertaken *as an adventure*, to use one of Adonis’s favorite phrases. It is also the moment when a peculiar brand of political liberalism—militantly anti-Communist, aggressively internationalist, spiritually engaged, and chiefly concerned with negative freedoms—sought to establish itself as a worldwide consensus among non-Soviet-aligned intellectuals.

It was a consensus that presented itself, as liberal politics often has, as “apolitical,” motivated chiefly by spiritual concerns or sheer economic rationality. The works of Arab modernism are heavily marked by this midcentury liberal imagination. In their poems and critical writings, abstract individualism is heroized, figures of collectivity are eschewed, local landscapes are sublimated or ignored, and the state is figured as a source of permanent threat. As is often the case with liberal art, the ideological content of Arabic modernist poems is most present where it is most strongly denied. In her analysis of liberal aesthetics during the Cold War, Amanda Anderson notes that critiques of liberalism as covertly ideological (or bloodlessly neutral) have “foreclosed recognition of the formal and conceptual dimensions of active literary engagements with liberal thought.” Critiques of liberalism as pragmatically complacent have made it especially difficult to discern liberalism’s links to modernist styles of thinking. In most scholarly literature, artistic experimentalism is typically or even exclusively associated with left-wing or right-wing radicalism.²² The difficulty in linking modernist experimentalism to political liberalism is particularly evident when, as in the case of the Beirut modernists, the liberalism in question arises in a non-European context whose literary codes and conceptual dimensions are relatively unfamiliar. In Lebanon, a seemingly staid midcentury ideology gave rise to a modernist movement that challenged the principal conventions of Arabic literary culture. Its corpus is one in which spontaneity battles with scholasticism and postures of rebellion are yoked to an abstract poetics. One task of my book is to untangle the contradictions of this radical liberalism.

To insist on the literary dimension of late modernism is not to ignore the ironies of its history. The claim of literary autonomy, along with the accompanying slogans of cultural and intellectual freedom, is compromised if not entirely vitiated when the claimants can be shown to have identifiable political aims or covert institutional support. This study includes a detailed history—the first to be based on archival sources—of the Arab modernists’ extensive transactions with the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), the CIA front organization that supported anti-Communist intellectuals throughout the world during the two decades following World War II.²³ *Shi‘r* magazine was not funded by the CCF, but its editorial principles echoed without completely endorsing the commonplaces of late modernist culture fostered by the Congress and its liberal allies across the globe. The *Shi‘r* group also situated their project carefully within the force field of Lebanese political and intellectual life, even as they pretended to stand above or to the side of it. My analysis of the institutional and historical conditions that made Arab modernism possible are intended in part as a critique of the group’s idea of itself as a “nonpartisan,” purely (or professionally) poetical movement. It is an attempt, in the words of Giles Scott-Smith, to reveal the (liberal) politics of “apolitical culture.” But if the *Shi‘r* movement had not done the poetic and critical work that it did, this revelation would hardly be worth the effort. Any

critique of the modernist project must take the full measure of its literary successes. The bulk of this study, chapters 3–6, is therefore addressed to that still understudied corpus.

City of Beginnings is situated at the crossroads of poetry criticism and intellectual history. Along with many Arab poets of the period, the Beirut modernists addressed themselves, albeit at times obliquely, to the signal debates of their day: the relations between cultural power and political power; rivalries between nationalism, secularism, and Marxism; and the transmission of literary authority. To do justice to these debates requires some code-switching between the specialized language of literary criticism and the broader discourses of intellectual, political, and economic history. In that spirit, the rest of this introduction will analyze a lyric poem by Adonis, an important early text that weaves together several strands of Arabic modernist thought and experience. By examining its patterns of allusion, themes, and rhetoric, I hope to suggest the argument of this book as a whole.

“*Nuh al-Jadid*” [The New Noah] was first published as the opening poem in the Spring 1958 issue of *Shi‘r*:

We sailed on the Ark through rain and mud
with oars promised by God.
We lived while all humankind died,
sailing over the waves while the emptiness
became a chain of corpses we fastened
to our very lives. A window for supplication
opened for us in the sky:

“Lord, why have you saved only us
of all people and created things?
Where will you cast us? Upon another land of yours,
upon our first homeland,
upon the dead leaves and the vibrant air?
Lord, we fear the sun
in our veins. We despair of the light,
we despair of the coming day
and a life lived again from the beginning.”

We sailed on the Ark in the rain
with oars promised by God
while the mud covered mankind’s eyes.
They perished in the clay but we were saved
from the flood and death, becoming seeds
on a globe that turned while staying still.

“If only we had not become a seed
for creation, for the earth and its generations.
If only we were still clay
or embers, or something in between,
never to see the world again,
never to see its hell or its Lord.
Lord, murder us with all the others.
We yearn for the end, we yearn to be dust,
we do not yearn for life!”

If time returned to the beginning
and waters covered the face of creation
and the earth shook and God said,
“O Noah, save the living for us,”
I would not listen to God’s word.
I would go to my Ark with a poet
and a rebel for freedom
and we would set out together
paying no heed to God’s word.
We would open ourselves to the flood
and dive into the mud. We would brush away
stones and clay from the eyes of the drowned
and whisper into their veins
that we had returned from the desert,
that we had escaped the cave,
that we had changed the sky of years
and were sailing forth, unbowed by terror
and deaf to God’s word.
Our appointment is with death. Our shores
trace a familiar despair we once accepted.
Now we cross an ocean as cold as iron,
sailing beyond the horizon
and paying no mind to that God.
We yearn for a new Lord, a different deity.²⁴

Adonis’s poem retells a myth of transmission, or translation. In the Old Testament and Qur’anic versions, Noah conveys his cargo safely from the dying world into the new. It is a myth of destruction but also continuity, whose seal is the covenant given by God to Noah and his descendants. In Sura Hud, one of the Qur’anic passages that relate the flood legend, God addresses his prophet after the waters have receded and the unbelievers are drowned: “Noah, get thee down [from the Ark] in peace from Us, and blessings upon thee and on the nations of those with thee” (11:48). Similarly, in Sura al-Mu’minun, God twice promises to raise “another generation” following the destruction he visits

upon those who deny the possibility of resurrection (23:31; 23:42). Adonis reverses this myth by rewriting it. While the familiar Noah is a figure of redemption, binding time past to time future through the medium of creed and community, Adonis's Noah is a figure of refusal. He does not want to be the seed for another generation but to remain in the earthly condition of "something in between" [*bayna bayna*]. In this sense, Adonis's Noah bears a family resemblance to all those "childless couples, orphaned children, aborted child-births, and unregenerately celibate men and women" who, as Edward Said writes, "populate the world of high modernism with remarkable insistence."²⁵ From the Qur'anic point of view, of course, this wish to remain unregenerate is a heresy that mirrors the unbelievers' denial of an afterlife.

In the long final stanza, Noah imagines a return to the purity of "the beginning," but this time with a difference. The "new" Noah ignores God's command to save the living. Instead of bringing his living charges to harbor, Adonis's prophet dives into the mud, where he uncovers the bodies of the unbelievers. This *katabasis* is the imaginative heart of the poem, and the figure of an interior descent is one we will encounter several times in this study. Down amid the human clay, Noah opens the eyes of the dead and whispers a new covenant (or revolutionary doctrine) into their veins. The new covenant is in fact an anticovenant, a refusal of the divine promise. "*Wa'd*" [promise], a word that Adonis uses in the second line of stanzas 1 and 3, is often linked in the Qur'an to the Day of Judgment, when the believers' resurrection and the unbelievers' punishment are both assured. In the final stanza, "*mar'id*" [appointment] is derived from the same root, though here the connotations are not redemptive but defiantly mundane: the only thing promised is an earthly death. Noah's denial of God's promise leads to a yearning for some new telos to his journey, represented not as a shore but a voyage without end—another heretical reversal. The unbelievers, who were drowned after refusing to give credence to the afterlife, are resurrected with a whisper. So the skeptical villains of the Qur'anic myth become the heroes, or at least the most precious cargo, of Adonis's revisionary lyric.

This study is focused on such acts of cultural and literary translation, which were essential to the Arab modernists' achievement. "The New Noah" provides a nice point of embarkation, since it is not only a lyric about an instance of translation—Noah's conveyance of "two of every kind" out of the old world and into the new—but also performs that act by retelling and revising the Qur'anic myth. In a sense, Adonis's revision is a radical one. The villains of the older version are valorized and the divine covenant is suspended, a Nietzschean reversal characteristic of Adonis's early poetry. But despite this overturning, the religious myth subsists as a kind of cultural ballast: the poem's commitment to the new is weighed down by its equally urgent commitment to an ancient model. This divided commitment is reflected in the intricate time structure of the poem, which begins in a crisis-ridden present, segues into a speculative past ("if time

returned to the beginning”), and ends by calling for an alternative future (“a new Lord”). In his later critical work, which I discuss in chapter 5, Adonis identifies this temporal structure with the hermeneutical operation of *ta’wil* or allegoresis: a revisionary return to authoritative texts motivated by present concerns (which might also serve as a definition of *translation* as such). The poem’s ambiguous commitment to both the new and the old is a commonplace of modernist poetry, whose texts are like gestalt figures, radically experimental or echt traditional depending on how one looks at them. The Mexican poet Octavio Paz, another late modernist, neatly formulates this paradox by calling modernism “*una tradición hecha de interrupciones*,” a tradition made of ruptures.²⁶ In Adonis’s poem, the Qur’anic legend is refused and transmitted in the same gesture. And so the ark serves as a figure for Arabic modernism as I attempt to read it here: a vessel or vortex that guarantees the survival of its cargo at the same time it exposes that consignment to unpredictable transformations.

Although I shall argue that translation—in Arabic, “*naql*” or “*tarjama*”—was the characteristic activity of the *Shi’r* group, the modernists described their ambitions very differently. Their own writings stress the importance of literary novelty and tend to relegate translation to a secondary position. The editor in chief of *Shi’r*, Yusuf al-Khal, puts the matter succinctly: “Translation [*al-naql*] is one thing and creation [*al-khalq*] is another.”²⁷ Al-Khal’s opposition is a conventional one. It casts literary creation as a heroic activity and translation as a passive technique. My own readings presume a different notion of *naql*. A standard English-Arabic dictionary provides the following equivalents: “*naql* carrying, carriage; conveyance, transportation, transport; removal; translocation, relocation, transplantation; transfer (also, e.g., of an official); change of residence, move, remove; transmission (also by radio); translation; transcription, transcript, copy; tradition; report, account; entry, posting (in an account book); conveyance, transfer, assignment, cession.”²⁸ In this study, translation is not understood as a process of passive reception or linguistic transfer but rather as a historical act of preservation, displacement, and transformation. The modes of *naql* that I examine include anthologization, elegiac inheritance, and genre appropriation as well as translations in the everyday sense of the word in English. Arab modernist poets used these modes to transmit and thereby transform a certain kind of literary cargo, whether foreign or ancient, or foreign because ancient. In their revisionary stance toward the past and their eagerness to translate texts from abroad, the *Shi’r* movement was a continuation of certain strands within the nineteenth-century Arabic *Nahda*, a historical precursor the Beirut poets were well aware of and often disavowed.²⁹

The modernists’ rivals frequently accused them of despoiling the cultural heritage [*al-turath*], but the *Shi’r* poets’ real achievement, as Adonis’s lyric suggests, was considerably more complex. Huda Fakhreddine rightly notes that one of the modernists’ signal achievements was to “[hold] a mirror up to the established canon of Arabic culture.”³⁰ While many of their writings adopt

an adversarial stance toward the literary tradition, the result of the modernists' many projects, whether critical, poetic, or anthological, was to ensure the survival of that corpus in an altered or translated form. This "internal translation" of the tradition, as Pascal Casanova has termed it, was systematic and consequential.³¹ To assert that the *Shi'r* movement is characterized by *naql* is not to denigrate it by comparison with some putatively more original instance of modernism (it is always worth remembering that Pound's great slogan, "Make it new," is a translation from the classical Chinese). My emphasis on the modernists' abilities as translators is meant instead to suggest that their own rhetoric of creativity is a kind of reaction formation, leading us away from the movement's historical origins and actual achievements.

The internal translation of the *turath* was crucial to the modernists' program, but equally important was their translation of European and American poetry. As Yusuf al-Khal writes in the introduction to his *Diwan al-shi'r al-amriki* [Anthology of American Poetry], "One of the guiding principles of *Shi'r* is that a creative engagement with the poetic heritage of the world is necessary for the renaissance of Arabic poetry."³² Although the French and Anglo-American poetic traditions were the most significant resources for the *Shi'r* poets, they cast their nets widely. During the ten years of its existence (1957–64; 1967–70), *Shi'r* published translations from English (Whitman, Pound, Eliot), French (Valéry, Michaux, Bonnefoy, Perse), Spanish (Lorca, Jiménez, Paz), Italian (Quasimodo), and German (Rilke)—a very partial list. Toward the end of the quarterly's life, there were special issues on contemporary Armenian, Iranian, and Turkish poetry as well as dossiers of Beat poetry and poetry from "the Third World." The magazine's book publishing arm, Dar Majallat Shi'r, published Yusuf al-Khal's American anthology, another of Robert Frost, and a book of selected poems by Eliot, including al-Khal and Adonis's version of *The Waste Land*.³³ As I discuss in chapters 3 and 4, the modernists' translation of the French *poème en prose*—in Arabic, *qasidat al-nathr*—generated fierce polemics about the basic nature of poetry in Arabic. In his earliest manifesto for the *qasidat al-nathr*, Adonis calls it "our ark and our flood."³⁴ In all these cases of translation, the *Shi'r* poets' criteria of selection and methods of execution were carefully thought out, lending the movement a remarkable theoretical and practical consistency.

The modernists' translations of American and European poetry were part of their effort to restructure the Arabic literary field along internationalist lines. At a moment when national cultures in Egypt, Iraq, and Syria were being formed and their boundaries policed by newly independent states, Beirut modernists sought to expand the literary field and to remove it from the purview of the nation-state altogether. In the first chapter of this book, I argue that this internationalist strategy must be understood within the context of Beirut's unique role in the intellectual geography of the Arab world as well as the wider background of Cold War cultural politics. Internationalism was

a key fact of late modernist culture, inseparable from its central ideological plank of artistic autonomy. For the Arab modernists, radical internationalism allowed them to pivot from an earlier adherence to the politics of Greater Syrian Nationalism, a movement I examine in chapter 2, toward the midcentury liberal ideal of apolitical culture. Arguing that poetry should be released from its moorings in the nation, the *Shiʿr* group sought to secure a place on what Yusuf al-Khal called “the map of world literature.”³⁵ Among the many reasons for studying Arab modernism is the light it throws on the recent history of this concept, now at the heart of debates concerning the future of comparative literature as a discipline.

A worry that animates many recent critiques of world literature as a political and pedagogical project is the looming possibility of an intellectual monoculture, or what Erich Auerbach in his 1952 essay, “The Philology of World Literature,” calls “a homogenization of human life the world over.”³⁶ One historical corollary of this worry, however, is the demand that non-European literatures exhibit symptoms of national or regional difference—in other words, local color—according to what Aamir Mufti terms “the logic of indigenization.” For Mufti, this logic is set in motion during the colonial context of the long nineteenth century, when Orientalist institutions helped provoke the emergence of distinct national literary traditions, particularly in the subcontinent. The dynamics of this colonial logic, which Mufti calls “the dialectic of Orientalism,” powerfully foreshadows the encounter between Western scholars and officials and the intellectuals of Afro-Asian nations during the early Cold War.³⁷ The midcentury moment was also a time when emergent literatures were encouraged, by subtle and not-so-subtle means, to develop and display their regional or national colors. The obvious contradiction at the heart of this indigenizing logic is that non-European literatures were only able to join the ranks of world literature by fully embracing their particularism. The *Shiʿr* poets, along with several non-European modernist groupings of the period, explicitly rejected the logic of indigenization. Their poetry displays a palpable aversion to local color and political nationalism even while the poets remained committed to the project of world literature. This commitment involved the Arabic movement in interesting contradictions of its own, as we shall see.

The Beirut modernists’ internationalism suggests another dimension to “The New Noah.” For while Adonis’s poem is a *naql* of Qur’anic myth, it also translates, more or less explicitly, a number of maritime tropes from French Romantic, symbolist, and postsymbolist poetry. This lyric tradition, beginning with Lamartine’s “Le Lac” (“driven ever onward to new shores”), passing through Baudelaire’s various *voyages*, Rimbaud’s “Le bateau ivre,” and the seafaring epics of Saint-John Perse, was well known to the modernists. In Adonis’s poem, Noah’s initial ennui and impatience with familiar shorelines gives way at the poem’s close to an exhilaration that echoes the famous *envoi*

of Baudelaire's "Le Voyage": "*Enfer ou Ciel, qu'importe? / Au fond de l'Inconnu pour trouver du nouveau!*" Viewed through this modernist lens, Noah's rupture with authoritative precedent, his determination to find a new lord to replace the old monotheistic one, could not be more "traditional."³⁸

The use of maritime tropes is so common in *Shi'r*, whether in the original poetry or translations, that it suggests the sea-poem as a full-fledged genre. The Arabic genre, whose ideological significance is discussed in chapter 2, had precedents in earlier modernist movements. "BLESS ALL SEAFARERS," Wyndham Lewis thundered in his manifesto for the first issue of *BLAST* (thinking perhaps of Pound's translation of the Anglo-Saxon poem "The Seafarer"). "BLESS the vast planetary abstraction of the OCEAN." Lewis's encomiums for the sea were balanced against his "blasts" of all the symptoms of British parochialism, from its love of sport to its local climate, hated for its mildness ("the flabby sky that can manufacture no snow"). The Beirut poets were equally enthusiastic on the subject of the sea. "O boats!" apostrophizes Yusuf al-Khal in his poem "The Voyage" [*al-Safar*]. "O rising ladder, / linking us with those we are not, / bringing us precious things / and taking sweet things from us."³⁹ The Arab modernists' geography has fixed points of compass, which reflect their appropriation of Orientalist tropes. For them, "the interior" is the desertified origin of a mythical, autochthonous Arab-Islamic civilization: the birthplace of its oldest poetry and revealed religion. In the terms provided by Adonis's poem, the interior is a wasteland of repetition and despair. The sea, on the contrary, is a *domaine de franchise*, as Saint-John Perse calls it, a forum for adventure and exchange. Its heroes are Phoenician entrepreneurs or Levantine dragomen, at home in a Mediterranean world of cultural and commercial give-and-take. The new Noah, driven onward by his obsessive search for the new and the foreign, is a characteristic member of this company.⁴⁰

The Arab modernists' love affair with the sea contrasts with their relative disinterest in the city—another trait that distinguishes them from earlier European and American modernists, for whom the city is the chronotope of contemporary life. It is remarkable how few references there are to the Lebanese capital in the work of the *Shi'r* poets; it is not so much an unreal city as an unseen city. "I pass through Beirut and do not see it, / I live in Beirut and do not see it," writes Adonis in "The Crow's Feather," a poem from his landmark collection, *The Songs of Mihyar the Damascene* (1961). Arab modernists evince none of the futurist passion for fast cars and new machines (Marinetti and Mayakovsky are conspicuous for their absence from *Shi'r*'s roll call); they do not swoon over the latest feats in civic engineering (it is not any part of Hart Crane's "The Bridge" that al-Khal selected for his *Anthology of American Poetry* but rather the six "Voyages," which begin, "Above the fresh ruffles of the surf"); the Arab modernists' texts are full of ennui and alienation, but these afflictions have little to do with urban spleen; finally, the poets rarely mention

and never plunge into the crowd, despite the fact that between 1930 and 1975 the population of Beirut increased nearly tenfold.⁴¹ But this avoidance of the city is typical of late modernist poetry. As Marshall Berman has noted of postwar movements, “The most exciting work of this era is marked by radical distance from any shared environment. The environment is not attacked: it is simply not there.”⁴²

In the Arabic sea-poems, the vast planetary abstraction of the ocean is not only a topos that links local culture to Mediterranean and even global streams of literary capital. It is also, as al-Khal writes in his “voyage” poem, “The way of return” [*sirat al-ruju*']. While the sea facilitates the importation of goods from abroad, it also makes possible the discovery and rebirth of a native heritage. This heritage, as Adonis's poem attests, is often a buried or repressed one. Noah's dive into the clay of creation and his resurrection of the unbelievers—a katabasis we might compare to those of Ulysses and Aeneas, or Pound's first canto, translated by al-Khal in the first issue of *Shi'r*—is a typical instance of Arabic modernism's effort to unearth the heterodox layers of their own literary heritage. “In terms of aesthetic values,” Adonis declared in an interview in 1960, “the most astonishing things in Arabic poetry are still buried, unknown to both the common reader as well as the specialist.” It is precisely this repressed, resurrected, and revised culture that the modernists sought to transmit to the future.⁴³

A final theme of Adonis's poem that helps link Beirut modernism with wider intellectual currents of the postwar period is the specter of human extinction. “The New Noah” is a dramatic monologue staged at a moment of species-death. Noah and his companions sail the seas while all around them “mankind” perishes in the flood. Arab modernist poets, like many Cold War intellectuals, assigned a great deal of importance to the figure of “man” [*al-insan*]—alternately, “the person” [*al-shakhs*] or “the individual” [*al-fard*]. American readers who come across the Arab poets' repeated, even obsessive references to “the person” might be led to expect a version of confessional poetry or something with a Frank O'Hara-like intimacy, but this is not at all the case. The *Shi'r* poets adopted the figure of “the person” in large part from philosophers of personalism, a Catholic-humanist school of thought, now mostly forgotten, that played a significant role in postwar intellectual life in Europe and elsewhere. For Arab modernists, “the person” is a conceptual abstraction rather than a trope of intimacy. In Lebanon, it was the philosopher and diplomat Charles Malik, a mentor of Yusuf al-Khal at the American University of Beirut, who brought the doctrines of personalism back from his training in the United States and Germany, where he studied with Martin Heidegger (the subject of Malik's doctoral dissertation). Personalists argued for the spiritual dignity of the human person, threatened by the rival materialisms of capitalism and communism. For Arab modernists too, the person is a hero of negative liberty, a lyrical “I” that floats free from the claims of all ideological collectives.

“The person [*al-shakhs*] is more important than the party, more important than ideology,” the *Shi‘r* poets wrote in an important editorial, early in 1962. “For us, the person and his freedom come first, before anything else.”⁴⁴ This hyperbolic valorization of the individual, untrammelled by historical circumstance or political commitments, would have important consequences for the *Shi‘r* group’s poetics. Indeed, the modernists’ personalist rhetoric, centered on notions of interiority, self-sufficiency, and autonomy, acted in many ways as their theory of lyric poetry.

Outside Lebanon, the figure of man was mobilized by personalists and their allies to effect what historian Samuel Moyn has called the “reinvention under pressure of a self-styled European humanism.”⁴⁵ For these thinkers, the figure served to anchor and provide conceptual continuity for Western civilization, one that was threatened by the seeming ruptures of Hiroshima and the concentration camps. Personalists repaired that humanistic tradition by tracing it forward from the Christological figure of “the son of man,” through Renaissance humanism and Enlightenment notions of “the rights of man,” up to the postwar present. “Man” was thus a trope for the viability of cultural transmission and a powerful stay against the forces of disruption. It inhabits the same historical field as a number of homonymous rivals, from Frantz Fanon’s “new man” (a collectivist figure of anticolonial struggle), to Albert Camus’s “*homme révolté*” (the solitary rebel with a troubled conscience), as well as the anthropological universalism of MOMA’s 1955 *Family of Man* exhibit.⁴⁶ The postwar reinvention of humanism facilitated the enshrinement of human rights discourse in the UN Declaration of Human Rights, for which Charles Malik was among the principal architects. Seen in this light, “The New Noah” can be read as a parable about the survival of humanism in the wake of a mythical genocide. In Adonis’s revision of the monotheistic narrative, Noah represents a heroically secular, dynamic, and individualized notion of the human—a kind of Cold War *Übermensch*.⁴⁷

The Arab modernists’ investment in the discourse of man is one example of their eagerness to join a global intellectual culture. One hope for this study is to place Arabic poetry in a dialogue of contemporaries with other postwar currents of thought: humanists, posthumanists, liberals, Marxists, and others. As a movement centered on acts of translation, the *Shi‘r* group’s history illuminates the afterlife of European and American poetry of the early twentieth century. It shows how that corpus was received, transformed, and put to use in a literary milieu—at once foreign as well as uncannily familiar—that was also transformed by the encounter. The history of the *Shi‘r* group also shows how a version of Cold War liberalism was translated into an alien and in many ways antagonistic terrain, with consequences that are still with us. Focusing on the act of translation has the additional benefit of avoiding sterile disputes about imitation and authenticity. Beirut modernism can be understood neither as the copy of a European prototype nor as a betrayal of the Arabic

poetic tradition. I hope that a concretely historical study of how *al-hadatha* was translated into Arabic intellectual life at a particular time and place—in this case, Beirut during its so-called golden age—might serve as an example of how to study the transmission and circulation of other putative universals, including human rights, liberal democracy, and secularism, all of which remain contentious topics of debate in the Arab world and elsewhere.