

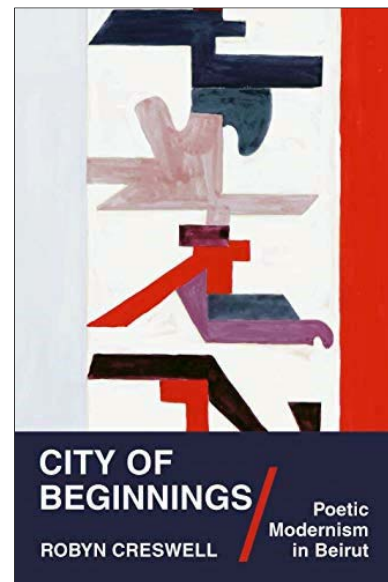
Incandescent Beirut Lost

by Franck Salameh

City of Beginnings: Poetic Modernism in Beirut. By Robyn Creswell. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019. 259 pp. \$39.95.

Writing in 1968 of a city of “varied vertigos,” Franco-Lebanese poet Nadia Tuéni described her native Beirut as both a courtesan sophist and sainted,¹ “A pink merchant city, like a fleet of ships adrift, scanning the horizons for the warmth of a seaport.” Tuéni’s Beirut was the “Orient’s very last shrine, where mankind could still adorn its kind with a mantle of light,”² burning away regional obscurantism and gloom.

Creswell’s *City of Beginnings* is a story of that irreverent, incandescent Beirut, of a coterie of young Arabophone writers, cosmopolitan iconoclasts who made that Beirut of multiple identities home. Beirut was a crucible for their cultural and political rivalries, a shrine for impieties suppressed elsewhere in the Middle East but given sanctuary in a Levantine city stalled between World War II and the beginnings of the 1975 Lebanese civil war. In that sense, *City of*



Beginnings is a book of mutiny and mutineers, who shunned the Arab world’s conformist proclivities in mores, language, cultural rituals, and intellectual production.

With an intellectual historian’s sensitivity and a firm grasp of mid-twentieth century Lebanon’s languages and world-views, Creswell’s focus is the “modernism” emanating from Beirut’s Arabic-language literary journal *Shi’r* and its luminaries: Greek Orthodox Lebanese Youssef al-Khal (1917-87) and Syrian heterodox Adonis (b. 1930.)

Like many of their contemporaries, whether *Shi’r* collaborators or Francophone Lebanese nationalists apprehensive of Arabism,

¹ Nadia Tuéni, *Liban: Vingt poèmes pour un amour* (1979) in *Œuvres poétiques complètes* (Beirut, Leb.: Dar al-Nahar, 1986), p. 278.

² Ibid.

Adonis and Khal spurned Arab national orthodoxies, espoused cosmopolitanisms, and called for “Eastern,” “Oriental,” and “Levantine” rebirth and renewal rather than then-normative allegiance to Arabism. They valorized pagan, pre-Arab, pre-Muslim progenitors—including Canaanite-Phoenician seafarers of classical antiquity—and spoke of the extinction of Arab civilization even as they sought to restore its *belles lettres*.

But Arabism’s tyranny had staying power, and the iconoclasts of *Shi’r* ran out of breath. This resignation played out in early 1970s Beirut, in the self-immolation of *Shi’r*’s vaunted “learned republic,” that had once married cultural and communal pluralism to political exceptionalism, irreverence, and a turbulent, pedigreed oriental Christendom, naturally predisposed to peculiarities, unlike those of the Arab hinterland.³

In the view of Kamal Jumblatt, founder of the Lebanese Progressive Socialist Party, the Beirut of *Shi’r* had a natural vocation: transmitting to the West the faintest pulsations of the East. This was the city’s immemorial calling, to “interpret the life ripples of the Mediterranean ... to the Muslim realms of sands and mosques and sun.”⁴ But there comes a time when a city and its people can no longer give. In Beirut’s chaotic clash of ideas, and later, orgies of

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violence, Adonis watched all the grand ideas emanating from Arabism, Syrianism, and Lebanese nationalism end up in bloodshed and wars of extermination. In the

mid-1980s, the writers of *Shi’r*, adopted sons of Beirut, no longer recognized the city that had once nurtured them.

And yet, *Shi’r* predicted its adoptive parent’s demise. Adonis in the late 1960s prophesied an apocalyptic end resembling Beirut of a decade or two later. He even depicted a self-immolating Beirut as harbinger of things to come elsewhere in the Middle East: Syria for instance, in these sad decades of the twenty-first century, child of an “Arab Spring” that never was. In his “Elegies for the Times at Hand,” one of his most haunting poems written in the late 1950s, Adonis spoke of tyranny, silence, destruction, and exile as renditions of the Arabs’ nightmares and realities.

Speaking of Syria’s own slide into war in 2011, Adonis indicted Arabism as a desecration of the Middle East’s diversity, surrendering its richness “to a single, one-dimensional linguistic, cultural, racial, and religious Arabism.”⁵ More nuanced in his charges against Arabism, Amin Maalouf, a Franco-Lebanese novelist, spoke of his Parisian neighbor Adonis’s Beirut cosmopolitanism as a notion

that brings a scornful smile to the lips of the ignorant ... partisans of triumphalist barbarity ... children of arrogant tribes who make battle in the name of the one and only

³ Samir Kassir, *Histoire de Beyrouth* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2003), p. 610.

⁴ Quoted by Camille Abousouan in “Présentation,” *Les Cahiers de l’Est* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1945), p. 3.

⁵ Adonis, “Risala maftuha ila ar-Ra’is Bashar al-Asad: al-insan, huquqihi wa hurriyatih, aw al-hawiya,” *as-Safir* (Beirut), June 14, 2011.

God, and who know no worse enemy than our subtle, fluid identities.⁶

Creswell's *City of Beginnings* is about those ideas of a capacious, Levantine port-city, a Beirut that once condensed the dreams of a generation of intellectuals and laymen, offered a crossroads of ideas, identities, and influences, and provided a laboratory of diversity, rebirths, and renewals—ultimately aborted—but which deserve being revisited. It is a snapshot of “another Middle East” that once was and a blueprint of a “Middle East yet to come,” seldom recalled by area specialists, students, scholars, and policy makers still smitten by Arabist uniformity.

To the student of the Middle East, Arabic literature, literary modernism, or Near Eastern intellectual history, this book is a learned, nuanced, and deeply searching guide.

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⁶ Amin Maalouf, *Les désorientés* (Paris: Grasset, 2012), p. 36.