

## BOOK REVIEWS

ROBYN CRESWELL, *City of Beginnings: Poetic Modernism in Beirut*, Translation/Transnation (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019). Pp. 272. \$39.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780691182186

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During the second half of the 20th century, Beirut became the capital of Arabic modernist poetry when a group of exiles and émigrés made the Hamra neighborhood in west Beirut their intellectual home. For the next two decades, the group's important if controversial output would significantly influence the course of Arabic poetry. Despite their importance, however, these poets have remained absent from non-Arabic studies of modernism. Even the recent transnational turn in modernism studies which managed to include non-European cities like Rio de Janeiro, Shanghai, and Buenos Aires into the study of modernism largely ignored Beirut. *City of Beginnings* attempts to do the Lebanese capital justice and put it on the map of global modernism.

In this extraordinary and original work, Robyn Creswell combines poetry criticism and intellectual history to produce one of the finest accounts of Arab modernism. He begins the book by situating the movement in its local and global contexts, exploring the various conditions that coincided to make Beirut the home of Arab modernism in the early years of the Cold War. During Lebanon's golden age, it was "an oasis in the midst of an authoritarian wasteland" (p. 4), and Beirut was a "laboratory of culture" where competing ideas were not only tolerated but encouraged (p. 23). While neighboring Arab countries were experiencing increasing state hegemony over the field of culture, Lebanon largely escaped such structure, especially during what Carolyn Gates called the "Merchant Republic." Creswell advances an intriguing argument about the shared liberal internationalism between the Arab modernists and the mercantile elites, and he attributes that environment to the unique political, cultural, and economic structures of Lebanon.

Furthermore, Creswell suggests that the Beirut modernist movement belongs to a distinct historical period, extending from the end of World War II to the beginning of the Lebanese civil war, which he calls "the period of late modernism . . . in which artistic modernism was formalized and made global" (p. 7). He insists that during this period Arab modernism was not a "period style," but rather a movement of "artistic canonization and revision" which sought to selectively preserve literary texts and organize them into a "firm if flexible canon" governed by the ideology of aesthetic autonomy (p. 7–8). Indeed, Creswell rightly sees this issue of autonomy as one "among the deepest fault lines in the cultural Cold War" (p. 8). While *al-iltizām* (the Arabic translation of Sartre's *engagement*) was the dominant model among Arab nationalist and Marxist writers for understanding the relationship between aesthetics and politics, the *Shi'r* group espoused an apolitical, art-for-art's-sake position. Creswell moves between historical accounts and close readings of poetry to spell out the meaning and significance of this position. He stresses that revealing the political implications of such seemingly apolitical stance

must take into account the literary characteristics of the movement, adding that “if the *Shi‘r* movement had not done the poetic and critical work that it did, this revelation would hardly be worth the effort” (p. 10). He, therefore, dedicates the bulk of the book, Chapters 3 through 6, to studying the literary production of the movement. This masterful combination of formalism and historicism contributes significantly to the originality of Creswell’s book.

Another testament to the book’s originality is its meticulous archival research. Recently, there has been a growing interest in investigating the relationship between Arab literati and the infamous Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), the CIA front organization that promoted anti-Communist policies. We are yet to realize the full extent of CCF influence on modern Arabic literature, but Creswell gives us the first archival account of the extensive transactions between the Arab modernists and the CCF. Scholars of Arabic literature already know that a number of *Shi‘r* members participated in a CCF-organized conference on Arabic literature in Rome in 1961, and this participation has generally been viewed with suspicion. Creswell’s account confirms these suspicions and tells of a deeper involvement. In fact, he reveals that the Rome conference was more or less an audition for Yusuf al-Khal and the *Shi‘r* group to win a CCF contract for starting a literary journal, *Adab*, in Beirut (in return for “something in the neighborhood of \$10,000 a year” (p. 47)). After extensive negotiations, however, John Hunt, the CIA officer directing the CCF office in Paris, decided against appointing al-Khal as the CCF representative in Lebanon due in part to his past SSNP affiliation, his apparent aloofness from local culture, and the fact that he was not a “Moslem” (p. 49). While sympathetically claiming that the Beirut poets were not American agents, Creswell articulates the irony that the writers affiliated with the CCF were at once opposed to the state-sponsored culture and “echoing official American propaganda and taking American money” (p. 43).

Another impressive aspect of this remarkable book is Creswell’s deployment of translation, understood as “a historical act of preservation, displacement, and transformation” (p. 14), as a method in the book. The *Shi‘r* group identified openness to translation as quintessential to its modernity. In a particularly apt move, Creswell uses various translatorial tropes—*tarjama*, *naql*, and *ta‘wīl*—to interpret the movement’s logic and inner workings. Not only were the modernists translating Western poetry—a topic explored especially in Chapters 3 and 4—they were also, as in the case of Adonis’s massive *Anthology of Arabic Poetry* for example, engaging in reconfiguring *al-turāth* (literary heritage) through “internal translation”—a term Creswell borrows from Pascal Casanova. Equally significant is Creswell’s use of translation as a backdrop to tell the story of how Beirut modernists “translated” their former militancy in the SSNP into “cultural apoliticism” in Chapter 2, as well as in his exploration of the fierce polemic about the nature of poetry generated by the modernist imitation of the French *poème en prose*.

Although Creswell succeeds, I think, in putting Beirut modernism on the map of global modernism, his preoccupation with proving the relevance of Arab modernism to global modernism seems to have prevented him on occasions from engaging more meaningfully with the Arabic critical tradition on modernism. A few important secondary works in Arabic on the modernist poets, especially Adonis, are surprisingly absent from the bibliography. In addition, some of Creswell’s readings of modernist poetry fail to engage with the established scholarship in Arabic on the topic. Although such distance gave Creswell the opportunity to provide a fresh perspective on some poems, his excellent close readings could have

been made even richer (and arguably more fruitful at times) if they were done in conversation with the Arabic scholarship on these poems. This is a missed opportunity.

That said, *City of Beginnings* is an ambitious and impressive study that will be invaluable to anyone interested in modernism's multiple legacies. The book is written in inviting, economical prose that matches Creswell's erudition. It is an original work that will certainly change the way we think about—and teach—literary production during Beirut's belle époque. Robyn Creswell has done the discipline a great service with this outstanding book.

CHAD ELIAS, *Posthumous Images: Contemporary Art and Memory Politics in Post-Civil War Lebanon* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018). Pp. 258. \$26.95 paper. ISBN: 9780822347668

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For once a story of contemporary Lebanon features not warlords, politicians, or militants, but daydreamers and creators. With few exceptions, studies of the country's cultural and artistic production have remained confined within disciplinary boundaries of literature or music. In *Posthumous Images*, Chad Elias makes a sociological claim for his analysis of two dozen globally renowned artworks dating between 1997 and 2014, from the era of Lebanese reconstruction to that of the Arab revolutions: their study highlights “the fundamental conflicts and contradictions within Lebanese society that continually undermine notions of citizenship, territorial sovereignty, and national culture” (p. 18). The artists Elias examines embody a curious paradox: they constitute the war generation, but their art defines postwar Lebanon internationally. How did a set of highly educated, globally mobile, polylingual Lebanese citizens respond to issues of incomplete peace, corrupt reconstruction, deferred national heritage and history, unclear civic obligations, and overwhelming personal and collective memory? The conjuncture of temporalities and spatialities lying at the core of their aesthetic corpus suggests that art might inspire, as Elias claims, not only recognitions of the yet “unactualized” nation (p. 167), but also strategies forward (pp. 10, 57–58). The imaginative processes and techniques they deploy could further elucidate societies undergoing similar arrested reconstruction processes in the Middle East or elsewhere. For these reasons, *Posthumous Images* is a needed book and could be read by scholars of Lebanon, the Middle East, imagination, identity, memory, postwar subjectivity, conflict resolution, and contemporary global art. Provided, that is, the reader bear in mind the book's theoretical and factual limitations.

Contrary to many studies that assume creative expressions either reflect given cultural conditions or soothe their ache, *Posthumous Images* proposes that art media pique awareness of socio-political contradictions and thus enmesh audiences in unresolved political processes. Building on Marxist art historians who have shown that “relations of force establish themselves first and foremost through symbolic practices” (pp. 28–29, 55), Elias directs readers to specific Beirut arenas where images are the grounds of identity formations, including government-issued identity documents, party-produced hostage and martyr videos, postage stamps, monuments, and the city center. Each of these