THE FAN OF SWORDS

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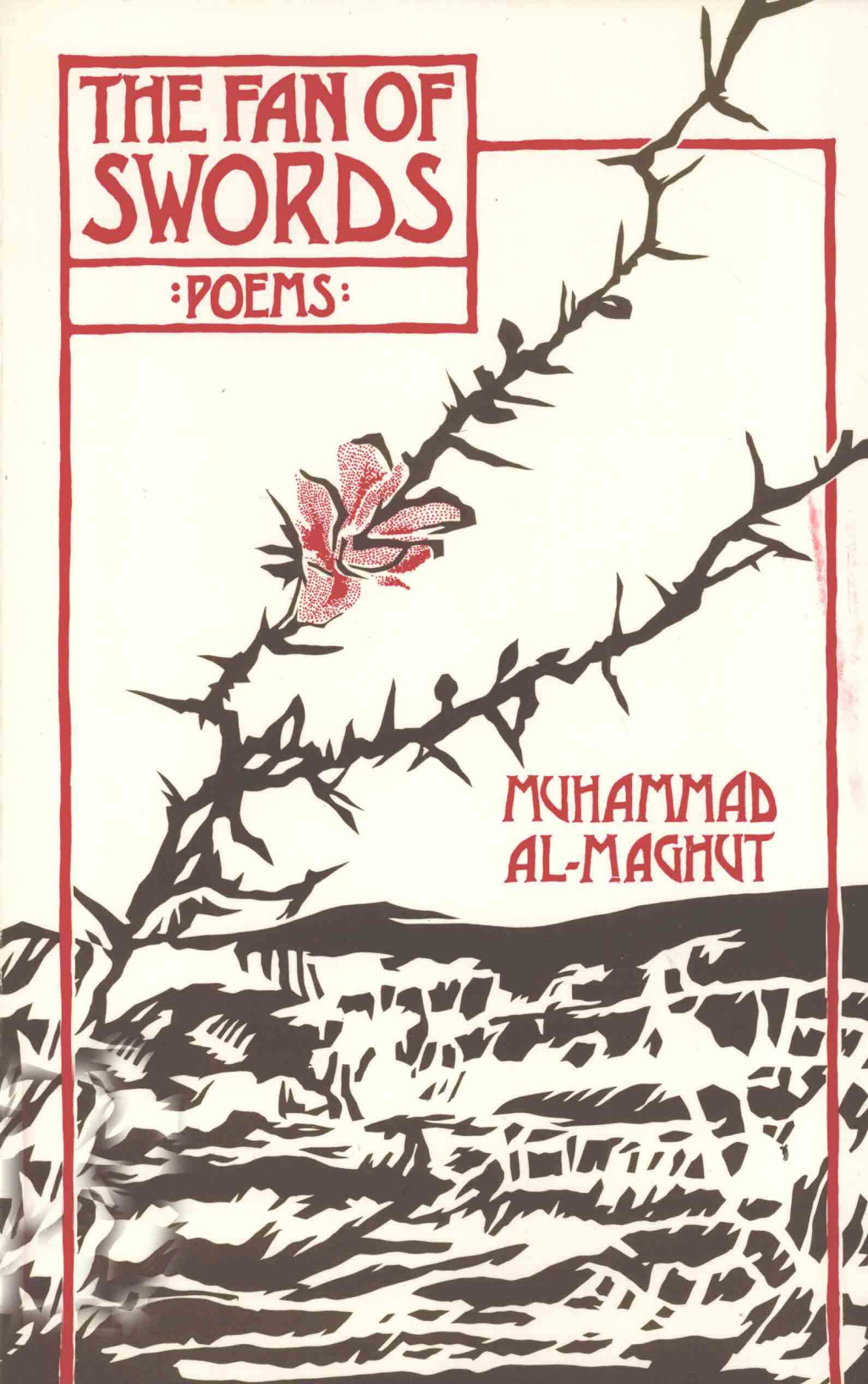

MUHAMMAD AL-MAGHUT

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The Fan of Swords

POEMS

TRANSLATED BY

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PROTA

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The poetry in this collection has been selected from the poet's three volumes:

Sorrow in the Moonlight
A Room with a Million Walls
Joy is not my Profession

This English translation is dedicated to the memory of Saniyya Salih,

"The Gentle One in a Savage Age"

for her deep humanity, her great love of freedom and her lovely poems which have enriched the output of Arab women poets in our times.

S.K.J.

FOREWORD

Muhammad al Maghut, poet and playwright, was born in 1934 in the small town of Salamiyya in Western Syria. Coming as he did from a very simple background, he was denied the luxury of a regular education, and this is one of the reasons why his achievement in writing a highly modernized poetry at quite an early age remains an artistic mystery.

Arabic poetry in the fifties, when Maghut began his poetic career, was grappling with many aesthetic and semantic issues. After its renaissance from a hackneyed and artificial poetry in the nineteenth century, it quickly passed through the neo-Classical, Romantic and Symbolist schools, compressing three hundred years or so of Western poetic experience into a few decades, in an instinctive thrust to achieve contemporaneousness with the best in world poetry. Experimentation was undertaken incessantly in all the aspects of the poem. By the beginning of the fifties, however, the aspect that had undergone the most radical transformation was that of form, which had been the most stubbornly resistant to change throughout the long history of Arabic poetry. Hitherto, Arab poetic form had been largely constricted, in formal poetry, to the balanced, symmetrical, two-hemistich, monorhymed or strophic verse of medieval times. This is not the place to go into the reasons why this form had remained so obstinately unchanging throughout the centuries, and how the pattern was at last successfully broken by the free verse experimentalists in the late forties.[1] Suffice it to say that during the fifties the issue of form evoked a loud and long-drawn-out debate between the traditionalists and the avant-garde group of poets then rising to fame in several countries of the Arab world. Free verse in Arabic broke the original symmetry and balance of the old form, and—employing, for strictly technical reasons, only seven of the inherited Arabic meters—it varied the length of the single line of poetry, and used rhyme at will. However, the fifties, when Maghut's prose poetry was first published, were marked by argument for and against *metrical* free verse. The debate over prose poetry was still to come.

Arising in the late forties in Baghdad, the free verse movement was centered, in the fifties, in Beirut, a city which had become a meeting place for the numerous budding talents seeking publishers or fleeing the coercive regimes of their own countries. The movement quickly grew in sophistication, enlarging its dimensions to include almost all aspects of the poem, and soon it came to be known as the "movement of 'modern' poetry". The tools of poetry had become extremely malleable by then, and experimentation continued briskly, backed by enlightened new concepts and robust talents. It was clear that Arabic poetry was now preparing to enter the field of world poetry, armed not only with new tools acquired mainly from Western poetic experience, but also with a tradition of Arabic poetry many centuries old, a tradition from which it was seeking liberation, but which yet lay at the roots of its continuing strength, protecting it from immature linguistic and stylistic pitfalls—though also holding it back, in some of its most important avant-garde examples, from achieving a thoroughly Modernist level of address. For although modern Arabic poetry, after its audacious revolution in form in the fifties, was able, thereafter, to achieve an equally radical revolution in diction and imagery (also unrivalled in its long history), the major poets of this period (now known as "the pioneers", all of whom were deeply versed in Classical Arabic poetry), had not, as will be explained below, been able to effect any real change in the tone and general vision of their work. As such they demonstrated only partial Modernist affinities.

Thus, when Maghut came upon the scene in the mid-fifties, he found a vigorous poetic activity in progress, an experimentation that was unselectively[2] learning new methods from outside the inherited tradition, and an atmosphere charged with controversy over problems of form, tradition and commitment. Self-taught and almost penniless, Maghut came to Beirut at the end of the fifties seeking to forge links with the avant-garde poets of his generation, and found himself welcomed by the group of poet-experimentalists who had formed themselves around the avant-garde *Shi'r* magazine, which catered exclusively to poetry. In a lecture he gave early in 1957 (the year he started the review), the founder of *Shi'r*, the Lebanese poet Yusuf al-Khal (1917-1987), had laid down what he believed to be new principles for modern Arabic

poetry.[3] Though it was regarded in its day as avant-garde, even revolutionary, the literary historian writing in the 1990s knows how far Arabic poetry has come since al-Khal gave this lecture. Between that early call to modernize poetry, which now sounds simplistic in the extreme, and the high level of modernity poetry reached in the eighties lies a period of a little over two decades—which speaks of an enormous artistic achievement within a very short span of time. It should be emphasized at this juncture that poetry in the fifties aspired to be "modern"[4] not "Modernist", and that the concept of Modernity in literature *(hadàtha)* had, as such, not yet been consciously explored.[5]

Maghut's advanced experiment at the end of the fifties, when he published his first collection, *Sorrow in the Moonlight* (1959), is enormously valuable, because it seemed to span years of fundamental experimentation and to produce a significantly modernized output, unique for that early period. It remains an enigma in the study of aesthetics. Maghut himself never voiced any loud opinion on poetry, and never participated in any of the long poetic arguments which abounded, in those days, throughout Beirut's vibrant evenings. He simply wrote a modernist poetry which transcended his times. There was indeed another poet, the Palestinian Tawfiq Sayigh (1923-1971), who had been able, early in the fifties, to achieve a modernist orientation in his poetry,[6] but he was a highly cultivated man, educated at various universities, including Harvard, and had studied the most modern Western poets in their own language. Maghut was never remotely so favored. His theoretical knowledge of poetry and poetic technique must have been scant, as was his actual experience with theories and concepts. Yet he had absorbed both the form and content of modernity as if by magic, writing a poetry which was immediately recognized as exceptional by al-Khal and the rest of the *Shi'r* group.[7]

Although the audience for poetry had now, in 1959, become more sophisticated than when Sayigh published his first collection, *Thirty Poems,* in 1953 (that collection had in fact gone almost unnoticed by most), it did not expect this kind of poetic creativity, and even the positive reviews of Maghut's early output lagged behind the actual achievement of the work.[8] It was only later, in the early seventies, that the concept of Modernity was brought to light, becoming the subject of a

long-drawn discourse. However, for all the discussion, which is still going on full force in the nineties, Modernity has remained a rather vague concept in Arabic; those writing on it attempting to accommodate it either to their own work, or to the European movement, which stemmed from cultural experiences not really fully relevant to the Arab experiment undertaken so many decades later. Either way, discussion of literary Modernity in Arabic has usually failed to reflect the true dimensions of certain Arab poetic experiments, of which Maghut's was one of the earliest.[9]

There is no space in this essay to go into the details of either European Modernism or Arab poetic Modernity.[10] Some of the major characteristics common to both are the rejection of inherited institutions, the will to destroy, the great revolution in form, diction and metaphor, the considerable lowering of tone in poetry, and the deep change in attitude and vision. These last two elements, tone and vision, have received the least attention in the discussion of Modernity in Arabic, mainly because the most vociferous promoters of Modernity have not themselves been able to modify them in their own poetry in the direction of a genuine Modernist apprehension of experience.

Sorrow in the Moonlight showed marked achievement in all these areas. A complete split with his predecessors, and a dramatic change of gear were manifest. Form was diametrically revolutionized, for, as noted above, Maghut had turned uncompromisingly to prose poetry as a medium. [11] His language was fresh and inventive, his imagery complex and unusual. Above all, a new low tone was heard in his poetry, a voice of our times, unadulterated by inherited motifs of old-fashioned heroics from Classical poetry, and undeceived by stale Romantic concepts of the role of the poet as teacher, healer and prophet. The vision here is of a poet who recognizes the full predicament of men and women in the Arab world, and who rises to meet it with the modern consciousness of suffering as part of the modern sensibility, with the full realization of the victim status to which the contemporary Arab malaise reduces the individual.

Maghut was the child of the mid-century, and had inherited its anxieties, fears, doubts and deep disappointments. Having enjoyed only a minimal formal education, he was not fortified against this malaise by

attitudes and motifs derived from Classical Arab poets whose experience was different and remote. On the other hand, he was not led, through too strong a sense of affiliation with foreign poetry, to measure the world in foreign scales. Neither in vision nor in technique did he feel complete affinity with either camp. And yet there are no weaknesses in his poetic language. This language does, in fact, exhibit strong roots, but roots which have very few affinities with the Classical contribution; he breaks emphatically from the old method of address, and from the old tone of voice—assertive, declamatory, sonorous and sometimes rhetorical—which a number of major Arab poets, even up till now, have internalized from Classical poetry. His language has a modern background, as if the poet had been reading more in good modern Arabic poetry and prose. Such a disinheritance was fortunate in the extreme, as it left the poet unhampered either by stubborn continuities emanating from a Classical education too deeply rooted in the creative resonance of the poet, or by those weak beginnings stemming from too great a dependency on foreign poetry, which have marked several modern Arab poets. In the latter case, familiarity with foreign poets, whether through direct reading or through translations, was a two-edged sword: vast new avenues of expression and ideas were opened up, but, at the same time, the command of some poets over their own language and poetic expression was considerably weakened.

Many of Maghut's famous contemporaries of the fifties were looking at the world often through European eyes; under the direct influence of Western poets, particularly T.S. Eliot, they began using the fertility myths of Adonis, Ba'l and the Phoenix, and, such foreign archetypes as Sisyphus, Prometheus, etc.[12] The poetry incorporating these myths and archetypes in Arabic was offered as a profound expression of hope in the resurgence of the Arab spirit after the Palestine catastrophe of 1948 which had plunged the whole Arab world into despair, as a reflection of renewed faith in the possibility of resurrection after symbolic death. However, Maghut's insight and prophetic vision concerning what he saw as the truth of Arab life under coercive, tyrannical and inhumane regimes, made him instinctively shun any participation in the loud chorus of voices rising at the end of the fifties to proclaim a new heroism for man. He was neither a nihilist nor was he a defeatist, but, in an era of crisis and global conspiracies that filled Arab life with turmoil and

unrelenting suffering, he realized, in true Modernist fashion, his status (and that of everybody else) as victim not hero of his times. [13]

Nor was he affected by other heroic motifs, dragged in from Classical poetry, and marked by sublime rhetoric and a self-assertive tone, which some of his major contemporaries had espoused—whether in poetry that reflected the heroic face of the poet himself speaking to his audience as prophet, teacher and redeemer (Khalil Hawi, 1925-1981; Adunis, b. 1929), or in poetry professing belief in man's enduring heroism (Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, 1926-1964). Maghut saw that heroic action was being viciously assailed by the police state that flexed its muscles everywhere, and by the armies of informers which Arab political regimes had amassed to confront the individual all over the Arab world. All the other major poets recognized this plight, and wrote denouncing it, but Maghut, feeling himself the product of the age he deplored, viewed it as a personal menace infiltrating even the most private recesses of his life. Ceaselessly and unflinchingly he declared his own terror in the face of this Arab demon:

> From whom did I inherit this terror?
> This jittery blood like mountain panther?
> Whenever I glimpse an official paper on the threshold
> or a helmet from the crack of the door
> my bones rattle,
> tears race, and my terrified blood
> jolts in all directions
> as if an eternal legion of police
> chased it from vein to vein.
>
> (from "Tattoo")

Here, Maghut, "through receptiveness, suffering, [and] passivity," helps transform the world to which he is exposed.[14]

The degree of Modernity achieved by any Arab poet will be partly decided by the concept he has of himself and his role. The work of most major poets of the fifties and sixties (Salah 'Abd al-Sabur is an exception) could not accept displacement from inherited heights or

refuse to be "the tool for asserting human lordship."[15] Such poets could not, in other words, renounce their inherited role as "heroic and liberating" masters who retained the power to judge, assess and indict. They confidently felt that "they stood outside a world of injustice and irrationality" and could act upon events and deliver the world from evil. As such they exhibited what Stephen Spender calls "the Voltairean I", which is not, in his view, a Modernist attitude. The Moderns, on the other hand, feel that they are acted upon by events; "by allowing their sensibility to be acted upon by the modern experience as suffering, . . . [they] will produce, partly as the result of unconscious processes, and partly through the exercise of critical consciousness, the idioms and forms of new art."[16]

Catering to no fashions, Maghut's use of imagery and choice of vocabulary are uniquely his. His images seem, at first glance, to be easily accessible, since many of them reject the traditionally sanctioned "nobler" sources of metaphore in Arabic poetry, but stem from familiar sights and objects of daily life. It is important to realize, however, that such images are being used in the Arabic poetic medium for the *first time,* and therefore remain highly unfamiliar as *poetic* images. They stand at considerable contrast to the very rarified and difficult images which have abounded in the Arabic poetry of the sixties and since, where the relationship between the image and its object is remote and often poses a formidable obstacle to understanding. Compared with these complex, luminous, strange and highly inventive images, Maghut's often seem mundane, slangy and lackluster: "I have been counting my teeth like a bank clerk"; "as the orphan sleeps on the pavement"; "We used to dream of the desert, as a priest dreams of love-making"; "with the bodice embroidered like clusters of huts"; "hurrying, like a lover to his rendezvous"; "the streets I cross reject my steps, like one rejects a bitter brew"; "his beak is worn like a cobbler's thumb"; "soiled, like the napkin of waiters"; "alone like a coachman"; "crouching under wilted boxthorn, like a robber". Such sensuous images give abstract meaning a garb of concreteness. Their Modernist qualities lie not only in their freshness and unfamiliarity as images in poetry, but also in the derisive and negative quality which many of them contain. Always crisp and direct, they are occasionally difficult, and often ironic, witty and hard. Never before in Arabic poetry, except in the Umayyad period

(661-750), have we had so many comic images strung, one after the other, in a single poem (the last four above, for example, are only some of the many in "The Fan of Swords"). The Umayyads normally used this device to satirize other individual poets. Maghut used them to satirize a whole age.[17] Most of his images create an unexpected, surprising effect. However, the poet's comic use of images is only one of his tools. Many of his other images are imbued with a sense of anguish.

Maghut's predilection for a profusion of similes does not indicate weak control over his tools, but rather his desire to give a direct and precise comparison for the objects he describes. The simile has gained a bad reputation in modern Arabic poetic criticism, and, as a result, some poets, such as Hawi, for example, use it very sparingly, if at all. But Maghut, who hardly ever paid any attention to theories, went instinctively to the simile, and often, as in "The Fan of Swords", with its clusters of similes, employed it with an impressive cumulative effect. In its definition of the simile, *The Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* points out the simile's logical nature, and other writers comment on the "unpretentiousness" and "simplicity" of similes, and how, when used in profusion, "the total result is more than the mere sum of them"[18] For, when poets want to "produce a particularly striking effect, they may pile up their similes."[19] Maghut's crucial message of freedom abhors semantic obliquities; it embodies its own logic within an impulsive aesthetic outpouring, and his pervasive, almost ritualistic use of these clusters of similes, whenever the intended message of the poem is heightened, guarantees both complete lucidity and high emotional and aesthetic appeal.

Satirizing the age is Maghut's prevailing concern, and he attacks it with all the tools of the poet. The comic representation of this poet's quarrel with his epoch does not mean that the actual defeat of will power and political wisdom did not fill him with anguish. His famous poem, "The Fan of Swords" is an agonized expression of sorrow in the face of the defeat of the Arabs in the 1967 June War with Israel. Full of comic images and bitter sarcasm, it is, nevertheless, a very explicit confession of the shattering of all hope and the breakdown of possibilities. In this poem, he resorts to the use of numerous images to accentuate his feeling of rejection and horror, but mainly in the comic mode. In other poems, he

resorts to a simple but more serious tone to release his scream of protest and resignation:

Alright, you damned epoch!
You have defeated me!
But in all this beaten land
I can find no proper hill
on which to plant my banner of surrender.

(From "The Plateau")

This accords with what George Rylands once said about poetry being "most simple when most terrible."[20]

There is a great longing in Maghut's poetry for peace and freedom, but it is always a foiled yearning:

. . . when I dreamt of freedom
spears surrounded my neck
like morning's halo.

(From "The Orphan")

However, a yearning away, eternally hopeless in his poetry, from urban squalor and complicity to the virgin simplicity and innocence of desert and village does not imply any real pastoral involvement in Maghut's poetry. He wrote from the very heart of an urban order where city alleys, side pavements, hotels, cafés and thwarted inhabitants form a solid background to his poetry. And it is in the middle of this intense experience with city sordidness that those yearnings for innocence suddenly reappear, unannounced, in his poetry, briefly interrupting the tirade of attack on an order he detests. This is not the simplistic nostalgia of the Romantics, but a scream of terror and a denunciation of a world besieged by negative forces, a fallen world, completely suspect and abounding with the most venomous intentions against the freedom of the individual:

Forget me, Father, return to your plough,

your sad songs.
I've been compromised, Father,
everything has now become as impossible
for me, as stopping a hemorrhage
with fingers.

(From "Letter to My Village")

In these sordid urban surroundings, a siege situation is created where the poet is always a loner, a wanderer and a fugitive, eternally homeless and deprived, and the city, like society itself, a blind alley that leads nowhere:

I long to complain about dust and multitudes,
... ...
to complain to you about the pavement—
which, as soon as I began my story
slithered away like a snake, leaving me bereft,
feet dangling in the air like a hanged man's.
That's why, Grandfather I came to you
flapping my arms like a bat,
not knowing where to spend the coming night
or any night.

(From "At Night")

Maghut is one of the earliest contemporary voices to detect the hopeless situation of an Arab world fallen victim to internal and external coercion. His work depicts the individual as defenseless in this world, as hopelessly besieged by the forces of contemporary evil, his dignity assailed, his rights subverted. Yet this individual, struggling in the throes of a deadly conspiracy against his happiness and integrity, still strives to rise and scream in the face of evil. We have translated these selections in solidarity with the ennobling message in Muhammad al-Maghut's poetry, and hope that the spark will touch many hearts. I dedicate the translated work to Saniyya Saleh, the poet's late wife. A poet in her own right, she stood by the man she loved during his days of hiding from

the political police, and when he chose exile in the Gulf, away from the suffocating political enclave of Damascus. At the same time, Saniyya Saleh had to wage the additional battle of an enlightened woman living in a world of darkness.

Salma Khadra Jayyusi, Editor
Director of P.R.O.T.A.

[1] For a full discussion of the free verse movement in modern Arabic poetry, see Salma Khadra Jayyusi, *Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry,* Leiden: 1977, Vol.II, pp. 557-560 and 605-626.

[2] The unselective method which poets followed in their choice of concepts and manners of writing has helped explore the latent diversity and immense possibilities of Arabic poetry, which the rigid rules of the old poetry had kept inaccessible. Some poets read exclusively in French, some exclusively in English, and many poets read all the world poetry they could lay hands on, from Tagore to Lorca, in translation. Arabic poetry was an open field for discovery, acquisition and the grafting on of methods of all kinds.

[3] This lecture gave a coherent view of how modern poetry in Arabic should in al-Khal's view be, without, however, touching much on any of the Modernist criteria in literature. The major propositions in this lecture, which was quite important for its time, were that poetry should be the expression of a lived experience, that the structure of the poem must be based on the unity of experience and that its first objective should be man, that a change must be made from the old diction which had exhausted its vitality, that Arabic metrics must be developed to suit the new context, that the poet should use living images, not simple similes and metaphors, and that these images "should present a challenge to logic." It is only this last stipulation that can be regarded as an initial shift towards a Modernist point of view. For a fuller discussion of this lecture, see *Trends and Movements,* Vol.II, pp.570-572.

[4] See the section on "Traditional and Modern" in *Trends and Movements,* Vol.II, pp. 594-599.

[5] See my chapter, "Modernist Poetry in Arabic", in *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature,* Vol.IV, ed. M.M. Badawi, now in press at Cambridge University Press.

[6] See *ibid.,* and, for a longer discussion of Sayigh's poetry, see the introduction to my *Modern Palestinian Literature, an Anthology,* in press at Columbia University Press (projected date of publication: 1992).

[7] His poetry was read in one of the famous *Shi'r* Thursday evenings, without his name being declared. The audience thought the poetry to be Baudelaire's or Rimbaud's in translation.. See Saniyya Saleh's preface to Maghut's *Collected Works,* Beirut, 2nd ed., 1981, pp. 9-10.

[8] See, for example, Khalida Sa'id's review of *Sorrow in the Moonlight,* in her collection of critical essays, *Search for Roots,* Beirut, 1960, pp. 71-80. Quite impressive for its time, it nevertheless did not offer an adequate interpretation to Maghut's crucial experiment.

[9] This furnishes an interesting example of the chasm between theory and practice in modern Arabic poetics. Aside from the experiments of Tawfiq Sayigh and Maghut, whose real Modernist achievement was not immediately recognized, the Modernist experiment of Salah 'Abd al-Sabur (1931-1981), Egypt's foremost poet since the fifties, was misunderstood not only in the sixties, when he began to gain prominence, but even in the eighties. See the deficient assessment which Adunis, probably the most vociferous contemporary champion of his own kind of Modernity, makes of Sabur's work immediately after the latter's death, "The Poetics of Harmony", in *The Politics of Poetry,* Beirut, 1985, pp. 131-133.

[10] See S.K. Jayyusi's chapter, "Modernist Poetry in Arabic", the introductory section.

[11] It is interesting to see how criticism in the late fifties regarded Maghut's experiment with prose poetry. In her review of his first collection, *op.cit.* (which first appeared in *Shi'r,* No. 11, 1959), Khalida Said, says that most readers, although showing interest in Maghut's collection, did not regard "the content of this collection as poetry . . . . and refuse to grant it the name of poetry". However, the writer herself accepts it as such. See p. 71. She then says that "the elements of the old poetry were meter and rhyme. They were the vessel which held the poetic content. Some modern poets . . . have broken this vessel and poetry poured alive from their hands," p.72. At that early stage, the linkage of good prose poetry with Modernity was premature in Arab poetic criticism. The controversy was simply about its "legitimacy" as poetry.

[12] It was the Iraqi poet Badr Shakir al-Sayyab who wrote the first major poem using archetypal images from Arab history. This was his poem "In the Arab Maghreb", which he published in 1956. In the early sixties other poets picked up the trend, and Adunis wrote his poem on the "Eagle of Quraish", making great use of mythical time and the archetypal potential from Arab history. For "Myth and Archetype" in modern Arabic poetry, see *Trends and Movements,* Vol.II, pp. 720-747.

[13] Within a few years, the use of these myths and foreign archetypes had reached saturation point and by the beginning of the sixties aesthetic fatigue had set in. The Phoenician myths then disappeared completely from the work of the major poets, which reflects the borrowed origin of their use.

[14] See Stephen Spender, "Moderns and Contemporaries", in *The Idea of the Modern,* ed. Irving Howe, New York, 1967, pp. 43-44.

[15] Richard Sheppard, "The Crisis of Language" in *Modernism 1890-1930,* ed. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, London, Penguin Books, new ed., 1987, p. 333.

[16] Spender, *loc.cit.*