In order to appreciate the disparity of forces behind contemporary Arabic poetry, it is interesting to focus on the contrasts between two pioneering modernists, Adonis ('Alī Aḥmad Sa'īd) and Muḥammad al-Māghūt. The juxtaposition may be unexpected, given the critical status accorded Adonis and the slighter body of criticism which al-Māghūt (better known, perhaps, as a playwright and screenwriter) has attracted as a poet. Nevertheless, I submit that the latter has been somewhat neglected, and that such a study proves rewarding from several viewpoints. The work of these two Syrian born poets, both self-exiled in Lebanon for long periods since the mid-fifties, represents two highly individual voices in modern Arabic poetry, subject to different influences, possessing different artistic aims, and expressing itself in different poetic forms and convictions about poetic language. To provide a focus for discussion of these contrasts, particular reference will be made to Adonis's "The Crow's Feather" and al-Māghūt's "When the Words Burn," which appear in full English translation below.

In voice and tone, al-Māghūt's wry projection of the poet contrasts dramatically with that of Adonis, who habitually adopts the stance of poet-prophet and educator of the people. Adonis's pronouncements are delivered in a voice of oracular authority, and his rebellious and visionary persona is surrounded and distanced by mythological overtones. As Kamāl Abū-Deeb has observed, the "personal I" of Adonis's early work is supplanted by "the impersonal, cultural 'I' embodying a multiplicity of forces, dreams, hallucinations, and the will to transcend the stagnation and morbidity of culture". This can be apprehended in a brief excerpt from "A Vision":

And I saw—the clouds were a throat;  
the waters, walls of flame;  
I saw a sticky yellow thread—  
a thread of history, that clung to me

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1 This, and subsequent poems referred to by Adonis, can be found in his Dīwān, Beirut: Dār al-ʿAwdah 1971.
2 This, and subsequent poems referred to by al-Māghūt, can be found in his Dīwān Beirut: Dār al-ʿAwdah 1981. The version of "When the Words Burn" translated here is from Majallat Shiʿr, 2, Nos. 7-8 (1958), 40-43.
from a hand that has inherited a sex of dolls,
an ancestry of rags.
It chews, knots, and loosens my days.
I entered the world in the womb of waters and virginity of trees
I saw trees to tempt me,
I saw rooms between their branches,
beds and windows, set to resist me...⁴

Al-Māghūt, on the other hand, establishes a playful anti-hero as spokesman for his poems, the antithesis of the poet-prophet. Unusual in modern Arabic poetry, this roguish speaker compromises the figure of the poet—who, with relatively few exceptions since Abū Nuwās and al-Hutay'ā, has retained a sober view of his artistic mission, little disturbed by self-directed irony. Parallel figures must, indeed, be found in the work of Western poets. Self-educated, al-Māghūt is familiar with some foreign literatures in translation, although less versed in Western poetic movements than is the erudite Adonis. However, if al-Māghūt could be said to subscribe to any particular poetic theory, it would undoubtedly have much in common with the American imagist poet William Carlos Williams' definition of the poetic task. In his long poem Paterson, Williams attempted

...to find an image large enough to embody the whole knowable world about me ... to write about the people close about me ... to the whites of their eyes, to their very smells.
That is the poet's business. Not to talk in vague categories but to write particularly, as a physician works, upon a patient, upon the thing before him, in the particular to discover the universal.⁵

In keeping with this realistic approach, al-Māghūt's speaker is no ivory-tower alter-ego, but a denizen of the streets, an artist of uncommon and incorrigibly low tastes who is guilty of a panoply of misdemeanours, and is an able witness to those of his neighbours. Equally vociferous in refusing to sublimate his desires or to accept starvation and destruction as a way of life, he is a rebel in quite another vein than, for instance, Adonis's Mihyār the Damascene. In "Autumn of Masks" he perceives himself as a monkey "plucking raw fruits / to pelt on the heads of passersby, / jumping from branch to branch / tittering and clapping". Even in the depths of bitterness he retains his offbeat sense of humour, which often runs black ("I think I talk more than all the other dead")⁶ and can be devastating in its indictment of society: "Time has defeated

⁴ All quotations and titles of poetry are the author's translations.
⁶ "A Face Between Two Shoes".