If we could imagine dissonance become man—and what else is man?—this dissonance, to be able to live, would need a splendid illusion that would cover dissonance with a veil of beauty.

Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*

Of all modern Arab poets, Tawfiq Sayigh is the most uncompromising in his formalistic experimentation, and of all modern Arab poets, his recourse to mythology, whether Classical or Middle Eastern, is the scantiest. Nevertheless, when he appropriates a mythopoeisis, he elicits wonder. His prose poem “A Few Questions I Pose to the Unicorn,” described by J.I. Jabra and I. Boullata as “the strangest poem in Arabic literature,” is exemplary in its cross-cultural richness. On the one hand, it carries a philosophical vision of the poetic self, conceived in modern Arabic letters as the prototype of the intellectual as the bardic redeemer from decadence; and on the other hand, it exhibits a polyphony that dissonantly intones both pathos and satire.¹

This study contends that while Nietzsche furnished Sayigh with the ontological basis of his philosophic vision, Yeats as a tragi-comedian proffered him a viable and resilient aesthetic model that could unite the apocalyptic theme of communal redemption with questions about the triad of heroism/action/knowledge, while concomitantly allowing these lofty themes to be interposed with a muffled but biting irony. Sayigh studied Nietzsche and Yeats at Oxford University in the academic year 1953-1954.² Like Nietzsche’s works, Sayigh’s poem dramatizes the necessity of a bipolar unity of opposites; like Yeats, he expresses this particular philosophical vision of renewal through an out-moded bestiary.


² The only available biography of Sayigh is written by Maḥmūd Shurayḥ [Mahmoud Shureih], *Tawfiq Sayigh: Sirat Shā’ir wa Manfū* (London: Riad El-Rayyes Books, 1989).
Sayigh’s interest in Nietzsche and Yeats is certainly partial and limited, yet Sayigh was a sensitive reader who understood the relevance of Nietzschean views and Yeatsian aesthetics to the precarious circumstances of a Palestinian intellectual who lived in the Diaspora and who embraced the enterprise of creating a national literature. The aim of this study is to cast a searchlight on Sayigh’s mythopoesis, to explore its Nietzschean and Yeatsian leitmotifs; the ultimate hope of the analysis, however, is to stimulate a significant change in Sayigh’s fluctuating reception. Before casting such a light, a few words on Sayigh’s reception in the Arab world are in order.

Sayigh’s first two books of poetry, Thirty Poems (1954) and The Poem K (1960), were favourably reviewed; their rebellious tones and radical experimentations with free verse were consistently noted and admired. In 1962 Sayigh established in Beirut Hiwār, a journal devoted to general culture and sponsored by the Paris-based Congress for Cultural Freedom. However, in 1966 The New York Times revealed that the C.I.A. was indirectly subsidizing the Congress for Cultural Freedom. Consequently, Hiwār was banned from entering many Arab countries, and Sayigh, who did not know of the clandestine C.I.A. funding, was severely attacked in the press. In 1967 Sayigh closed the journal, an event that left permanent emotional scars. Although Sayigh died in 1971, the ramifications of the Hiwār affair still linger on, and they engender a suspicious, at times hostile, attitude toward his work. Nevertheless, even when politics is put aside and sympathetic attention is given to his poetry, its highly westernized aesthetics proves

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3 In his 1954 introduction to Sayigh’s Thalāthūn Qaṣīda, Sa‘īd Āql wrote: “This [Sayigh] restless youth, with wrathful eyes, has the most daring pen. He has undertaken a marvellous task; he takes foreign thoughts and clothes them in unique garments which, perhaps, are still being woven in Paris by intrepidity’s fancy.” See: “Muqaddimat Sa‘īd Āql,” reprinted in Tawfīq Sayigh, Al-A'māl Al-Kamila (London: Riad El-Rayyes Books, 1990) 19. Moreover, in an interview with Sawt al-Mar’a Nov.-Dec. 1954, Sa‘īd Taqi al-Dīn stated: “Consider a book like Thalāthūn Qaṣīda, written by a young man of the name Tawfiq Sayigh; this book knocked me out. Who has read it? Who has written about it? If we are willing to abolish Pasharchy (al-bashawiyyya) in literature... and burn some dry wood and ring some bells for the Tawfīq Sayighs who show up, our standards will begin to ameliorate.” As quoted in Shurayh, Tawfīq Sayigh 105. Translations of all quotations are mine.

4 As to the reception of Al-Qaṣīda K, the book review section of Al-Nahār 1 Oct. 1960, stated that “since the publication of Thalāthūn Qaṣīda, six years ago, this book of poetry is the second most daring masterstroke which Tawfīq Sayigh has shown to modern Arabic poetry.” And about Al Qaṣīda K Salmā Khadrā Jayyūsī wrote in Shi‘r 16 (Autumn, 1960) that “the poetry of Tawfīq Sayigh is sui generis. No imitation can match it.” As quoted in Shurayh, Tawfīq Sayigh 106.

5 For a detailed account of the Hiwār affair in Arabic see: Shurayh, Tawfīq Sayigh 115-165; in English see: Boullata, “The Beleaguered Unicorn” 69-71.