



Adonis (1930-)

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Poet; Essayist.

Active 1960- in Lebanon; Syria

There are few writers whose names happen to signify their worldview and character as much as the Syrian poet and intellectual ‘Ali Ahmad Said Esber. He adopted the name Adonis at the age of seventeen and has ever since been widely known by it. Adonis was born in 1930 in the village of Qassabin in the district of Latakia in Northern Syria to an Alawite family. He struggled to get his poems published under his original name, and therefore opted for Adonis, which allowed him to publish in magazines. Another early milestone in his life was when he recited his poetry to the then Syrian President Shukri al-Kuwatli (1955-1958), who subsequently helped him to secure scholarships. Adonis’s life and vision are reflected in his copious contributions to Arabic poetry, literary life and politics and culture. His change of name suggests that there is hardly anything fixed to him, and his political views came to affirm freedom as the essence of creativity – creativity and political positions as not bound by primordial affiliations. His most notable early political association was with the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party (SSNP) and its leader Antun Saadeh. Saadeh advocated a pan-Arab unity with Syria at its heart, but was executed in 1949 for an alleged coup against the Lebanese government. Adonis’s membership in the party landed him in jail for a year in 1955. He moved to Lebanon in 1956, where he experienced his second (cultural) birth and became a pillar of culture in the country, which plunged into an intractable civil war between 1975 and 1990. In 1980, Adonis went to live in Paris where he experienced his “international birth”, as he put it (Adonis, 2003).

These experiences, from his peasant roots onwards, alongside his direct political engagement with an active party and his imprisonment gave him an early view of the modern Arab world as abounding with political challenges, contradictions and dilemmas. His literary outlook translates such dilemmas in a way that can be said to project his almost existential estrangement from the political dynamics of the Arab scene. At the same time, it has afforded him distinct cultural and philosophical positions towards radical change and creativity, which he has never tired of advocating. This could have scarcely happened without his wide learning of the Arabic literary tradition, which equipped him with a panoramic view of its qualities and its uses through the centuries. In 1957, he aimed to usher in a new paradigm in Arabic poetry through the journal *Sh‘ir* (*Majallat Sh‘ir*) which he founded with the Syrian poet Yusuf al-Khal (1917-1987). Adonis meant for *Sh‘ir* to signify a new beginning for Arabic poetry, one inspired by the modernist strands in the Arabic tradition and at the same time open to other poetic traditions as well. This beginning explores the fluid dynamism of the human subject in congruity with ideas about modernity as an open project of human exploration. His poetry is thus unmistakably modernist in its form and content. It restlessly drives towards modes of expression and revelation spun from within the interiority of language and its possibilities for creativity, and he explored it and used it to

the extreme, even when only for its own sake. Adonis does not view modernity in Arabic poetry as being of this age. In his view, there has always been modernity in the Arabic tradition — and it is the spirit of this modernity that he set out to resuscitate in the modern period, with himself as the torchbearer of this process.

To this end, Adonis's singular concern has been with the Arabic tradition and the question of modernity and how these forces — tradition and modernity — operate in Arab life. In three significant volumes published between 1974 and 1978, *al-Thabit wa 'l-Mutahawwil (The Fixed and the Changing [in Arabic Culture])*, Adonis decried the persistence of tradition which he saw as an ossified and unproductive form in modern Arabic life, which impedes inclusive, creative and confident modern attitudes and methods. In particular, he saw Arab political and literary discourses as being afflicted with orthodox attitudes, which are divested of the dynamism of the past and its evolving nature. This work is superbly summarised in lectures he delivered at the Collège de France in 1984 in the form of a manifesto called *Arab Poetics*, which have been published as an *Introduction to Arabic Poetics*.

Adonis explains that the early Caliphs did not tolerate dissent and attempted to institute cultural homogeneity to facilitate their rule. This control runs counter to the Quranic ethos and certain notable strands within the literary tradition. These strands include subversive and innovative elements that ensured vibrancy and vitality within the medieval culture of the Arab and Islamic world. Adonis reconstructs Arabic culture as follows:

Those in power designated everyone who did not think according to the culture of the caliphate as 'the people of innovation' (*ahl al-ihdāth*), excluding them with this indictment of heresy from their Islamic affiliation. This explains how the terms *ihdāth* (innovation) and *muhdath* (modern, new), used to characterize the poetry which violated the ancient poetic principles, came originally from the religious lexicon. Consequently we can see that the modern in poetry appeared to the ruling establishment as a political or intellectual attack on the culture of the regime and a rejection of the idealized standards of the ancient, and how, therefore, in Arab life the poetic has always been mixed up with the political and the religious, and indeed continues to be so. (Adonis, 1990, p.76)

Adonis pits the traditionalists against the modernists in dichotomous terms. The modernists refused to be bound by established old norms from pre-Islamic times where oral poetic traditions reigned at the expense of a more introspective and existential modes of expression, expressing timeless and universal truths. Those who were truly modern in poetry, according to Adonis, were poetic figures such as Abū Nuwās (756-814) and Abū Tammām (788-845), and thinkers such as Ibn al-Rāwandī (d.910), al-Rāzī (d.1210), and the visionary mystics, who highlighted new things and added to what existed before rather than being bound by the past. For Adonis, modernity entails a constant search within an aesthetic of revelation and openness that transcends any fixed roots and remains open to conflict and tension. However, it is the earlier norms of orthodoxy that continue to dominate the Arab world of today, sidestepping the modernist trends that the aforementioned poets and thinkers set in motion. For Adonis, this stagnation in interpretation and creation was reinforced during the 19th century within the context of what is commonly known as the period of Arab renaissance or awakening. Adonis contends, rather unconventionally and controversially, that the poetic and intellectual figures of this period, such as Mahmoud Sāmī al-Bārūdī (1839-1904) and Ahmad Shawqī (1882-1932) did not tap into these earlier modernist streaks in Arabic poetry to be inspired by them, but, "instead, they began to imitate modern Western poetry" (Adonis, 1990, p.79). Such imitation is narrowly selective and misapplied, in the sense that "modernity in Arab society has continued to be something imported from abroad, a modernity which adopts the new things but not the intellectual attitude and method which produced them, whereas true modernity is a way of seeing before it is production" (ibid, p.79).

Adonis situates the crisis of modernity in the Arab world in an historically ideological misuse of language, which resulted in distorted thought. Adonis writes, “it is as if language ‘created’ the Arabs, through instinct in the *Jāhiliyya* [the pre-Islamic time], revelation in the prophecy, and reason in Islam[...] modernity is the problem of Arab thought in its dialogue with itself and with the history of knowledge in the Arab tradition [...] we must first re-examine the structures of Arab thought” (ibid, p.82-83). This led to religion, politics and poetry being indelibly bound together, as the scriptural textual heritage acquired unquestioned oral sacredness. It shunned influences from other cultures and creative tendencies, which the Arabs once embodied most magnanimously in Andalucía. The radical diagnosis of an entrenched Arab crisis allowed Adonis to put himself forward as a pioneer of poetic modernity with roots in the Arabic tradition.

In this respect, Adonis views Western modernity and progress as primarily scientific; hence the linear logic of science must be accepted and adopted. For poetry, however, the idea of progress does not apply to science. Poetry “exists on a different level nearer to man and more expressive of the inwardness of his being” (ibid, p.94). This inwardness is timeless. Therefore, the concept of time is crucial in Adonis’s philosophy of poetry. Time is what the exploration of what has existed and what exists can reveal, and it is not moored to fixed paradigms that cannot be unraveled. Adonis is a master of ambiguous, and at times sublime, turns and imagistic extravaganzas. Much of his poetry is not anchored in a particular time and place. It is steeped in legendary references, mystical, magical and non-rational elements, aiming to reveal what he calls “the mysterious regions of the human soul” (ibid). Adonis is an explorer of human desires and ambiguities as facilitated through language, so as to “comprehend human existence as a whole” (ibid). He accords such a vital significance to poetry and states, “when there is no poetry in a period of history, there is no true human dimension”. Here, poetry is “an innate quality [...] not a stage in the history of human consciousness but a constituent of this consciousness” (ibid, 97). In this view, poetry is a guide to human maturity, maturity as underpinned by an existential introspective questioning.

Adonis’s almost metaphysical faith in poetry is demonstrated in more than twenty volumes of poema and critical works which engage with the Arabic tradition and poetry in general. His extraordinary intellectual odyssey has tried to instill poetic modernity in Arab life by unlocking the shackles of orthodoxy and realizing the potential for innovation. He has pursued such modernity with persistent and restless doggedness. He provokes thought through powerful linguistic inventiveness that seems baffling, particularly for people with inadequate education in the tradition and its vast intricacies. As Edward Said wrote of him, “he has almost single-handedly been challenging the persistence of what he regards as the ossified, tradition-bound Arab-Islamic heritage, stuck not only in the past but in rigid and authoritarian rereading of that past” (Said, p.379). It is perhaps of little wonder that Adonis is both subversive and grand in his tone. Embedded within his works is the theme of new cultural and political beginnings for the Arab world, as represented in titles such as *A Beginning for the Ends of the Century: Pamphlets towards a New Arabic Culture* (1980) and *The Language of Beginnings* (1989). In these works, Adonis calls for new cultural beginnings for the Arab world, with ideals of freedom and innovation at its heart, and advocates moving away from religious and patriarchal authorities. In one of his most noted works of poetry, namely *Aghānī Mihiyār al-Dimashqī* (Songs of Mihyar: The Damascene), he calls his collection after the rebellious, originally Persian, poet Mihiyār al-Dulaymi (d.1037). The latter exhibited hostility in his poetry to the revered companions of the Prophet, and indeed showed no respect to any authority, be it poetic, religious, political or social. In the poetry of Adonis, there is an emphasis on human agency with poetry representing its most important emblems within its infinite expressive possibilities.

From a dialogue

Neither God nor the Devil do I choose
Each is a wall
Each closes my eyes for me—
Can I exchange one wall for another
And my confusion is the confusion of an enlightened one
The confusion of one who knows all things...

The language of sin

I burn my heritage; I proclaim my land is virgin,
And there are no graves in my youth
I walk over God and the Devil
My way is more distant than the ways
Of God and the Devil—
I pass through my book
Through the procession of the dazzling storm
Through the procession of the green storm
I shout, there is no heaven, there is no falling after me
And I erase the language of sin... (my trans. 1963, p.177-178).

Adonis's rebelliousness fits the description of the "the metaphysical rebel", as portrayed by the French existentialist writer Albert Camus. He is "certainly not an atheist, as one might think him, but inevitably he is a blasphemer [...] human rebellion ends in metaphysical revolution" (Camus, *The Rebel*, 1951, p.30-31). The poems affirm the capacity of the human subject to take part in the making of its own fate; they signal rebellion against any form of authority. In particular, they substitute edicts prescribed by religion with secular human acts that transcend good and evil. Such poems that embody and celebrate modernist thought elevate human agency as the bringer of change and ceaseless creativity. No fixed notion of authority, whether it is of divine origin or of a political nature, can limit the poet, whose very vocation entails rebellion, creativity and questioning, aspirations which Adonis's theoretical as well as poetic creations reiterate and enact.

Within the context of the Arab revolutions which started in Tunisia in 2011, Adonis has been a vocal critic. He suggests that religion should not be used to create new political realities and cover oppressive authorities. A real revolution has to be cultural as well as political. Without such a revolution, the Arab world risks indulging in practices that reproduce old patriarchal structures and religious orthodoxies (Adonis, 2011). Given such views, one could argue that Adonis purports to be apolitical in his analysis. However, it is more appropriate to see him as advocating an ideal vision for the Arab world, which sidesteps the present realities and their imperatives, taking into account the fact that change is often gradual, even if harnessed by revolutions. In addition, his poetry tends to a rigidity that escapes perceptible aesthetic cohesion and integrity beyond its own hermetic and inward references. Other great poets within the literary Arab landscape, most prominently the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish (1942-2008), have shown that poetry can – and should – be of this world, of which politics is an indispensable part. It is earth-bound in the most expansive sense of the term, and it is this distinctive capacity for lyrical embodiment and revelation that endows it with power and resonant values. Yet Adonis' inclusive view of modernity as facilitated by cultural freedom, and his profound understanding of the traditions on which it is based, has given his poetry not only its unique flavor, but also a profound aesthetic impact. It is perhaps no exaggeration to suggest that Adonis's contribution to contemporary Arabic letters world has been unrivalled.

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