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Adonis' Poetics of Vision and Modernity

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ADONIS' POETICS OF VISION AND CREATIVITY

BY

RASHA ARABI

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Middle Eastern Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The Graduate Center,

The City University of New York

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ABSTRACT

ADONIS' POETICS OF VISION AND CREATIVITY

By

Rasha Arabi

The Syrian poet and cultural critic Ali Ahmad Said (1930 -) (Adonis) is one of the most influential Arab poets of the 20th century. His poetry represents a radical rupture with what was established before. Adonis' poetry is associated with innovation and revolution, and his language is characterized by mysticism and hermeticism. While living in Beirut, he co-founded the influential literary journal *Shi'r* (1956-63) with the Lebanese poet Yusuf al-Khal (1917-1987), and a few years later he founded his own journal, *Mawaqif* (1968-1998). Both journals served as a prominent literary platform for cultural modernity and radical criticism of the Arab heritage and tradition. Adonis' literary and theoretical oeuvres have been the subject of a number of discussions and debates within the Arab intellectual circle and beyond.

This paper, is chiefly concerned with Adonis' notion of the poetic vision that expresses itself in two dimensions, as a matter of form and content. The formal expression of vision is artistic, to "make it new," as Ezra Pound said: poetry must take new forms and use new techniques to reflect the now-ness of vision; its ability to present the world as it is right now. When a poet is being visionary, he or she cannot use old forms and motifs, because this would be to substitute the lived experience of the poet for purely literary conventions.

The notion of *vision* that manifests itself as a poetic content is essentially concerned with the poet's insight and not his technique. Such poetic insight finds resonance in Sufist and Surrealist pronouncements; it seeks meaning in other metaphysical realities. Hence, the *content* of vision is the mystical, the otherworldly. This is more like William Blake's view of vision: poetry must describe the truth of everything that evades and escapes the senses. A poet who is visionary cannot simply write poems about everyday life, because the poet sees more than the everyday person. I suggest that these two dimensions are potentially in tension. They are not, exactly, saying the same thing. However, I attempt to investigate how Adonis adapts and develops this interesting marriage of the two kinds of vision in his poetics.

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INTRODUCTION

We travel upon the Ark, in mud and rain,
Our oars promises from God.
We live—and the rest of Humanity dies.
We travel upon the waves, fastening
Our lives to the ropes of corpses filling the skies.
But between Heaven and us is an opening,
A porthole for a supplication.

"Why, Lord, have you saved us alone
From among all the people and creatures?
And where are you casting us now?
To your other Land, to our First Home?
Into the leaves of Death, into the wind of Life?
In us, in our arteries, flows a fear of the Sun.
We despair of the Light,
We despair, Lord, of a tomorrow
In which to start Life anew.

If only we were not that seedling of Creation,
Of Earth and its generations,
If only we had remained simple Clay or Ember,
Or something in between,
Then we would not have to see
This World, its Lord, and its Hell, twice over."

2

If time started anew,
and waters submerged the face of life,
and the earth convulsed, and that god
rushed to me, beseeching, "Noah, save the living!"
I would not concern myself with his request.
I would travel upon my ark, removing
clay and pebbles from the eyes of the dead.

I would open the depths of their being to the flood,
and whisper in their veins
that we have returned from the wilderness,
that we have emerged from the cave,
that we have changed the sky of years,
that we sail without giving in to our fears—
that we do not heed the word of that god.
Our appointment is with death.
Our shores are a familiar and pleasing despair,
a gelid sea of iron water that we ford
to its very ends, undeterred,
heedless of that god and his word,
longing for a different, a new, lord.¹

First published in 1958, “The New Noah” (نوح الجديد) was the opening poem of *Shi'r* magazine’s spring issue. The poem narrates the original Koranic and the Old Testament story of Noah in a heterodox and mystical interpretation. In this poem, Ali Ahmad Said, commonly known as Adonis, is transmitting a radically and deliberately new message evoking an existentialist mood that tomorrow promises salvation, not the past. Adonis’ linguistic symbolism evokes Sufist and mystical allusions, a meditation on the interconnectedness between the poetic persona and the prophet. Although God saved Noah and his people from the flood in the original story, Adonis’ new Noah ignores God’s commands to save the living; instead he sails off to a different kind of salvation, immersing himself in a destructive fight with the mud and the nature. The poem constitutes a refusal of the divine word of God, declaring a Nietzschean sentiment that “God is dead.” Adonis creates a new image of the universe through the image of the flood, and renders the earth another heaven in which no God resides. By rewriting the story, Adonis takes the cargo of the dying world into a new one, creating a vision of continuity and a journey of

¹ Translated by Shawkat M. Toorawa

renewal. Adonis creates a prophetic persona that embodies the visions and the sentiments of the poet, who is a revolutionary and seeks new mystical visions and yearns for metaphysical prophecies beyond the Islamic divinity.

The poem introduces a new kind of poetic diction unprecedented in Arabic poetry. “The New Noah”’s language is opaque, full of literary allusions and structural complexity. The poem is written with an irregularity of rhythms that broke the traditional metric theory and creates new rhythmic and formulaic patterns. It introduces Adonis’ poetic and linguistic program of change and renewal which, to many literary Arab critics, marked the beginnings of poetic modernism in Arabic literature.

Fleeing to Beirut after spending a year in prison for anti-government activities in Syria, Adonis, along with the Lebanese poet Yusuf al-Khal, established the seminal journal *Shi'r* in 1956. *Shi'r* magazine was unique in “its aesthetic, ideological and institutional coherence,”² and it was the first literary Arab project that placed the question of modernity at the center of its poetics. Adonis’ and al-Khal’s poetry published in *Shi'r* was mainly influenced by earlier experiences of Arabic Romanticism, Sufist poets³, and modern Western poetry, particularly, French Surrealism and Symbolism.⁴ Through their poetic theory, the *Shi'r* poets advocated for a new kind of poetry whose “main theme is the human being in the universe,” in response to the poetry of the period which was either traditionalist or nationalist.⁵ In his opening *Shi'r* article, Adonis introduces the magazine’s philosophy: “What we are trying to achieve is discovery of the

² Robyn Creswell, *Tradition and Translation: Poetic Modernism in Beirut*, 12.

³ Specifically the metaphorical writing of Muhammad al-Niffari.

⁴ Mouna Khouri, 33.

⁵ Muhsin J. al-Musawi, 79.

self, against the tribe, the *umma*, against all these ideological forms of culture.”⁶ Adonis believes in the significance of the magazine and that “everyone acknowledges today that all that is true and real in Arab poetry comes from *Shi'r*.”⁷

The word “vision” has been repeatedly used in the context of *Shi'r* magazine when discussing the relation between poetry and the universe, and poetry and man. Adonis’ notion of poetic vision embodies various meanings and operates on multiple levels: political, social, religious, and philosophical. The poetic vision marks a rupture from the past and advocates for the new; it asserts the individual against the collective will.⁸ This new vision that Adonis, along with other modernist poets, introduced to Arab poetics is one that aims to put poetic authority in place of the pervasive political and religious ones. The new vision is an aesthetic demand that embodies not only the society and the individual, but also literature in its various forms.⁹ The modernists’ vision is abstract and metaphysical, it conflates the role of the poet with that of the prophet and poetry with divine prophecy; a characteristic that gives new poetry, according to Adonis, the ability to “foresee, foretell, and never to be content with the customary meaning of things.”¹⁰

The Emergence of the New Vision in Arabic Poetry

What is it that touched al-Mutanabi
other than his soil that felt his tread?

⁶ ٩٣, ادونيس, محاولة في تعريف الشعر الحديث

⁷ <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/07/13/arts/12ADON.html>

⁸ ٢١-٢٢, ساندي ابو سيف, قضايا النقد والحداثة

⁹ M.M. Badawi, Introduction, 13.

¹⁰ ٥, ادونيس, بيان الحداثة

He betrayed many things,
but not his vision.
Adonis: “The Desert”

Since the 1950s, the literary and the cultural climate in the Arab world has been fueled with politics of change and urgency. This period in contemporary Arab history has been punctuated with events and changes that left a profound impact on the outlook and vision of modern poetry and modern Arab life at large. Thus, the question of the modern in the Arab world was provoked by such urgency: The aftermath of the Palestinian Nakba in 1948 and the subsequent defeat after the June 1967 war – many would argue that the following October 1973 war constituted a victory, especially in the Egyptian context – left the Arab world in a state of despair.¹¹ Conversely, the Cold War, and the emergence of new powers in the Middle East, forced the majority of Arab intellectuals and poets to be fully involved in the politics of this period; thus political and factional divisions surfaced among many prevailing ideologies, especially the Marxist and nationalist. This state of disbelief and demoralization deeply affected the collective Arab psyche.¹² Up until the 1970s, poets and intellectuals were forced to question their political and social engagement; their intellectual commitment to such issues was bound to develop a language of potency in the face of some agenda.¹³ However, the Palestine disaster and the subsequent wars marked a turning point for modern Arabic literature.¹⁴ In light of these dramatic occurrences that took place since 1948, a new kind of poetry started to surface characterized by defiance, challenge and a new poetic vision for change and renewal. Poets of

¹¹ Muhsin J. al-Musawi, 81-82.

¹² Ibid. 82.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

this period shared a program for modernity and innovation, a desire for rebirth, for new life, and a strong sense of disassociation with the contradictory past. In *Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry* Salma Khadra Jayyusi captures this emerging sentiment in the following lines:

The past, whenever invoked, [...] is usually a dark abyss, an intolerable memory of a terrible fall that has produced an intolerable present. The present is still a time of failure, of stupor, of terror, of tyranny, where innocence is devoured, and freedom curtailed, where man is crucified and tortured. It is therefore a time of death, a petrified existence.¹⁵

Although an important shift took place in all spheres of life, poetry in particular underwent the most dramatic changes. As Jayyusi contends: “there is an Arabic poetry before the ‘fifties’ and there is an Arabic poetry after the ‘fifties’.”¹⁶ The poetry of this period advocated for a vitality and dynamism needed in order to change things drastically and on all levels. Assuming a fundamental role in society, the poet becomes the new prophet that can anticipate profound changes in all aspects of life, Jayyusi, looks at the poet in a new vein:

The poet is no more a figure in solitude; he is now the prototype, even sometimes the archetype, whose personal experience is rarely so private as to have no

¹⁵ Salma Khadra Jayyusi, 49-50.

¹⁶ Ibid.

relationship with the word around him, with the moment in history, with a sense of the past and future.¹⁷

The emerging literary consciousness of this period was a fusion of Baudelairean defiance and English and French Romanticism.¹⁸ The notion of tradition has slowly gained popularity in Arabic poetry perhaps since T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" first appeared in 1919.¹⁹ Ezra Pound's "loose-leaf system" had also added new perceptions to the Arabic literary corpus along with other writings by Western scholars and critics.²⁰ These writings contested the privilege of classical heritage and challenged the superiority of cultural tradition. During this period of drastic social and political change, young Arab intellectuals were occupied with writing on and exploring what role literature plays in the construction of Arab cultural and political consciousness. Poets during this period assumed the task of advancing a new kind of poetics. These newly adopted modes of literary expressions, as Musawi argues in *Trajectories of Modernity and Tradition*, were meant to serve as a "poetics of challenge and innovation."²¹ Literary journals have also played a significant role in the dissemination of the new literary knowledge, and poets were involved in a fight with tremendous cultural, social, and political complexities.²²

¹⁷ Ibid. 46.

¹⁸ Jabra I. Jabra, "Modern Arabic Literature and the West," 7.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Muhammad 'Abd al-Hayy, Introduction, 6.

²¹ Muhsin J. al-Musawi, 96.

²² Ibid. 97.

The mood of alienation from contemporary Arab reality trapped many poets and artists. There was a strong sense of emptiness and loss from the present, as well as rejection and despair from the past. In the words of Jabra I. Jabra, the Arab poet suffered from a “complete spiritual impotence.” Al-Sayab expresses this spiritual crisis in his desperate inability to bring himself to pray in “the Crown’s feathers,” his alienated spirit, and broken soul pleas to pray for not god but “to the owl with the broken wing/I want to pray to a perplexed star in the sky/ to death and disaster.” Mahmoud Darwish’s poems “are without a color/voiceless and tasteless,” and Hawi’s disillusionment expressed in most tragic sentiment: “He [god] was a black shadow/looming over the mirror of my breast.”²³ In search of hope, the *Tammuzi* poets, mainly inspired by Antoun Sa'adeh’s philosophy, concentrated on the notion of birth and rebirth, transcendence, and the inevitable arrival at fertility, and gave way to the subsequent literary aesthetic of Sufist and Surrealist sensibilities.²⁴

Poets were on the lookout for a new sort of poetry that reflected their intimacy and connectedness with nature and the universe. There was a strong desire to find a communal prayer that expresses itself outside the established theological rituals, a prayer that resonates within a Sufist and Surrealist dimension²⁵. Likewise, the plea for a new poetics that break the artificial imperatives of the classical poem was essential to the modernist agenda and its poetics of creativity and innovation. Despite some of their inconsistencies, modernist poets were unified by

²³ M.M. Badawi, *An Anthology of Modern Arabic Verse*, 51.

²⁴ Issa J. Boullata, *Critical Perspectives on Modern Arabic Literature*, 215-216.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 216.

a sort of energy to create “a movement from oratory to vision, from subjects to experience, within a search of becoming.”²⁶

In his first *Shi'r* article, Adonis aimed to give the emerging audience during this period a novel poetic syllabus, one whose authority is not colored by the ruling political, literary and cultural norms. Instead, the modernist project aimed both to uproot and establish the authority of poetry and give a central role to the individual, or “man” (الإنسان).²⁷ There was a strong and collective effort to place the poet and poetry at the heart of cultural and political fight. For instance, Adonis’ early poetry collection, *Songs of Mihyar of Damascus* (1961) in particular, is symbolic in its fusion of the persona of the poet, the revolutionary, with the prophet-hero. Arab modernists often equated the character of the poet with that of the prophet, placing the poet at the crossroad of history, where the “energies of the past” Creswell argues “were received, rearranged, and released into the future.”²⁸ Similarly, in an effort to find refuge from the ailing present reality, the modernist poets have restored the use of metaphysical symbols and mystical images to create a more intimate poetic expression.

Adonis’ Metaphysical Poetry:

Poetry lies where the known verges upon the unknown.

Prescott, *The Poetic Mind*.

²⁶ Muhsin J. al-Musawi, 33.

²⁷ Robyn Creswell, *Tradition and Translation: Poetic Modernism in Beirut*, 69

²⁸ *Ibid*.

Despite the obvious religious roots of the term “vision” – the supernatural, metaphysical phenomenon revealing a divine, prophetic message from God – Adonis’ adaptation of this concept is evoked by both Sufism and French Surrealism; his adapted notion of the *vision* constitutes a complete departure from and protest against the original theological belief. Both Sufism and French Surrealism consider the vision as a result of the state of enlightenment in which the distance between the self and the subject matter is obliterated.²⁹ According to Isam al-'Asal, there is an evident influence of French Romanticism in Adonis’ poetry; the influence of Baudelaire and Rimbaud, among many others, appears in his emphasis on Surrealist poetics.³⁰ French Surrealism is a sort of a revolutionary protest against the formal strictness of classical French poetry. Therefore, emerging from similar roots in the Arab literary context, Arabic Surrealism, if one could use such term, viewed within this familiar environment of rejection, rebellion, and opposition.³¹

Adonis adopts the Surrealists’ philosophy which attempts to unify the universe, discover the correspondences and affinities between metaphysical and the physical realms, and reveal the intercourse between the abstract and concrete, the internal and the external; thus, enriching reality with artistic and mystic energy.³² Addressing al-Khal in *Shi'r*, Adonis advocates for a sort of poetry that breaks boundaries, and “assumes multiple layering, joining the visible to the

²⁹ Haskell M. Block, “Surrealism and Modern Poetry: Outline of an Approach,” 177.

³⁰ عصام العسل , الخطاب النقدي عند ادونيس , ١٩٣ .

³¹ Ibid.

³² Haskell M. Block, “Surrealism and Modern Poetry: Outline of an Approach,” 179.

invisible.”³³ He calls for a metaphysical poetics that has no close affinity with the material world. The nuanced concepts and values that *Shi'r* introduced since its establishment encapsulate a strong rejection for the aesthetics of the physical world and the possibility to soar freely beyond history and time. Poetry doesn't reproduce reality; rather it creates an alternative world that exists through the poet's vision alone.³⁴ Adonis constantly highlights the existing contrast between reality and vision, society and poetry, and thus, the contrast between the metaphoric and the truth.³⁵ Even the concept of reality has a different meaning in Adonis' theory and poetry; for there are two existing worlds, the physical and the metaphysical; one is sensed through the sight and the other through the insight, the former is available to all human, the later is an aspect of modern poetry.³⁶

Adonis' poetic modernity manifests itself through a metaphysical consciousness that highlights the individual's sensibility to connect with the unknown world, only seen and felt by poets.³⁷ Therefore, the “vision” then finds its true expression on both the human and the spiritual levels: the human that needs to be rescued from the existential ails of the physical world, and the spiritual world whose contradictions can be reconciled through the vision and its unifying quality. Thus, its only possible to define modern poetry as “poetry of vision” when both the human and spiritual dimensions are integrated.³⁸

In his elaborate study of Adonis' poetry, Hassan Makhafi asserts that what distinguishes classical Arabic poetry from the new poetry is the creative drive and poetic insight, both of

³³ Adonis, “Poetry and Apoetical Culture,” 106-7.

³⁴ Ibid. 108.

³⁵ ١٩٤, ادونيس عند النقدي الخطاب , العسل عصام

³⁶حسن مخافي, القصيدة الرؤيا: دراسة في التنظير الشعري والممارسات النقدية لحركة شعر ٩٠

³⁷ Ibid. 91

³⁸ Ibid.

which are fundamental elements of new poetry: for the vision is fueled with an urgent yearning for the beyond, transcending the superficiality of the physical world in search of the harmonious, metaphysical sphere.³⁹ One of the main achievements of modern Arabic poetry, Adonis celebrates, is the prominence of the poet's profound insight: "For poetry is not considered great unless it is visionary, and this vision ought to defy logic and the desire to find remedies."⁴⁰ Therefore, for the vision to be pure it should not be a reflection of a given ideology; rather, modern poetry is the ultimate expression of a metaphysical reality.⁴¹

In a 1962 *Shi'r* article, Adonis writes about the poetic experience that finds its concrete expression in isolation from the social and political atmosphere; for this experience is individual and pertains to the poet's personal reality and not his society. In this sense, what inspires the poetic experience of modern poetry is the individual vision that stems from the poet's subjectivity and uniqueness.⁴² The poet, according to Adonis, is a man of "exceptional qualities," one that is able to "distance himself from the influences of the physical world" to eventually find a place of neutrality, such position only deities and prophets can occupy.⁴³

New poetry rejects narrating events and borrowing terminology that carries superficial and familiar meanings which contradict the true mission of poetry, that is to strip the poetic language of its ancient burden and fuel it with opaque expressions.⁴⁴ The true function of poetry is to explore the invisible, mystical world, which is obscured by the visible one. The poet is a creator, through his strong insight he can penetrate what the visible world conceals of meanings

³⁹ Ibid. 92-93.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid. 102.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 110.

⁴⁰ ادونيس، بيان الحدائثة، ١٢.

⁴² ادونيس، الشعر العربي ومشكلة التجديد، ١٠١.

and expressions. It is the poet's relentless journey of discovery, investigating the connection between man and the universe in which he resides.⁴⁵ In this vein, Kamal Abou Deeb asserts the following:

Adonis, by breaking outside the limits of reality, the conscious and the concrete, by establishing new relationships between the phenomena of the universe, and by relating the here to there, is in essence, trying desperately to strip reality, and, to a large extent, language, of its appearance, show it naked and ugly.⁴⁶

In his poetry, Adonis attempts to expand the capacity of poetic experience to encapsulate metaphysical problems formerly belonging to the domain of philosophers and thinkers. Questions of life and mortality, divinity, the spirit and human destiny occupy a central position in his poetry.⁴⁷ Adonis' philosophical thirst is evident in his rejection of the traditional modes of speech and the "clarity and logical sequencing as found in everyday language," Moreh argues, "he [Adonis] attempts to draw the reader into unknown regions of the world."⁴⁸ Adonis' poetry, according to Abou Deep, is a relentless reminder that there is no constant conformity "between the world around us and the ways in which we describe it," and our complex and unique bond to

⁴⁵ Joseph Zeidan, "Myth and Symbol in the Poetry of Adonis and Yusuf Al-Khal," 23.

⁴⁶ Kamal Abou Deeb, "The Perplexity of the All-Knowing: A Study of Adonis, 319.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Shamuel Moreh. *Modern Arabic Poetry: 1800-1970; the Development of its Forms and Themes Under the Influence of Western Literature*, 63.

it.⁴⁹

In *First Poems* (قصائد أولى 1956), one notices Adonis' concern with the question of poetic creation. This collection contains poems that express the poet's existential anxieties and sense of creation at large; each poem encapsulates a world "within which the poet's heart is beating."⁵⁰ In this book, Adonis wanders the universe with the joy and enthusiasm of a child whose celebration of the world renders the poems as a childhood imagination. Just like the woman in Adonis' poetry, the child is a symbol that carries multiple meanings: love and growth (evolving into the state of the "new"), purity and spontaneity. New poetry doesn't celebrate the physical being in the materialistic sphere, but rather, it celebrates the being through life itself, through earth, fertility existing in the metaphysical world⁵¹. The woman becomes the child, and the child becomes the woman, the being becomes an emblem of continuity in the world. According to Adonis, the human being ceases to maintain socially and religiously constructed labels; the man, woman, child, etc. become absolute terms of existence and continuation.⁵²

Adonis' last three collections, *Songs of Mihyar of Damascus* (1961), *The Book of Metamorphosis and Migration in the Regions of Day and Night* (1965), and *The Stage and the Mirrors* (1968), are loaded with repeated visions that come together to make a creative collage saturated in symbolism, mysticism, and sensuality. In all of them, we encounter a "trend to create images with spontaneous freedom usually close to surrealism," Jabra notes "it is the freedom of the mystical position that transcends both mind and logic" in order to provide the reader with

⁴⁹ Kamal Abou Deeb, "The Perplexity of the All-Knowing: A Study of Adonis," 320.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Joseph Zeidan, "Myth and Symbol in the Poetry of Adonis and Yusuf Al-Khal," 27.

⁵² Ibid.

profound and powerful poetic experience.⁵³ For instance, in *The Stage and the Mirrors* Adonis portrays the protagonist as one of the heroes of his age. As he lines up the mirrors in front of his readers, his incredible narcissism becomes completely exposed. In his attempt to smash all mirrors that do not reflect his own being, we are faced with the only mirror reflecting the protagonist, as though the whole human history and existence is revealed through the hero's reflection on his own mirror.⁵⁴ None of the aforementioned volumes ever bring us to a final sense of tranquility for such endeavor is rife with contradictions; the poet's own mirror is in fact shattered, reflecting fragments of light in arbitrary directions.⁵⁵ Ultimately, the flawed prophet and the defeated hero as Adonis portrays them in the poem represent nothing but the absurdness of the human condition. This sort of poetry echoes Adonis' prevailing mood of creativity and innovation. The poetic vision allows the poet to see and delve into his endless sorrow, the angst that accompanies the human condition. It also transcends the unknown; it explores new spiritual and mystical territories in search of the new.⁵⁶

In "Is This My Name," first published in *A Time Between Ashes and Roses* (1971), Adonis violets and destroys the patterns of poetic stability. The literary critic Khalida Said, Adonis' wife and who translated the majority of his collections into English, argues in her 1971 *Mawāqif* article that this poem "proclaims the canon of change: every single poem must transcend all previous successes in poetry,"⁵⁷ including the poems written by the poet himself. Therefore, there can be "no relaxation, no pause for breath, no final form – instead, continuous,

⁵³ Jabra I. Jabra, "Modern Arabic Literature and the West," 10.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Kamal Abou Deeb, "The Perplexity of the All-Knowing: A Study of Adonis," 321.

⁵⁶ Bays M. Gwendolyn, "The Orphic Vision of Nerval Baudelaire, and Rimbaud," 19.

⁵⁷ Khalida Said, *Mawāqif*, 250

ever-renewing creativity, and unending risks bursting forth.”⁵⁸ Ultimately, every poem will occupy a new territory added to the unknown, ever-evolving world of poetry.

In the literary Arab scene, at least until late 1990s – the period in which Adonis’ stance on Arab culture and heritage has become more radical and adopted an Orientalist tone. Many Arab intellectuals consider his new views an attempt to pander for the Nobel Prize to which he has been regularly nominated since 1988 – Adonis is considered an emblem of both creativity and creative longing; his innovative vision and creative nostalgia are two chief characteristics that came to distinguish his poetry from as early as his first 1961 collection. In *The Flood* poem he writes:

Mihyar sang cried acquitted prayed indicted
Blessed the face of madness,
Dissolved in his voice
The wound of the ages,
Desired his voice to be
A flood, and like a flood it was...

Through its constant flux, the world is perceived in this poem through a Sufi mystic vision. Adonis advocates for creating a poem that embraces the world through the vision of becoming transparent, mysterious, dwelling in the objects of the universe, “between the thing and itself,” as Abou Deeb elaborates, imagining a world imbued with immense harmony and

⁵⁸ Ibid.

purity.⁵⁹ In “Wound,” the poem becomes a celebration of the poet’s pain; through its timelessness, the wound changes into a state of freshness and physical transcendence:

The leaves lying sleep under the wind
Are a ship for the wound
And a perished time is a glory for the wound
And the trees raising in our eyelids
a lake for the wound.
And the wound is in the bridges
where the grave becomes longer
where the patience becomes longer
between the edges of our love and our death.
And the wound
is a gesture, and the wound is
in the crossing.⁶⁰

The wound is symptomatic of the poet’s yearning for the virginal state of both being and becoming: for the wound, through its endless freshness, celebrates its unity with the nature, and finds its existence beyond the confinements of time.⁶¹ Every wound is an endless rupture with the past, encapsulating a world of warmth and possibilities.⁶² Throughout the poem, the wound never finds its healing, for healing, borrowing from Abou Deeb’s analysis, “brings it [the wound]

⁵⁹ Kamal Abou Deeb, “The Perplexity of the All-Knowing: A Study of Adonis, 319.

⁶⁰ Adonis, “The Wound,” Translated by Khaled Mattawa.

⁶¹ Kamal Abou Deeb, “The Perplexity of the All-Knowing: A Study of Adonis, 320.

⁶² Kamal Abou Deeb, “This is My Name,” 166.

into a state of finality and completeness, i.e., fossilization and death.”⁶³ The structure of the poem clearly embodies Adonis’ vision: the wound becomes an incarnation of the hero, of Mihyar himself, of Adonis – the god of fertility and creativity – and all other representations of creative yearning.⁶⁴

In the “Wound” poem the moment of oneness between the bodies of the two lovers is delivered in a ritualistic prayer, celebrating the total innocence and purity of the body, and the strong, amalgamated affinities between the moments of mortality and immortality. As though love and death – through their contradictions, dissolve into one unifying harmony – belong to the same abstract realm, surrendering to the forces and elements of nature.⁶⁵

The poem “Wound”, like most of Adonis’ poetry, resonates quite neatly with al-Jayyusi’s description of the new poem: “It [the new poem] becomes a land of discovery,” in which we, readers, are introduced to new insights about the human psyche to discover new emotional regions.⁶⁶ The “wound” is a projection of the poet’s reality; the ways in which he envisions alternatives and possibilities is what Adonis calls “poetic vision”. Through the poet’s vision, the poem reaches a totality within which contradictions are dissolved into one another. Poetry, therefore, becomes a transformation of the physical reality and “an act of harmonization, balance, and discovery.”⁶⁷ Every component in the poem becomes yet another expression of a profound and essential meaning. A woman, for example, transcends her physical being to

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Salma Khadra Jayyusi, *Trends and Movements*, 66.

⁶⁷ ادونيس، في قصيدة النثر، ٧٣.

become an object in nature:

the light of stars

the face of clouds

And the moaning of dust Are all one flower. ⁶⁸

The woman in another instance becomes a city, an Arab city embodying Arab history and civilization. Expressing his unrequited love, Adonis's beloved woman becomes Damascus, a cold, heartless city, resembling the contemporary Arab world yearning for a new spirit of rebirth⁶⁹: "How will he read you, O woman/how will he read you, O city?" In a moment of total poetic slumber, Adonis fuses his passion for the woman with his passion for his language, the woman, yet again, loses her conventional role, and takes on another disguise, one that suits the poet and his projection of reality at that particular moment: "I write you in every one of my cells/I speak you/and I surrender to you, O my language."⁷⁰

The yearning for unity between the *being* (الإنسان) and the *universe* (الكون) and resolving contradictions into a total oneness have become the central preoccupation of Adonis' poetry. Such unity, as he envisions it, achieves its ultimate form in the body and love of a woman. Since his early poetry, the woman "has remained the microcosm which reveals the universe in its yearning for itself and its celebration of total unity of its elements"⁷¹. In an earlier and youthful poem to his wife Khalida, Adonis writes:

⁶⁸ Adonis, "A Mirror for Khalida."

⁶⁹ Kamal Abou Deeb, "This is My Name," 171.

⁷⁰ Adonis, "A Mirror for Khalida."

⁷¹ Issa J. Boullata, "Adonis: Revolt in Modern Arabic Poetics," 8.

When I drown my eyes in your eyes
I glimpse the deep dawn
And see the ancient past
I see what I don't comprehend
And feel the universe
Flowing between your eyes and me.⁷²

Following the *Songs of Mihyar of Damascus*, Adonis published *The Book of Transformations and Migration Between the Regions of Day and Night* (1965), which, as the title suggests, explores the metamorphoses of the hero into multiple shapes. The poems “Transformation of the Eagle” and “The Transformations of the Lover,” are presented through a series of surrealistic allusions of virginal – one that had been rarely explored by any Arab poet previously – purity and through a complexity of rhythms and dramatic effects.⁷³

New poetry, according to Adonis, is a vision of change that encapsulates the totality of our modern life, a new sort of poetry that views change as a constant phenomenon of life. In *Zaman al-Shi'r* (1972), Adonis argues that beyond the superficial lies a new meaning of things brought into being by change. It is thus the poet's task to find this change and present it to those who are in a state of “intellectual stagnation” and need to be rescued from superficiality of the materialistic life.⁷⁴

⁷² Adonis, “Between Your Eyes and Me.”

⁷³ Joseph Zeidan, “Myth and Symbol in the Poetry of Adonis and Yusuf Al-Khal,” 79.

⁷⁴ ادونيس، زمان الشعر، ١١٤.

Poetic Vision and the Form

Another important aspect of Adonis's poetics of creativity and vision is *form*. However, form cannot be completely comprehended apart from content: for form and content dissolve into each other to create a perfect invisible unity.⁷⁵ In his *Critical Perspectives on Modern Arabic Literature*, Issa Boullata elaborates on Adonis' *vision*, he says: "The vision of the poet has to be embodied in words to become a poem, and the words have to be certain structure to become an aesthetic creation."⁷⁶ Thus, ultimately, the poem takes the form of the poet's vision. However, Adonis contends that the poetic structure is not fixed or absolute; every poem is unique in its form because it is, after all, "the outcome of the thematic expression of the poet's vision."⁷⁷ In *Introduction to Arabic Poetics* (1985), Adonis elaborates further:

The modern poem will never reside in any form. It will always endeavor to escape from all kinds of imprisonment in definite meters or rhythms so that it may more comprehensively suggest the feeling of a surging essence that cannot be perceived with completeness and fragility, namely, the essence of our present age, the essence of man⁷⁸

According to Adonis, so long as the world is in constant state of change the poet will have to use new forms to express the human condition, and new poetry will constantly strive to reflect this fluctuating nature of the modern man. Thus what makes the poem exist is its form, which is an aesthetic embodiment of the poet's vision, arrested at a particular time and place –

⁷⁵ Ibid

⁷⁶ Issa Boullata, *Critical Perspectives on Modern Arabic Literature*, 84.

⁷⁷ ادونيس، مقدمة للشعر العربي، تمهيد، ١٠.

⁷⁸ Ibid. 14.

this what he calls the poetic experience.⁷⁹ He contends that the poetic form is a reflection of the fundamental pursuit of exploration, which finds its true expression in transcending established poetic principles. Accepting the fixed models of form and poetic techniques will “stifle the vision and cramp the creativity of the poet;” for the form of the poem grows and develops as the theme gradually comes to being.⁸⁰ The form doesn’t exist outside the parameters of the poem; the poem’s aesthetic reality, according to Abu Deeb, exists only in the “present of the poem as an organic unit and as a whole [...] deriving its meaning and aesthetic value from the whole.”⁸¹

In describing how the poetic vision influenced the form, or the lack of it, in the “new poetry,” Adonis comments that the new poem is “a surrender to emotion without an artistic ruler or structural formal method. It is a walk in a straight line which has no end.”⁸² This is what makes the poem “inclined mostly to metaphysical meditation” and the poet’s emotional state; the poem is “controlled by an unconscious will that observes the poetic experience, leads it and guides it” and ultimately recreates it in a new poetic language.⁸³

While many critics argue that modern poetry violates the poetic orthodoxy of the classical *qasida* and is nothing but “prose distributed into sections over the page,”⁸⁴ supporters of modern poetry contend that the change in form “is the result of a change in understanding the

⁷⁹ Ibid. 14-15.

⁸⁰ Ibid. 15.

⁸¹ Kamal Abu Deeb, “This is My Name,” 167.

⁸³ Ibid. 20-21.

⁸⁴ Bassam K. Franghieh, “Modern Arabic Poetry, Vision and Reality,” 223.

⁸² ادونيس، مقدمة للشعر العربي، تمهيد، ١٩.

nature of poetry.”⁸⁵ The polished and symmetrical form of the conventional *qasida* maintains the simplest form of expression: using direct implications and simple statements (التقرير) to deliver the poetic sensibility in a declaratory tone (لغة الخطابة) and finds in monometer its most convenient approach.⁸⁶ What sets apart the classical poem from the modern one, according to modern poetry enthusiasts, is that the former is concerned with the poem's form over its content, while the latter deems any true poetic experience as a possibility capable of finding its form regardless whether new or conventional.⁸⁷ The harmony between form and matter is “the overarching element of new poem,” which encompasses conflicting emotions, tense, trivial or ambiguous, and is capable of fitting them into one poem. This aspect of modern poetry gives the poet the capacity to express his emotions freely, unchained by the *qasida*'s stiff and rigid structure. Modern poetry, as Salah Abd al-Sabur argues, challenges the “tendency of Arabic meter and rhyme to enslave the poet.”⁸⁸

Adonis' impatience with the contemporary Arab poets who claim to be modern is perhaps not surprising; he accuses them of being derivative and uncreative. Their poetry is merely a description of “life and its little things” or it is a concrete reflection of the political and cultural conditions and ideologies of the contemporary Arab life. The modern Arab poets, according to Adonis, much like the classical and medieval poets, are “content with dwelling on the external aspects of life and man's relation with the world.”⁸⁹ In light of these considerations, Samuel

⁸⁵ Salma Khadra Jayyusi, *Trends and Movements*, 82.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ , ٣٩ صلاح عبد الصبور, المجلة⁸⁸

⁸⁹ ادونيس, زمان الشعر, ١١٥.

Moreh in *Modern Arabic Poetry 1800-1970*, describes new poetry, the poetry that Arab modernists advocate, as follows:

The new poetry penetrates into the spirit of the age in order to understand it and express it. The modern poet who writes new poetry relates himself to the events and problems of his time, not as a spectator who describes what he sees and is affected by what he describes, but as a person who lives these events. Conventional poetry records the events and emotion and does not go beyond them, while modern poetry is an attempt to reveal the essence of life and not merely to be moved by it. It takes a positive not a negative stand.⁹⁰

Therefore, the contradictory forces that came to shape the history and the reality of Arab culture didn't find a true resonance in the linearity and one-dimensional structure of earlier poetic forms. The *qasida* was accused of lacking an organic unity: its tendency toward punning (تورية) and superficial rhetorical ornaments (الزينة البلاغية) along with its use of static themes, metaphors, images and poetic diction, stripped poetry from the poetic creativity and placed a significant emphasis on form and not on the subject matter.⁹¹ Unlike conventional poetry, modern poetry, as Adonis argues, is a true representation of the poet and his experience; it is a revolt against excessive restraints which reduced poetry to meter and rhythm rather than art.⁹²

⁹⁰ Samuel Moreh, *Modern Arabic Poetry 1800-1970*, 260.

⁹¹ Ibid. 261-262.

⁹² ادونيس، مقدمة للشعر العربي، تمهيد، ٢٢.

Modern poetry is not descriptive, it derives its inspiration from the man in the universe and its chief tool is the vision, which “reconstructs the world in a new way.”⁹³ In *Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry*, Jayyusi elaborates on the modernists’ celebration of both formal and thematic change; “the poetic imagery in modern poetry is drawn from the poet’s actual life;” which can be a description of miserable and grey scenes and not necessarily the beautiful things in life. What caused this change is the poet’s intention to “find a vivid image, evocative deeply expressive, an image closely linked with his mental and emotional state.”⁹⁴

Adonis perceives the trend in poetry that prevailed after the Arab renaissance (النهضة) pioneered mainly by al-Barudi (1838-1904) Shawqi (1882-1932) and their contemporaries, as no more than a “ritual consolidation” of the values of pre-Islamic orality.⁹⁵ In a relentless attempt to underline the crucial role of poetic vision and creativity, he launches an attack against the Arab poets who identify themselves as modern for their mere abandonment of the conventional metrical form; and who tend to adopt the Western poetic tradition based on the belief that the “West is the source of all modernity: the material, artistic and intellectual.”⁹⁶ Thus, by embracing the Western principles of modernity, this view presumes the superiority of the West and “constantly disparage[s] the Arab poetry as being backward and unable to reach the level of Western poetry.”⁹⁷ For instance, Adonis identifies two contradicting tendencies – both of which lead to the subsequent and inevitable state of what he comes to term in his *Introduction to Arab*

⁹³ Ibid. 262.

⁹⁴ Salma Khadra Jayyusi, *Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry*, 256.

⁹⁵ ١٥٦، ادونيس، بيان الحداثة

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

Poetics (1985) “double-dependency” – when attempting to grasp the concept of modernity by Arab poets and intellectuals. The first tendency is the return to the ancient heritage in search of creativity by way of remembering and reviving. The second is the tendency to depend on the European-American West to compensate for the lack of innovation through “intellectual and artistic borrowings and adaptations which lack the necessary individual vision.”⁹⁸ This process of which the Arab poet either denies his traditional past, or asserts its timeless presence in face of an encompassing and blind adaptation results in what he calls “self-dissolving.” Ultimately, this leaves the poet or the individual deprived of the poetic vision that inspires creation not imitation.⁹⁹

The modern poem, to use Adonis’ words, is not a “verbal mosaic” or “a verbal chemistry” but rather it is what he terms “emotive chemistry,” that is, the emotion which reflects “an existentialist state whereby sensibility and intellect unite as they project the modern human condition.”¹⁰⁰ In his *Arabic Poetics in The Golden Age*, Vicente Cantarino believes that Adonis’ notion that the content is “an explosion from inside” refers to the same essential quality of poetry adopted by classical, Aristotelian prosodists which they termed “imaginative creativity” (التخيل (الابداعي). The poet’s imaginative creativity is not conveyed in what Cantarino calls “sober statements,” rather it is expressed in a highly poetic fashion charged with a powerful mystical energy.¹⁰¹ It goes without saying that Adonis’ emphasis on the quality of imaginative creativity, and the poetic content, with its projection of the uncustomary, is his attempt to highlight the

98 ادونيس، مقدمة للشعر العربي، ١٧٠.

99 Ibid.

100 Issa J. Boullata, “Adonis: Revolt in Modern Arabic Poetics,” 4.

101 Vicente Cantarino, *Arabic Poetics in The Golden Age*, 88.

importance he associates with the elements of mysticism, newness, and revelation – essential qualities for his poetics of creativity. This further explains Adonis’ strong disapproval of the traditional mode of Arabic poetry that inhibited the poet’s imagination in the name of classical theory of “pillar of poetry,” limiting both the poetic rhetoric and diction in literary writing.¹⁰²

In “Prose Poetry: A Radical Transformation in Contemporary Arabic Poetry,” Mounah A. Khouri notes that poetic imagination doesn’t achieve its ultimate effectiveness without abolishing the interconnectedness between familiar objects, for “destruction is creation” as Adonis notes. This state of poetic creativity is capable of unifying things within the poet’s imagination, it also “permits complete possession of them by penetrating into their reality and, ultimately, into the world.”¹⁰³ It is an all-absorbing state of mind, as C. M. Bowra notes, a moment in which the poet “loses sights of anything outside the immediate object of his vision, and loses his notion of time.”¹⁰⁴ For the presence of reality is inevitably the absence of poetry, as Adonis contends in *Zaman al-Shi'r*. The vision is a state of inspiration that invokes creativity and innovation. The greatness of poetic imagination is contingent upon its “remaining a means to reveal the beauty of the poem.”¹⁰⁵ New poetry doesn’t thrive on being on the surface of things, nor does it aspire to describe objects externally; it finds its true manifestation in the new and rejects the notion of the static existence.¹⁰⁶ Therefore, the poet’s conception of reality is both “nebulous and hazy” for he tries to “comprehend it [the reality] to disengage himself from it, and

¹⁰² Vicente Cantarino, *Arabic Poetics in Golden Age*, 88.

¹⁰³ Mounah A. Khouri, “Prose Poetry: A Radical Transformation in Contemporary Arabic Poetry,” 134.

¹⁰⁴ C. Maurice Bowra, *Romantic Imagination*, Introduction, VI.

¹⁰⁵ ادونيس، زمان الشعر، ٢٢.

¹⁰⁶ Mounah A. Khouri, “Prose Poetry: A Radical Transformation in Contemporary Arabic Poetry,” 135.

finally to transcend it.”¹⁰⁷ Penetrating the world to its depths, the poet’s vision inevitably becomes abstract and obscure. One may not endeavor to comprehend the new poem entirely for such comprehension might intervene between the reader and the poem and ultimately ruin the poetic pleasure.¹⁰⁸

Adonis’ emphasis on the poet’s imagination and creativity is couched in his aversion to the hegemony of the dominating rhetoric in writings of the “Abbasid apologists and their oratory edification” as he describes them. He rejects the “ideological manipulation” that influences, with force, the new poetic endeavors. For ideology, as Musawi argues, attempts to “entangle the poetic in its battle, emptying it of its potential freedom, and reproducing it as a political text.”¹⁰⁹ Arab nationalists, Adonis’ fierce opponents, view the poetic text as “a battleground between ideas and current tendencies: it makes the poetic text a political text.”¹¹⁰ The nationalist tradition stands in complete contrast to what Adonis considers the heart of his poetry: creativity, imagination and the poetic vision – disentangled from strictures of ancient authority, dormancy of the past, literary tradition, and politics.¹¹¹

The Prophet Poet (Adonis: the Greek god of fertility and resurrection)

He was a tower of light

as high as the horizon

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Muhsin J. al-Musawi, 104.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ ادونيس، زمان الشعر، ٢٦.

¹¹⁰ ادونيس، زمان الشعر، ٢٦-٢٧.

*He filled space with space,
connected time with time.*

Adonis "Unintended Worship Ritual"

Since the pre-Islamic times, poets have played a central role in their societies; such a role has not changed much in the modern Arab world today.¹¹² Through their deep commitment to the social, cultural and political life of their societies, poets are considered to possess vision and prophecy.¹¹³ In the past few decades, and in a climate of political volatility, many prominent Arab poets have been tortured, detained, exiled and forced to leave their homelands.¹¹⁴ The attitude of the modern poet, as Jayyusi argues, reflects a mode of presentation "where the poet is also the oracular priest, the visionary, the inspired bard."¹¹⁵

In "Adonis: Revolt in Modern Arabic Poetics," Boullata believes that the poet's function is to "anticipate, to predict, and by his foresight to reveal the future, or prepare others for it and, in this sense, to create it."¹¹⁶ Adonis' new poetry of vision, therefore, loses its inherited function as a description and becomes a revelation.¹¹⁷ Edward B. Pollard notes the conflation between the persona of the prophet and that of the poet, he says: "just as the poet's thoughts must be touched by emotion, so the prophet's words are energized by divine human enthusiasm."¹¹⁸

¹¹² Stephen A. Geller, "Were the Prophets Poets?," 67.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Bassam K. Franghieh, "Modern Arabic Poetry, Vision and Reality," 255.

¹¹⁵ Salma Khadra Jayyusi, *Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry*, 97.

¹¹⁶ Boullata, "Adonis: Revolt in Modern Arabic Poetics," 4-5.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Edward B. Pollard, "The Prophet as a Poet," 328-9

In “The Tree Between Day and Night (1994),” Adonis declares himself a prophet who creates and changes the order of the universe around him:

Before daylight arrives, I come
Before it asks about its sun, I light
And the trees come running after me, the blossoms walk
In my shadow
.....
then when the springs fall into my chest ,
leave their buds and go to sleep
I wake up the water and the mirrors
And, like them, polish the face of visions,
Then fall asleep.

Portrayed as a creator in the poem, Adonis appears capable of being in an absolute harmony with himself and his universe. The nature’s forces and elements come together harmoniously in response to his will. There is an utter state of oneness with what he creates and with what he comes in contact¹¹⁹. Just like the prophet, Stephen A. Geller argues, the poet endeavors to find solutions to the existential problems of humanity; he goes beyond the most obvious and visible, seeking the truth in a meaningless realities. Through his insight and wisdom,

¹¹⁹ Kamal Abou Deeb, “This is My Name,” 177.

the poet assumes the role of both theologian and philosopher.¹²⁰ *The Songs of Mihyar of Damascus* opens with this song:

He comes unarmed like the forest, and like the
clouds cannot be repelled; and yesterday he carried
a continent and moved the sea from its place ...

In this song, the new hero and his magic presence are felt and seen through the verses of the poem; his divinity changes and rearranges the order of things as he views them. Just like the prophet, the poet is a seer; his vision pierces what lies beneath the materialistic and temporary to encounter the metaphysical and permanent.¹²¹ For the commonplace and temporary, to borrow from Pollard, do not form strong grounds to be “the motive for prophetic and poetic utterance.”¹²² On the one hand, Mihyar realizes the paradoxical nature of man in the universe, divinity, and the self of the poet. Thus, he seeks to find unification in such desperate realities, “the unification of the elements of the universe, of diverse experiences, or irreconcilable ethical or intellectual notions.”¹²³ The person of Mihyar highlights the poet’s yearning for questioning, the individual’s longing for the new, and the search for paths never tread by ancestors:

Uncertainty is his homeland, but he is full of eyes

He creates his kind starting with himself – he has

¹²⁰ Stephen A. Geller, “Were the Prophets Poets?,” 70.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Edward B. Pollard, “The Prophet as a Poet,” 330.

¹²³ Kamal Abou Deeb, “This is My Name,” 178s.

no ancestors and in his footsteps are his roots.

He was in the abyss, and has the figure of the wind.¹²⁴

This prophet-like attitude dominates Mihyar's songs and his existence. Just like a divine being that encounters metaphysical and mystic moments, Mihyar:

Fills life and nobody sees him

Where the stone becomes a lake and the shadows a city

he lives and leads despair astray

dancing for the dust to make it yawn

and to trees to send them to sleep.

Since *Mihyar* was first published in 1961, many Arab poets celebrated the collection's uniqueness in embodying unusual "poetic language and powerful imagery both endowed with mysticism and symbolist meditations."¹²⁵ Through the persona of Mihyar, Adonis articulates his individuality as a poet. This collection also fuses Judeo-Christian and Islamic tradition with Greco-Roman mythology.¹²⁶ Quite explicitly, Mihyar is often identified with numerous mythical figures, including Adam, Noah, Ulysses and Orpheus¹²⁷. The content and the subject matter of *Mihyar* were distinct; the songs' rebellious and rejectionist voice dominated the poetics of the

¹²⁴ Adonis, "The Knight of Strange Words" in *Songs of Mihyar of Damascus*.

¹²⁵ Weidner Stefan. "The Divinity of the Profane: Representations of the Divine in the Poetry of Adonis" in *Representations of the Divine in Arabic poetry*, 264

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

fifties and early sixties. These songs reflected the sense of oneness and harmony, for Mihyar, as Khaled Mattawa asserts, embodied “the inner vision, the self turning inward and taking the world with it.”¹²⁸

Since *Mihyar*, Adonis began to employ Sufist symbolism, and allude to mythical and spiritual figures. One very enigmatic and mystical image that Adonis uses in *Mihyar* is the divine figure of “Ali.” The merging of the mythico-historical figure of “Ali” and the “I” of the poet (whose real name is indeed “Ali”) leaves the allusion open to mystery and draws closer attention to the essential dialectic between the figure of the poet and the figure of the prophet.¹²⁹ Pollard reminds us again of this interconnectedness in his speculation that the “world’s most spiritual utterance have been poetic, and the most poetic have been spiritual.”¹³⁰ After all, is it Adonis who calls himself “the pagan god” the one who “wrote the history/over the minaret (there is)”? Through the persona of *Mihyar*, Adonis’ association with his subject matter becomes explicit – *Mihyar* is a prophet, and this finds echoing resonance in Adonis himself as a poet.

Mihyar becomes the knight of new poetic diction and vocabulary, he exists in the “rough and magical [...] climate of new alphabet.”¹³¹ By “crawling under the rubble,” *Mihyar* engages in demolishing theological idols one by one, replacing them with new mystic encounters and human discoveries.¹³² *Mihyar* is a symbol of freedom; he strives to break man’s chain to divine gods and ideological tyrants. The poet and the prophet are “both restless under unjust laws [...]

¹²⁸ Khaled Mattawa, *Adonis: Selected Poems*, Introduction, 22.

¹²⁹ Weidner Stefan. “The Divinity of the Profane: Representations of the Divine in the Poetry of Adonis” in *Representations of the Divine in Arabic poetry*, 264.

¹³⁰ Edward B. Pollard, “The Prophet as a Poet,” 332.

¹³¹ Adonis, “King *Mihyar*” in *Songs of Mihyar of Damascus*.

¹³² Khaled Mattawa, *Adonis: Selected Poems*, Introduction, 12.

and meaningless customs; and each is a law unto himself.”¹³³ Just like the poet, the prophet has continuously fought against being doomed by limiting conventionalities and mere physical and temporary existence.

CONCLUSION:

Perhaps not the most-widely read contemporary poet, Adonis, through his poetic and theoretical endeavors, has paved the way for an unprecedented experimentation of lyrical innovation and thematic creativity. His poetic vision is deeply rooted in the process of change and adaptation enabling poetry to become more dynamic in both form and content. Adonis relentlessly asserts that poetry is not a craft or expression, but rather creation and vision; poetry is a living thing that responds to the diverse human experience. Through his unique poetic vision, Adonis creates a new Noah, a new Mihyar, and a new Arab who rejects the established conventions.

However, considering Adonis’ poetics of rejection and revolution since the establishment of *Shi’r* in the 1950s, it is quite compelling to not to question his most recent intellectual and political position on the ongoing Arab Spring. In an appearance on the Saudi-owned satellite channel, *al-Arabiyya* in 2007, the eighty-five-year-old revolutionary poet found no satisfaction when the vicious dictators of Tunisia and Egypt were uprooted; he described what has taken place as a mere “youthful rebellion,” suggesting its fruitlessness and imminent demise. We might want to expect the poet who spent years’ worth of imprisonment in Syrian prisons to celebrate the resilience of the unarmed citizens facing the bullets of a brutal region. Instead, in an *al-Hayat*

¹³³ Edward B. Pollard, “The Prophet as a Poet,” 334-35.

article, Adonis was dismissively pessimistic, rather than reaffirming Mihayr's revolutionary spirit and dream of freedom, Adonis's stance on the conflict revealed how detached he is from the lived reality of his people. Perhaps the Adonis of today is not the same cultural critic and radical intellectual we knew over the last two and a half decades; however, Adonis the poet, especially in his early years, will always be at the heart of the modern Arabic poetry. His poetic vision is overwhelmingly irrefutable, and his poems will always be read with much admiration and awe.

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