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A Vision of Modernity: Religion and Mysticism in the Poetry of Adonis

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Abstract

The Syrian poet Adonis, hailed as a leader of the Arabic modernist movement, has enjoyed near-universal renown in the Arabic-speaking world for more than half a century. His views on Islam and Arab culture, deemed controversial by many, have been reasonably well-studied, along with his contributions to Arabic modernism. However, much of the relevant literature draws primarily, if not exclusively, from his critical works. Direct analysis of his poetry largely centres around his most famous collection, *Songs of Mihyār the Damascene* (1961), or involves the exposition of single poems or excerpts in isolation from the broader corpus. This paper thus provides more extensive analysis of a wider selection of his poetry, making the argument that, despite his unremitting criticism of “religious” culture, or what I will refer to as “prescriptive orthodoxy,” the centrality of mysticism to his worldview can scarcely be overstated. Particularly from the mid-1960s onwards, while modernist themes—such as fertility, death, renewal, identity, and exile, among others—continue to prevail in his poetry, they are conceptualised with recourse to mystical cosmology and expressed through mystical terminology. Any comprehensive analysis of Adonis’s poetry must therefore explain this fundamental synthesis of modernism and mysticism which inevitably defines it.

Lay Summary

Adonis is the pen name of the Syrian poet Ali Ahmed Said Esber. As a leading figure of the Arabic modernist movement of the mid-20th century, he is much celebrated for his contributions to Arabic poetry, including his role in the introduction of the prose poem and his experimentation with meter, language, and imagery. He is also well-known for his views on Arab culture and religion, deemed controversial by many. Therefore, much of the available academic literature focuses either on his critical works, in which he articulates explicitly his criticism of culture and religion, and/or on his earlier poetry and the aforementioned contributions to modernism. However, given that he has been publishing poetry for over seven decades, and has been especially prolific, much of his poetry has been neither translated nor analyzed. Moreover, the mystical influence, which emerged in the 1960s and has become increasingly prevalent over time, has been largely absent from analysis. Therefore, while he often appears in the literature as both modernist and cultural critic, he is less often presented as a mystic, though this label, in a sense, explains the other two, because it explains the way in which he sees and understands existence on the most profound level. This paper analyzes excerpts from approximately twenty poems, published over the span of his career, making the argument that mysticism is the foundation upon which Adonis has built his understanding of the world and justified his modernist values, that this is reflected in his poetry, and, therefore, that any comprehensive analysis of his thought and/or his poetry must take this into account.

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INTRODUCTION

The name of the Syrian poet Adonis has long been familiar to the Arabic-speaking world. A leading figure of the twentieth-century Arabic modernist movement, he has published hundreds of poems over the course of more than seven decades. His work has been instrumental in the introduction to Arab poetry of free verse and the prose poem, and is distinctive for its experimentation with meter, language, and imagery, as well as its expression of characteristically modernist themes, such as humanism, individual freedom, creativity, and renewal. It is through this modernist lens that much of the extant literature considers Adonis's work, namely, the way in which it challenges, or even criticizes, the Arab literary heritage (*turāth*). Indeed, much of the literature either focuses its analysis on his earliest poetry, most notably, his collection *Songs of Mihyār the Damascene*, published in 1961, and/or on his critical works, in which his views on Arab culture and society are stated explicitly and thus offer themselves more readily for the reader's consumption.

The aim of this thesis is not to contradict the prevailing perception of Adonis as a modernist or critic of Arab culture, but rather to shift the dominant frame through which his thought and his poetry is understood. Therefore, instead of emphasizing his commitment to modernism and/or criticism of religious culture, it argues that one can only understand the scope and magnitude of his convictions in the context of the mystical orientation in which they are grounded. While this orientation has been present in his work from the beginning, it becomes increasingly prevalent over the course of his career. Any analysis of his poetry which focuses exclusively on his earliest works thus largely overlooks it, and any analysis of his thought which focuses exclusively on his critical works fails to appreciate the relationship between his mystical orientation and, in turn, his poetic language, which is directly informed and defined by it.

To this end, the thesis consists of five chapters, each of which offers analysis of Adonis's poetry through the lens of a particular theme central to Adonis's thought in relation to this broader argument. Chapter I addresses the theme of religion, defined by Adonis narrowly in the sense of religion as *fiqh*, or religious jurisprudence, making the argument that Adonis's opposition to religion stems from the conviction that it is intrinsically connected to violence. Chapter II addresses the theme of the state and its relationship to religion, arguing that Adonis views the state as responsible for perpetuating religious orthodoxy and imposing collective adherence to it in the interest of political power. Chapter III introduces the theme of "refusal,"

which constitutes one's rejection of the narrative imposed collectively by religious and political authorities, making the argument that this refusal is not merely a negative position, but a positive one, for it is as equally defined by the embrace of a mystical vision of existence as it is by the refusal of a religious one. Chapter IV, in turn, addresses the theme of madness as it appears in Adonis's poetry, defining it as a mystical state reflective both of refusal in the sense outlined above and of the mystical capacity for vision and gnosis which operates in the context of the creative imagination. Finally, Chapter V focuses on the theme of love, which is directly related to creativity, and which requires both mystical vision and imagination, making the argument that love in Adonis's poetry specifically indicates movement between the realm of the apparent (*al-zāhir*) and the realm of the hidden (*al-bāḥin*). Collectively, the arguments of these five chapters demonstrate both the inherent distinction Adonis draws between religion and mysticism, as well as the fundamental congruence he observes between mysticism and modernism.

The purpose of the following introduction is thus to establish a foundation upon which to understand the ideas and arguments made in subsequent chapters. It is divided into four sections, the first of which provides brief context with regard to recent history and the nature of criticism advanced by those who view his work as "anti-Arab," "anti-Islam," or even "anti-Sunni." The second section provides biographical information, tracing the trajectory of his life and career as it relates to the evolution of his thought. The third section focuses specifically on his understanding of Arab history and culture as articulated in his doctoral thesis *The Static and the Dynamic* in the early seventies, which is particularly important as it served to crystallize previously-held modernist ideas and integrate them into a conceptual framework. This framework, in turn, has largely defined his thought in the ensuing decades. Finally, the fourth section of the introduction will expand upon the conceptual framework, methodology, and aims of this thesis, as well as upon its relationship to relevant literature.

0.1 Criticism and the Syrian Civil War

While the name Adonis has long been familiar to inhabitants of the Arabic-speaking world as a leading figure in the Arabic modernist movement, the Syrian poet remained, until recently, largely unknown to Western audiences outside literary and/or academic circles. However, when protests broke out in Syria against the Assad regime in 2011, many took note of the failure of certain prominent Syrian intellectuals to speak out in support of the Syrian opposition. Among those who drew criticism for their reaction to the protests was Adonis, who

published an editorial in *Al-Hayat* on 26 May, 2011, by which time hundreds of protesters had died at the hands of regime forces, in which he reiterated a position he had expressed previously in interviews, namely, that he would “never agree to participate in a protest that comes out of a mosque.”¹ Statements like this led critics to accuse him not only of misrepresenting the nature of the protests, but of betraying the very principles of freedom and revolution he had for decades claimed to espouse.

In an article for *Al-Jazeera*, the Iraqi writer Sinan Antoon argued that Adonis’s failure to condemn the abuses of the Assad regime directly and unambiguously constituted a violation of the “radical and revolutionary culture” he once represented, a betrayal of those who were murdered by the regime simply for “calling for the freedom [he] once sang for.”² Similarly, in *Al-Hayat*, the Lebanese scholar Ridwan Al-Sayyid claimed that, despite having spent his entire life advocating for change, Adonis refused it when it came, simply because it did not conform to his conditions.³ The implication being made was that Adonis’s emphasis on secularism as a prerequisite for legitimate revolution blinded him to the reality of the historical moment and prejudiced him against the Syrian revolutionaries. Indeed, in another article published in the Egyptian paper *Al-Bashayer*, Al-Sayyid presented Adonis as hostile towards Islam writ large, stating that Adonis “has a long history of disguising hatred of Islam as intellectual theorization,” and criticizing Adonis and others for representing the situation in the Arab world as a “struggle between fundamentalism and enlightenment.”⁴

Others went a step further in their criticism, alleging, directly or indirectly, that Adonis’s position amounted to little more than poorly concealed sectarianism, this in reference to the Alawite background he shares with the Assad clan, as well as to the fact that he had initially voiced support for the Iranian revolution in 1979. Indeed, in an article in *Al-Arabiya*, the Syrian journalist Ahed Fadel argued that Adonis’s stated reluctance to support any protest that emerged from a mosque was self-contradictory, given that he had been “one of the fiercest supporters of the Iranian Khomeinist revolution.”⁵ Even more scathingly, the Egyptian poet

¹ Adonis, “Dix thèses sur les révoltes arabes actuelles,” *Printemps arabes: religion et revolution* (Paris: Éditions de La Différence, 2014), 84.

² Sinan Antoon, “Adunis, the revolutionary poet,” *Al Jazeera*, 11 July, 2011, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2011/7/11/adunis-the-revolutionary-poet/>.

³ Ridwan Al-Sayyid, “al-Muthaqqaf al-‘arabī wa ḥarakat al-taghyīr wa-l-zaman al-munqidhī,” *Al-Hayat*, 25 June, 2011, quoted in Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, “Critics and Rebels: Older Arab Intellectuals Reflect on the Uprisings,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 41, no. 1 (2014): 23.

⁴ Ridwan al-Sayyid, “al-Dīn wa ḥarakat al-taghyīr al-‘arabiyya,” *Al-Bashayer*, 5 August, 2011, <https://elbashayer.com/271438/149195/>.

⁵ Ahed Fadel, “Adūnis al-mu‘ajib bi-l-Khumaynī la yu‘ataraf bi-l-thawra al-sūriyya,” *Al-Arabiya*, 18 April, 2015, <https://bit.ly/3g2BxIU>.

Hasan Tilib stated in an interview with the literary journal *Akhbār al-Adab* that “it has been clear... since Khomeini’s revolution in the seventies that Adonis’s Shiite identity has acquired the upper hand, winning out over Adonis the modernist and man of enlightenment.”⁶ The late Syrian intellectual Sadiq Jalal al-‘Azm, Adonis’s former colleague at the literary journal *al-Mawaqif* and arguably his most prominent critic, similarly questioned, in an article published in *Al-Hayat*, how “the Adonis of freedom, transformation, revolution, progress, and modernity” managed to justify the “praise and glorification” with which he had received the Iranian revolution in light of his “evasiveness” and “ambiguity” regarding the more recent Syrian uprisings.⁷ In an interview with Dubai TV which aired only a few days after his article was published in *Al-Hayat*, al-‘Azm argued that, not only had Adonis supported the Iranian revolution—indeed, he conceded, many had at the time—he did so using “Shiite theological language.”⁸ In 2015, al-‘Azm doubled down on his criticism in an interview given to *Deutsche Welle Arabic*, expressing his dismay at what he perceived to be Adonis’s sudden abandonment in the late 1970s of “the values of freedom, creativity, change, equality, secularism, objectivity, and rationality,” values which he claimed Adonis traded in for a newfound inclination to make apologies for “totalitarian, sectarian obscurantism.”⁹ Hence, the argument being made by this group of critics was not that Adonis’s staunch adherence to secularism and/or hostility towards religion made him unsympathetic to the Syrian protestors, but rather that his purported concerns about secularism were, in fact, merely a cover for his own sectarian biases, which he had revealed decades earlier by aligning himself with the Shia-based revolution in Iran.

Robyn Creswell has argued that, contrary to the claims of his critics, Adonis’s support for the Iranian revolution, subsequently retracted, constituted a singular deviation from his commitment to the staunch secularism he evinced both in the earlier stages of his career as a member of the so-called “*Shi’r* modernists” and in the years afterwards.¹⁰ Therefore, Creswell suggests, Adonis’s criticism of the Syrian opposition was not exceptional, but reflective of the reversion to form which took place immediately following the revolution in Iran as a result of

⁶ Hasan Tilib, *Akhbār al-Adab*, 27 May, 2012, quoted in Robyn Creswell, *City of Beginnings: Poetic Modernism in Beirut* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 191.

⁷ Sadiq Jalal al-‘Azm, “Fī sha’n Adūnīs... ta’alluqan ‘ala rad Khalida Said,” *Al-Hayat*, 22 June, 2013, quoted in Robyn Creswell, *City of Beginnings: Poetic Modernism in Beirut* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 191.

⁸ Sadiq Jalal al-‘Azm, “Rad al-‘Azm ‘ala nīyumīdā al-shāri’ al-‘arabī hawl al-islām,” interview by Zeina Yazigi on Arab Street, Dubai TV, 25 June, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c54WkKYCqk8>.

⁹ Sadiq Jalal al-‘Azm, “al-Rabī’ al-‘arabī kashaf ‘an huwiyyat wa ‘aṣabiyyat taht waṭaniyya,” interview by Khaled Salaama, *DW Arabi*, 28 August, 2015, <https://bit.ly/3a2ALI2>.

¹⁰ Robyn Creswell, *City of Beginnings: Poetic Modernism in Beirut* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 200.

Adonis's disillusionment with the Khomeini regime. This is a view supported by Adonis's wife, Khalida Said, who responds to al-'Azm in an article published in *Al-Hayat*, in which she concedes that Adonis had been hopeful at the outset of the Iranian revolution, and yet maintains that this initial optimism was predicated on the perception that the movement was the type of comprehensive revolutionary movement that promised to lead to the achievement of genuine liberation for the individual, to justice, equality, dignity, and human freedom.¹¹ In other words, the explanation given by both Creswell and Said is that Adonis's experience of the Iranian revolution reinforced his conviction that only secularism could guarantee genuine freedom for the individual.

While this is undoubtedly the case, given Adonis's unwavering position on religion in the years post-1979, I would argue that one must situate Adonis's support for the Iranian revolution in the broader context of the development of his thought regarding Islamic history and Arab culture in order to understand more clearly the criticism of his detractors. Indeed, although Adonis's articulation of modernist values has remained remarkably consistent over the course of his career, his perspective on history and culture underwent a marked evolution between the early years of his career in Beirut as co-editor of the literary journal *Shi'r*—the primary focus of Creswell's study—and the late 1970s. This evolution transformed in critical ways not so much the values expressed in his poetry as the referential frame and manner of their expression. Despite his firm recommitment to secularism, Adonis has never disavowed the views on history and culture that he formulated in the late-1960s and early-1970s; in fact, they have informed his poetry perhaps more than anything else in the years since. And yet, it is arguably his adherence to these views rather than the mere fact of his insistence on secularism which both groups of critics find most objectionable in the current context, in the first case because they perceive therein a hostility towards religion, and in the second because they perceive an inherent bias in favor of Shi'ism which they interpret as the reason for his deviation from secularism in the first place.

0.2 The SSNP, *Shi'r*, and Adonis's Early Modernism

In order to understand more clearly the development of Adonis's thought on history and culture, to identify that which has remained constant and that which has evolved over time, it

¹¹ Khalida Said, "Radan 'ala Sadiq Jalal al-'Azm... fi sha'n Adūnīs," *Al-Hayat*, 17 May, 2013, bit.ly/4aFYF9j.

is useful to give some information on his background and outline briefly the various stages of his career. Adonis was born Ali Ahmad Said Esber into an Alawite family in the small mountain village of Al-Qassabin in northwestern Syria in 1930. He learned to read and write in a traditional *kuttāb* during his early childhood and received an informal education from his father, who introduced him to classical Arabic poetry.¹² It was at some point during his teenage years that he first began publishing poems under the pen name “Adonis,” though the way in which he came by this particular sobriquet remains unclear. By his own account, he chose the name himself after coming across the myth of Adonis and Aphrodite in a magazine, finding that newspapers which ignored poems written by Ali Ahmad Said were willing to publish those same poems when signed by Adonis.¹³ Moreover, he claims, the choice of this new name served the additional purpose of liberating him from the religious associations of his birth name, Ali, thus allowing him to exchange a preconceived religious identity for one with more humanistic connotations.¹⁴

On the other hand, there are sources which suggest that the name was bestowed upon him personally by Antoun Sa‘adeh, founder and leader of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), a controversial political group which eschewed the Arab nationalism of the era, advocating instead for secularism, the unity of Greater Syria, and its revival as a distinct civilization.¹⁵ Indeed, Franck Salameh notes that this is the claim made by none other than Sadiq al-‘Azm, who relates that the name was bestowed by Sa‘adeh in 1947 in response to a poetic tribute made by the young poet, who, Sa‘adeh claimed, served as a symbol of the Syrian nation’s “vigor,” “rebirth,” and “renewal.”¹⁶ Joseph Zeidan makes a similar argument, suggesting that Adonis, after being imprisoned briefly in Syria and subsequently distancing himself from the party in the mid-1950s, actively sought to obscure the origins of the name in an effort to strip it of any political implications and downplay his former political affiliations.¹⁷ In any case, despite the lack of clarity regarding the origin of his pseudonym, it is known that Adonis joined the SSNP during his teenage years and remained an active member until at least 1955, when he was arrested and imprisoned by Syrian government forces in a roundup of SSNP

¹² Adonis, *Identité inachevée* (Paris: Éditions du Rocher, 2004), 57.

¹³ Adonis, “There are many Easts in the East and many Wests in the West,” *Banipal* vol. 2 (1998), <https://www.banipal.co.uk/selections/16/162/adonis/>.

¹⁴ Adonis, *Identité inachevée*, 60.

¹⁵ Joseph Zeidan, “Myth and Symbol in the Poetry of Adūnīs and Yūsuf al-Khāl,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 10 (1979): 74.

¹⁶ Franck Salameh, “Adonis, the Syrian Crisis, and the Question of Pluralism in the Levant,” *Bustan: The Middle East Book Review* vol. 3 (2012): 44.

¹⁷ Zeidan, “Myth and Symbol,” 86.

members following the assassination of Colonel ‘Adnan Malki by a fellow member of the party.¹⁸ Upon his release from prison in 1956, Adonis left Syria permanently and settled in Beirut.

While Adonis’s move to Beirut was accompanied by a shift away from the Greater Syrian nationalist politics espoused by the SSNP, there is no doubt regarding the influence of Sa‘adeh’s ideology on Adonis’s poetry and that of his other colleagues at the literary journal *Shi‘r*, which he co-founded in 1957 with Yusuf al-Khal, another former member of the SSNP. As Muhsin al-Musawi notes, Adonis himself has cited Sa‘adeh’s book, *Intellectual Conflict in Syrian Literature*, as a foremost influence on his own thought during those early years.¹⁹ Sa‘adeh’s book, which called for a “recovery of native mythology, with its emphasis on cyclical regeneration and rebirth,” served as a precursor to the Tammuzi movement of the 1950s and early 1960s, a literary movement commonly associated with Adonis, al-Khal, and Khalil Hawi, along with other well-known pioneers of Arabic modernism, such as Badr al-Sayyab, Salah ‘Abd al-Sabur, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, and Tawfiq Sayigh.²⁰ The movement took its name from the Phoenician god of fertility, Tammuz—a precursor to the Greek god Adonis. Drawing on such disparate sources as Greek, Phoenician, and Babylonian mythology, various monotheistic narratives, and Western modernists like T.S. Eliot, the Tammuzi movement flourished in the 1950s, at a historical moment when the Arab world was still reeling from the Palestinian defeat of 1948. As Jabra Ibrahim Jabra notes, “a whole order of things had crumbled,” leaving in its wake the overwhelming sense of the need for regeneration.²¹

Thus, the figure of Tammuz, god of fertility and namesake of the movement, served as a symbol of strength and vitality restored to a barren land. Other popular symbols of the same theme included the phoenix—of which Adonis was particularly fond—Christ, and Husayn ibn ‘Ali, among others. It is not difficult, therefore, to see why much is often made of the similarities between Tammuzi poetry and, for instance, T.S. Eliot’s “The Wasteland.” As Jabra notes, both were written in the aftermath of a great catastrophe which had left in its wake a world in need of hope and revitalization—specifically, World War I for Eliot and WWII and the 1948 Palestinian defeat and exodus for the Tammuzi poets.²² Both envisioned myth as a means of locating the tragedy of their specific historical moment within the broader context of

¹⁸ Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 100.

¹⁹ Muhsin J. Al-Musawi, *Arabic Poetry: Trajectories of modernity and tradition* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 90.

²⁰ Al-Musawi, *Arabic Poetry*, 90.

²¹ Jabra I. Jabra, “Modern Arabic Literature and the West,” in *Critical Perspectives in Modern Arabic Literature*, ed. by Issa J. Boullata, (Washington D.C.: Three Continents Press, Inc., 1980), 14.

²² Jabra, “Modern Arabic Literature,” 14.

a universal story. Hence one of mankind's most enduring myths, namely, "the restoration of fertility to the dead land through the blood of the god," became the narrative through which man could make sense of the present moment and ultimately rebuild a fallen world.²³

While the similarities between Eliot and the Tammuzi poets are undeniable, one should nevertheless emphasize that Eliot's work, though often seen as a definitive influence on the Tammuzi movement and its use of indigenous mythology, is certainly not *the* definitive influence on the movement, particularly with regard to those Tammuzi poets who were members of the SSNP and later worked together at *Shi'r*. As Creswell notes, familiarity with Eliot among the *Shi'r* modernists came relatively late, and "any claim of association with his work should be viewed as a first step toward the repression of Sa'adeh's earlier and more profound intervention."²⁴ Indeed, in the aforementioned *Intellectual Conflict in Syrian Literature*, Sa'adeh had advocated the use of indigenous myth as a means of "de-provincializing Syrian poetry" and "[putting] Arabic poetry 'on the map of world literature,'" an ambition which survived the poets' affiliation with Sa'adeh and his party and heavily informed the modernist project they undertook while at *Shi'r*.²⁵ Indeed, the desire to revitalize Arabic poetry by entering it into dialogue with the literature of other cultures may be seen as one of the driving motivations behind the literary journal. To this effect, in a speech given in 1957, shortly after its inception, co-founder Yusuf al-Khal argued that "when approaching the European spiritual and intellectual heritage, every effort should be made to understand and react to it."²⁶ Furthermore, he argued, modern Arab poets "must not shy away from the achievements of poets elsewhere in the world as the old Arab poets had shied away from Greek literature, but should [instead] benefit from them."²⁷ Indeed, this idea of translation and cultural exchange, along with the shift away from traditional poetic forms and the emphasis on the experience of man as an individual, served as the foundation for the modernist project of the poets at *Shi'r*.

Shi'r was known for being both "militantly internationalist" and apolitical in its editorial stance, characterized by the aforementioned openness to foreign literature and ideas, as well as its disavowal of overtly political poetry.²⁸ Indeed, the very name of the journal, *Shi'r*,

²³ Jabra, "Modern Arabic Literature," 14.

²⁴ Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 66.

²⁵ Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 66.

²⁶ Salma Khadra Jayyusi, *Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry*, vol. 2 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1977), 571.

²⁷ Jayyusi, *Trends and Movements*, 571.

²⁸ Robyn Creswell, "Modernism in Translation: Poetry and Intellectual History in Beirut," in *Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age*, eds. Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 117-118.

or “poetry” in Arabic, may be understood implicitly, Creswell notes, as “Poetry—and only poetry.”²⁹ Disillusioned by their experience with the SSNP, the modernists at *Shi’r* took a sharp turn away from political nationalism. Yusuf al-Khal had publicly announced his decision to leave the party in a statement published in the Lebanese newspaper *Al-Nahar* in 1947, citing concerns regarding freedom of thought and Sa’adeh’s “dictatorial” control over the party, and Adonis had ceased any involvement after his imprisonment in Syria in 1955.³⁰ However, their avowed stance of apoliticality met with incredulity on the part of *Shi’r*’s rivals, many of whom never believed Adonis and al-Khal had truly relinquished their former affiliation with the SSNP and thus suspected them of anti-Arab sentiment. These included, most notably, the editors of the rival Beirut literary journal *Al-Ādāb*, as well as other pan-Arab intellectuals and proponents of the so-called “committed literature” movement, or *iltizām*, which rose to prominence in the mid-fifties, espousing principles of social realism and the view that writing serves a social function, to take sides, stand with the oppressed, and bear witness to the reality of their everyday lives.³¹

This notion proved divisive in literary circles; a schism developed between, on the one side, those who advocated the idea of *iltizām*, many of whom also supported Arab nationalism, and, on the other, those who rejected the prevailing discourse, convinced that “such an involvement would vulgarize and lower the standards of literature.”³² Jabra Ibrahim Jabra distinguishes between the two by use of the terms “commitment” and “rebellion,” respectively. While the former, he argues, is “directed outwards,” is “group-propelled” and thus inevitably “political” and “partisan,” the latter is primarily directed “towards one self and one’s own society,” propelled by the individual and “based on a moral and philosophical attitude... [which] aspires to effect a change in the lives of men as individuals.”³³ In other words, while commitment emphasized the need for collective action in engaging with the political exigencies of the present, rebellion emphasized the need for a “shift in fundamental attitudes and ways of thinking consonant with man’s freedom and dignity.”³⁴ In Beirut in the fifties and sixties, *Al-Ādāb* thus served as the preeminent publication for the advocates of *iltizām*; *Shi’r* served as a base for those in favor of rebellion.

²⁹ Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 8.

³⁰ Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 77.

³¹ Jayyusi, *Trends and Movements*, 579.

³² Jayyusi, *Trends and Movements*, 579.

³³ Jabra, “Modern Arabic Literature and the West,” 195.

³⁴ Jabra, “Modern Arabic Literature and the West,” 195.

As Creswell notes, the critics at *Al-Ādāb* viewed their adversaries at *Shi‘r* as rival nationalists, convinced they were still secretly affiliated with the SSNP and devoted to the cause of Greater Syria.³⁵ From their vantage point, the declaration of apoliticality on the part of al-Khal, Adonis, and *Shi‘r*’s other editors merely disguised their propaganda as a poetic program. For this reason, they consistently accused *Shi‘r* of undermining the Arab cultural and literary tradition, or *turāth*, by affording undue space to the publication of foreign texts in translation at the expense of the native literary tradition, the implication being that the *Shi‘r* modernists were “proxies of cultural imperialism.”³⁶ For the *Shi‘r* poets, the translation of foreign literature into Arabic was a crucial element in their project of poetic renaissance, which sought to modernize Arabic culture by entering it into conversation with the literature of other cultures. To this end, the journal routinely published Arabic translations of foreign poetry, most notably French and Anglo-American, but also Spanish, Italian, German, Iranian, and Turkish, among others.³⁷ Creswell makes the argument that, although *Shi‘r*’s critics were right to emphasize the significance of its affiliation to the SSNP, they were mistaken in their assumptions about the reasons for this significance.³⁸ In his view, writers at *Al-Ādāb* saw Adonis and his colleagues as advocates of a rival nationalism, antagonistic towards pan-Arabism, in large part “because the modernists’ real ideology was a historical novelty.”³⁹ Indeed, he maintains, the narrative of the *Shi‘r* group’s political inclinations was not one of concealed Syrian nationalism, but rather of a shift away from the SSNP towards “international modernism and mid-century liberalism.”⁴⁰

With regard to the allegations leveled at *Shi‘r* in relation to the literary heritage, the journal’s interest in *turāth*—Adonis’s in particular—was not destructive in nature, but rather revisionary. The modernists’ project involved profound engagement in what the French literary critic Pascale Casanova has referred to as “internal translation,” namely, a systematic process of curation and canonical revision of classical texts, which in turn results in the creation of a “counter-canon” to stand alongside the original one.⁴¹ Hence, the tradition is transmitted, albeit in a novel form which distinguishes it from the established narrative sanctioned by the state or other authorities. As Creswell notes, both the *Shi‘r* modernists and their leftist counterparts

³⁵ Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 53.

³⁶ Creswell, “Modernism in Translation,” 119.

³⁷ Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 15.

³⁸ Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 57.

³⁹ Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 57.

⁴⁰ Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 57.

⁴¹ Creswell, “Modernism in Translation,” 130.

engaged in revision of *turāth*, seeking to adapt it to the needs of the present.⁴² For this reason, both were regarded with antipathy and suspicion by the classicists who favored preservation of the heritage in its unaltered form. However, the two groups disagreed in their interpretations of the needs of the moment, which in turn “determined which legacies they strove to transmit.”⁴³ Moreover, while the modernists at *Shi‘r* largely valued internationalism, or the notion of a universal, human tradition, over what they perceived to be the more parochial national tradition, the pan-Arab writers at *Al-Ādāb* privileged the latter.⁴⁴ In other words, the charge leveled against the *Shi‘r* modernists by their rivals was not simply that they were destroying *turāth* by engaging in revision, but, more precisely, that they were destroying it by revising it in such a way as to dilute, or even strip it of, its Arab character.

In a recent interview, Adonis concedes that, even now, he “believe[s] in the essence of... Sa‘adeh’s ideology,” namely, the centrality of the land of Syria to the Syrian people, without regard for “sect, ethnicity, race, or religion,” as well as the influence on Syrian civilization of the “Greeks, Romans, and especially the Sumerians, Babylonians, and Phoenicians.”⁴⁵ However, he notes, as the Arabs were the most recent wave of influence, Syrians have become Syrian-Arab, and “the Arabic language is [their] culture.”⁴⁶ This last statement is important, as it is indicative of a shift that occurred in Adonis’s perspective sometime in the mid-1960s, leading to a breach in his relationship with fellow editor Yusuf al-Khal and his ultimate departure from *Shi‘r*. In 1963, Adonis’s name disappeared from the list of the journal’s editorial board. This corresponded roughly with his decision to begin signing his poems with his Arabic name, Ali Ahmed Said—with Adonis in parenthesis, leading Faddul to suggest that his departure may have stemmed from an ideological disagreement with al-Khal regarding the journal’s approach to heritage.⁴⁷ This is further substantiated in recent research by Basilius Bawardi, who claims that Adonis left the magazine along with several others due to an internal conflict along these lines.⁴⁸ While Adonis appeared to remain silent on this issue for some time, he confirms, in the same interview cited above, what had previously been speculation, namely, that he left *Shi‘r* because al-Khal and others in the group were unconvinced that Arabic

⁴² Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 152.

⁴³ Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 152.

⁴⁴ Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 30.

⁴⁵ Adonis, “I Have Been Born Three Times: An Interview with Adonis, Part I” interview by Huda Fakhreddine, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 22 June, 2022, <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/mqr/2022/06/adonis-interview/>.

⁴⁶ Adonis, “I Have Been Born Three Times: An Interview with Adonis, Part I.”

⁴⁷ Atif Yusuf Faddul, “A comparative study of the poetics of T.S. Eliot and Adonis.” *PhD Dissertation*, University of Pennsylvania (1988), 101.

⁴⁸ Basilius Bawardi, *The Magazine Shi‘r and the Poetics of Modern Arab Poetry* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang GmbH, 2019), 17.

modernism need orient itself in relation to the Arabic language, tradition, and context.⁴⁹ Indeed, Adonis's increased engagement with the cultural heritage at that time is evident. While his earlier works had largely disregarded the Arab heritage in favor of the mytho-historical themes characteristic of the Tammuzi movement, it was primarily Adonis in his later years at the journal who undertook the aforementioned project of canonical revision. Most of the classical texts published in *Shi'r* were curated and edited by Adonis himself and subsequently published in his three-volume *Diwan of Arabic Poetry* between 1964 and 1968.

In 1968, Adonis founded his own literary journal, *Mawaqif*, which ultimately became associated with the New Arab Left. This corresponded with what Creswell deems "a shift in rhetoric as well as intellectual alliances."⁵⁰ Indeed, the direction of the journal, which remained in publication until 1994, reflected the political realignment that had taken place following the Arab defeat in the Six-Day War of 1967.⁵¹ As Nadia Wardeh notes, Adonis, like many other intellectuals of the era, sought to address the underlying reasons behind the Arab defeat.⁵² As a result, his writing during this period acquired a more explicitly political character and found him increasingly linked to the type of leftist intellectuals who had formerly been rivals during his time at *Shi'r*, including Sadiq al-'Azam.⁵³ Whereas *Shi'r* had largely avoided overt political discussions on its pages, *Mawaqif* devoted much space to discussion of the various political, religious, and social ills plaguing Arab society and proposed revolutionary means of addressing them.⁵⁴ Significantly, the name of the journal points to Adonis's increased interest in mysticism as a point of historical and cultural reference, taken as it was from the name of a collection by the 10th-century Sufi poet al-Niffarī (d. 965 CE), whose influence on Adonis's thought and poetry beginning in the mid-1960s has been profound. As Adonis writes in *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, he regards al-Niffarī's writing as "a complete break with tradition in its various forms and manifestations," thus constituting a renewal "of Arab creative energy and the language of poetry."⁵⁵ He identifies al-Niffarī, along with such poets as Abū Nuwās (d. 814 CE) and Abū Tammām (d. 845 CE), as historical precedents for the contemporary problematic of *ḥadātha*, or poetic modernity, which, he claims, relates in Arab society not merely to poetry,

⁴⁹ Adonis, "I Have Been Born Three Times: An Interview with Adonis, Part II" by Huda Fakhreddine, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 1 July, 2022, <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/mqr/2022/06/i-have-been-born-three-times-an-interview-with-adonis/>.

⁵⁰ Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 181.

⁵¹ Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 182.

⁵² Nadia M. Wardeh, "From 'Ali Ahmad Sa'id to Adonis: A Study of Adonis' Controversial Position on Arab Cultural Heritage (*turāth*)," *Asian Culture and History* vol. 2, no. 2 (2010): 195.

⁵³ Wardeh, "From 'Ali Ahmad Sa'id to Adonis," 195.

⁵⁴ Wardeh, "From 'Ali Ahmad Sa'id to Adonis," 110.

⁵⁵ Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, translated by Catherine Cobham (London: Saqi Books, 1990), 63.

but to culture and society more broadly.⁵⁶ Historically, he argues, “the modern in poetry [has] 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”; as a result, “in Arab life, the poetic has always been mixed up with the political and the religious, and indeed continues to be so.”⁵⁷

0.3 *The Static and the Dynamic*, Prescriptive Orthodoxy, and Mysticism

The way in which Adonis perceives the aforementioned relationship between poetry, politics, and religion in Arab history and culture is critical to understanding his controversial views on *turāth*, or the cultural heritage. These views were solidified in the early 1970s in the form of his doctoral dissertation, completed at Saint Joseph University in Beirut between 1970 and 1973 and later published in four volumes under the title *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutahawwil* (*The Static and the Dynamic*) between 1974 and 1978. In the 20th century, debate on the nature and value of the cultural heritage among Arab intellectuals was widespread. On the one hand, there were those who believed it absolutely vital that the heritage be preserved in its pure, unadulterated form, in order to stave off the threat posed to Arab identity by modernization and globalization. On the other were those who feared a lack of change would serve only to isolate Arabs from the rest of the world and curtail any hope of progress; Adonis falls squarely in this latter camp.

In *The Static and the Dynamic*, he contends that there have historically been two currents running through Arab culture and society. The first is what he deems the “static” trend, which is the dominant, more orthodox one, often perpetuated by those in power; the second is the “dynamic” trend, which he associates with revolutionary elements and whose proponents have routinely been suppressed by those in power. He explicitly links the static tendency in Arab culture to religion, namely, the primacy afforded the Qur’an as a product of divine revelation and the predominant manner of its interpretation. Given that Arab society has historically looked to revelation rather than reason as its ultimate source of truth and knowledge, he argues, Arab culture inclines towards conformity and imitation (*itbā’*) rather than innovation and creativity (*ibdā’*). Moreover, the static, in his view, is associated with “the manner of thought based on the text, which takes the fixity of the text as evidence of fixity in terms of understanding and evaluation, imposing itself as the sole correct meaning of the text,

⁵⁶ Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 76.

⁵⁷ Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 76.

and, on that basis, ascribing to itself cognitive authority.”⁵⁸ The dynamic trend, on the other hand, is associated with “the manner of thought, also based on the text, which nevertheless through interpretation (*ta’wīl*) renders the text amenable to adaptation in response to existent reality and its renewal, seeing in the text no authority and relying principally on reason rather than transmission.”⁵⁹ In other words, the static trend considers the text infallible and immutable, adopts as valid a single, fixed interpretation of the text, and institutes its own authority on the basis of that interpretation. The dynamic trend, by contrast, while it may indeed make reference to the text, does not consider the text immutable and thus does not rely on a political or religious authority for its meaning.

The primacy of the static has therefore historically been reinforced through what may be referred to as “prescriptive orthodoxy” or “prescriptive authority,” namely, religious orthodoxy which confers upon itself the authority to enforce prescriptions and proscriptions, coercing submission and ensuring conformity through the operation and in the interest of political power.⁶⁰ As a result, he argues, the predominant mentality in Arab culture is one excessively oriented around a particular conception of God which separates the human from the divine. Perhaps most importantly, the preoccupation with fixed meaning, he maintains, comes at the expense of the unknown and the unchartered, and, as such, is inherently antithetical to modernity, which relies on creativity and transgression. As Issa Boullata notes, Adonis’s vision of modernity entails “a continuous and endless struggle to transcend oneself, to go beyond the accepted and known world, [and] therefore to revolt against prevailing conditions and practices in order to destroy them and create new and better ones.”⁶¹ It is for this reason that Adonis identifies the dynamic, or heterodox, as the modernizing trend in Arab history.

In the context of the literary heritage, Adonis aims to foreground those figures in Arab history who sought to challenge prescriptive orthodoxy through acts of creation, innovation, transformation, refusal, and rebellion in order to establish a counter-canon which undermines the dominant version of the heritage promoted and perpetuated by the state. Such a counter-

⁵⁸ Adonis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutahawwil* vol. 1 (London: Saqi Books, 2002), 13.

⁵⁹ Adonis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutahawwil* vol. 1, 13-14.

⁶⁰ I have borrowed this term from Shahab Ahmed, who defines it as the license to prescribe and proscribe to another as a means of maintaining order in this world, in contrast to its counterpart, explorative authority, which confers the license to explore and to question for oneself, in pursuit of the higher truths accessible in the unseen realm. See Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 282.

⁶¹ Issa J. Boullata, “Review Essay. Adonis: Towards a New Arab Culture,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 20, no. 1 (1988): 111.

canon serves as a rectification of the historical narrative, he argues, for those who contributed to the richness of Arab civilization have routinely been subjected to banishment, condemnation, imprisonment, or execution by religious and/or political authority, with the result that the conventional narrative has been “completely fabricated,” often ascribing said richness instead to the very sources responsible for cultural stagnation and devitalization.⁶² While it is true that the political movements he identifies as revolutionary are primarily Shi‘a, this is, he argues, due to the fact that power was typically held by the Sunni.⁶³ This does not, however, preclude the inclusion of Sunni individuals as progressive or heterodox, such as the caliph Umar bin ‘Abd al-Azīz (d. 720 CE), or various mystics, poets, and philosophers commonly believed to be Sunni.

It is therefore not the case, as some of his critics argue, that he is anti-Arab or even anti-Islam; rather he sees Arab civilization as stagnating due to a prevailing reading of Islam which asserts its authority to the exclusion of others and thus limits the potential for change. A casual reader of Adonis’s work might misinterpret his criticism of prescriptive orthodoxy as a criticism of religion writ large; indeed, use of the term “prescriptive orthodoxy” is mine, while he most often refers simply to “religion” as shorthand in his writing on the subject. However, it is important to keep two things in mind when reading his work: first, he makes no claim regarding the right of an individual to private religious convictions, whatever they may be, and, second, he typically uses the term “religion” to mean religion in the narrow sense of *fiqh*, that is, religion as a juridical institution, which prescribes and proscribes on the basis of a human interpretation of divine law and for the purposes of political power. Indeed, for Adonis, religious orthodoxy in the Arab context has traditionally amounted to the enforcement of *fiqh*, thus “annihilat[ing] the rights of the individual through recourse to the idea of the licit and the illicit, setting limits to the very idea of freedom and tracing the conditions for knowledge.”⁶⁴

More specifically, in the modern context, Adonis associates religious orthodoxy with the Wahhabi brand of political Islam, which he regards as currently dominant in the Arab world and a direct inheritance of the conflicts over succession which took place following the death of the Prophet. In an interview given in 2016 as publicity for a recently published book on the subject, he specifies this explicitly, stating that “the reigning interpretation of Islam today is

⁶² Adonis and Houria Abdelouahed, *Violence and Islam* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 149.

⁶³ Adonis, “Adonis, poète mystique et Libanais par choix,” interview by Hind Darwich, *L’Orient Littéraire*, November 2006, https://lorientlitteraire.com/article_details.php?cid=6&nid=6090.

⁶⁴ Adonis, *Violence and Islam*, 64.

the Wahhabi one, which has institutionalized itself.”⁶⁵ Moreover, in the prologue of said book, he writes that “the death of the Prophet Muḥammad was followed by the founding of the first caliphate and the transformation of Islam into a political regime,” as the result of which “Islam became an ideological war, and the Qur’an was interpreted according to these conflicts of interest.”⁶⁶ He thus maintains that “the Islam of today is this historical Islam” and that his book serves as criticism “purely about this political Islam that has existed since the first caliphate to the present day.”⁶⁷ Adonis’s criticism of religion is thus directed at this particular, politicized form of religion, which he perceives as predominant in Arab history and culture and associates with literalism, exotericism, prescription, submission, conformity, imitation, and stasis.

Importantly, given this definition, Adonis’s thought does not subsume mysticism under the category of religion; rather, he posits mysticism, with its emphasis on experiential knowledge, as inherently antithetical to religion, associating it, in turn, with metaphor, esotericism, exploration, freedom, innovation, creativity, and dynamism. Indeed, he argues, Sufism constituted a cognitive revolution within Islam, insofar as it conceived of God not merely as the creator of the universe, but as the created universe itself, which is to say, part of existence rather than separate and distinct from it.⁶⁸ Mysticism thus invites man to delve deeper into existence itself in his search for unity with God, thus embodying, in contrast to prescriptive authority, what may be deemed “explorative authority,” that is, the individual’s right to explore and to question, to probe for himself the nature of reality and the limits of knowledge.⁶⁹ For this reason, Adonis maintains that Sufism does not of necessity entail either “belief in traditional religion” or “traditional belief in religion.”⁷⁰ Indeed, Adonis refers to himself as a “pagan mystic,” combining emanationist mystical cosmology as exemplified in the works of Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240 CE) with an emphasis on modernist and humanist values. The notion of a hidden realm (*al-bāṭin*), distinct from the apparent (*al-ẓāhir*) and infinite in its mysteries, is central to his conception of the world and, by extension, his conception of language and poetry.

Furthermore, this emphasis on the dialectic of the hidden and the apparent, along with his commitment to modernist themes of renewal and transformation and his eschewal of definitive truth, logically ally with the promotion of esoteric interpretation (*ta’wīl*) as a hermeneutical approach in relation both to sacred and non-sacred texts. While *ta’wīl* is

⁶⁵ Adonis, “Author Adonis on latest book *Violence and Islam*,” interview by Maria Magnusson on Babel, STV News, 6 October, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T90Cy_jFfAA.

⁶⁶ Adonis, *Violence and Islam*, vii.

⁶⁷ Adonis, *Violence and Islam*, vii.

⁶⁸ Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism* (London: Saqi Books, 2005), 8.

⁶⁹ See Footnote 60.

⁷⁰ Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 7.

traditionally associated more closely with Shi‘ism than with Sunnism, it is also closely associated with Sufism, and Adonis’s treatment of it is decidedly mystical in its orientation. Indeed, charges of sectarianism made against him in relation to the Iranian revolution stem largely from a misunderstanding of his orientation towards these ideas, which they mistakenly attribute to an affinity for Shi‘ism rather than for Sufism. There is, of course, some overlap between the two, which Adonis himself acknowledges:

The Sufi experience, in its deepest and most complete form, is connected to the experience of the Hidden Imam. This latter experience is based on transcending written history because it is directed towards the future and awaits the coming; on transcending the comprehensible apparent in teachings and beliefs because it is directed towards the interior realm and concerned with its hidden meaning; and on transcending logic and its rulings because it emanates from prophecy and the esoteric science.

Although Muḥammad’s prophecy is the end of prophecy, it is only the end of external, apparent prophecy, for what completes it internally is the imamate or guardianship. Guardianship, in this sense, is the essence of prophecy. Prophecy, in other words, is the law, while guardianship is the truth... The imamate is the continuous divine presence which prevents the objectification of truth into institutions, traditions, and legislation, thus turning it into a moribund shell. Stopping at the surface of the text leads to this objectification, and religion devolves into ritual forms of worship and transaction, as is the case in the jurisprudential perspective.

Hence, saying what is hidden gives religion endless movement, because it becomes, from the Sufi perspective, movement in the direction of what is endless. The difference between religion in the exoteric jurisprudential perspective, and religion in the mystical, Sufi perspective is like the difference between the water rising on the surface of the sea and the movement of water exploding in its depths.... [for] the hidden has no end. It cannot be limited by a single image, or rather cannot be limited by images at all.⁷¹

This passage from *The Static and the Dynamic* has been cited at length because it contains the ideas for which Adonis is criticized by Sadiq al-‘Azm and others, specifically those of prophecy and guardianship. First, it is important to note that this passage appears in the context of a broader discussion of Sufism; reference to the imamate serves as an illustration of what Adonis presents principally as a mystical concept, namely, the dialectic of the hidden and apparent. Second, Adonis’s conception of this dialectic—and, by extension, of the notions of prophecy and guardianship—does not entail belief in the supernatural, as it is traditionally understood; indeed, he regards mysticism as entirely compatible with the natural world and prophecy as the purview not merely of the divinely-ordained, but of any creative visionary. The emphasis here is thus not so much on the legitimacy of the guardian—especially as manifested in Iran post-revolution—but rather on the conceptual framework which affords room for transformation of the apparent in accordance with differing interpretations of the hidden, in other words, that which is conducive to renewal and modernization. Adonis attributes his initial support to the revolution to the fact that it was carried out entirely by the Iranian people themselves against dictatorial oppression, across class divides and without foreign

⁷¹ Adonis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil* vol. 2 (London: Saqi Books, 2002), 97-98.

intervention, thus constituting an “unprecedented historical phenomenon.”⁷² While one might speculate about the extent to which this support was predicated on his perception of the potential regime’s espousal of his own values, the irrefutable fact is that he retracted his support almost immediately after the Khomeini regime assumed power, revealing itself to be precisely the sort of orthodoxy he abhorred and thus instilling in him the lasting conviction that religion, when wedded to the power of the state, inevitably institutes itself as prescriptive authority.

0.4 Conceptual Framework and Methodology

The mystical notion of the hidden and the apparent has served as the basis for Adonis’s approach to poetic language and his modernist project of renewal and transformation since the mid-1960s. In *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, first published in Arabic in 1971, he writes that “the epistemological system which was built upon religion (jurisprudence and theology) on the one hand, and language (grammar and rhetoric) on the other, also made an unequivocal division between poetry and thought.”⁷³ And yet, he argues, the original meaning of the Arabic verb “*sha‘ara*,” from which the word “poetry” (*shi‘r*) derives, is not “to feel,” but “to know, understand, and perceive”; hence poetry is itself a form of thought, a means of knowledge.⁷⁴ Thus the modern or “creative text” is one which “transcends [the aforementioned] epistemological systems and their theories” and “achieves in its structure and its vision an organic relationship between poetry and thought.”⁷⁵ Moreover, it employs metaphor and figurative language, releasing words from their accepted meanings, thus producing divergences in understanding, opinion, and evaluation and precluding definitive answers.⁷⁶ In relation to mystical poetry, specifically, metaphor serves as “a bridge connecting the seen and the unseen,” the mechanism by which the mystic, through the continuous destruction and creation of forms, penetrates the unknown.⁷⁷

In Adonis’s view, therefore, a poem is modern to the extent that it reflects a spirit of creativity, that is, to the extent that it displays a willingness to break with dominant epistemic and aesthetic structures. The revolutionary content of a text is directly tied to the way in which it employs language. In other words, for writing to reflect creativity and engender change, it must shift from the use of the “old” language, in which the meanings of words are inherited

⁷² Adonis, “I Have Been Born Three Times: An Interview with Adonis, Part II.”

⁷³ Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 56.

⁷⁴ Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 57-58.

⁷⁵ Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 59.

⁷⁶ Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 71.

⁷⁷ Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 73.

and therefore pre-existent, to a “modern” language, in which words are emptied of their traditional, familiar meanings.⁷⁸ This philosophy of language, which Adonis associates with the tradition of mystical writing, is applied in his own poetry not merely to recapture the language from religious orthodoxy, but also, particularly beginning in the mid- to late-1960s, to express mystical cosmological ideas in the service of modernism. Some argue that Adonis’s approach to language fails him precisely because the departure from the traditional usage of language is too great, resulting in a state of total ambiguity and obscurity, where the reader is unable to extract any meaning from the text at all. Abdul Sattar Jawad makes this argument; referring to Adonis’s poetic language as “Adonisian gobbledygook” and “language anarchy,” he claims that “there is a consensus that Adonis is the champion of ambiguity, linguistic fallacy, and bizarre sentence construction.”⁷⁹ While Jawad rightly attributes these characteristics in large part to Adonis’s adoption of Sufi terminology and symbolic language, he fails to note that recognition of this association in fact serves as the means by which to decipher that which presents on first read as seemingly so anarchic and obscure.

Indeed, the apparent obscurity of Adonis’s poetry, particularly after his departure from *Shi‘r* when mysticism becomes a more central element therein, has resulted in a lack of engagement with it in the academic literature relative to his critical works and his earlier poetry. Indeed, most studies of Adonis relate to his views on *turāth*, including, most notably, those by Issa Boullata, who has published extensively on the subject, or to his contribution to Arabic modernism in the years during and immediately following his time at *Shi‘r*, including, most notably, those by M.M. Badawi, Basilius Bawardi, Robyn Creswell, Salma Jayyusi, and Muhsin al-Musawi. Direct analysis of his poetry largely centers around his most famous collection, *Songs of Mihyār the Damascene* (1961), or involves the exposition of single poems in isolation from the broader corpus. Significantly, however, while some studies acknowledge his use of mystical language and/or engage with the mystical ideas presented in his critical works, there exists no extensive, direct analysis of his poetry through a specifically mystical lens. For this reason, his critical views on Islam and the Arab cultural heritage are reasonably well understood, as well as his promotion of modernist themes, such as fertility, death, renewal, and transformation. Less understood is the decidedly mystical orientation of his modernist vision, that is, the way in which mystical cosmology informs his conceptualization of these

⁷⁸ Adonis, Nancy Berg, and Nur Elmessiri, “Language, Culture, Reality,” *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 7 (1987): 116.

⁷⁹ Abdul Sattar Jawad, *T.S. Eliot in Baghdad: A Study in Eliot’s Influence on the Iraqi and Arab Free Verse Movement* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press Ltd., 2014), 252-253.

modernist themes and the epistemological structures through which they operate, as well as the way in which this manifests in the context of his poetry. Without this understanding, however, one finds it easier to associate Adonis with a negative vision than with a positive one; in other words, one sees more easily what he seeks to destroy than what he seeks to create, for his criticism of religion and prescriptive authority is more readily accessible upon first read than his promotion of mysticism.

This thesis thus provides more extensive analysis of a wider selection of his poetry, making the argument that, despite his unremitting criticism of religious culture, or “prescriptive orthodoxy,” the centrality of mysticism to his worldview can scarcely be overstated. Particularly from the mid-1960s onwards, while modernist themes continue to prevail in his poetry, they are largely conceptualized with recourse to mystical cosmology and expressed through mystical terminology. Any comprehensive analysis of Adonis’s poetry must therefore explain the fundamental synthesis of modernism and mysticism which inevitably defines his positive vision.

I have organized my analysis into five chapters according to the themes I consider most illustrative of Adonis’s poetic message. Chapter I addresses Adonis’s criticism of religion, particularly with regard to its capacity to foment violence. Chapter II focuses on his criticism of political authority and its relationship to religion in the Arab context. Collectively, therefore, Chapters I and II serve as an analysis of Adonis’s criticism of the two pillars of prescriptive authority, what may be considered his negative vision or that which he seeks to extirpate from Arab culture in the interest of modernization. In approaching these two themes, I have selected for analysis excerpts from a number of poems, ranging from the earliest stages of his career to the most recent, primarily to demonstrate the consistency of his message in this respect over time. Chapter III centers on the theme of refusal, or *rafd*, which may be understood as Adonis’s posture of rebellion in relation to prescriptive authority. The three poems selected for analysis in this chapter illustrate the poet’s “internal translation” of traditional narratives from the cultural heritage, as well as, in the case of the latter two, the introduction of mystical concepts into that translation as a framework for conceptualizing and promoting modernist values. Chapter IV, in turn, addresses the theme of madness, which Adonis depicts as a state of refusal combined with creative vision. In this chapter, I have included a section of analysis on Adonis’s use of madness as a poetic theme in *Songs of Miḥyār the Damascene*, as well as analysis of two poems from later collections, to illustrate the way in which, as the mystical orientation of his work solidifies, his conception of vision is increasingly informed by the mystical notion of the creative imagination. Chapter V, the final chapter, focuses on love, a theme which rarely

appears in his earliest works, at least by that name, but which emerges, due to the mystical influence, as largely equivalent to creativity, the theme most fundamental to his message.

My analysis incorporates approximately twenty of Adonis's poems, chosen from multiple collections and decades, some of which have been previously translated into English and some of which have not. Given the scope of Adonis's poetic corpus, I have selected poems based on the immediate relevance of their content to the themes outlined in the previous paragraph. Moreover, given that many of Adonis's poems are dozens, if not hundreds, of pages long, I have isolated specific lines and/or verses for analysis in order to illustrate the relevant concepts. In order to justify the poetic analysis, I have supplemented it with reference to secondary literature, including critical works and statements made in interviews by Adonis himself, as well as other academic and literary sources. I have also supplemented it with extensive reference to the ideas of Ibn 'Arabī, upon which Adonis structures much of his thought, particularly through the incorporation of studies conducted on Ibn 'Arabī by William Chittick and Henry Corbin. The number of Adonis's poems published in translation is small relative to the scope of his overall corpus, comprising, most notably, the collection *Songs of Mihyār the Damascene* (2019), translated by Kareem James Abu-Zeid and Ian Eubanks; the collection *A Time Between Ashes and Roses* (2004), translated by Shawkat M. Toorawa; *Adonis: Selected poems* (2010), translated by Khaled Mattawa, which features a sample of poems drawn from various collections; *If Only the Sea Could Sleep* (2003), translated by Kamal Boullata and Mirène Ghossein, which similarly features poems selected from multiple collections; and the long poem *Concerto al-Quds* (2017), also translated by Khaled Mattawa.

In my analysis, however, all translations are my own; while, in some cases, the available translations accurately reflect the inherent mystical influence of the original Arabic, in others, it has been obscured or overlooked in the service of fluidity or accessibility for the reader. Therefore, I have attempted in my translations to emphasize this influence by choosing the appropriate word in English, even if it detracts from the fluidity of the text, explaining and/or contextualizing it where necessary, and being consistent in my choice across analyses so as to highlight for the reader the consistency within Adonis's own use of language. Where my translation has been informed by that of others, however, I have indicated this in the relevant footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, my translations are based on the Arabic versions of Adonis's poems found in *Adūnīs: al-A'māl al-shi'riyya al-kāmila (Adonis: The Complete Poetic Works)*, published in eight volumes by Dar al-Saqi between 2012 and 2015. In the transliteration of Arabic words and phrases, I have followed the transliteration system of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (IJMES).

CHAPTER ONE

Religion: Ideology & Violence

*I see the mosque and the church as executioners and the earth as a rose.*⁸⁰

Introduction

In 2014, at the height of the Syrian Civil War, Adonis gave an interview to *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs* in which he claimed that the Arab Spring had “betrayed the spirit of the revolution.”⁸¹ The failure of the Arab Spring to bring about meaningful change, as well as its devolution into violence, served as further evidence, in his view, that “we can’t carry out a revolution with religion.” Indeed, he argued, “we must carry out a revolution *against* religion.” Those familiar with Adonis’s work will understand that his condemnation of religion does not extend to the right of the individual to his personal faith. “The practice of faith and religion,” he states, “is for the individual an incontestable right which I respect and defend.”⁸² His condemnation is directed rather at religion as *fiqh*, which forces the individual to behave in accordance with the prescriptions imposed by religious orthodoxy on the entire community. Therefore, it is a criticism of prescriptive orthodoxy, which, Adonis believes, is particularly prevalent in Arab-Islamic culture, promoting a single, fixed interpretation of scripture and, by extension, of God and of truth. This interpretation, he argues, evinces a sharp distinction between man and God, relegating the former to a position of mere servility vis-à-vis the latter. Moreover, insofar as it assumes that revelation has ended and that the highest virtue may be found through emulation of the Prophet and his companions, that is, through behaving in accordance with norms and laws established centuries ago, Adonis believes religious orthodoxy encourages man to look to the past rather than the future, to the text as foremost authority rather than to nature, thus promoting imitation and conformity over creativity and innovation. For these reasons, he holds it responsible for what he perceives as the stagnation of Arab culture. Religion, he maintains, was an invention of man, created to serve man, and yet, it is now man who serves religion.

While Adonis’s focus is primarily on Islam, given his own background, his criticism extends to monotheism more broadly. “The dominant religious reading of monotheistic

⁸⁰ Adonis, *al-A‘māl al-shi‘riyya al-kāmila* vol. 2 (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2013), 332.

⁸¹ Adonis, “Age of Darkness,” interview by Jonathan Randal and Scott MacLeod, *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, Spring 2014, <https://www.thecairoreview.com/q-a/age-of-darkness/>.

⁸² Adonis, “Dix thèses sur les révoltes arabes actuelles,” 84.

revelation,” he asserts, “promotes an image... of God in which He appears to know nothing of the infinitude hidden in man and in the universe.”⁸³ Due to its emphasis on singularity, he argues, monotheism and violence are closely intertwined, for such singularity of vision almost inevitably leads to the aforementioned restrictions on freedom of thought and the imposition of conformity. Indeed, he insists, “all notion of the illicit connotes violence.”⁸⁴ Furthermore, a mentality that imposes conformity promotes violence not only by restricting the rights of the individual, but also by advancing an exclusionist notion of identity based on ideology at the expense of alterity. In other words, it encourages one to regard those whose beliefs differ from the accepted beliefs of one’s own group as different *in essence* from oneself and thus to treat them accordingly. Herein, Adonis maintains, lies the basis for the sectarian violence which has troubled the Arab world, namely, the emphasis on collective as opposed to individual identity, on ideological narrative as opposed to natural humanity. This is a problem which he claims stems from the “certitudes” and “absolute and infallible imperatives” of religious orthodoxy, for, under the dominion of such orthodoxy, “man dies and is replaced by doctrine.”⁸⁵ Instead of representing enquiry and pursuit, truth becomes “prejudices” and “property,” and “the first meaning of existence” is represented by a war, the slogan of which is “Be as I am, or I will kill you.”⁸⁶ Adonis identifies a solution to the problems posed by religious orthodoxy in the modernist ideals of humanism and individualism, as well as in mysticism’s emphasis on gnostic knowledge and on the notion of God as immanent in nature.

This chapter will thus provide an analysis of relevant excerpts from several poems written and published between 1970 and 2012. It is divided into four sections, each of which corresponds to a particular collection or poem. The first is a collection published in 1970, entitled *A Time Between Ashes and Roses*, largely viewed as Adonis’s response to the Arab defeat in the 1967 Six-Day War. The second is the collection *Book of the Siege*, which was written during the Lebanese Civil War of the seventies and eighties. The third is the three-volume *Al-Kitāb*, published between 1995 and 2002, in which Adonis reconstructs Arab-Islamic history in the centuries immediately following the death of the Prophet. Finally, the long poem *Jerusalem Concerto*, published in 2012, highlights the violence incurred upon the world by monotheism. Collectively, analyses of these poems address the theme of religion in Adonis’s poetry and reflect his principal criticisms of it, making the argument that Adonis

⁸³ Adonis, *Identité inachevée*, 12.

⁸⁴ Adonis, *Identité inachevée*, 14.

⁸⁵ Adonis, “Un bouquet de nénuphars pour les places de la libération arabes,” *Printemps arabes: religion et révolution* (Paris: Éditions de La Différence, 2014), 50.

⁸⁶ Adonis, “Un bouquet de nénuphars,” 50.

identifies religious orthodoxy with the curtailment of individual liberty and freedom of thought, the promotion of conformity, the subordination of nature and experience to ideological narrative, and, finally, the cultural stagnation and sectarian violence which he perceives as the inevitable result of these prior tendencies.

1.1 The 1967 War and *A Time between Ashes and Roses*

In 1970, Adonis published *Waqt bayna al-ramād wa-l-ward* (*A Time between Ashes and Roses*), a collection comprised of two long poems, respectively titled “Muqaddima li-tārīkh mulūk al-ṭawā’if” (“Introduction to the History of Petty Kings”) and “Hadha huwa ismī” (“This Is My Name”).⁸⁷ While subsequent editions of the collection have included a third long poem, “Qabr min ’ajl Nū Yūrk” (A Grave for New York), it is the two that were included in the initial publication which have largely been regarded as Adonis’s response to the Arab defeat in 1967 at the hands of Israel. As Issa Boullata has argued, the 1967 *naksa*, or setback, in which Israel defeated a coalition of Arab forces in a matter of merely six days and seized control of all remaining Palestinian territories, occasioned a great deal of self-examination and self-criticism in the Arab world.⁸⁸ Much as the 1948 *nakba* had led Arab intellectuals to reflect on the state of Arab society and account for its role in the loss of Palestine in decades past, so did the Six-Day War of 1967 encourage the development of ideas regarding the reasons behind this more recent loss. In the foreword of the English translation of *A Time between Ashes and Roses*, Nasser Rabbat explains that the loss was devastating and humiliating to Arab countries not only because it meant ceding what remained of Palestine of Israel, but also because it “exposed the fragility of the political and social programs of the 1960s,” foremost among which was the so-called “Nasserite project,” which combined Arab nationalism with socialism.⁸⁹

“Introduction to the History of Petty Kings” and “This Is My Name” thus serve in the first instance as Adonis’s direct response to the *naksa*, a “sweeping indictment” of Arab culture for its inability to escape from restrictive notions of tradition and embrace modernity, an

⁸⁷ In subsequent editions of this collection, the original title, *A Time between Ashes and Roses*, has been changed to *This Is My Name*. An English translation by Shawkat M. Toorawa based on the 1972 edition, printed alongside the original Arabic, and bearing the original title *A Time between Ashes and Roses*, was published by Syracuse University Press in 2004. It is on this Arabic version of the text that I have based my translations, which have been informed by those of Toorawa.

⁸⁸ Issa J. Boullata, *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990), x.

⁸⁹ Nasser Rabbat, Foreword to *A Time between Ashes and Roses* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2004), xiii.

inability which he and others perceived as directly responsible for the defeat.⁹⁰ At the time of publication, Adonis had already left his position at *Shi'r*, reportedly due to differences of opinion with Yusuf Al-Khal, and was the editor of his own poetry journal *Mawaqif*, which he founded in 1968. He had also already published his three-volume *Anthology of Arabic Poetry* between 1964 and 1968, which sought to update or revise the literary heritage by subjecting classical poems to a process of “internal translation,” thereby emphasizing previously marginalized or heterodox voices and creating a “counter-canon” which might serve as a modern alternative to traditional texts. While Iman Mersal is thus correct to pinpoint the 1967 War and its aftermath as a turning point for Adonis in relation to questions of identity and literary heritage, the shift is perhaps not quite as drastic as one might imagine.⁹¹ Indeed, the cultural project Mersal highlights, namely, that of engaging both Western and classical Arab sources to confront the crisis of modernity in the Arab world, was a project to which Adonis had already been devoted for years. Although Adonis did, in the late sixties and seventies, become much more political in tone than he had been during his time at *Shi'r*, realigning himself with some of the leftist intellectuals who had formerly been his adversaries, his fundamental positions did not change. As Robyn Creswell notes, for Adonis and the other modernists at *Shi'r*, the defeat in 1967 was perhaps a shock, but not quite as traumatic as it was for some of their peers, given that it served as confirmation of arguments they had been making for years regarding the moribundity of Arab culture and society and the extent to which Arab countries were thus collectively ill-equipped to engage with the modern world.⁹²

In the afterword to his English translation of the collection, Shawkat Toorawa states that “This Is My Name” is arguably Adonis’s best attempt at creating what he refers to as “the total poem.”⁹³ By Adonis’s own definition, the total poem incorporates “various types of expressions, prose or metrical, narrative or dialogue, singing, epic and fiction” as well as “the intuitions of philosophy, science and religion.”⁹⁴ It is, in his view, not merely a medium of expression, but of existence itself. Written in 1969, “This Is My Name” includes many themes present in Adonis’s poetry of the early sixties, most notably that of refusal and erasure, and thus may be seen, in this respect, as a continuation of the same message regarding religion, the cultural heritage, and their combined effect on the state of Arab society. What is remarkable

⁹⁰ Rabbat, Foreword, xiii.

⁹¹ Iman Mersal, “Reading the Qur’ān in the Poetry of Adonis,” *Middle Eastern Literatures* 19, no. 1 (2016): 3.

⁹² Robyn Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 180.

⁹³ Shawkat Toorawa, Afterword to *A Time between Ashes and Roses* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 193.

⁹⁴ Adonis, *Muqaddima li-l-shi'r al-'arabi* (Beirut: Dar al-Aqda, 1971), quoted in Shawkat Toorawa, afterword to *A Time between Ashes and Roses* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 193.

about “This Is My Name,” however, is the fact that it manages, given its length, to incorporate the entirety of said message in a single poem.

The poem begins with a line that the reader would be forgiven for attributing to Mihyār, the heroic figure of Adonis’s 1961 collection, *Songs of Mihyār the Damascene: Erasing every wisdom/This is my fire/No sign remained—My blood is the sign/This is my beginning*. With this opening line, the speaker signals his intention to abandon conventional wisdom in favor of a new era and, in so doing, tacitly exhorts his fellow Arabs to do the same. Implied by this new beginning, moreover, is the subsequent formulation of new ideas to replace the old wisdom which has been erased. The question that logically follows from this premise, therefore, is, what constitutes the old wisdom? The answer may itself be found in the opening line. In the original Arabic, Adonis uses the word “*’āya*”, which I have translated here as “sign,” but which might also be translated as “miracle” or “verse.” It is a word which carries distinct religious connotations. Through this word choice, therefore, the speaker conveys the notion that the wisdom he seeks to erase is religious in nature. Furthermore, he implies that the old “sign” is replaced with a new one, his own blood; this may be interpreted as the blood of Adonis, or Tammuz, and thus associated with fertility, and/or that of Ali (also Adonis’s birth name), and thus associated with revolution and martyrdom, broadly construed. A subsequent verse simultaneously substantiates this and indicates the preferred method of erasure: *The steps of life stopped at the door of a book erased by my questions: What do I see?* Here, one infers that the book to which the line refers is the Qur’an, which has, in turn, been erased by the act of questioning. In other words, having been subjected to the speaker’s questions, *the book*—or, more specifically, the orthodox interpretation of this book—becomes merely *a book*, forced to cede its position of primacy in culture and society.

The ensuing lines reveal *why* the speaker considers such a forfeiture of position to be necessary: *What do I see? I see pages in which civilizations are said to rest... I see the mosque and the church as executioners and the earth as a rose*. The orthodox interpretation of scripture, symbolized by the mosque and the church, is thus portrayed as perpetrating violence and even death. By contrast, the earth, that is, nature, represents a “rose,” which in Sufism often symbolizes beauty, mystery, and the manifestation of God. The relationship between religion and violence is invoked elsewhere in the poem as well, albeit less explicitly: *The women relax in a separate room/Invoking the Revealed Books/Transforming the sky/into a puppet or a guillotine*. In this line, the speaker draws a connection between scripture and death once again. Implied is the notion that scripture and, by extension, religious orthodoxy, encourages a

collective mindset which anthropomorphizes God and/or renders Him a mere instrument of execution.

Such a mindset, moreover, is portrayed as a form of imprisonment which inevitably leads to death by sclerosis: *The people rested/In the honey of the rabab and the mihrab/The Creator fortified it like a trench/and walled it in. No one knows where the door is/No one asks where the door is.* In the original poem, Adonis uses the Arabic word “umma”, which I have translated here as “people”; however, in Arabic, “umma” denotes Muslims as a whole, the “community of believers.” Analysis of these lines therefore suggests that the nation, or the faithful, have taken refuge in religion; it has become a fortress within which they are trapped, with no knowledge of a way out, nor any inclination to search for one. As a result: *History runs dry from its repetition/in the windmills/The Creator has fallen into his coffin/Creation has fallen into its coffin.* Failure to innovate, in other words, failure to progress, has stripped Arab culture and society of its vitality and rendered it moribund. Indeed, *This is the time of death, and yet/every death therein is an Arab death..... It is the swansong of/a bird in a burning forest.* This line reiterates Adonis’s conviction that Arab culture has become sclerotic, due to the dominance of religious orthodoxy, a sclerosis which inevitably poses the most risk to Arabs themselves. Moreover, the mention of a bird’s swansong calls to mind the symbolism of the bird in mysticism, often associated with the sheikh, or mystic guide, as well as with al-Khidr specifically, also known as “The Green One,” who represents direct illumination from God absent any human intermediary. The burning forest, meanwhile, may be interpreted as the erosion of greenness, of creative vitality, thus implying the deleterious influence of religious orthodoxy on growth and development.

Many of the aforementioned ideas also appear in “Introduction to the History of Petty Kings.”⁹⁵ In one verse, the word “*kitāb*”, or “book”—an allusion to the Qur’an—has been disassembled into its component letters and combined with startling imagery: *kāf shakes beneath an inner core refusing with the depth of light/tā is a history covered with corpses and the vapor of prayer/alif is a gallows wet with muddy light/bā is a knife that scrapes off man’s skin and makes of it a shoe for two heavenly feet in a map that extends.* In these lines, Adonis makes an implicit association between religion and violence, using the imagery of corpses, gallows, and knives to emphasize the point. Importantly, however, the first line indicates that,

⁹⁵ I have used the accepted English translation of this title; however, it is worth noting that this translation fails to convey the meaning implied by the Arabic word “*ṭawā’if*.” Literally translated, the title would be closer to “Introduction to the History of the Kings of the Sects,” demonstrating the link Adonis draws between religious orthodoxy, violence, and sectarianism.

within the tradition, there are those who dissent, who “refuse,” a concept which serves as the focus of Chapter III. The notion that Arabs are imprisoned, even enslaved by, a mentality overly steeped in religion re-emerges as the speaker addresses the people of his country: *I see you as children dragging/their entrails, bending over, prostrating themselves/to their chains*. Indeed, in another line, the speaker dons the mask of ‘Ali and asks: *How did knowledge transform into shackles?* In another, he states: *I ask for water and they give me sand/I ask for the sun and they give me a cave*. This conveys the notion that, rather than vitality and light, the individual is subject to desiccation and darkness. As a result of this mentality which fails to relegate religion to its rightful place, the speaker observes: *the past has fallen and yet not ended/(Why does the past end yet not end?)*. In other words, under the influence of religious orthodoxy, culture fails to progress. Near the end of the poem, the speaker proffers a solution to the challenges he has identified, one which explicitly involves a turning away from religion and the dissolution of the old order, the old wisdom: *Bring your axes/Let us carry God like a dying shaykh/Let us open for the sun a path other than minarets/for the child a book other than angels/for the dreamer a well other than Medina and Kufa*. In other words, the way forward involves not the “minarets,” “book,” or “well” of institutional orthodoxy, but rather new sources of enlightenment.

None of the ideas expounded upon above would have struck one familiar with Adonis in the early sixties as particularly novel or surprising. Indeed, as stated previously, Adonis and his fellow modernists at *Shi‘r* had for years been known for their controversial views on *turāth*, and Adonis himself spent much of the late fifties and early sixties deconstructing and reinterpreting traditional religious narratives. By the time *A Time between Ashes and Roses* was published, however, Adonis’s ideas with respect to religion and its role in culture and society had begun to crystallize. Indeed, the collection was released only three years before the publication of his doctoral dissertation in 1973, *The Static and the Dynamic*, which focused on the historically opposing trends within the cultural heritage. His critique of religion during this period ultimately revolves around the following points, both of which are intimately related: first, orthodox interpretations of religion which draw a sharp distinction between man and God ultimately encourage subservience and conformity, to the detriment of creativity and individuality, and, second, such a mindset corresponds to an excessive attachment to and sacralization of the past, to the detriment of progress.

In *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, Adonis elaborates on his position, arguing that religious knowledge, in contrast to poetry, implies a world that is “closed and finite, because it

is certain; it becomes a system of beliefs and an ideology.”⁹⁶ In other words, truth exists *a priori*, through the revealed texts, and this truth is singular and absolute, brooking no criticism.⁹⁷ Similarly, in a recently published book entitled *Prophecy and Power: Violence and Islam*, he maintains that “in Islam, there is no thinking outside religion.”⁹⁸ According to religious orthodoxy, he argues, all truth resides within the Qur’an; therefore, all thought must take place “through the Text, based on the Text, and not based on the world.”⁹⁹ In other words, truth is based on the ideas found in scripture, rather than on experience or reality. As a result, he contends that a Muslim lives in “two prisons”—an expression he borrows from the poet Al-Ma‘arrī—the first of which is “the prison of orthodox, traditionalist interpretation” and the second of which arises following “the forfeiture of his own ego, his self, and so, his subjectivity.”¹⁰⁰ Indeed, he argues:

There is no subjectivity in a monotheistic religion like Islam. There’s always the group, what we call today the *umma*. The individual is but a leaf on a tree. It doesn’t have any meaning. Its meaning is to be there, on the branch of that tree, but as an individual, it doesn’t exist.¹⁰¹

In Adonis’s view, therefore, religious orthodoxy restricts freedom and creativity by claiming a monopoly on truth, dictating what is licit and illicit, and promoting the notion of inherited group identity. As will be demonstrated in subsequent chapters, this contrasts directly with his understanding of mysticism, which he perceives as promoting individual subjectivity. It is through this theoretical framework that one might best understand the message of both poems in *A Time between Ashes and Roses* elucidated above. The poems are an exhortation to Arab society to escape both of its “prisons,” that is, to “ask where the door is,” and, in turn, to erase the “knowledge which has transform[ed] into shackles” and inscribe the knowledge that liberates, that is, gnostic knowledge. Such erasure should not be seen as a denial of one’s history, moreover, but rather a departure from it, one which simultaneously assimilates the past and transcends it, thereby inviting the possibility of innovation and the opening of new horizons.

⁹⁶ Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 72.

⁹⁷ Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 78.

⁹⁸ Adonis and Houria Abdelouahed, *Prophecy and Power: Violence and Islam II* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2021), 8.

⁹⁹ Adonis, *Prophecy and Power*, 8.

¹⁰⁰ Adonis, *Prophecy and Power*, 63.

¹⁰¹ Adonis and Pierre Joris, *Conversations in the Pyrenees* (New York, NY: Contra Mundum Press, 2018), 19.

1.2 The Lebanese Civil War and *The Book of Siege*

In 1975, civil war broke out in Lebanon, as the result of an attack by Phalangist militia on a bus transporting Palestinians to a refugee camp. This attack was merely the latest in an escalating cycle of violence between the Maronite Phalangists and the Lebanese National Movement (LNM), a coalition of both secular leftists and Sunni Muslim political parties which supported the PLO, allowing it to maintain its base and launch military operations against Israel from within Lebanon. Fifteen years of bloodshed followed, fueled not only by various sectarian forces within the country, but also by the involvement of external actors, including Israel and Syria, among others. Indeed, in the early summer of 1982, after a failed ceasefire, Israel invaded Lebanon with the intention of evicting, or at least weakening, the PLO and installing the Phalangist leader Bachir Gemayel as President. Israeli forces thus laid siege to Beirut for approximately two months, subjecting the city to intense bombing and shelling campaigns and disrupting supply of food, water, and electricity.

It is this siege which serves as the inspiration for the title of Adonis's collection *Kitāb al-Ḥiṣār* (*The Book of the Siege*), which was published in 1985, and many of the poems in the collection—including both “al-Waqt” (“Time”) and the prose poem “Ḍaw’ al-sham‘a” (“Candlelight”)—were written at the height of the siege, when Adonis, along with the rest of the city's inhabitants, was sequestered from the outside world and surrounded by violence on a scale scarcely conceivable to those who have not experienced it.¹⁰² The poems in the collection, while not a departure from previous works, thus represent a shift of a sort in Adonis's poetry; the specter of war is omnipresent, even in decidedly more introspective poems like “Candlelight.” Man's inhumanity to man, in the shape of bombs, bullets, and corpses, is on full display. The destruction of Beirut had an evident and profound impact on Adonis; in 1985, he chose to leave the city, which had at this point been his home for nearly thirty years, moving permanently with his family to Paris. Robyn Creswell notes in his book *City of Beginnings* that Adonis blamed the “instrumentalization of identities” for the devastation wrought by Lebanon's civil war and, by extension, for the loss of relative openness and dynamism which characterized the era directly preceding it.¹⁰⁴

In the opening lines of “Candlelight,” Adonis writes: *During the years of the civil war, especially during the years of the siege, I learned to form an intimate relationship with*

¹⁰² Adonis, “Ḍaw’ al-sham‘a,” *al-A‘māl al-shi‘riyya al-kāmila* vol. 4 (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2014), 37-70; Adonis, “al-Waqt,” *al-A‘māl al-shi‘riyya al-kāmila* vol. 4, 7-24.

¹⁰⁴ Robyn Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 23.

darkness, and to move in another light, which comes neither from electricity, nor butane or kerosene. He writes that he has, rather, *chose[n] to seek the company of candlelight*, and this candlelight has led him to reflect upon man's *departure from the night of the world to its day... from illusion to truth*.¹⁰⁵ He references Plato's cave allegory, which implies that the shadows cast upon the wall of the cave are merely an illusion, mistaken as real by those who have not yet seen truth by the light of the sun, that is, by those who have not yet moved *from the night of the world to its day*. And yet, Adonis asks, *have we truly left [the world's darkness]?* In other words, has man's apparent step into the day corresponded to a step into truth? Adonis suggests that it has not. In the modern world, he writes, many equate light and truth with *a mere ascent up the ladder of electricity*. In other words, light and truth are seen as corresponding directly to the acquisition of scientific knowledge and technological advancement. And yet, he asks, how can man claim to stand in sunlight while his purported advances along the path to truth merely amount to more effective methods of killing one another? Indeed, he observes: *As I saw death take so many of us in an instant, I said... we still turn our backs to the sun*.

Importantly, moreover, Adonis's reference to candlelight highlights his mystical orientation, alluding to the Sufi allegory of the moth and the flame. In this allegory, the moth represents man, the mystic, the lover, while the flame symbolizes the light of God, the Beloved. While proximity to the flame may inspire awe or provoke desire, it is only in merging with the flame that the moth acquires true knowledge of God and its being is transformed. Similarly, the "darkness" with which the poet forms "an intimate relationship" refers not merely to the literal darkness during the siege, but also to the mystical idea that the apparent world is darkness or shadow in relation to the hidden world, its forms serving as veils which simultaneously conceal and disclose the light of God. Indeed, in a subsequent verse, the allusion to mysticism is more explicit; *The light of the candle*, he writes, *is another type of darkness*, in which the darkness ceases to be darkness and instead reveals itself as *an awaiting on the doorstep of a hidden, internal light*. Ultimately, therefore, the reader of these lines understands that the daylight perceived by those who engage in and perpetrate violence, regardless of their faith, is illusory. They stand with "[their] backs to the sun," that is, facing away from the light of God and the hidden realm. Indeed, further analysis demonstrates the poet's conviction that the predominant religious orthodoxy directly promotes this turning away from the light.

¹⁰⁵ An English translation of "Candlelight" may be found in *Adonis: Selected Poems*, translated by Khaled Mattawa (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 209-221. This translation has informed my own.

Adonis proceeds in the poem to ruminate upon various figures from Greco-Phoenician mythology and history, including Electra, Cadmus, Prometheus, and Euclid. Electra, he reminds the reader, is the symbolic representation of energy; Cadmus, her brother, brought the alphabet to the West, and Prometheus bestowed upon man the gift of fire, which he stole from the gods. Euclid, in turn, was a teacher of optics, and the first to predict a solar eclipse. He elaborates on these mythological figures in order to contrast *this mythological, pagan history* with *the real, divine history that we live today*. This *living history*, he writes, *is written with iron and fire, rockets and bombs, and human limbs*. Moreover, he continues, it is written *by our cousins, descendants of Moses and Solomon, our shared prophets*. In these lines, therefore, Adonis refers to the ongoing war in Lebanon and the siege of Beirut. The use of words like “rockets”, “bombs”, and “human limbs” serves to emphasize the violence of the historical moment, of reality. Moreover, it forces the reader to consider the question posed at the beginning of the poem, namely, *have we truly left [the world's darkness]*? Do we truly believe, in other words, that such violence is the product of truth and light?

Additionally, by referring to Israeli forces as “descendants of Moses and Solomon,” Adonis implies a connection between the violence of war and monotheism. Indeed, in subsequent verses he draws the following comparison between Euclid and Moses: The first, he writes, *is a man who did not speak to God or know of him, whose only source of light was a candle*. The second is, by contrast, *a man to whom God spoke, whom God preferred above all creation, to whom electricity surrendered itself as though it were a camel bowing before him..* And yet, he continues, while Euclid *create[d] a history which elevated man and the world, opening before them endless horizons of advancement*, Moses *create[d] a history which begins with the murder of man and descent into an endless, infernal abyss of limbs and blood*. There are two implications here. The first is that monotheistic ideology has engendered untold violence in the centuries following the birth of Judaism; in other words, the God of orthodox monotheism has not given rise to peace and coexistence. The second, more subtle, implication is that that which appears to be the brightest light—i.e.. that which claims the highest degree of certainty, whether it be science or religious dogma or something else—is not necessarily closest to truth, assuming truth may be defined as that which leads to progress, dynamism, and harmony among peoples. In this verse, therefore, Adonis calls into question both the perceived “light” or “truth” of technological advances which facilitate death and destruction, as well as that of the Abrahamic God, traditionally understood.

It is, moreover, significant that Adonis, while referring to Israelis as “descendants of Moses and Solomon,” also refers to them as “our cousins.” In so doing, he not only emphasizes

the religious connection, but introduces a theme which appears frequently in his works, namely, that religious sectarianism sows division, by encouraging people to identify themselves first and foremost by their religion, a form of group identity, rather than by their common humanity. As a result, those who would otherwise be one's "cousins" according to nature become one's enemies according to ideology. Indeed, in an interview from 2014, Adonis argues that "violence against the 'other' is an integral part of monotheism."¹⁰⁶ "Monotheists," he maintains, "go to war to defend God, in the name of God."¹⁰⁷ In his view, this contrasts sharply with the pagan or polytheistic societies that inhabited the Mediterranean prior to the advent of Judaism, such as the Greeks or Phoenicians, who, he claims, "never went to war to defend a god."¹⁰⁸ He attributes this difference largely to the perceived emphasis placed by the former on singularity, as represented by the notion of one true God, and the latter's embrace of plurality, as represented by a multitude of deities.

Two verses near the end of the poem begin with the command "'iqra'", which may be translated as "read" or "recite." This is a clear allusion to the first word revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad at the beginning of the Revelation. Adonis thus reminds the reader of Revelation while simultaneously denying its content, replacing the words of Revelation with his own. In the first of these two verses, he paints a picture of humanity rendered nearly unrecognizable by religion. *The man is almost a man*, he writes, *and the woman almost a woman*. And yet, he implies, *this species that talks about things of a different nature, like heaven and the fires of hell, God and Iblis*, clearly differs from man in his natural form in some fundamental way. The subsequent paragraph offers some insight: the streets of Beirut, he writes, are *still woven by priest, colonizer, and capitalist*. These three symbols represent three separate historical periods in Lebanon's history, namely, the conversion of the ancient Phoenicians to Christianity, European colonialism, and capitalist imperialism. These three symbols, he writes, *applaud...the human limbs that fly like particles through the haze of Beirut*. The suggestion here is not merely that institutionalized monotheism, along with colonialism and capitalism, is inherently violent, but also that it has altered the proper or natural form of humanity, creating artificial divides where none naturally exist. Indeed, in *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, he addresses this very theme. It is the advent of Western imperialism, he argues, which created the ideological categories of East and West as they exist in modern times, a "false dualism" which has resulted in "political and ideological opposition to the West" and which "risks becoming an opposition

¹⁰⁶ Adonis, "Age of Darkness."

¹⁰⁷ Adonis, "Age of Darkness."

¹⁰⁸ Adonis, "Age of Darkness."

to its culture and civilization.”¹⁰⁹ This false dichotomy between East and West is one which Adonis frequently contrasts with the perceived openness to cultural exchange characteristic of Phoenicia, Sumer, and Babylon. One should note that this romanticization of ancient Mediterranean cultures, which he associates with plurality and diversity, is a recurring theme in Adonis’s poetry, representative of an interest which arguably extends as far back as his teenage years, when he first adopted his pseudonym and joined the SSNP.

In another poem published in *The Book of the Siege*, entitled “Time,” Adonis similarly establishes a link between monotheism and the violence unfolding in Beirut, while simultaneously reiterating his views regarding the Arab cultural heritage. Indeed, the first few verses contain graphic, almost apocalyptic, imagery, with mention of “blood,” “terror,” “corpses,” and “granaries of bones.” Bodies dismembered beyond recognition populate the speaker’s environs; he asks himself: *Is this the head of a child, or a lump of coal?/Is this a body I see, or a clay skeleton?* Though the speaker attempts to “repair [the victim’s] eyes” and “mend his waist,” all attempts to uncover the victim’s identity are in vain. The violence perpetrated upon him is twofold; it has stolen his life, as well as any distinguishing features. Thus, it has symbolically erased that which marked him as an individual. In the midst of such bloodshed, the speaker poses the question to a friend who is also himself: *Is your killing born of your God/or is your God born of your killing?* As in “Candlelight,” Adonis seems to be insisting the reader confront the question of God’s role in such savagery or, more importantly, the role of man in conceiving a God who would endorse it. *Is it rapture*, the speaker demands, *to see your house raised to God in pieces?* Indeed, such destruction is carried out by men in the name of God, as though God Himself had commanded it, and yet, he suggests, it is rather the case that men have created a God who allows them to wreak whatever devastation they deem necessary for their own interests in order that they may be absolved of any guilt by asserting to act on His behalf and with His blessing.

Invoking the 8th century judge and poet commonly known as Baḥlūl, or “the wise fool of Baghdad,” the speaker asserts: *Baḥlūl revealed his secrets/that this revolutionary time is a jewelry store/that it is a swamp of prophets./Baḥlūl revealed his secrets/The truth will be death/and death is the bread of poets.* The allusion to Baḥlūl is no accident; Baḥlūl was a comedic figure, one who feigned madness to thwart tyranny. He is one of a number of figures frequently invoked by Adonis as an example of the dynamic current within *turāth*. In this poem, therefore, Baḥlūl symbolically represents this dynamism. By referring to the current age as a

¹⁰⁹ Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 91.

“swamp of prophets,” he challenges the static elements within the heritage, those trends which cling to religious orthodoxy and, in so doing, consign Arab culture to stagnation. And yet, Baḥlūl indicates that *the truth will be death*; this “death,” in turn, this “bread of poets,” signals a familiar theme in Adonis’s poetry, namely, erasure. This is, in other words, the death of the old which heralds the new, the simultaneous assimilation of the past and departure from it. Indeed, as the poem approaches its end, the speaker indicates that he has chosen a different path forward from that of his forefathers: *O’ grandfather whom I now reject, though I loved creation/in the name of the creator, you will know me no more, and nothing will tie me to you/save those remnants deep within myself*. In this poem, therefore, Adonis addresses the violence of religious ideology in both its forms, namely, the manifest violence of sectarian conflict and the more subtle—though, in his view, no less damaging—violence which privileges orthodoxy and conformity at the expense of heterodoxy and creativity.

1.3 *Al-Kitāb* I-III

Al-Kitāb, described by Adonis as “an epic voyage through Arab history,” was initially published in three volumes between 1995 and 2002.¹¹⁰ Collectively, the work spans approximately two thousand pages and just over three centuries of history, beginning immediately after the death of the Prophet Muḥammad in the year 632 and concluding with the death of the poet Al-Mutanabbī in 965. It is, moreover, a “rereading” of this history, a continuation of Adonis’s project of creative engagement with the cultural heritage. Indeed, Adonis’s aim with this work is to deconstruct the traditional narrative of the Arab-Islamic Golden Age from within, a narrative he believes has been falsified by those in power.¹¹¹ Al-Mutanabbī, chosen for his capacity to unite politics with poetry, serves as the poet’s guide and mask in this endeavor. In terms of format, Adonis, rather than opting for straightforward narrative, divides each page into four sections: the first represents Al-Mutanabbī’s memory as he walks through this history; the second represents Al-Mutanabbī’s personal experience as imagined by Adonis; the third establishes a connection between these first two; and the last includes historical references and quotations to assist the reader with interpretation. Interspersed throughout the three volumes, moreover, are homages to poets who have been

¹¹⁰ A French translation of *Al-Kitāb* by Houria Abdelouahed was published by Seuil between 2007 and 2015. I have consulted this translation, in addition to the original Arabic, while translating into English. The work has also been translated into Persian by Amir-Hossein Elahyari and published by Mola Publishing House in 2017.

¹¹¹ Adonis, *Conversations in the Pyrenees*, 66.

persecuted and/or marginalized in Arab history, various parenthetical impressions, and a series of “notebooks” or “journals,” meant to serve as windows into the thoughts of a particular personage, such as Al-Mutanabbī or Sayf al-Dawla. *Al-Kitāb* represents, in many respects, a culmination of Adonis’s career-long efforts to subject *turāth* to scrutiny, to unearth the dynamism buried therein and force it into a dialogue with modernity. As such, it reflects many of the same ideas present in previous works with respect to religion and violence. While subsequent chapters will address in greater detail the political aspects of religious violence, the present chapter restricts itself primarily to an analysis of the connection Adonis perceives between monotheistic ideology, enforced conformity, and intergroup violence.

Adonis affords a great deal of space in *Al-Kitāb* to the maltreatment of apostates, heretics, and dissidents. Moreover, he suggests in the opening pages of the first volume that he views such treatment as the product of pernicious ideas, namely, religious ideas. Indeed, he writes: *it is true that certain thoughts resemble voracious plants, but devour only humans.*¹¹² Ensuing pages recount the massacre of apostates at the hands of the first caliph and father-in-law of the Prophet, Abū Bakr and his military commander, Khālīd ibn al-Walīd, during the so-called Ridda Wars, or Wars of Apostasy, which sought to quash rebellion among non-Muslim tribes in Arabia and bring them under the control of the caliphate. The narrator credits one such apostate, Ṭulayḥa ibn Khuwaylid al-Asadī, with saying, “The angel Gabriel came to me and said, ‘My Lord does not appreciate faces dusty with prayer’ and ‘pray only for life.’”¹¹³ The implication, of course, is that, by contrast, the God of Islam demands worship and subservience from His adherents, and that, moreover, Islam places undue emphasis on the afterlife, which comes at the expense of terrestrial existence.

Subsequent pages likewise paint the picture of a history which has been unforgiving to apostates and heretics. *It is permitted in our religion, writes the narrator, to kill the infidels of our faith, as well as others, who do not share our views.*¹¹⁴ Elsewhere, he defines an apostate as *He who gives an interpretation contrary to Revelation and teaches that the illicit must be interpreted.*¹¹⁵ The message, in other words, is that those who hold different views, those who think for themselves, rather than offering mere blind conformity, have historically been subject to persecution. This is a notion that has often appeared in Adonis’s works, both poetic and critical; in *Sufism and Surrealism*, he argues that the “literal interpreters” of the Qur’an, in the

¹¹² Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. I (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 1995), 12.

¹¹³ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. I, 13.

¹¹⁴ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. I, 125.

¹¹⁵ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. II (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 1998), 26.

attempt to “preserve the dominant authority and its culture,” ultimately “regard anyone who does not hold similar opinions to them and share their understanding of the meaning of the text as an opponent.”¹¹⁶ As a result, he continues, they label any such person “a heretic, a sinner, an atheist, [or] an unbeliever,” thus transforming Arab-Islamic society into one which “ostracizes, isolates, and repudiates anyone who does not share its views.”¹¹⁷ To underline this point, he provides numerous historical examples of those who were executed due to heresy or apostasy. In one such example, he imagines a conversation between two men who “do their five daily prayers”—implying their adherence to orthodoxy— regarding one Muḥammad ibn Abi al-‘Awja, who was murdered and decapitated in the eighth century during the reign of the Caliph Al-Mahdī:

-*Ibn Abi al-‘Awja’ renders licit the illicit.*
 -*He prohibits that which is licit.*
 -*He advises us to break the fast if we fast, and to fast outside the prescribed times.*
 -*Heresy*
 -*He must be killed.*¹¹⁸

In other words, Adonis suggests, he who transgresses the line between what is deemed permissible and impermissible by law merits death in the eyes of religion. Indeed, the narrator writes: *It is the scourge of theology: transforming every letter of the law into sword and prison.*¹¹⁹ And yet, all are expected to submit to this law; none may opt out, for: *If you say, ‘I am tired of the Invisible, of its legends and futilities,’ you are a heretic.*¹²⁰ To this point, the narrator, while recounting the execution of the poet Ḥammād ‘Ajrād, also during the reign of Al-Mahdī, alludes to a well-known verse from the Qur’an: *They accused him of heresy. Is religion not a tolerant space, without compulsion or coercion?*¹²¹ No matter, continues the narrator: *They placed him on a carpet and decapitated him.* Here Adonis is alluding to a well-known verse from Sūrat al-Baqara, which states that “there shall be no compulsion in religion.”¹²² By juxtaposing this *sūra*, which is often cited as evidence that Islam advocates peace and tolerance, with countless examples from the historical record of those who have been executed for heterodox views, Adonis evinces what he considers the abject absurdity of such a claim. As he argues in *Prophecy and Power*, monotheism, including Islam, provides “only

¹¹⁶ Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 144.

¹¹⁷ Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 144.

¹¹⁸ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. I, 293.

¹¹⁹ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. III (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2002), 147.

¹²⁰ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. II, 85-86.

¹²¹ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. I, 294.

¹²² Sūrat al-Baqara 2:256

religious answers,” and these answers are “exclusive, absolute, and final.”¹²³ This effectively results, moreover, in “the cancellation of all enquiry and therefore of all thought,” a “small, closed world,” like a “box” or “tunnel” in which the human being is “shut away” and “deprived of [the] freedom to choose his own path.”¹²⁴ In other words, the individual can choose either to yield and conform, or consign himself to persecution, imprisonment, and/or death. He can choose, that is, the “sanctuary of submission,”¹²⁵ which promises resurrection in the afterlife in exchange for obedience in the here and now, or the “theological music”¹²⁶ of “shattered swords” and “tumbling heads,” which proceeds from the failure to comply. Either path, he argues, is paved with violence; while the latter perpetrates violence against the body, through what Adonis’s poet-guide Al-Mutanabbī deems a “trinity” of “prison, murder, and crucifixion,”¹²⁷ the former perpetrates violence against the mind. As such, Adonis asserts, it amounts to “the highest degree of barbarism” which “destroys the very essence of his person—his conscience, his innermost self, his thought, and his imagination.”¹²⁸

Indeed, in the second volume of *Al-Kitāb*, appears the orphan-chemist Abjad, who represents the union between letters (his name derives from the first four letters of the Arabic alphabet). He guides the reader through various towns, each of which is named after a single letter of the alphabet, each of which is meant to represent the conditions of a society in which people have been subjected to violence against both mind and body, perpetrated under cover of religious orthodoxy. The arguments advanced will be familiar to those acquainted with Adonis’s ideas regarding religion, the cultural heritage, and the perceived stagnation of Arab culture. In *Nun*, he writes, lives a wise man who has inherited his wisdom by listening to the stars’ tales: *It is he who interrogates and he who responds. And you are to do nothing but acquiesce.*¹²⁹ The emphasis here is on the word “inherited”; in other words, his is a wisdom acquired not through questioning, personal experience, or gnosis, but rather a predetermined wisdom, received from previous generations, its authority derived from collective tradition. In *Ta*, meanwhile, *the rose itself is a cage.*¹³⁰ Given that the rose, in mysticism, symbolizes God and his manifestation, the implication is clear; the God of religious orthodoxy is one who imprisons rather than liberates. Moreover, *the city of Alif extends to everything, save that*

¹²³ Adonis, *Prophecy and Power*, 137.

¹²⁴ Adonis, *Prophecy and Power*, 137.

¹²⁵ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. II, 267.

¹²⁶ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. I, 207.

¹²⁷ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. I, 157.

¹²⁸ Adonis, “Dix thèses sur les révoltes arabes actuelles,” 85.

¹²⁹ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. II, 253-254.

¹³⁰ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. II, 380.

*beautiful organ, the heart.*¹³¹ Similarly, here Adonis invokes the mystical notion of the heart as that which connects the mystic to God; it is, indeed, the vessel that receives gnostic knowledge, reflecting the various images in which God appears and thus serving as the place of transformation within the mystic himself. The implication, therefore, is that religious orthodoxy “extends to everything,” imposing itself on all domains of life, and yet fails to cultivate genuine knowledge of the divine. Likewise, in *Lam, the people...behave as though they were the sky’s protectors.*¹³² In other words, the adherents of religious orthodoxy impose its prescriptions, as though they were the enforcers of God Himself. Through his descriptions of these fictional towns, Adonis thus reiterates the core of his argument with respect to religious ideology and enforced conformity as a type of violence against the mind, which imprisons man and even precludes a genuine personal relationship with God. Furthermore, he maintains that such violence goes hand in hand with violence against the body, that is, the execution of those who refuse to conform to the prescribed ideology and/or who subscribe to an alternative ideology. In *Dhal*, he writes, *lives an herb that never dies called murder.*¹³³ Indeed, he continues, *the inhabitant of Dhal is sworn to a single fight: eating the flesh of his brother.*¹³⁴ Similarly, in *Nun*, *the letters of all of its streets are written with the blood of the other.*¹³⁵

Adonis has written frequently about this notion that monotheism generally, and Islam specifically, constitutes a denial of the other. Indeed, he argues that “violence against the ‘other’ is an integral part of monotheism.”¹³⁶ Given that all monotheistic religions claim a monopoly on truth, he maintains, what unites people is neither their shared humanity, nor their brotherhood in nature, but rather their shared beliefs with respect to religious dogma and thus their fellowship in ideology.¹³⁷ In other words, religion provides people with answers to existential questions, as well as a ready-made identity. As a result, the “other” comes under scrutiny, his humanity only fully recognized insofar as his beliefs mirror one’s own.¹³⁸ It is this line of reasoning that leads Adonis to criticize monotheism as being “against the human being,” for, in his view, it encourages people to subordinate the reality of this world to the fiction of

¹³¹ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. II, 66.

¹³² Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. II, 248.

¹³³ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. II, 482.

¹³⁴ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. II, 484.

¹³⁵ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. II, 252.

¹³⁶ Adonis, “Age of Darkness.”

¹³⁷ Adonis, *Conversations in the Pyrenees*, 26.

¹³⁸ Adonis, “Now the Writing Starts,” interview by Jonathan Guyer, *The New York Review of Books*, 16 April, 2016, https://www.nybooks.com/online/2016/04/16/syria-now-writing-starts-interview-adonis/?lp_txn_id=1327054.

religious narrative.¹³⁹ Such narrative, in turn, sows division, preventing people from recognizing one another's innate humanity. Indeed, in the second volume of *Al-Kitāb*, he writes, donning once again the mask of Al-Mutanabbī: *The invisible was born Cain's twin—murder. The land was born twin of a song.*¹⁴⁰ The “invisible” here represents the aforementioned fiction of religious narrative or ideology, inextricably tied, in Adonis's view, to murder and bloodshed. The “land,” on the other hand, represents the reality of this world, of nature, and is therefore implicitly related both to music, which draws the mystic closer to God, and to creativity more broadly.

Adonis emphasizes this point by detailing conflicts among groups professing rival ideologies, as well as the ill treatment of minority factions or dissidents by those in power. In the second volume, for instance, he highlights the treatment of Christians by the fifth Abbasid caliph, Hārūn al-Rashīd, who ordered the destruction of churches and mandated separate dress for non-Muslims,¹⁴¹ as well as the eighth caliph, Al-Mutawakkil, who decreed a host of discriminatory policies towards Christians and other non-Muslims, including, but not limited to, forcing them to don distinctive belts, prohibiting their instruction in Muslim schools, banning the cross, leaving their graves unmarked, and hanging statues of Satan at their doors.¹⁴² Furthermore, he focuses on the division between Sunni and Shia, whom he collectively describes as “*a single man [devouring] himself from the inside,*”¹⁴³ and “*a single flower crushed by hatred and ignorance.*”¹⁴⁴ Both sides, he writes, *burn houses and shelters and drag their owners, bound, across the ground.*¹⁴⁵ *Some, he continues, do so in the name of Sunnism, others in the name of Shi'ism.*¹⁴⁶ Indeed, *each prepares war against his brother.*¹⁴⁷ In other words, Adonis asserts repeatedly, brother denies the humanity of brother in the name of religious ideology and thus marks him as enemy. This has been the case since the dawn of monotheism, Adonis suggests: *Since Abel, the river of creation has been divided.... What is it that divides the two shores if not fratricidal war?*¹⁴⁸ And yet, he questions: *If you're not me, who are you?*¹⁴⁹ This line introduces the idea that self and other are mutually dependent, even

¹³⁹ Adonis, *Conversations in the Pyrenees*, 25.

¹⁴⁰ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. II, 182.

¹⁴¹ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. II, 191.

¹⁴² Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. II, 341-347.

¹⁴³ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. III, 237.

¹⁴⁴ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. III, 239.

¹⁴⁵ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. III, 242.

¹⁴⁶ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. III, 242.

¹⁴⁷ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. III, 237.

¹⁴⁸ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. II, 208.

¹⁴⁹ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. III, 285.

mutually constitutive; Adonis's conceptualization of this relationship between self and other borrows largely from mystical conceptions of the relationship between man and God, a point which will be explored in more detail in Chapter V.

Ultimately, therefore, Adonis advances in the three volumes of *Al-Kitāb* the vision of a world unburdened by the artificial division and violence which proceeds from ideological narrative: *That we may live, each according to his wishes... No prophecy of war and executions, no East or West, no Arabs or foreigners.*¹⁵⁰ In other words, Adonis here proposes a world undivided by what he considers the fictions of religious ideology, ideology which comes at the expense both of terrestrial reality and of the mutual recognition of the other as one's own brother in humanity. This is an idea which he has articulated time and again over the course of decades, namely, that:

The religious norm according to which we judge man either as a believer or an apostate, expresses not only injustice and tyranny, but antihumanism par excellence, because it is a segregationist norm which ignores any notion of alterity.¹⁵¹

1.4 *Jerusalem Concerto*

Initially published in 2012, *Kūnshīrtū al-Quds (Jerusalem Concerto)* is arguably Adonis's most powerful indictment of monotheism, the culmination of decades spent warning against the violence perpetrated in its name.¹⁵² The Jerusalem found in *Jerusalem Concerto*, therefore, is not the holy city of lore, but rather a place of endless bloodshed and profound suffering, the ultimate representation, in Adonis's view, of religious ideology made manifest. Indeed, Adonis has remarked elsewhere that, given its sacred status among the three monotheistic faiths, one might expect Jerusalem to be a singular example of peace and coexistence, and yet, in reality, precisely the opposite is the case.¹⁵³ In reality, he argues, the human being is scarcely of import in the holy city; rather, an "imaginary world" of "power" and "interests" dominates, a world in which man is devalued and relegated to the role of mere pawn.¹⁵⁴ Given that Adonis has been the target of criticism over the past decade, due to his

¹⁵⁰ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. III, 238.

¹⁵¹ Adonis, "Dix thèses sur les révoltes arabes actuelles," 85.

¹⁵² For my analysis, I have referred to the first edition Arabic publication by Dar al-Saqī: Adonis, *Kūnshīrtū al-Quds* (Beirut: Dar al-Saqī, 2012). The poem has also been translated into English by Khaled Mattawa and published by Yale University Press in 2017, as well as into French by Aymen Hacén, published by Mercure de France in 2016 under the title *Jérusalem*.

¹⁵³ Adonis, *Conversations in the Pyrenees*, 18.

¹⁵⁴ Adonis, *Conversations in the Pyrenees*, 18.

views on the Arab Spring and the Syrian Civil War—a revolution, he maintains, must be divorced from religion in order to merit the name—*Jerusalem Concerto* may be read, in a sense, as a response to those who have censured him. The ideas it advances are not new to his work, but rather a continuation of the same message regarding religion and violence which has appeared in Adonis’s poetry since the inception of his career. This message asserts that religious ideology leads to the perpetration of violence against mind and body alike and, moreover, that this violence ultimately stems from the fact that, when religion becomes synonymous with identity, man tends to regard the “other” as the symbol of a rival ideology, rather than as his brother in humanity.

In the opening verses of *Jerusalem Concerto*, the speaker depicts Jerusalem and, by extension, monotheism, as requiring absolute submission and obedience from the human being, thus stripping him of any individual agency. Indeed, he claims: *No one walks on his feet to approach her/one can approach on his forehead and shoulder, or perhaps his navel.* The implication here is that the human being’s role in regards to religion is one of subservience and compliance; rather than approaching Jerusalem, the symbol of monotheistic religious orthodoxy, from a position of relative autonomy, walking upright, the human being must assume a posture of submission from the outset. This concept appears repeatedly in the poem: *Worst of all is the wretchedness of man/He falls into the vessel of ‘You, You’/And rises as smoke of ‘Labayka labayk.’* Through use of the phrase ‘*labayka labayk*,’ Adonis refers to the Talbiyah, a devotional prayer recited by pilgrims performing the Hajj, of which it is part. The phrase may be translated roughly as “I am at your service” or, as Mattawa has translated it, “I am at your beck and call.” The implication, in other words, is the same as outlined above, namely, that man surrenders his own agency and assumes a position of servitude with respect to God and his religion. Indeed, one finds frequently throughout the poem the assertion that religion seeks to deprive man of the ability or will to think for himself at all. *Knock on the door [of Jerusalem],* enjoins the speaker, *a prophet opens it and teaches you how to walk and how to bow.* Moreover, he insists, religious ideology exhorts men to violence as a means of ensuring conformity: *Murder for the betterment of progeny/for the perfection of the mind... Lift this head from the table/set it aside/examine it/Ensure that it contains no remnants of thoughts or dreams that could disturb/the image the Creator is said to have used in drawing the images of his creation.* In other words, the human being is expected not to entertain any ideas which might conflict with the orthodox narrative. This echoes the argument outlined in previous sections regarding enforced conformity and religion’s tendency to subordinate the individual to the collective. Moreover, it articulates another argument frequently found in Adonis’s poetic and

critical works, namely, that religion subordinates the reality of the world, the reality of earthly existence, to the fiction of religious narrative, as a result of which the narrative dominates nature itself.

This concept appears numerous times throughout the poem. In one verse, the speaker claims: *there exist between reality and language unfilled trenches*. In another, the speaker poses the question: *How can a head be imprisoned in a cellar of words it had itself invented?* In yet another, he asserts that: *words/are bombs and prayers*. Hence, the argument being articulated repeatedly is that the orthodox religious narrative is an image of reality which has been constructed by man, one which distances him from nature and thus does not liberate him, but rather imprisons him and renders him both the instrument and subject of violence. Furthermore, Adonis emphasizes the point that undue attachment to this narrative ultimately consigns both the individual and the society to premature death by sclerosis, for, as Adonis has stated elsewhere, “in all monotheisms... the future is always the past.”¹⁵⁵ Indeed, in *Jerusalem Concerto*, the speaker observes in reference to those who perpetuate such narratives: *They have become skilled in the art of embalming/They embalm not only bodies, they embalm/minds and ideas/and now, too, they are on their way/to embalm light*. He continues the subsequent verse in the same vein: *There are no locks on the houses they built and left as heritage/for their sons. The houses themselves are the locks*. Moreover, remnants of these ancestors who “spread their shadows” are carried “from generation to generation,” “mostly in tongues and brains.” These ideas are directly linked to Adonis’s position on *turāth*, namely, that religious orthodoxy’s preoccupation with prescription and, by extension, with conformity and imitation, has ultimately led to the stagnation of Arab culture. Society has come to see the heritage, based as it is, in Adonis’s view, on a single, fixed interpretation of scripture, as an immutable source of absolute truth rather than as a source of inspiration or place of departure. Hence, there are no “locks” on the doors of *turāth*; rather, *turāth* itself is the lock. In Adonis’s view, religion, in its provision of answers which are “exclusive, absolute, and final,” signifies “the cancellation of all enquiry and therefore of all thought.”¹⁵⁶ The human being in this context thus finds himself “deprived of his freedom to choose his own path or paths.”¹⁵⁷ In other words, prescriptive authority deprives the individual of explorative authority and thus of the right to intellectual and spiritual enquiry.

¹⁵⁵ Adonis, *Conversations in the Pyrenees*, 17.

¹⁵⁶ Adonis, *Prophecy and Power*, 137.

¹⁵⁷ Adonis, *Prophecy and Power*, 137.

This amounts to what Adonis refers to as “the myth deformed, separated from logos,” that is, a reliance on myth, or narrative, as a source of truth, to the exclusion of logos, that is, reason and observation, or experience.¹⁵⁸ Elsewhere he describes it as the “destruction of the beauty of existence on earth in order to replace it with the infinite padding of legends concerning paradise.”¹⁵⁹ This is, in other words, the same distinction he repeatedly draws between the fiction of narrative and the reality of existence, one which divests the human being of the requisite agency to acquire new knowledge and generate new ideas—that is, to create—relegating him instead to the role of obedient servant. According to Adonis, moreover, such violence against the mind is inextricably linked to violence against the body; the former ultimately implies the latter. Hence, in an evident allusion to a well-known verse from the New Testament, the speaker of *Jerusalem Concerto* proclaims: *In the beginning of the world, there was the word/in the beginning of the word, there was blood.* In so doing, he directly equates the monotheistic God with blood, implying that the singularity in vision represented by the inception of monotheism and the predominance of religious orthodoxy is inextricably linked to violence and bloodshed..

Indeed, the specter of death and warfare pervades Adonis’s *Concerto*, and this violence is explicitly attributed to monotheistic ideology: *Do you want to be described as a believer? Then you must kill.* Repeatedly, Adonis emphasizes the notion that the subordination of nature to religious narrative has unleashed untold violence on the earth. Addressing Jerusalem and, by extension, religion itself, the speaker poses the question: *Do you know a sinner more arrogant and murderous than yourself?* Similarly, elsewhere he demands: *Are we to say, “Blessed be the heavens who can only be sated with the earth’s blood?/Are we to say, “Blessed be this earth who can only celebrate the heavens if it is a graveyard?”* These questions are, of course, rhetorical, meant to convey the aforementioned idea that the triumph of religious orthodoxy and its emphasis on a single, fixed truth has had devastating consequences for humanity, that the celebration of life has, in a profound way, been supplanted by the celebration of death. Adonis expounds on this concept in an article initially published in 2011, in which he argues that “heaven, which only ever existed in the imagination, has become a being armed to the teeth....transforming itself into certainties, doctrines, absolute and infallible imperatives.”¹⁶⁰ The earth, by contrast, has been “extinguished,” transformed into a mere “wheel that makes

¹⁵⁸ Adonis, *Identité inachevée*, 38.

¹⁵⁹ Adonis, *Violence and Islam*, 125.

¹⁶⁰ Adonis, “Où est donc le problème,” *Printemps arabes* (Paris: Éditions de La Différence, 2014), 50.

the machine of heaven turn.”¹⁶¹ As a result, he maintains, “the first meaning of existence seems represented, nowadays, by war,” namely, by a war that seeks “the elimination of diversity, of pluralism, of freedoms, [and] of differences.”¹⁶²

Ultimately, therefore, this argument echoes an idea which Adonis has been advancing in his poetry for decades regarding monotheistic ideology and its tendency to foster division along sectarian or confessional lines. Religious ideology, he maintains, when adopted as absolute truth and as the cornerstone of one’s identity, promotes the negation of the other, thereby dehumanizing the other, while simultaneously eroding one’s own humanity. Indeed, in *Jerusalem Concerto*, the speaker asserts: *The sky is like a rare painting in the earth’s museum/And each is battling to prove that he is the one who has stolen it.* In other words, Adonis implies, each group wages war on those who profess rival ideologies in order to assert its exclusive claim on truth and establish its authority on this basis. In response, nature speaks in the poem, warning the poet: *Nothing leads to knowledge, save the parable of the tree.* She specifies moreover that it is *not the tree that Adam knew*, nor is it a tree to be found in either heaven or hell, but rather a tree *neither from the East, nor the West.* In this verse, therefore, nature symbolizes the reality of existence and experience, contrasted with the fiction of ideological narrative. Moreover, Adonis’s reference to such a tree is an allusion to the so-called Verse of Light (24:35), often associated with mysticism, which compares the light of God to a lamp lit from the oil of an olive tree, located neither in the East nor the West. The implication here is that no single ideology, narrative, or group has a monopoly on knowledge. Rather, true knowledge is universal; it comes from nature, from existence, from lived experience and gnosis. The recognition of such universal wisdom, in Adonis’s view, encourages people to recognize their shared humanity, rather than embracing ideologies and narratives which lead them to deny humanity in others.

In a section of *Jerusalem Concerto* entitled “A Bridge to Job,” the speaker, addressing the Prophet Job, poses the question: *How does one build a bridge between two sides/when he sees only one of them?* He continues in a subsequent verse: *When I read you, o’ Book of Job, I see how it swings inside you and how it shatters, this reed called humanity.* And yet: *Is the other not the heartbeat of infinity within you? Is he not your other self?* Adonis chooses to address this message to the Prophet Job, who is associated, above all, with such singular devotion to God that it never wavers, even in the face of untold suffering and calamity. He is,

¹⁶¹ Adonis, “Où est donc le problème,” 50.

¹⁶² Adonis, “Où est donc le problème,” 50.

by extension, addressing this message to all those who cling steadfastly to religious ideology, despite the violence and destruction inflicted upon others, and even themselves, in its name. Such a person, he maintains, who sees “only one” side when there are two, who fails to see the other as his “other self,” endangers his own humanity. *Why*, the speaker demands of Job, *do you not stop erasing [your other], as though you, too, never stop erasing yourself?* The implication here is that, in constantly striving to eliminate the other, one eliminates a part of himself, namely, that which most profoundly makes him human. He continues: *Are you a journey to distant shores? If so, you and the other are one.* In other words, he suggests, what characterizes humanity is the desire to question, to explore, and to create, to “journey to distant shores.” Moreover, this fundamental nature of man is ultimately what ties him both to his fellow man and to the infinite. By contrast, argues Adonis, “the worst representation possible of the relationship between man and God is that which consists of transforming God into private property.”¹⁶³ In such cases, he asserts, religion is politicized and politics made sacred.¹⁶⁴ What results is a “sacralization of the fight against adversity [which] transforms every man into an enemy of the ‘other’” and, by extension, renders sacred massacre, death, theft, pillaging, and other forms of destruction.¹⁶⁵ What results, in other words, is the perceived “legitimacy to exterminate that which does not resemble [oneself]” out of the conviction that one acts in the name of God.¹⁶⁶

Conclusion

Ultimately, therefore, Adonis’s criticism of religious orthodoxy stems from the conviction that monotheism and violence are inextricably related. This violence, moreover, is directed against both mind and body. In a world dominated by religious orthodoxy, asserts Adonis, the individual is subordinated to the collective and expected to conform, forced to accept pre-established answers and prevented from seeking his own. Hence, the fiction of ideological narrative usurps the reality of nature and lived experience. What results in not merely an imprisonment of the mind, but also a dehumanization of those with differing perspectives and beliefs and an erosion of one’s own humanity, which leads inevitably to

¹⁶³ Adonis, “L’obscurantisme de cette lutte,” *Printemps arabes* (Paris: Éditions de La Différence, 2014), 110.

¹⁶⁴ Adonis, “Les révolutions naissantes ne font pas mourir les régimes établis,” *Printemps arabes* (Paris: Éditions de La Différence, 2014), 164.

¹⁶⁵ Adonis, “Les révolutions naissantes,” 164.

¹⁶⁶ Adonis, “Les révolutions naissantes,” 167.

sectarian conflict and bloodshed. *Since Cain*, he writes, *blood has been the first pleasure*.¹⁶⁷ This is a position which has crystallized over time, as he has repeatedly witnessed the effects of sectarian conflict in the region. Indeed, in Adonis's view, the danger inherent in monotheism generally, and Islam specifically, ultimately stems from its vision of an absolute truth based on a single, immutable interpretation of religious scripture, which leaves little to no room for multiple interpretations, dissent, innovation, or individual enquiry. Furthermore, such singularity of vision gives rise to the inevitable temptation for man to confer upon himself the authority to adjudicate and enforce prescriptions in the name of God. This signifies, Adonis argues, not just a specious claim to know what cannot be known, but the will to impose one's chosen ideology on others, by force if necessary, a position antithetical to creativity and the flourishing of ideas requisite for progress and growth. It is precisely for this reason, in Adonis's view, that the failure to separate religion from politics is so problematic and potentially fatal to a society. In the absence of secularism, religious orthodoxy is tantamount to law, the sovereign effectively becomes deity, and religion serves merely as an "instrument [with which] to achieve the history of power and violence."¹⁶⁸ The following chapter, therefore, addresses the question of the state in Adonis's poetry, its relationship to religious orthodoxy, and its role in perpetuating ideological narratives which lead to cultural stagnation at the expense of individual freedom and dynamism.

¹⁶⁷ Adonis, "Kūnshīrtū al-ṭarīq'ila kanīsat Dante," in *al-A'māl al-shi'riyya al-kāmila* vol.6 (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2014), 105.

¹⁶⁸ Adonis, *Conversations in the Pyrenees*, 16-17.

CHAPTER TWO

The State: Power and Tyranny

*Between the caliph and the people, a single link—the sword and power.*¹⁶⁹

Introduction

Over the decades, Adonis has repeatedly expressed the view that genuine progress in the Arab world is contingent upon the categorical separation of politics and religion. Religion, he argues, should be treated as a matter of individual conscience, beyond the purview of the state and disentangled from any and all mechanisms of social and political coercion. Absent a new reading of the religion which accepts such a distinction between personal faith and the collective, socio-political dimension, he asserts, “Islam will remain a prisoner of violence and political power.”¹⁷⁰ According to Adonis, this historical alliance between religion, violence, and power may be traced back to the inception of the first caliphate, if not the inception of Islam itself. On a theoretical level, he maintains, Islam was founded upon three essential ideas, namely, that Muḥammad is the last of the prophets; that, consequently, the truths transmitted by the prophet are definitive and absolute; and, finally, that the individual believer has no authority to adapt these truths to suit his own experience, but rather must content himself with “obeying the precepts.”¹⁷¹ Over the course of history, he argues, those in power—or those aspiring to power—have actively perpetuated this conception of religion, effectively weaponizing God in the service of their own political and economic interests. Indeed, in Adonis’s estimation, God has become little more than an instrument, the mere means by which power attains whatever end it has in mind.¹⁷²

Even in the early years of Islam, he argues, Revelation served as a means of gaining “politico-economic hegemony over the Arabian peninsula.”¹⁷³ With the emergence of the first caliphate following the death of Muḥammad and the *Saqīfa* meeting, where a group of the Prophet’s companions convened to appoint a successor, Adonis argues that the founders “exploited religion instead of submitting to it,” establishing a model of governance which eschewed any distribution of power, elevated the caliph to a position of absolute authority, endowed him with the aura of divinity, and conferred upon him the role of preserving the

¹⁶⁹ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. II, 423.

¹⁷⁰ Adonis, *Violence and Islam*, 104-105.

¹⁷¹ Adonis, *Violence and Islam*, 9.

¹⁷² Adonis, *Conversations in the Pyrenees*, 16.

¹⁷³ Adonis, *Prophecy and Power*, 28.

orthodox version of the heritage and, by extension, the legitimacy of the caliphate.¹⁷⁴ As a result, any political or intellectual dissidence within the caliphate was considered tantamount to rebellion against Islam itself; those who declined to adhere to the dominant culture of the regime were consequently labelled heretics or atheists and dealt with accordingly. In other words, religion became “the key element in guaranteeing the security and stability of the political regime,” which, in turn, served as the mechanism by which adherence to religious orthodoxy was enforced.¹⁷⁵ It is through this frame that we might better understand Al-Musawi’s claim that “the underlying thesis [in Adonis’s work] targets authority.”¹⁷⁶ As he observes, the dominant forces to which Adonis is so opposed are those which “manipulate theological discourse to pre-empt criticism” and “equate power... with religious infallibility.”¹⁷⁷ This marriage between religion and political power has been so insidious, in Adonis’s view, because it establishes total control over the individual. Indeed, he asserts, when religious precepts are enshrined in law, and religious conformity thus enforced by the state, the individual’s freedom is severely circumscribed. He is forced to adhere to laws based on doctrines of faith he does not necessarily believe, and alternative points of view regarding the deepest philosophical and moral questions to which religion is meant to serve as a response are undervalued or disregarded entirely.¹⁷⁸ In other words, one returns, once again, to Adonis’s view that the notion of truth based on a single, fixed interpretation of the religious text is inherently linked to violence and the authority that derives from it inherently tyrannical.

While Adonis acknowledges that, for the most part, the culture of the caliphate and hereditary power has been replaced by new structures of governance in the Arab world, particularly in the wake of mid-twentieth century nationalist movements, he nevertheless argues that aspects of that culture endure, that “the tools it employed have not ceased to be effective.”¹⁷⁹ Indeed, he argues, the process of governance in Arab countries since the 1950s may be summarized as follows: “exploiting the power of religion by transforming it into a ‘religion’ of power.”¹⁸⁰ Embedded in such governance is a philosophy which represents the ruling power as the “mother-tree” and its subjects as “climbing plants,” or vines.¹⁸¹ In other words, the ruler simultaneously embodies the essence of society and transcends it; he is the

¹⁷⁴ Adonis, *Prophecy and Power*, 79-80.

¹⁷⁵ Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 83.

¹⁷⁶ Al-Musawi, *Arabic Poetry*, 93.

¹⁷⁷ Al-Musawi, *Arabic Poetry*, 93.

¹⁷⁸ Ninar Esber, *Conversations avec Adonis, mon père* (Paris: Seuil, 2006), 168.

¹⁷⁹ Adonis, “‘La cendre’ de Bouazizi,” in *Printemps arabes* (Paris, France: Éditions de La Différence, 2014), 30.

¹⁸⁰ Adonis, “Ô mon Obama! Ô mon Sarkozy!,” in *Printemps arabes* (Paris, France: Éditions de La Différence, 2014), 91.

¹⁸¹ Adonis, “Ô mon Obama! Ô mon Sarkozy!,” 91.

“Supreme Being” around which the nation revolves.¹⁸² Just as religious orthodoxy imposes a single, fixed interpretation of scripture and thus of God, the authoritarian state imposes a single vision of the nation, with the leader as absolute power and authority. Furthermore, rather than promoting civic society and building new civic institutions, he argues that Arab leaders have continued to “exploit all manner of religious, tribal, and ethnic conflict”; that they have sought to substitute the idea of the nation with that of the regime; and that they have systematically “repressed, humiliated, and subjugated” their people.¹⁸³ This has been accompanied, he maintains, “by a multifaceted ontological collapse, both individual and collective,” characterized by “the impoverishment of mind and body, life and meaning.”¹⁸⁴ Significantly, therefore, Adonis makes the argument that even the regimes that have presented themselves as secular have both exploited and perpetuated a pre-existent mentality instilled by religious orthodoxy which imposes singularity of vision and the idea of absolute truth through the persecution of dissidents.

Indeed, in the modern Arab world, argues Adonis, “political parties become new religions,” motivated by power and purporting to hold “all the answers to all questions.”¹⁸⁵ As Issa Boullata notes, Adonis considers most of the Arab regimes that have emerged since the 1950s as similar in essence, if not in appearance and/or form.¹⁸⁶ In “traditionalist” and “progressive” regimes alike, the state monopolizes information, imposes censorship, forbids criticism, and demands loyalty and obedience.¹⁸⁷ Dissent is met with “the risk of defamation, loss of job and of economic security, persecution, imprisonment and even exile, if not physical liquidation, depending on the degree of.. opposition and the methods of the regime.”¹⁸⁸ Furthermore, “thought is politicized and intellectuals are either co-opted by the regime or else silenced by force or the fear of force.”¹⁸⁹ In other words, irrespective of whether a regime embraces traditionalist or progressive ideology, it prioritizes its own survival over the wellbeing of its people.¹⁹⁰ To this end, it enforces ideological conformity at any cost in an effort to silence differing opinions which might pose a threat to its primacy. In this respect, Adonis contends, there is little difference between the caliph of old and the modern Arab leader. It is for this reason that Adonis is critical of the various movements in the Arab world that have

¹⁸² Adonis, “Ô mon Obama! Ô mon Sarkozy!,” 91.

¹⁸³ Adonis, “‘La cendre’ de Bouazizi,” 31.

¹⁸⁴ Adonis, “‘La cendre’ de Bouazizi,” 31.

¹⁸⁵ Esber, *Conversations avec Adonis*, 151.

¹⁸⁶ Issa J. Boullata, “Review Essay,” 109.

¹⁸⁷ Boullata, “Review Essay,” 109-110.

¹⁸⁸ Boullata, “Review Essay,” 110.

¹⁸⁹ Boullata, “Review Essay,” 110.

¹⁹⁰ Boullata, “Review Essay,” 110.

assumed the mantle of “revolution” since the mid-twentieth century. A mere *coup d'état*, in his estimation, does not rise to the level of revolution. Absent any social or cultural transformation which advances the freedom of the individual by affording space to a plurality of views, such change is superficial at best, a substitution of power rather than a revolutionary movement. Moreover, insofar as it resorts to the same mechanisms of control as the medieval caliphates and “harnesses itself to the preservation of religious precepts” in its ploy for domination, any political struggle becomes a mere “avatar of... those traditional ‘wars’ in the history of the Arabs which depended on the quest for power, religion, capital, and the social cohesion of the tribe.”¹⁹¹

This chapter therefore provides analysis for relevant excerpts of poems published between the years of 1954 and 2003, making the argument that Adonis views religious orthodoxy and the authoritarian Arab state as mutually reinforcing. This applies even in those cases where the ruling power asserts the principle of secularism, in part because this principle is not fully implemented in practice, but also, and arguably more importantly, because the core problem he identifies with both is the notion of a single, fixed interpretation of truth from which power, be it religious or political or both, derives its prescriptive authority. Therefore, while the poems analyzed in the following chapter primarily direct criticism at the Arab regimes of the late-20th century, this criticism is interwoven with criticism of religious orthodoxy, for Adonis views religious and political authoritarianism in the Arab context as interdependent, if not one and the same. Moreover, his focus on events that took place in Arab-Islamic history, such as in *Al-Kitāb*, serve as more than mere historical commentary; in his view, they continue to be relevant, serving also as commentary on the current moment, for they reflect a dominant orientation towards truth which has not changed, namely, that it is singular, absolute, and immutable. This orientation, he maintains, serves as the fundamental cause of ongoing Arab cultural stagnation, for it is inherently antithetical to individual creativity and thus cultural dynamism.

2.1 Early Poems and *Songs of Mihyār the Damascene*

The years following the Second World War witnessed the large-scale dismantlement of colonial empires and the withdrawal of European colonial powers from occupied regions in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. In this transitional period, therefore, newly independent Arab

¹⁹¹ Adonis, “Le cercle infernal,” in *Printemps arabes* (Paris, France: Éditions de La Différence, 2014), 101.

states found themselves confronted with various challenges related to self-governance, including difficult economic conditions, corruption, outdated socio-political structures, and internal and external security threats. The collective Arab defeat in 1948, which resulted in the loss of Palestine and the establishment of Israel as a state, was widely regarded as a source of humiliation and despair by the Arab public.¹⁹² Loss of faith in political leaders and institutions precipitated an era of military coups d'état, nationalization, and land reform, as well as the rise of Arab nationalism. In the cultural sphere, many poets began to depart, not only from traditional forms, but also from their traditional role in society. As Jabra notes, the Arab poet was historically "the voice of the tribe"; whether eulogizing its glories and exploits or articulating collective wisdom, his voice typically rang in harmony with the wider society of which he was part.¹⁹³ However, Arab poets in the years following the *nakba* began to adopt a stance of "intense consciousness of self," highly attuned to questions of history, humanity, modernity, and freedom and more inclined towards expostulation and the criticism of traditional social and cultural norms.¹⁹⁴

It is in this context that Adonis wrote the poem entitled "al-Farāgh" ("Emptiness") in 1954, while in the final year of his undergraduate program in Damascus.¹⁹⁵ Although many critics have drawn comparisons between this poem and T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, Adonis himself states that he was unfamiliar with Eliot and *The Wasteland* at the time of publication.¹⁹⁶ Nevertheless, one can easily detect similarities, in terms both of form and of content. Indeed, while Eliot's poem is an expression of the disillusionment of his generation after World War I and a representation of the decadence of Western civilization, Adonis's "Emptiness" expresses the disillusionment of his own cohort in the wake of independence and the Arab defeat of 1948. It evinces not only the conviction that Arab culture and society was in decline, but also a lack of faith in the ability of the prevailing socio-political order to address the root causes of this decline. As in *The Wasteland*, however, there is in "Emptiness" hope for the future in the form of revolution and resurrection. Despite being one of his earliest poems, therefore, "Emptiness" reflects many of the themes to which Adonis repeatedly returns throughout his career and which

¹⁹² Bassam K. Frangieh, "Modern Arabic Poetry: Vision and Reality," in *Tradition, Modernity, and Postmodernity in Arabic Literature: Essays in Honor of Professor Issa J. Boullata*, eds. Kamal Abdel-Malek and Wael Hallaq (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 223.

¹⁹³ Jabra I. Jabra, "The Rebels, the Committed, and the Others—Transitions in Arabic Poetry Today," in *Critical Perspectives in Modern Arabic Literature*, ed. Issa J. Boullata (Washington D.C.: Three Continents Press, Inc., 1980), 193.

¹⁹⁴ Jabra, "The Rebels, the Committed, and the Others," 193.

¹⁹⁵ Adonis, "al-Farāgh," *al-A'māl al-shi'riyya al-kāmila* vol. 1 (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2012), 117-126.

¹⁹⁶ Adonis, "There are many Easts in the East and many Wests in the West."

he regards as being undeniably and inextricably linked, namely, the perceived decadence of Arab-Islamic society and culture, the disavowal of institutionalized religion, the criticism of political authority, and the consequent need for cultural revolution as a means of renewal.

In the opening verse, Adonis uses natural imagery to convey the idea that the Arab world is in a state of transition, having lost its vitality: *Here, across my path, asserts the speaker, spring dies and the countryside turns yellow/Here, in my veins, an echo of drought.* And yet, he continues: *Here, in my blood autumn is born/and in my present is reflected/and the sun of destiny distances herself from me, and remains afar.* As was characteristic of the Tammuzi poets of the era, therefore, Adonis incorporates imagery related to the changing of seasons—which was linked to the annual death and resurrection of Tammuz—to suggest that the Arab world is itself in a state of decadence and in need of renewal. In other words, he implies, the Arab world has passed beyond the vibrance of spring and arrived at the decline associated with autumn; the specter of winter thus separates the speaker from *the sun of destiny*, which represents the spring to come, the resurrection.

In the meantime, however, the landscape remains grim and inhospitable to life. *In our land a ghost stretches out/mirage and sand/and dryness fills our depths/and darkness and barrenness fill our depths/and in our land weariness creates cemeteries/and spreads moaning through our days, and through our errors, slaughter.* In other words, suggests the speaker, the specter of the past, which is itself little more than an illusion, has stripped Arab culture and society of its dynamism; lack of progress and vision for the future has resulted in death, both literally and figuratively. The speaker claims: *hatred in our people/has a country, and the people/have an arena and a rage, and war/pollutes our air/and buries our buildings.* From these lines thus emerges an idea which repeatedly appears in Adonis's work over the course of the ensuing decades, namely, that the conflict and violence that destroy Arab lands may be traced to hatred, or rather, failure to acknowledge and embrace the other. Indeed, Adonis's use of the word "*malal*," which I have translated above as "weariness," is instructive; while the context makes it clear that this is the most accurate translation, the substitution of a single short vowel alters the word's meaning considerably. Whereas *malal* denotes "weariness" or "boredom," *milal* refers to "religions" or "sects." Absent diacritical marks, the two words are indistinguishable from one another. Therefore, this choice of word is arguably the result of a conscious decision on the part of the poet to kindle the notion in the reader that sectarianism, too, *creates cemeteries*. A subsequent line lends further credence to this idea, demonstrating, at the very least, Adonis's preoccupation with the need to embrace alterity: *And he who sees no other but himself/and who does not find the good to be good, if it isn't his good/emptiness,*

emptiness/emptiness in which destruction nests. In other words, the reader understands, it is the failure to see the other and to recognize other ways of being and thinking as equally valid, which has led both to “emptiness” and “destruction.”

The question that presents itself is, who or what is ultimately to blame for this decadence? In “Emptiness,” Adonis subjects both religion and political authority to criticism. In terms of the former, he implies that the faithful submit themselves in vain to a God who is either unworthy of their veneration or indifferent to their plight. Indeed, the speaker asks: *For whom does our generation burn incense/for whom does it bow down/which deity is worshiped?/To whom does it belong and for whom does it clasp its hands in esteem/offering up a cry and a jihad?* He continues: *The gods/loathe its offerings/and spurn them one by one/and scorn them and become arrogant.* The implication is, of course, that traditional religion is no solution to the challenges besetting the Arab world. Nor, Adonis implies, does the answer lie with political leaders who have led their people into such a wasteland. Indeed, in the final verse of the poem, Adonis points instead to youth as the source of hope for the future: *The youth of my country sing to us/their songs of innocence/They say: “In our land, there is revolution”...../They say: “In our land, dead are those who strayed and led astray/dead is the emptiness.”* Taken in isolation, it may be argued that this line is somewhat ambiguous in its indictment of political leaders. However, the first point to consider is that this poem was written in 1954. At this point in time, Adonis was still an active member of the SSNP, and his use of the word “revolution” at this stage of his intellectual development would thus have reflected more closely its meaning within the vernacular, that is, political revolution. Furthermore, reference to another poem written during this same period reveals a similar formulation of his ideas regarding political authority. In “Qālat al-’Arḍ” (“The Earth Said”), also published in 1954, Adonis likewise indicates that political leaders have strayed from their duty to the people, in this case with much less ambiguity¹⁹⁷: *O’ the humiliation that enfolds souls and builds from them thrones that go astray, or a sultan.* Indeed, the “sultan” here is charged directly with dereliction of duty, as well as with, by implication, using people or “souls” as a means by which to obtain and/or consolidate power. Importantly, moreover, Adonis’s use of the verb “*da’a*,” that is, “to go astray,” which appears frequently in the Qur’an, implies that the very power which confers upon itself religious authority is guilty of spiritual poverty and/or moral corruption.

¹⁹⁷ Adonis, “Qālat al-’Arḍ,” *al-A’māl al-shi’riyya al-kāmila* vol. 1, 7-28.

Shortly after the publication of “Emptiness,” in the spring of 1955, Adonis was arrested following the assassination of a military officer by a member of the SSNP. While Adonis himself was not involved in the assassination, the Ba‘ath Party and leftist factions in the army saw the incident as an opportunity to eliminate the SSNP as a political threat and therefore carried out a roundup of party members.¹⁹⁸ As a result, Adonis spent eleven months in prison, an experience he has referred to as “a year of torture, true hell.”¹⁹⁹ Upon his release in 1956, he moved to Beirut, in large part to escape the political situation in Syria, where the struggle for power among various nationalist groups had led not only to political instability, but also increased repression and censorship in the cultural and intellectual realms.²⁰⁰ In Beirut, he began collaborating with Yusuf al-Khal on *Shi‘r*. Indeed, it is in the pages of *Shi‘r* that much of Adonis’s poetry from this period initially appeared, including several of the poems that were later included in his 1961 collection, *’Aghānī Mihyār al-Dimashqī (Songs of Mihyār the Damascene)*.²⁰¹ While the poetry he published during this time was less overtly political than either his earlier poems, written when he was actively involved with the SSNP, or some of his later work, written after his departure from *Shi‘r*, it nevertheless reflects the same disregard for traditional political and religious authority which has become his signature.

As Creswell notes, if Arab modernism is characterized by a veneration of “abstract individualism,” then Mihyār, the hero of Adonis’s 1961 collection, arguably serves as the figure which, of all those produced by the *Shi‘r* modernists, most closely adheres to this stated ideal. Indeed, Creswell argues that Mihyār serves as “Adonis’s most powerful attempt to establish the authority of an autonomous individual,” one which is, moreover, “unsanctioned by any collective and which acquires its legitimacy from exclusively literary sources.”²⁰² This autonomy is reflected in the numerous denunciations of political and religious authority scattered throughout the collection. “Wajh Mihyār” (“Mihyār’s Face”), for instance, reads as follows: *Mihyār’s face is fire/Burning the land of familiar stars,/Behold, he crosses the caliph’s borders,/Raising a banner of fading stars,/Demolishing every home,/Behold, he refuses the imamate,/Leaving the mark of his despair/Upon the seasons’ face.*²⁰³ In this poem, fire, which is directly associated with the figure of Mihyār himself, represents an inner light, a flame that

¹⁹⁸ Robyn Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 100.

¹⁹⁹ Robyn Creswell, “The Man Who Remade Arabic Poetry,” *The New Yorker*, 18 & 25 December, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/18/the-man-who-remade-arabic-poetry>.

²⁰⁰ Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 100.

²⁰¹ In addition to the Arabic text as found in *al-A‘māl al-shi‘riyya al-kāmila* vol. 1, I have consulted an English translation published by New Directions Publishing in 2019. Please see Adonis, *Songs of Mihyār the Damascene*, translated by Kareem James Abu-Zeid and Ivan Eubanks (New York, NY: New Directions, 2019).

²⁰² Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 98.

²⁰³ Adonis, “Wajh Mihyār,” *al-A‘māl al-shi‘riyya al-kāmila* vol. 1, 259.

seeks the destruction of that which is familiar or traditional but fails to serve the aim of progress; it is, therefore, a flame that prepares the ground for resurrection or renewal. While the poem does not foretell what will rise from the ashes of Mihyār's fire, it does indicate its primary target—the caliphate, or imamate. The imagery is powerful; Mihyār, in flagrant disregard of caliphal authority, penetrates its borders and destroys everything therein over which it exercises power. In so doing, he explicitly rejects the legitimacy of prescriptive orthodoxy. Furthermore, Adonis's use of the word “ya 's,” or despair, marks the introduction of mystical terminology, referring to the lover's experience of sorrow and hopelessness when he loses sight of the Beloved. Hence, Adonis implies, the domination of prescriptive orthodoxy in the Arab world has created a distance between man and God, the traversal of which requires the destruction of prescriptive authority and the institution of explorative authority, as represented by the inner light of Mihyār's flame. Indeed, as he states in an article which first appeared in *Al-Hayat*, Adonis believes that Arab countries have historically regarded the relationship between the government and the people as one which is ruled by “a logic of ‘caliph’ and ‘heteronomous subjects,’” a logic which he characterizes as “transcendental” in nature and actively defended by traditional culture.²⁰⁴ “The current Arab culture of power,” he argues, “is still a continuation of the culture of the caliphate and its apparatus of servitude.”²⁰⁵ He voices criticism, moreover, at the notion that any individual should be forced to live in accordance with religious law, thereby denying him the autonomy to develop his own beliefs in accordance with his personal conscience.²⁰⁶ The target of Mihyār's fire, therefore, is this very “apparatus of servitude,” that is, compelled religious adherence rather more so than religion itself.

Indeed, Adonis maintains, it is necessary to deconstruct “the profound and obsessive religious structure in Arab society,” not to eliminate religion from people's lives, but rather to arrive at “the understanding that religion, too, is liberation, not servitude.”²⁰⁷ This idea reemerges in “Barā'a” (“Innocence”) another poem in *Songs of Mihyār*.²⁰⁸ In this poem, Mihyār emphasizes the distinction between spirituality based on explorative authority, deinstitutionalized and conferring authority upon the individual, and that which is based on prescriptive authority, institutionalized, imposed by force, and conferring authority upon political and religious rulers. At the beginning of the poem, Mihyār declares, “I accuse,” proceeding to charge a succession of entities, from “the phantoms” to “the trees and waters,”

²⁰⁴ Adonis, “Place de la Libération,” in *Printemps arabes* (Paris, France: Éditions de La Différence, 2014), 39.

²⁰⁵ Adonis, “Place de la Libération,” 41.

²⁰⁶ Adonis, “Place de la Libération,” 40.

²⁰⁷ Adonis, “Place de la Libération,” 42-43.

²⁰⁸ Adonis, “Barā'a,” *al-A 'māl al-shi 'riyya al-kāmila* vol. 1, 354.

with responsibility for the bloodshed endured by his people. I accuse everything and everyone save you, he seems to say: *For you, our shining sky/bride of the sultan and of God/are innocent of our blood, innocent.* In other words, the sky, which represents unfettered spiritual exploration, the mystical and the unknown, is itself “innocent” of violence. Rather, the threat, one infers, derives from its subjugation both by the sultan, who personifies the union of political and religious power, and the notion of a singular God more broadly, a monotheistic claim which assumes a monopoly on truth and the supremacy of which is ensured by the institutions of prescriptive authority, both political and religious. Indeed, as Adonis writes in *Identité inachevée*, he believes that the distortion of spirituality proceeds from the fact that religions “have been transmitted in repressive forms, as institutions, and thus have gradually become sterile and sclerotic.”²⁰⁹ As a result, he maintains, “I am against religion in the form of an institution imposed on all of society. I am not against the man who practices religious faith as an individual. I have a great respect for the human being, and therefore for his faith, provided that this faith is not converted into law.”²¹⁰

This emphasis on the cruelty and violence inflicted by autocratic political leaders whose power derives, at least in part, from concomitant claims to religious authority, permeates Adonis’s early collections. “Marthiya li-l-qarn al-’awwal” (“Elegy for the First Century”), published in *Songs of Mihiyār*, is perhaps most explicit in its encapsulation; Adonis depicts therein the widespread suffering of the masses at the hands of those who purport to represent God.²¹¹ *A man falls*, he writes, *sliced in two by the bridge to paradise.* Another man *lies with his wife beneath the prince’s cloak, beneath the silk of concubines and terror.* Meanwhile, *a child wears the robe of the gallows.* The desolation of the masses, is, in turn, juxtaposed with the power and prestige of divinely-ordained rulers. While the former are described as “vanquished,” subject to the tribulations of death and hunger, the latter are “the lords of our land,” “our princes,” and “our crowns of victory.”²¹² *The stars are an army that spits on us in the name of the Supreme Lord*, asserts the speaker; indeed, *the fall is our country.* And yet, he remarks with irony: *May God grant victory to Sultan ibn Sultan, lord of land and sea.* In other words, Adonis suggests, it is not the interests of its people which the ruling authority ultimately

²⁰⁹ Adonis, *Identité inachevée*, 40.

²¹⁰ Adonis, *Identité inachevée*, 29.

²¹¹ This poem has been removed from recent publications of the collection, as Adonis frequently engages in the editing and revising of previous works, particularly with regard to their political content. I have therefore relied on the aforementioned translation of Abu-Zeid and Eubanks, which is based on the original 1961 edition.

²¹² The relevant line, which appeared in the initial publication of the poem in *Shi’r* in 1961, has been excised from later editions of the poem. In full, it reads: *Ahmed Abu al-Fawaris, Kafur Abu al-Misk, Timur—these are the lords of our land. These are our princes, our crowns of victory.*

holds as a guiding principle, but rather the extension of its own power by means of conquest and subjugation. Religion is thus invoked merely to lend legitimacy to this pursuit and to ensure the compliance of the populace.

2.2 *Stage and Mirrors*

Five years after his departure from *Shi'r* in 1963, Adonis founded his own literary journal entitled *Mawaqif*, which published not only poetry, but also essays on a range of topics, including religion, politics, and philosophy. As Creswell notes, much of Adonis's work from the late sixties and early seventies exhibits "an explicitly engagé spirit," in contrast to the avowed apoliticism of his former colleagues at *Shi'r*, and *Mawaqif* thus serves as a reflection of his political realignment in favor of the Arab New Left, particularly after the 1967 *naksa*.²¹³ That being said, this shift was more one of tone than of substance; the rhetoric of revolution does indeed move to the forefront, but it was by no means absent from his earlier works. Moreover, the challenges posed by the prevailing structures of religious and political authority in the Arab world remain the primary target of his criticism. Indeed, his 1969 collection, *al-Masrah wa-l-marāyā* (*Stage and Mirrors*), contains a number of poems that refer explicitly to the tyrannical nature of political authority and the consequent need for sweeping political, social, and cultural change. While the link between political and religious authority is made explicit in some cases, it is, in others, much less perceptible. What is evident throughout, however, is Adonis's contempt for political despotism in any form.

One work that appears in *Stage and Mirrors*, "Ḥuzmat al-qaṣab" ("Bundle of Reeds"), depicts an exchange that takes place among a group of soldiers.²¹⁴ At the beginning of this exchange, one of the soldiers, who appears to be new to his position, alerts the others that the people have been driven to anger by the circumstances and treatment they have endured: *I hear that the people are angry/prayer and fire unite in their hearts*. His superior responds sarcastically: *sword and gold will extinguish their fire*. Indeed, continues the superior: *the sword and gold/roll them up like a bundle of reeds... and revolutionaries are cooked like chickens at a feast*. In other words, he implies, in order to control the people, one need only use weapons to inflict violence on them and/or the money accrued by means of their ongoing subjugation. Otherwise, he asserts, *they are like savages/dwelling in anger*. The reader thereby

²¹³ Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 180.

²¹⁴ Adonis, "Ḥuzmat al-qaṣab," *al-A'māl al-shi'riyya al-kāmila* vol. 2, 200-204.

infers the disdain felt by the ruling authorities for the people. No concern is shown for the reasons behind the popular unrest; indeed, the people are regarded as “savages,” easily controlled by threats or bribes and unworthy of respect. When the newcomer objects to such characterizations, accusing his peers of “despising the people” and “consigning them to slaughter,” the superior orders his execution. This is, in turn, followed by several soldiers’ approaching the superior and presenting him with a variety of human body parts as gifts. Pleased with these offerings, he declares maniacally: *the spear.../in the heart and the conscience/in the navel of the pregnant woman and the eye of the child/in inhalation and exhalation*. Indeed, he proclaims, *slaughter... my only seed*.

This text is instructive on a number of levels. First, while all of the other actors involved in the scene are referred to as “Mask 1,” “Mask 2,” etc., the young soldier who objects to the regime’s treatment of the people is referred to as “Face 1.” In other words, those who adhere unquestioningly to regime ideology and exact violence in its service are de-personalized, little more than a number within the collective of which they are part. By contrast, the soldier who speaks out against injustice is the sole figure of difference; he symbolizes individuality and, by extension, the individual’s ability to think freely, a manifestation or “face” of God. As a result, he poses a threat to the regime and must be eliminated. This will to eliminate difference is likewise reflected in the superior officer’s final words, namely, in the expression of his desire to bury the spear “in the heart and the conscience,” which collectively represent the individual’s innermost self. In addition to an emphasis on the importance of individuality, Adonis also conveys the idea that the violence inflicted on the masses by the ruling authority is not merely an assault on their physical bodies, but an assault on what Adonis views as the essence of life, namely, creativity and progress. Indeed, the superior officer seeks to sink his spear, not into an arm or a chest, but rather into the womb of a pregnant woman, into the very breath of life. His admission that “slaughter... [is his] only seed” implies that he—and, by extension, the apparatus of power he represents—has neither the capacity nor the will to engender life. This lack of will stems, in turn, from the desire to maintain the status quo, which services his own interests; tyranny is thus posited as inherently antithetical to creativity and progress.

In “Bundle of Reeds,” therefore, one discerns a number of ideas which frequently emerge in Adonis’s work. The superior officer represents the type of Arab leader that Adonis so often criticizes, namely, the omnipotent “father-president,” the “miniature god,” to whom the people are compelled to submit and around whom everything revolves.²¹⁵ It is this dynamic

²¹⁵ Adonis, *Identité inachevée*, 16-17.

between the ruling authority and the people which Adonis finds so troublesome. Moreover, while this poem makes no specific reference to the relationship between political and religious authority, Adonis has elsewhere described such a dynamic in relation to the nominally secular Syrian Ba‘ath Party as akin to “political monotheism.”²¹⁶ This dynamic may be understood more clearly through further analysis of the above-cited line, in which Adonis names as the targets of violence “the heart,” “the navel of the pregnant woman,” “the eye of the child,” “inhalation,” and “exhalation.” A reader familiar with Adonis’s works instantly recognizes the allusions to mysticism, particularly the cosmology of Ibn ‘Arabī. While these concepts will be explored in more detail in subsequent chapters, it suffices here to point out that the heart in Sufism serves as the mechanism by which the mystic relates to God, reflecting the multiple images in which His essence discloses itself. In turn, the “navel of the pregnant woman” and “the eye of child” respectively symbolize the creative womb of the universe, of existence, and the vision made possible through man’s creative imagination. Finally, “inhalation” and “exhalation” collectively indicate the continuous renewal of the universe, as God’s Breath represents creation itself. Hence, Adonis implies, the political authority in the poem targets for slaughter all that which represents creativity itself, multiplicity, and dynamism. It is in this respect that a purported secular authority may nevertheless be deemed a “political monotheist,” for, in Adonis’s view, both the dogmatic religious monotheist and the political monotheist advocate and impose by force or coercion a singular, impoverished vision of truth which denies the validity of all others and thus results in spiritual and cultural stasis.

Another dramatic scene from *Stage and Mirrors* illustrates more clearly the link in question between tyranny, political authority, and religion with reference to a specific historical figure, namely, Tīmūr, the Turco-Mongol conqueror and founder of the Timurid empire. In addition to his reputation as one of history’s greatest military tacticians, Tīmūr is also known as one of history’s greatest tyrants, due to the bloodshed and devastation wrought by his army in the territories it conquered. Moreover, Justin Marozzi notes in his biography of Tīmūr that, just as the Crusaders used Christianity as the “ideological propulsion” behind their campaigns into the Holy Land, “it was under the banner of Islam that [Tīmūr’s] conquests were prosecuted.”²¹⁷ Despite referring to himself as “the sword of Islam,” Tīmūr was not particularly devout, disregarding those aspects of the faith he found inconvenient. Nevertheless, he used the concept of jihad to “justify the use of force and savagery against virtually anyone,” travelled

²¹⁶ Adonis, “Age of Darkness.”

²¹⁷ Justin Marozzi, *Tamerlane: Sword of Islam, Conqueror of the World* (London: Harper Perennial, 2004), 55.

with an entourage of religious clerics to lend the appearance of divine sanction to his campaigns, and made frequent public displays of piety.²¹⁸ And yet, the most frequent victims of Tīmūr's brutality were his fellow Muslims; in the Arab world, he is remembered for his sacking of Aleppo, Damascus, and Baghdad, and the massacre of civilians. In many respects, therefore, he is precisely the type of political authority that Adonis condemns, one who unleashes tyranny in the service of power, conquest, and material gain and who invokes religion—either claiming religious authority himself or securing the sanction of the religious establishment—to justify his activities. In “Tīmūr wa Mihyār” (“Tīmūr and Mihyār”), therefore, Adonis depicts an exchange between Tīmūr, who represents the archetype of the tyrant claiming both political and religious authority for his misdeeds, and Mihyār, the prophetic hero-poet from *Songs of Mihyār*.²¹⁹

In the opening line of the scene, Tīmūr orders his guards to execute Mihyār, who has inexplicably escaped his prison cell: *Bring him, bring volcanic lava, bring voracious hyenas/wrap him in rats and snakes/Bring him and crush him*. Despite being decapitated and dismembered, Mihyār returns, evoking Tīmūr's great wrath. *He will not rise again*, declares Tīmūr, for: *I am hellfire and I am judge*. The Arabic word “*dayyan*”, which I have translated here as “judge,” is one of God's names in Islam, appearing not in the Qur'an but in the *sunna*. According to one of the Prophet's companions, it is said that when the people are gathered on the Day of Judgement, they will hear God's voice calling out to them, declaring “I am King, I am Judge.” Through the use of this word, therefore, Tīmūr is not merely asserting himself as judge, but asserting a claim to religious authority equivalent to that of God Himself. One need not speculate about Adonis's views on such a notion. He writes the following with regard to those who justify murder, pillage, theft, and destruction in the name of religion:

The person in whom faith engenders such ideas, such behaviors, is no longer a man like any other. He becomes an “idol” or a “totem,” venerating his own whims and impulses. Becoming legislator, he is an end in itself. The mere thirst for money and acquisition do not produce this idolatry, nor the idea of domination or victory over the enemy. There is behind this self-idolatry an insatiable avidity which extends not only to material things, but casts them as well into another, more monstrous furnace—that which devours the soul, man having, as does nature, a metaphysical “force.”²²⁰

In other words, he who sees himself as God's arbiter is ultimately motivated not just by the desire to acquire land, wealth, and/or other material goods, but also by a more insidious desire to consume “souls,” metaphorically speaking, that is, to exercise power over other

²¹⁸ Marozzi, *Tamerlane*, 55-56.

²¹⁹ Adonis, “Tīmūr wa Mihyār,” *al-A'māl al-shi'riyya al-kāmila* vol. 2, 211-215.

²²⁰ Adonis, “Les révolutions naissantes,” 165.

people, to break their spirits, to cannibalize both the physical vitality of their bodies and the creative vitality of their minds. To this end, such a person is capable of unspeakable violence.

If Tīmūr thus represents tyranny of the type outlined above, Mihiyār serves as his antithesis. As Badawi notes, the exchange between Tīmūr and Mihiyār addresses “the problem of the poet versus authority.”²²¹ Though Tīmūr lays claim to political and religious authority, Mihiyār recognizes neither claim. Rather, Mihiyār represents what Bassam Frangieh describes as “the warrior poet who [fights] against justice and oppression” in defense of his people, the prophet, the visionary, the martyr, a heroic figure who serves as a source of fear for the autocratic ruler.²²² Indeed, in “Tīmūr and Mihiyār,” although Tīmūr attempts to execute Mihiyār a second time, Mihiyār rises from the ashes. His resurrection, in turn, spurs the death and rebirth of the city and its inhabitants: *It is said that rain began to fall from the sky/a fire over the city—it was humiliated/crushed and burned,/And so it remained for a while. And yet: Mihiyār is blood and water/and the earth is like his face/it begins, like his voice.../and the people are born.* In a sense, therefore, Mihiyār serves as martyr; his death and resurrection ensure the renewal of society, the need for which Adonis emphasizes in “Emptiness” and elsewhere. It is for this reason that the court magician in “Tīmūr and Mihiyār,” in addressing Tīmūr, observes that: *you are a fire/on earth, and he is a fire on earth and in the sky/and he is the soul planted/in the lung of life.* In other words, the tyrant’s fire is a purely destructive force, a punishing force; indeed, Tīmūr himself proclaims that he is “hellfire,” or “*al-jaḥīm.*” By contrast, Mihiyār’s fire is associated not with hell, but with “the sky,” or “*al-samā’*,” which may also be translated as “heaven”; as such, it is the flame of inner light which serves not merely to destroy, but to revive.

Linked to the dramatic scene of “Tīmūr and Mihiyār” are four short poems collectively titled “Arba’ ’ughniyyāt li-Tīmūr” (“Four Songs for Tīmūr”).²²³ The first, “Mir’ā li-l-shar’” (“Mirror for the Law”), is one of many “mirrors” in *Stage and Mirrors*, an example of what Creswell refers to as “an emergent genre of poem, situated at the crossroads between historical reflection, elegy, ode and invective.”²²⁴ The speaker declares: *Overtake/the body of the virgin/the body of the pregnant woman/overtake and kill/leave no man or child untouched/this is my law.* Adonis’s choice of words here is important; rather than the word “*qānūn*,” he opts for “*shar’*”. While both may be translated as “law,” the latter applies exclusively to Islamic law as interpreted and elaborated by religious jurists. One therefore infers that Adonis seeks to

²²¹ M.M. Badawi, *A Critical Introduction to Modern Arab Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 238.

²²² Frangieh, “Modern Arabic Poetry,” 222-223.

²²³ Adonis, “Arba’ ’ughniyyāt li-Tīmūr,” *al-A’ māl al-shi’riyya al-kāmila* vol. 2, 217-222.

²²⁴ Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 177.

emphasize the fact that a political leader with a legitimate claim to religious authority effectively has the power to dictate religious orthodoxy, or at least to enforce a particular interpretation of it, and thus has the power to act with moral impunity. Indeed, the second and third poems of the group, respectively titled “al-Ghazw” (“Invasion”) and “Hum” (“Them”), depict the violence that ensues when a ruler is afforded such impunity. *A bird catches fire*, observes the speaker in “Invasion,” *and horses and women and pavements/are split like loaves of bread/in Tīmūr’s hands*. Similarly, in “Them,” the speaker deplors: *They came/entered the house unclothed/They dug/They buried the children, and left*. The last short poem in the set, entitled “Sayl” (“Flood”) reprises a familiar theme, namely, the need for social, cultural, and political renewal: *Mihyār sang tenderly/blessed the face of madness,/melted in his voice/the wound of ages, and longed/for his voice to be/a flood, and so it became*. In this poem, therefore, Mihyār again becomes the precipitating force for transformation; it is the voice of the poet-prophet, in other words, the visionary voice of change, which serves to heal “the wound of ages” and relieve society of the historical burdens that impede its progress.

This imperative to heal the wounds of history by confronting tyranny is a recurring theme in Adonis’s poems of the sixties and seventies. In “Mir’āt ṭāghiya” (“Mirror for a Tyrant”), also published in *Stage and Mirrors*, the speaker proclaims: *Spike of wheat by spike of wheat/leave not a single one behind/for this harvest/is our paradise regained/our country of tomorrow*.²²⁵ In other words, implies the speaker, it is by rooting out tyranny that the nation may reap a new harvest and secure a brighter future. Indeed, continues the speaker: *Pull out all the roots/change this soil that has/carried them/Erace the time that told their history/Erace the sky that bent towards them/So the earth may fulfill her covenant/spike of wheat by spike of wheat*. Thus, in order to ensure progress, the speaker indicates, it is necessary not simply to uproot tyranny by eliminating individual tyrants, but also to address the deeper, underlying structures which have historically given rise to tyranny and cultivated it. In Adonis’s view, this largely entails the transformation of prevailing notions of religion and religious authority. Indeed, the phrase “the sky that bent towards them” may be interpreted as an expression of the idea that the marriage of religious and political authority ultimately denotes the subordination of religion to—and the instrumentalization of religion by—political interest. It is not the authority which inclines itself towards the heavens, that is, to God, but rather God who bends to the will of a self-imposed authority.

²²⁵ Adonis, “Mir’āt ṭāghiya,” *al-A‘māl al-shi‘riyya al-kāmila* vol. 2, 227.

2.3 *Al-Kitāb* I-III

It is evident that the research Adonis undertook for his doctorate served to crystallize his ideas regarding the cultural heritage and institutions of authority in Arab society. Most significant is his assertion that oppressive structures of authority in modern times ultimately serve as the continuation of those oppressive structures of authority from history, which, given their religious provenance, are still afforded the air of legitimacy. Indeed, he argues, recorded history disproportionately reflects the history of the dominant culture, which is, in turn, associated both with orthodox interpretations of religion and autocratic political authority. His doctoral dissertation, *The Static and the Dynamic*, completed in 1973, makes the argument that the heritage ultimately comprises two trends, a “static” one which favors tradition and conformity and a “dynamic” one which inclines towards change and creativity. In Adonis’s view, the static trend has dominated historically, resulting in cultural and societal structures that are overly preoccupied with religion and the past. Moreover, as Boullata observes, the dominant trend has “imposed conformity...because change would threaten [its] existence.”²²⁶ In other words, voices of orthodoxy, with their aforementioned preoccupation with religion and idealization of past models, have historically prevailed over voices of heterodoxy, thus succeeding in their effort to maintain the status quo and retain power. In so doing, however, they have impeded societal progress by stifling creativity and silencing dissent, resulting in the “frozen history” and/or “moribund culture” to which Adonis so frequently refers. Indeed, Adonis argues that, while Arab and Muslim history is full of examples of those who were opposed to the dominant religious and political authority, the majority of these rebels were condemned, marginalized, imprisoned, exiled, or even murdered by “the machinery of power.”²²⁷ It is this power structure, he contends, which demands conformity and absolute submission, effacing the individual and subsuming him within the collective.

As Creswell has noted, it is above all “the institution of the caliphate, enforcer of intellectual and spiritual conformism,” which, for Adonis, embodies the aforementioned dominant trend within the heritage.²²⁸ On the other hand, it is the voices of heterodoxy comprising the dynamic trend which constitute the best means of transcending such institutions, which invariably prioritize the retention of power over considerations of progress and the rights of the individual. Hence, *Al-Kitāb*, published in three volumes between 1995 and

²²⁶ Boullata, *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought*, 28.

²²⁷ Adonis, *Prophecy and Power*, 94.

²²⁸ Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 150.

2002, may be read as Adonis's attempt to provide an alternate reading of Arab history, one which wrests the heritage from the grip of dominant institutions, elevating instead the voices of those who have, throughout history, rebelled against these institutions, rejecting their claims to absolute authority. As the narrator of *Al-Kitāb* remarks: *I do not live in this history, nor wander in it, save that I may transcend it.*²²⁹ Commencing, therefore, with the inception of the first caliphate following the death of the Prophet, Adonis presents the reader with an alternative historical narrative in which the institution of the caliphate, the embodiment of religious and political authority, is subjected to intense scrutiny and ultimately discredited as little more than an apparatus by which those in power have sought to maintain their power. Furthermore, insofar as it serves as a mechanism of power, the caliphate—and the monopoly on religious and political authority which it represents—is, in Adonis's view, responsible for untold violence and bloodshed. Indeed, asserts the narrator of *Al-Kitāb*: *The spilling of blood is a trait well-instilled in humans since the beginning of religions...above all when the governor installs himself here and erects his throne.*²³⁰

As mentioned in Chapter I, *Al-Kitāb* commences at the time of the Prophet's death, in the midst of a power struggle among his companions regarding the question of succession. This event, known as the *Saqīfa* meeting, resulted in the complete exclusion of the Anṣār from power, as well as the inauguration of Abū Bakr as the first caliph. It thus represents the consolidation of political and religious authority in the wake of the Prophet's death. Upon studying the opening pages of *Al-Kitāb*, the reader is left with little doubt that Adonis regards *Saqīfa* as a pivotal moment in Arab-Islamic history. Indeed, through use of dialogue, he depicts the way in which Omar and Abū Bakr secured power at the expense both of the Anṣār, who had proposed shared rule, and 'Ali, who had, in the eyes of some, the greater claim to succession. Addressing 'Ali, Omar asserts: *By war or by peace,/willfully or by force/you will not leave until you have acknowledged he who was chosen by the notables of the Quraysh—therefore pledge your allegiance.*²³¹ 'Ali declines, stating: *No, if all is as you say/how am I to acknowledge one who, according to the words of God and his prophet, is less worthy than I?/What is your argument against the Anṣār?/By it I recriminate you.*²³² Through this exchange, therefore, Adonis seeks to challenge the legitimacy of the caliphate at the very moment of its inception. Indeed, he argues, certain members of the Quraysh, including Omar and Abū Bakr,

²²⁹ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. I, 74.

²³⁰ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. I, 81.

²³¹ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. I, 11.

²³² Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. I, 11.

among others, took advantage of the Prophet's death to seize power for themselves. As the above lines attributed to 'Ali imply, the argument that Omar and Abū Bakr used to exclude the Anṣār at *Saqīfa*—namely, that only those who were closest to the Prophet might rightfully be eligible to rule—could just as easily be used to support 'Ali's claim to succession over theirs, given that he was Muḥammad's cousin and son-in-law. And yet, just as they had excluded the Anṣār against the Prophet's wishes, they elected to neutralize 'Ali's claim by forcing his compliance.

In *Prophecy and Power*, Adonis argues that the events of *Saqīfa* are tantamount to a military coup d'état.²³³ Furthermore, he asserts that this coup was carried out, not in order to protect the authenticity of the religion, but rather “to defend the foundation of a politico-religious society,” and “create a model of governance that drew on Muḥammad's relationship to God.”²³⁴ In other words, he argues, “Omar and Abu Bakr used Mohammed and his God to build a political empire.”²³⁵ In so doing, “[they] exploited religion instead of submitting to it,” and “prophecy became a sword,” wielded in defense of the ruler's interests.²³⁶ As a result, the decades following the Prophet's death were characterized by violence rather than peace. Indeed, declares the narrator of *Al-Kitāb: Astonishing, how the era of prophecy and the Rāshidūn was inaugurated with battle, death, and murderers*.²³⁷ Similarly, elsewhere the narrator asserts: *The speech/that took place between the tribes... under Saqīfa/a sand/that rained upon us/burdening the heritage with death/uprooting the seed of hope—here it is, now/a warehouse for blood*.²³⁸ Thus, Adonis maintains, prophecy and, by extension, religion more broadly, ultimately became weapons in the hands of caliphs who abused their office, frequently invoking religious authority as justification for violence of a political nature, inflicted for political reasons.

Throughout *Al-Kitāb*, therefore, Adonis seeks to emphasize the violence and corruption which inevitably ensue from the marriage of religious and political authority, both during the Rāshidūn Caliphate and beyond. For this reason, the narrator of *Al-Kitāb* repeatedly associates political and religious authority with murder and commerce: *If meaning/for the Quraysh were water/we would have bathed in it... but meaning for the Quraysh/is a sword, or a throne/or a*

²³³ Adonis, *Prophecy and Power*, 79.

²³⁴ Adonis, *Prophecy and Power*, 78-79.

²³⁵ Adonis, *Prophecy and Power*, 81.

²³⁶ Adonis, *Prophecy and Power*, 80.

²³⁷ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. I, 23.

²³⁸ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. I, 52.

*handful of money.*²³⁹ As a result, he continues: *A river of blood flows from the vein of time.*²⁴⁰ Elsewhere, donning the mask of the poet Al-Mutanabbī, Adonis conveys the same message: *The entire history of this prophetic country/is commerce and money.*²⁴¹ The Arabic words Adonis uses, and which I have translated as “commerce” and “money,” are, respectively, “*qarsh*” and “*qirsh*.” The latter denotes a unit of currency, and, while the meaning of the former is a bit less certain, it is typically believed to refer to a gain of assets or a business transaction of some nature. Adonis’s usage of the term in the text specifically ties it to the Quraysh—considering it the possible origin of the tribe’s name—simultaneously evoking the idea of commerce as well as the role of the Quraysh in establishing institutions of authority which prioritize economic gain and, by extension, the retention of power. Furthermore, the text implies, those in power invoke God primarily as justification for the violent actions taken to procure money and more power. Indeed, observes the narrator: *The kingship is an invocation of God/The kingship is a minaret/strangled, and iron/pouring gold.*²⁴² In other words, this verse implies that the “king” or “caliph” who asserts both political and religious authority effectively oversees a corruption of spirituality in the service of his own interests; hence, the “minaret” is “strangled.” Moreover, such a ruler invokes God to justify the use of violence for the purpose of augmenting his wealth; thus “iron” weaponry breeds “gold.” Indeed, laments the mask of Al-Mutanabbī: *Time is ingots of corpses killed in the name of the Creator.*²⁴³

Furthermore, in Adonis’s view, the ruler who lays claim to both political and religious authority is dangerous insofar as he wields the authority to dictate which interpretation of scripture is considered to be “correct” on any given subject, as well as the authority to compel adherence to his chosen interpretation under threat of violence. To illustrate this point, Adonis includes countless examples of those who were persecuted and/or executed throughout history as a result of their beliefs. One such example is the Abbasid-era poet Ḥammād Ajrad who was executed on charges of heresy. In reference to his decapitation, the narrator remarks with irony: *Is religion not a forgiving realm/with neither compulsion, nor coercion?*²⁴⁴ This is evidently a reference to the oft-cited Qur’anic verse (2:256) which asserts that there is no compulsion in religion. Adonis alludes to it here in order to emphasize the ruling authority’s contravention of this principle in practice. Indeed, Adonis repeatedly makes the argument that this compulsion

²³⁹ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. I, 108.

²⁴⁰ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. I, 108.

²⁴¹ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. I, 234.

²⁴² Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. III, 209.

²⁴³ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. I, 148.

²⁴⁴ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. II, 294.

to adhere to the religious beliefs and practices dictated by the ruling authority constitutes violence against both mind and body and leads to the erasure of the individual subject. As the narrator of *Al-Kitāb* asserts: *An incommensurable war/between languages and interpretations/alif lam ha'/and the rubble is sometimes minds/and sometimes heads.*²⁴⁵ In other words, there is a war over meaning and interpretation with respect to God and religion, and those who are on the losing side of the battles fought in this war are either killed or forced to sacrifice freedom of thought and/or speech. Indeed, declares the narrator: *One can lose his body or his mind or both at once.*²⁴⁶ This violence stems largely from the ruling authority's lust for power and, by extension, its determination to quash freedom of thought, which is perceived as antithetical to obedience and conformity. It is for this reason, in Adonis's estimation, that *fiqh* has historically been interwoven with the exercise of power. Neither "liberation" nor "exploration," he argues, *fiqh* has historically "followed and justified the political power of the caliphate."²⁴⁷ Moreover, by forcing every individual to adhere to the same laws and precepts, regardless of personal disposition or inclination, he argues, the imposition of *fiqh* amounts to a denial of the plurality of nature and thus an erasure of the individual as an individual. Even in the absence of physical coercion, such denial of subjectivity inflicts violence by restricting freedom of thought and freedom of expression. As such, Adonis argues, "freedom remains the exclusive property of those who exercise power."²⁴⁸

2.4 The Ba'ath Regimes: "Poetry Places Her Lips on Baghdad's Breast" and "The Wounds and Qāsiyūn and Tasnīm"

Given the frequent references to caliph and caliphate in Adonis's works, one might be forgiven for wondering whether the observations he makes regarding political and religious authority continue to be relevant today. Indeed, Jayyusi argues, Adonis's "preoccupation with the past" has, at times, led him "to forget about the present and lose touch with his own age."²⁴⁹ And yet, caliph and caliphate are for Adonis, not merely literal references to historical realities, but also symbols for the marriage of religious and political authority which persists in much of the Arab world even today. As Boullata explains, Adonis views the political regimes that have ruled over Arab societies after the dissolution of the Ottoman empire and decolonization as

²⁴⁵ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. I, 26.

²⁴⁶ Adonis, *Al-Kitāb* vol. II, 484.

²⁴⁷ Adonis, *Violence and Islam*, 64.

²⁴⁸ Adonis, *Violence and Islam*, 88.

²⁴⁹ Jayyusi, *Trends and Movements*, 746.

being based, not on civic society and institutions, but rather on “systems of total submission.”²⁵⁰ Indeed, Adonis has argued, the collapse of the Ottoman empire gave way to political regimes which ultimately served as variations on the caliphal system.²⁵¹ As a result, the reach of such regimes in recent decades has extended well beyond politics into the realms of “religion, thought, literature, art, ethical, and aesthetic values.”²⁵² Moreover, he asserts, the process of governance in Arab countries since the 1950s has amounted to the “[exploitation] of the power of religion by transforming it into a ‘religion’ of power.”²⁵³ As opposed to mobilizing in the effort to construct new civic institutions, these regimes “have exploited all manner of religious, tribal, and ethnic grievance” and “have sanctified these grievances in order to dominate the people.”²⁵⁴ Such political instrumentalization of religion, Adonis contends, constitutes violence against both body and mind; it turns religion into “political capital” and “an instrument of hegemony” and man himself into a pawn of the regime.²⁵⁵ Thus, by controlling information, depriving individuals of subjectivity and the freedom to think or speak freely; by endorsing—and often enforcing adherence to—a particular reading of religion; and by inciting tribal and sectarian conflict, Arab regimes in past decades have, in Adonis’s view, perpetuated the brand of tyranny practiced by the caliphs of old. This dynamic is particularly well-illustrated in two of Adonis’s poems, namely, “Yaḍa‘u al-shi‘r shafatayhi ‘ala thady Baghdād” (“Poetry Places Its Lips on Baghdad’s Breast”) and “al-Jirāḥ wa Qāsiyūn wa Tasnīm” (“The Wounds and Qāsiyūn and Tasnīm”), both of which were published as part of the 2007 collection *Warrāqun yabī‘u kutūb al-nujūm (A Printer Sells the Books of Stars)*.²⁵⁶

Adonis initially wrote “Poetry Places Its Lips on Baghdad’s Breast” in April 1969, during a visit to Baghdad as a member of a Lebanese delegation participating in a conference held by the Arab Association of Writers. At this point in time, the Ba‘ath Party had been in power for just under a year, having staged a successful coup against President Abdul Rahman Arif the previous summer. Moreover, three months earlier, in January 1969, the new government had made international headlines as a result of its decision to hang fourteen people publicly in Liberation Square as punishment for alleged espionage, a decision which has been credited with helping it consolidate control over Iraq. In his foreword to the poem, Adonis takes

²⁵⁰ Boullata, “Review Essay,” 110.

²⁵¹ Adonis, “Dix thèses sur les revoltes arabes actuelles,” 81.

²⁵² Adonis, “Dix thèses sur les revoltes arabes actuelles,” 82.

²⁵³ Adonis, “Ô mon Obama! Ô mon Sarkozy!,” 91.

²⁵⁴ Adonis, “‘La cendre’ de Bouazizi,” 31.

²⁵⁵ Adonis, *Prophecy and Power*, 149.

²⁵⁶ Adonis, “Yaḍa‘u al-shi‘r shafatayhi ‘ala thady Baghdād,” *al-A‘māl al-shi‘riyya al-kāmila* vol. 7 (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2014), 136-152; Adonis, “al-Jirāḥ wa Qāsiyūn wa Tasnīm,” *al-A‘māl al-shi‘riyya al-kāmila* vol. 7, 105-123.

care to specify that the thoughts included therein apply to the atmosphere created by the regime and its supporters rather than to the Iraqi people as a whole. Moreover, despite the Ba'athist regime's officially secular platform, Adonis's description suggests that it rivals the caliphal system in its tactics of repression and coercion. As for his arguments regarding the instrumentalization of religious-based sectarianism by the ruling power, one would be hard-pressed to find a better example than Iraq under the Ba'ath Party and Saddam Hussein, particularly with regard to its treatment of Kurdish and Shi'i minorities. More importantly, however, is its use of repression and coercion to impose a singular vision of the nation. As Issa Boullata has noted, therefore, Adonis sees little difference between the purportedly progressive ideology of the Ba'ath regime and the conservative and/or overtly religious ideology of more traditionalist regimes; in both cases, the regime prioritizes self-perpetuation over the welfare of its people.²⁵⁷ Moreover, in both cases, the state controls the flow of information, views dissent as tantamount to subversion, and persecutes those deemed to be disloyal.²⁵⁸ Loyalty, in turn, is regarded as equivalent to obedience and adherence to the singular vision of truth imposed by the powers that be.

Indeed, the speaker in "Poetry Places Her Lips on Baghdad's Breast" repeatedly indicates that the people of Baghdad have been coerced into submission under threat of violence. He declares: *I am convinced,/that the ruler's mind is devoted to the composition of specific lexicons which hunt human beings and tame them.* In other words, the authority dictates the usage and parameters of language to control the population and ensure compliance, a phenomenon Adonis likewise associates with religious orthodoxy. Indeed, the speaker remarks: *Baghdad is a mother with fetuses tied to her pelvis, and each one emerges praying to the absolute ruler.* In other words, implies the speaker, even from birth, the individual understands the importance of reproducing the regime's rhetoric, even if only performatively. Nevertheless, if psychological coercion proves insufficient, the ruling authority is prepared to resort to physical violence: *Look how the tyrant's sword is sharpened/look how necks are prepared to be struck.* As a result of such tactics, the people live in a permanent state of fear and paranoia, with the knowledge that deviation from prescribed behavior or speech is likely to incur punishment. Indeed, the idea that one cannot think or speak freely appears repeatedly throughout the poem. *Please whisper,* implores the speaker repeatedly, *the threshold of the house has ears.*

²⁵⁷ Boullata, "Review Essay," 109-110.

²⁵⁸ Boullata, "Review Essay," 109.

The issue addressed by the poem as outlined above is thus the regime's attempts to curtail freedom of expression. In some cases, this involves retaliation, or the threat of retaliation, against speech that is deemed subversive, incendiary, or otherwise deviant. In other cases, this begins with controlling what people think, which, in turn, involves manipulation of the public discourse and, by extension, public perception of reality. In Adonis's view, this has the effect of depriving the individual not only of the right to think freely, but even, at times, the inclination to do so. One sees how this aligns with Adonis's perception of religious orthodoxy and its method of control. As the speaker of "Poetry Places Its Lips" observes: *We have no need for thought. There is someone who renders us superfluous to it. He knows everything and answers everything.* The "he" in question is, of course, the ruler, the "head of power" or "supreme being" around whom, according to Adonis, the entire nation turns.²⁵⁹ In an article initially written in March 2011, during the Syrian Civil War, Adonis addresses several such rulers, referring to them as "partisans of the left," and charges them with "transforming their countries into spaces for slogans and banners devoid of all cultural and human content."²⁶⁰ In other words, he suggests, such rulers, motivated by the will to advance their own ideologies and maintain their grip on power, have dispossessed their nations of all vitality by restricting individual creativity, freedom of thought, and dissent. Indeed, in "Poetry Places Its Lips," the speaker poses the question: *What is the difference between Baghdad in 1258 and Baghdad in 1969?* In response, he declares: *The first, the Mongols destroyed/and the second, her children now do.* In this line, Adonis thus implies that the autocratic ruler and those who facilitate his rule—by restricting freedom of thought and freedom of expression, by fostering sectarian conflict, and by resorting to violence as a method of control—are responsible for the destruction of their own culture. While the Mongols were the enemy from without, the current rulers are the enemy from within, responsible for effacing the individual, sowing terror and distrust, and thus consigning their city to a figurative death. As the speaker affirms: *Here, life loses its time observing death.* Moreover, in the presence of such a repressive apparatus of power, the speaker implies, there is little hope for revitalization in the near future. Indeed, he observes: *All of Baghdad is smoke... but where is the fire?* The fire to which the speaker alludes is, of course, the fire associated with Mihyār, namely, that which is at once destructive and revivifying. By posing this question, therefore, the speaker simultaneously evinces the hope for such a transformative force and the absence of any indication of it.

²⁵⁹ Adonis, "Ô mon Obama! Ô mon Sarkozy!," 91.

²⁶⁰ Adonis, "À la lumière du moment syrien," in *Printemps arabes: religion et révolution* (Paris, France: Éditions de La Différence, 2014), 69.

Similarly, “The Wounds and Qāsiyūn and Tasnīm,” published as part of the same collection, reflects Adonis’s impressions of Damascus under the Ba‘ath Party. The poem was written based on observations Adonis made during a visit to Syria in 2003, at which point Bashar Al-Assad had been in power for nearly three years. Following his father’s death in the summer of 2000, Syria witnessed a brief period of socio-political debate and liberalization, known as the Damascus Spring, and it had appeared as though, under new leadership, the country might be transitioning from an era of acute political repression to one of relative freedom and pluralism. Indeed, in September of that year, a group of ninety-nine prominent intellectuals, including Adonis, signed a statement addressed to the government, demanding that it implement a number of political reforms; these included an end to the state of emergency and martial law, which had been in place since 1963; public pardon for political detainees; dismantlement of the surveillance state; and the establishment of laws protecting freedom of expression, of the press, and of assembly. While it initially appeared that the new president might be sympathetic to the idea of reform and even took tentative steps in that direction, releasing hundreds of political prisoners and allowing the proliferation of civil society organizations, these minor reforms were just as quickly rescinded. Indeed, by 2001, the Al-Assad government had reverted to repressive tactics, imprisoning opposition activists and suppressing political debate. Thus, by the time of Adonis’s visit in 2003, this brief period which had fostered hope that genuine change might be imminent had passed, and it was clear that Bashar Al-Assad had no intention of implementing reforms which might threaten his hold on power.

In “The Wounds and Qāsiyūn and Tasnīm,” one observes a number of familiar themes regarding prescriptive authority, power, and violence. Indeed, in one verse, the speaker proffers a series of rhetorical questions which collectively serve as the basis of Adonis’s critique:

Is there a politics that can be described as ‘nihilistic’? A politics based exclusively on the pleasure of power and lust of the king? And is the human being in this legislator-law merely an instrument of the will of power? A politics which is self-perpetuating and self-destructive at the same time? The politics of a world that destroys itself in what it builds? A politics that ‘does’ too much, ‘thinks’ too little? A politics that prevents others from thinking about it or its work?

The principal target of Adonis’s criticism is the political regime which serves the interests of the ruling authority rather than the people. Indeed, suggests the speaker, the politics of such a regime is based entirely on *the pleasure of power and lust of the king*. As a result, the individual is relegated to the role of pawn or “instrument,” significant only insofar as he proves

useful for the ruler's purposes, which inevitably amount to the acquisition and/or maintenance of power. Moreover, the politics of such regimes are simultaneously "self-perpetuating" and "self-destructive": self-perpetuating because they actively oppose any disruption to the system which might constitute a threat to the status quo and, by extension, to their own power, and self-destructive because, in so doing, they suppress the vision and creativity necessary for progress. Indeed, they quash dissent, by coercion or by force, thus depriving their people of the right to think and express themselves freely. As the speaker notes in a subsequent line: *The word 'think' means, specifically, to confront, and not to agree or accept. But 'confront' does not mean the other alone, but also the self—and perhaps foremost.* In other words, implies the speaker, such regimes fail to subject their own motivations and ideology to due scrutiny, opting instead to assign blame to, if not eliminate entirely, those who disagree with them. Once again, one sees the comparison Adonis draws between the mentality of authoritarian political regimes and prescriptive religious orthodoxy. In both cases, he argues, the authority institutes and enforces a singular vision of truth from which it derives its own legitimacy and deals brutally with any who dare to challenge it, thus closing the door to the freedom of thought and spirit of innovation required for cultural dynamism. Indeed, in an article written in June 2011 for the Lebanese publication *As-Safir*, entitled "Open Letter to President Bashar Al-Assad," Adonis argues that the authorities within the Syrian Ba'ath regime have historically pursued a single objective, namely, to "obtain power and maintain it," for, he contends, "power in and of itself interests them more than the establishment of a new way of life."²⁶¹ Moreover, their espousal of a "backward cultural politics" which "prohibits any positive development" ensures that "they carry within themselves the seeds of their own downfall."²⁶² With regard to its treatment of citizens, he asserts that regime ideology has exterminated "the dynamism of man and of society," in part by fostering political and social structures which conflate loyalty with culture, slogans with thought, and nation with party, while simultaneously undermining any attempts to institute a civic society.²⁶³

Indeed, Adonis asserts in a subsequent article published in *As-Safir* and addressed to the Syrian opposition, the regime may not be understood through the mere lens of politics. Rather it comprises "a complex, socio-cultural, politico-religious structure which proceeds

²⁶¹ Adonis, "Lettre ouverte au Président Bachar al-Assad," in *Printemps arabes: religion et révolution* (Paris, France: Éditions de La Différence, 2014), 56.

²⁶² Adonis, "Lettre ouverte au Président Bachar al-Assad," 56.

²⁶³ Adonis, "Lettre ouverte au Président Bachar al-Assad," 55-60.

from a ‘heritage’ instrumentalized by ideological and institutional apparatus.”²⁶⁴ In other words, the regime derives legitimacy from its instrumentalization of the heritage, as the result of which its reach extends beyond the political realm into society, culture, and religion. In Adonis’s view, moreover, the uncritical reception of this heritage, which has historically been tied to the state, enables the ruling authority to exercise control over the population by eroding individualism. Indeed, observes the speaker in “The Wounds and Qāsiyūn and Tasnīm”: *We agree and we are convinced that we are thinking. Under the roof of a conveyed fatherhood. In a genealogical chain in which the latter is linked to the former, the link is submission and emulation. No singularity. Rather, it is a fusion of “we” – abstract and barren.* In other words, he implies, the problem lies in the tendency to adopt the heritage uncritically, to submit collectively to the authority of inherited truths and to the authority of those who perpetuate them, thus reproducing past models at the expense of progress and valuing imitation over creativity. Moreover, Adonis argues, given that the heritage is itself deeply interwoven with religion, such instrumentalization of it by the state inevitably draws religion into the political realm. Indeed, the speaker asserts: *Tyranny, violence, and injustice in our lives and our thoughts have almost a spiritual flavor.*

In Adonis’s estimation, tyranny denotes that which attempts to impose conformity on the individual by coercion or by force. Thus, the ruling authority which curtails freedom of thought in the interest of maintaining its own power is by definition tyrannical. And yet, to the extent that society itself attempts to enforce conformity on the individual, it, too, may be deemed tyrannical. Indeed, uncritical reception and transmission of the heritage, which is closely linked to religious orthodoxy, amounts in Adonis’s view to a forfeiture of thought and thus reinforces the power of the ruling authority, regardless of whether it purports to be secular. Therein lies the crux of the problem, namely, a devaluation of the individual which extends beyond politics into culture and society. In order to resolve the political problem definitively, society must look beyond the regime; Adonis’s conception of revolution is not, in the first instance, a political one, but rather a social and cultural one. There is no point, he argues, in replacing one political regime with another if one has not first resolved the more fundamental problem posed by religion as it is transmitted through the heritage, namely, the notion of a fixed interpretation of truth upon which prescriptive orthodoxy relies. It is for this reason that the speaker in “The Wounds of Qāsiyūn and Tasnīm” insists upon freedom of expression as the

²⁶⁴ Adonis, “La révolution: loin du régime, au-delà de la politique,” in *Printemps arabes: religion et révolution* (Paris, France: Éditions de La Différence, 2014), 124.

antidote to tyranny. *Writing, he asserts, is more than just using speech. It is a matter of existence. And the question of becoming. A second blood. A second lung.* In other words, writing, or freedom of expression, can be a vitalizing force; it assumes freedom of thought and individual autonomy, and thus is antithetical to the mentality imposed not only by authoritarian regimes, but also by the prescriptions of religious orthodoxy, promoting not stasis but transformation. In the absence of critical thought and freedom of expression, the speaker insists: *Arab cities are dominated only by those who lead them as sheep are led.* In response to such tyranny, contends the speaker: *We must practice writing as a 'criminal' act... The writing that shakes the foundations of tyranny in all its forms and manifestations, whether in values, traditions, customs, or beliefs... The writing that removes the bark, so as to reveal the living sap underneath... Writing in which the world seems to be in a constant state of formation and fluctuation.*

Conclusion

Ultimately, therefore, political power constitutes the second pillar of prescriptive authority, alongside religious orthodoxy. As reflected in *Al-Kitāb*, Adonis argues that the relationship between politics and religion may be traced back to the founding of the first caliphate, which, he suggests, was primarily a political rather than religious event. The decision to establish a political authority, which was itself based upon the religious authority of the leader, served the purpose of control, by dictating the parameters of, and serving as intermediary for, man's relationship with God. Historically, therefore, Adonis argues that a symbiotic relationship evolved, in which political power derived its authority from religion, while religious orthodoxy enforced and perpetuated its prescriptions through the mechanism of political power. Furthermore, the notion of religious authority was itself based upon the general idea that there exists a single, correct interpretation of the text and that that interpretation of the text is itself immutable, in other words, that truth itself is absolute and immutable. The caliph and/or religious jurists thus became the arbiters of the text and of truth, imposing their chosen interpretation of the text on culture and society by law and, if necessary, by force. Therefore, Adonis argues, not only has this single interpretation of the text become inextricably interwoven with the dominant cultural heritage, but the dominant cultural heritage has historically been largely shaped by the state itself. It is for this reason that Adonis refers to the need to "wrest the heritage" from the state, for, he insists, it largely excludes the voices of heterodoxy and dissidence which posed any challenge to the orthodox narrative.

Indeed, in Adonis's view, given that prescriptive authority, both political and religious, derives from a single, fixed interpretation of the text which allows it to act as intermediary between man and God, man and truth, and thereby accrues and perpetuates its own power, it is inherently hostile to the notion that this interpretation is not fixed or, indeed, to the idea that there may be an infinite number of interpretations. This is what may be understood as its "singularity of vision." Furthermore, as its power directly relies on the acceptance by society of its chosen interpretation of the text, it is motivated to ensure this acceptance, perpetrating what has been referred to in Chapter I as violence against both mind and body. On the one hand, it subsumes the individual into the collective, restricting freedom of thought and individual subjectivity, elevating the truth of ideological narrative over nature and the legitimacy of received knowledge over experience. On the other, it enforces its strictures by law and/or by force, discouraging heresy, apostasy, and dissent and sowing the seeds of sectarian conflict by encouraging the notion of identity based on shared beliefs rather than on common humanity. For this reason, it is, in Adonis's view, inherently opposed to modernist ideals of freedom of thought, individualism, and humanism. Moreover, this insistence on a singular vision of truth which orients itself predominantly to the past rather than the future leads to cultural stagnation rather than cultural dynamism because it inhibits creativity. Questioning and innovation become heresy when the answers at hand are definitive.

This perceived dynamic between politics and religion, as well as that of prescriptive orthodoxy and populace, is most evident during the historical periods in which the head of state was caliph, imam, or sultan. However, Adonis argues "the established regime in any Arab state represents... a variation of the caliphal system."²⁶⁵ Indeed, in his estimation, even those regimes which are nominally secular, such as in Ba'athist Iraq or Syria, rely on social, cultural, and religious structures which have emerged from a dominant version of the heritage, one which is steeped in the orthodox interpretation of religion and which has historically been curated, cultivated, and perpetuated by state power. Therefore, while such regimes indeed operate under the leadership of a single, dictatorial figure, or "supreme leader," tyranny—insofar as it is defined by its attempts to coerce or compel the individual into submission and/or conformity—emanates not only from above, but also from below. As a result, a political ruler need not declare himself caliph to harness the enmity borne of centuries of sectarian violence and direct it in the service of his own interests. In Adonis's view, he need merely preside over the preservation of an inherited system, in which religious orthodoxy dominates the discourse and

²⁶⁵ Adonis, "Dix thèses sur les révoltes arabes actuelles," 82.

in which creativity and freedom of thought and expression on the part of the individual are severely circumscribed. Furthermore, even were one to set religion aside, the fixation on a single, definitive narrative of truth in the sphere of politics which assumes the absolute infallibility and discretion of the leader directly mirrors the dominant operative mentality in the religious sphere.

It is for this reason that Adonis condemns any ideological system that seeks to impose beliefs on the individual and force adherence to prescriptions which should fall rather under the purview of personal conviction. With respect to religious faith, specifically, he argues, the apparatus of power renders religion immutable and therefore lifeless, a mechanism of exploitation rather than a source of vibrancy which may guide man in the service of freedom and personal evolution.²⁶⁶ As Issa Boullata observes, freedom is for Adonis “the most essential value... [for] it is equivalent to revolution, to creativity, to modernity.”²⁶⁷ In other words, it is not merely a question of freedom in the political sphere, but also, and arguably more importantly, a question of the freedom to subject to criticism even the most deeply-ingrained collective beliefs regarding the nature of God and existence. Hence, the battle for freedom begins, in Adonis’s view, with the wresting of heritage from the clutches of power, with the refusal to submit to or receive uncritically the narratives expounded by religious orthodoxy in service of its own interpretation of truth and likewise cultivated by political power in service of its own perpetuation.

²⁶⁶ Esber, *Conversations avec Adonis*, 175.

²⁶⁷ Boullata, “Review Essay,” 111.

CHAPTER THREE

Refusal: Reinterpreting the Narrative

*Let the nations of flame and refusal awaken.*²⁶⁸

Introduction

In 1961, following the publication of Adonis's collection *Songs of Mihyār*, the summer edition of *Shi'r* included an essay written by his wife, the literary critic Khalida Said, on the theme of refusal (*al-rafd*) in modern Arab poetry. According to her analysis, the concept of refusal proffered by Adonis and his cohort was neither entirely novel nor unique to Arab poetry; rather, it had roots in such movements as Romanticism, Existentialism, and Surrealism, all of which sought to understand man's place in a world characterized by increased uncertainty and instability.²⁶⁹ Although they originated in the West, Said maintains, these cultural movements addressed questions that were universally relevant in the modern era. Indeed, she notes, the Arab man is a human being like any other; regardless of his specific social, cultural, and political challenges, he, too, is "subject to blind fate, surrounded by the forces of the universe, and yet helpless before them."²⁷⁰ If anything, she argues, the specific challenges he faces "exacerbate his perception of these silent forces and their cruelty."²⁷¹ In the case of the Arab poet, therefore, refusal has the potential to serve as a response to both sets of challenges, local and universal. As such, it operates on two distinct levels. The first and most common is what Said refers to as "partial" or "cultural" refusal and entails a rejection of established beliefs, traditions, values, perceptions, and/or relationships.²⁷² It constitutes not merely a refusal of form, but also of content, meaning, and vision.²⁷³ By contrast, "total" or "existential" refusal is more philosophical in nature. It entails a rejection not merely of localized beliefs and values, but also of more fundamental categories and logical principles, such as the law of identity, the principle of non-contradiction, and/or the presumed inevitability of life, death, and the passage of time.²⁷⁴

According to Said, the modern Arab poet is motivated to adopt a posture of refusal by the realization that man is simultaneously overwhelmed by a profound longing for that which

²⁶⁸ Adonis, "Hadha huwa ismī," *al-A'māl al-shi'riyya al-kāmila*, vol. 2, 429-452.

²⁶⁹ Khalida Said, "Bawādir al-rafd fī-l-shi'r al-'arabī al-ḥadīth," *Shi'r* 19 (1961): 88-96.

²⁷⁰ Said, "Bawādir al-rafd," 90.

²⁷¹ Said, "Bawādir al-rafd," 90.

²⁷² Said, "Bawādir al-rafd," 92-93.

²⁷³ Said, "Bawādir al-rafd," 93.

²⁷⁴ Said, "Bawādir al-rafd," 93.

is infinite and yet unable to reach it directly, subject as he is to a multitude of laws and relationships which confine his thoughts and movements within pre-established boundaries and thereby thwart him in his aim.²⁷⁵ Refusal thus serves as a means by which the poet disrupts the laws and relationships that govern the existing order and, in so doing, exposes its perceived absurdity, contradiction, disintegration, and/or sterility.²⁷⁶ Moreover, in its mature stages, refusal invites the poet not only to disrupt and undermine, but to build and create, for it ultimately seeks a world reimagined rather than a world destroyed. Destruction is not an end in itself but a means. Indeed, Said emphasizes, refusal does not signify nihilism; on the contrary, at its core, it harbors “a hidden nostalgia for God, for union and for love,” though the poet himself may “[try] to drown this nostalgia with his screams.”²⁷⁷

Adonis’s poetry reflects both levels of refusal. As Abu Deeb notes, the poem becomes for Adonis “a microcosm through which he can redefine the world.”²⁷⁸ By violating established poetic standards with respect to everything from rhythm and form to syntax, imagery, and tone, Adonis is, effectively, “violating the structure of the world as inherited and accepted by the culture.”²⁷⁹ Adonis’s work thus serves as a challenge not only to poetic orthodoxy, but to orthodoxy writ large; it rejects prescriptive authority, explicitly targeting the various social, cultural, and religious institutions that Adonis views as oppressive with respect to the individual and thereby inherently antithetical to the creative impulse. Moreover, it evinces considerable Surrealist influence in its aim to unify exterior and interior reality and in its emphasis on unseen worlds, dreams, and new horizons; frequently incorporates paradox; and displays both a preoccupation with death and time and an inclination to transgress the natural laws that govern them, all of which indicate a refusal that extends well beyond the rejection of localized beliefs and values.²⁸⁰ Adonis’s refusal thus expresses itself in many forms; however, at its essence, it represents a profound and unequivocal rebellion against the idea that creativity is the exclusive purview of God.

As outlined in previous chapters, Adonis perceives Arab culture as being dominated by elements that seek to enforce conformity and preserve the status quo at the expense of individual freedom and creativity. This is due, in his estimation, to the pervasive influence of an orthodox religious discourse which posits God as the only being capable of creation, thus

²⁷⁵ Said, “Bawādir al-rafd,” 92.

²⁷⁶ Said, “Bawādir al-rafd,” 92.

²⁷⁷ Said, “Bawādir al-rafd,” 96.

²⁷⁸ Kamal Abu Deeb, “The Perplexity of the All-Knowing: A Study of Adonis,” in *Critical Perspectives in Modern Arabic Literature*, ed. Issa J. Boullata, (Washington D.C.: Three Continents Press, Inc., 1980), 309.

²⁷⁹ Abu Deeb, “The Perplexity of the All-Knowing,” 309.

²⁸⁰ Jarryusi, *Trends and Movements*, 684.

placing an interdiction on innovation, particularly when said innovation is deemed to be in contravention of religious authority, and relegating man to the role of imitator. Adonis rejects this notion categorically, for he equates imitation with submission, with a failure to doubt or engage critically with the heritage, and with an abdication of the very qualities that constitute the essence of the human being. Indeed, in his view, the essence of the human being and that which separates him from other animals is “his capacity to create things that surpass him.”²⁸¹ It is this capacity for creation, moreover, which allows him “to contribute to progress and participate in building the world.”²⁸² Prescriptive orthodoxy, therefore, is based upon a false premise which separates man from himself, from existence, and even from God, for it fundamentally misunderstands all three categories.

This chapter therefore analyses three poems, all of which engage with the traditional narrative advanced by religious orthodoxy. Each of these poems reflects Adonis’s effort to rewrite this narrative in a manner that strips orthodoxy of its authority and promotes the authority of the individual and his creative capacity. The first, “The New Noah,” is one of his earlier poems; written in the late fifties and first published in *Shi‘r*, it exemplifies the modernist style characteristic of his poetry during that period. The second, “Eighth Heaven,” and third, “Ode of Babel,” were published in 1968 and 1980, respectively, and thus reflect Adonis’s adoption of mysticism as a frame through which to conceptualize and express modernist values. This chapter therefore makes the argument that the poet’s refusal of prescriptive orthodoxy and the narrative on which its authority is based is deeply defined not only by an embrace of modernism, but also an alignment with mysticism. Indeed, while mysticism may be understood by some as a branch or offshoot of religion, Adonis posits it as being directly opposed to religion and prescriptive authority, conducive to individual creativity and explorative authority and thus emblematic of modernism.

3.1 “The New Noah”

In 1961, Adonis published *Aghānī Mihyār al-Dimashqī* (*Songs of Mihyār the Damascene*), arguably his most popular collection to date. While many of the poems included in *Songs of Mihyār* had previously appeared in *Shi‘r*, much of the collection was composed and edited between 1960 and 1961, when Adonis was living in Paris and teaching at the

²⁸¹ Esber, *Conversations avec Adonis*, 12-13.

²⁸² Esber, *Conversations avec Adonis*, 18.

Sorbonne. As he explains in an interview with the literary magazine *Banipal*, his residence in Paris was critical in that it afforded him a certain distance from his native land and culture, one which allowed him to better understand it and, in turn, brought him closer to it.²⁸³ Indeed, he remarks, the exposure to this foreign environment effectively served as “a mirror created by the other,” in which he saw reflected his own history, culture, and self.²⁸⁴ As Robyn Creswell notes, the figure of Mihyār has long been considered central both to Adonis’s own poetry and to the *Shi‘r* movement more broadly.²⁸⁵ He is the quintessential figure of refusal, the epitome of the modernists’ conception of man, through which the reader is invited to recognize and reject the uncritical inheritance of the dominant culture. Moreover, Adonis emphasizes that his creation of the Mihyār was born of a desire to move beyond the subjective language typical of poetry in favor of one which was simultaneously impersonal, objective-historical, and symbolic; for this reason, he argues that Mihyār is not merely a mask or a persona, but a “vortex” in which all the dimensions of Arab culture converge in a “central and pivotal cause,” namely, “crossing from the old Arab world into the new one.”²⁸⁶

There has been no shortage of speculation regarding Mihyār’s historical and literary influences; however, while many critics associate him with the medieval Persian poet Mihyār al-Daylamī, Adonis himself dismisses this notion, remarking that the two bear no relationship to one another aside from the shared name.²⁸⁷ He emphasizes, rather, Mihyār’s Western influences, such as Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, Goethe’s Faust, and Lautréamont’s Maldoror, in other words, figures who represent the transgression of established moral and/or ethical boundaries. Indeed, the influence of Nietzsche, in particular, on Adonis’s work can scarcely be overstated. Explicitly positing as his project the “revaluation of all values,” Nietzsche was convinced of the need for man’s liberation from the moral system forged by Christianity, a system he perceived as both counter to nature and hostile towards life. James Howarth notes that Zarathustra may thus be read as an “argument for the integrity of the individual against an arbitrary moral orthodoxy and ideological institution.”²⁸⁸ Similarly, through Mihyār, Adonis seeks to usher in a revaluation of the norms and values dominating Arab culture which ultimately amount, in his estimation, to a collection of prescriptions and proscriptions dictated

²⁸³ Adonis, “There are many Easts in the East and many Wests in the West.”

²⁸⁴ Adonis, “There are many Easts in the East and many Wests in the West.”

²⁸⁵ Robyn Creswell, “Tradition and Translation: Poetic Modernism in Beirut,” PhD Diss., New York University (2012), 112.

²⁸⁶ Adonis, “There are many Easts in the East and many Wests in the West.”

²⁸⁷ Adonis, “There are many Easts in the East and many Wests in the West.”

²⁸⁸ James Howarth, “Neo-Sufism in Modern Arabic Poetry, 1960-2005: A Study in the Poetry of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayyātī, Ṣalāḥ ‘Abd al-Ṣabūr and Adonis,” PhD Diss., University of London—School of Oriental and African Studies (2005), 66.

by religious law. As Abu Deeb posits, one might therefore argue that Mihyār's ancestors comprise "the rejected and the rejectionists, the outcasts and outsiders in Arab culture, the rebellious and transcending poets of Sufism, and... the spiritual and intellectual heritage of Shi'ism."²⁸⁹ In other words, Mihyār represents a confluence of the forces of cultural and religious heterodoxy, an avatar for the so-called "dynamic" currents which Adonis identifies within Arab-Islamic culture.

In order to subvert the entrenchment of religious orthodoxy, Mihyār appropriates religious terminology and imbues it with new meaning; thus, he recites "psalms," styles himself a "barbaric saint" and a "prophet," and proclaims refusal as his "gospel." And yet, his subversion extends well beyond the level of religious language to that of religious narrative more broadly. *Songs of Mihyār* is filled with revisionary readings of stories related to Adam, the fall of man, the great flood, and the destruction of Iram, among others.²⁹⁰ Indeed, the popularity of the collection largely stems from the revolutionary way in which it confronts the cultural heritage. The remainder of this section will therefore be devoted to an analysis of one of the poems from the collection, namely, "Nūḥ al-jadīd" ("The New Noah"), a revisionary interpretation of the Abrahamic narrative, in which the prophet Noah (Nūḥ) is transformed from a figure of submission and obedience into one of active skepticism and refusal.²⁹¹

Adonis wrote and published "The New Noah" in the late 1950s, just as the modernists at *Shi'r* were establishing their foothold in artistic and intellectual circles, both in Beirut and in the Arab region more broadly. The poem therefore features many of the characteristics associated with modernist poetry of the era, namely, irregularity of rhythm and rhyme scheme, the use of mask and persona, celebration of the individual, allusions to foreign literature, and creative engagement with a narrative that comprises part of the cultural heritage. Furthermore, "The New Noah" locates itself squarely in the Tammuzi movement of the era, through its use of the mythico-historical figure of Noah and the myth of the flood to depict the signature Tammuzi theme of death and rebirth, which it imbues, in turn, with modern implications. Ultimately, therefore, this poem exemplifies Adonis's earlier modernist works of the type published during his first few years at *Shi'r*.

²⁸⁹ Abu Deeb, "The Perplexity of the All-Knowing," 316.

²⁹⁰ For a thorough explication of "Shaddād," Adonis's retelling of the Qur'anic narrative of the city of Iram, please see Kareem James Abu-Zeid, "Poetry as Spiritual Practice: The Poetics of Adonis and Yves Bonnefoy," PhD Diss., University of California—Berkeley, 2016.

²⁹¹ Adonis, "Nūḥ al-jadīd," *al-A'māl al-shi'riyya al-kāmila* vol. 1, 410-412; An English translation of this poem may be found in *Songs of Mihyār the Damascene*, translated by Kareem James Abu-Zeid and Ivan Eubanks (New York, NY: New Directions Books, 2019), 182-184. Another English translation, accompanied by analysis may be found in *City of Beginnings: Poetic Modernism in Beirut*, translated by Robyn Creswell (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 11-20.

In the traditional Old Testament narrative, the prophet Noah serves as a figure of redemption, he who is chosen by God to survive the flood sent to purge the earth of mankind in order that the human race might, too, survive, having undergone this purification. In a world which has become rife with violence and corruption, stemming from man's evil nature, Noah distinguishes himself from his fellow men through his exceptional piety and obedience to God. For this reason, it is he who is chosen to ensure the perpetuation of mankind. With few exceptions, the Qur'anic narrative largely mirrors that of the Old Testament. In the Islamic narrative, as in the Judeo-Christian one, Noah is favored by God for his piety and righteousness and thus chosen to serve as the bridge between the old world and the new. Special emphasis is placed, in the Qur'anic version, on Noah's role as a prophet, whose attempts to warn the disbelievers of the fate that awaits them if they continue to reject God's messengers and fail to heed His signs fall repeatedly upon deaf ears. This has led some scholars, such as M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, to argue that, in the Qur'anic text, the function of Noah and the flood myth, rather than being to emphasize the theme of divine punishment, is primarily "to reinforce the prophethood of Mohammad" and "reassure... believers in their long struggle against persecution."²⁹³ Moreover, in the Qur'an, unlike in the Old Testament, Noah is accompanied in his ark by all believers, whose ranks—although the exact number remains unspecified—include neither his wife nor his son. This buttresses the notion that the Islamic narrative places more emphasis on belief in God's message and his messengers, and, by extension, on the implied association between disbelievers and evil-doers. In any case, Noah appears, both in the Old Testament and in the Qur'an, as a figure whose goodness derives from his inherent devotion and obedience to God, the one to whom falls the duty of preserving man's existence in the wake of the flood and populating a new world.

In "The New Noah," Adonis subjects the traditional monotheistic narrative outlined above to what Creswell and Pascal Casanova refer to as "internal translation"²⁹⁴ and Imed Nsiri alternatively calls "creative adaptation,"²⁹⁵ both terms denoting that hallmark of modernist poetry which is predicated simultaneously on the engagement with *turāth* and the revision of it. Indeed, the Noah of the Old Testament and the Qur'an is a figure of obedience who faithfully submits to God's commands to build an ark, through which he may pass, along with those who have been entrusted to his care—be it his immediate family, as in the biblical version, or his

²⁹³ M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, "The Qur'anic Employment of the Story of Noah," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 8, no. 1 (2006), 55.

²⁹⁴ Creswell, "Tradition and Translation," 5.

²⁹⁵ Imed Nsiri, "The Question of Tradition between Eliot and Adūnīs," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 51 (2020): 230.

fellow believers, as in the Qur'anic one—from a fallen world into a new world, a more pure world, one which has not yet been tainted by the sinfulness of man. Adonis's Noah, on the other hand, is decidedly a figure of disobedience. Rather than accept God's covenant and agree to serve as the progenitor of a new human race, he ultimately ignores God's command to "save the living," prioritizing instead those whom God has condemned: *I would not heed his word./I would set sail in my ark and sweep the stones/and the clay/from the eyes of the dead.* This decision represents both a rejection of the divine covenant and of divine authority.

One gleans from the first section of the poem that Adonis's Noah is uncertain as to why he, among men, was spared (*O Lord, why did you save only us/among all people and all creation?*) and wary both of the new world into which God is sending him and of what his role is to be in it. Indeed, he would rather remain in a state of pre-existence or potential, as "clay or embers," or "somewhere in between," than be forced to begin another life in a world which is indistinguishable in any substantive way from the one he has just left behind, governed by the same laws and the same god and thus subject to the same afflictions and misfortunes: *If only we were still clay/or embers,/or somewhere in between,/so that we might never again see the world,/so that we might never again see/its hell or its god.* This vision of a world that is destined for stagnation, despite its ostensible regeneration, is further underlined in a verse which was included in the original version of the poem, but omitted from the final one: *They perished in the clay but we were saved/from the flood and death, becoming seeds/on a globe that turned while staying still.*

By contrast with the mournful, desolate tone of the poem's first section, one passes in the second section into a tone of self-possession and determination. This shift is accompanied by a shift from the first person plural of the first section to the first person singular in the second. As such, "we" becomes "I" in that critical moment of defiance: *If the earth were to tremble and god were to say to me,/"Noah, save for us/the living,"/I would not heed his word.* Through this simple shift in poetic voice, Adonis emphasizes the importance of the individual and the power of man's free will in deciding his own fate. In this second section, Adonis's Noah therefore represents a turning away from man's covenant with God, a rebellion against God's authority, and a lack of faith in God's judgment. Instead of sailing into the new world created by God, having saved from the flood those deemed worthy by God, he chooses to chart a less certain path, one which makes no promise of an afterlife, but rather guarantees mortality and thus elevates the natural over the supernatural: *Our appointment is death, and our shores/a familiar despair/which we've accepted.* As Creswell notes, the term "wa'd," meaning "covenant" or "promise," which appears in the poem's beginning and is associated in the

Qur'an (*Sūra* 27:67-71) with the Day of Judgment and the promise of resurrection for believers and punishment for disbelievers, contrasts with usage of the term “*maw'id*,” that is, “appointment” or “appointed time,” in the poem's penultimate verse.²⁹⁶ While derived from the same root, the latter is free from the religious connotations of the former; thus, the “new Noah” turns away from God's promise of judgment and resurrection toward an appointment with death which is much more final. Moreover, his companions on this journey are not to be God's chosen ones, but those whom God consigned to the flood—the wicked and the wrongdoers, the heretics and disbelievers.

As outlined above, therefore, “The New Noah” reflects that “creative engagement” with *turāth* so characteristic of Adonis and his fellow *Shi'r* modernists. However, it also reflects another distinguishing feature of the *Shi'r* movement, namely, its engagement with foreign literature. As Creswell points out, “The New Noah” is replete with maritime tropes drawn from French Romanticism, symbolism, and post-symbolism and associated with the works of such poets as Lamartine, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Saint-John Perse.²⁹⁷ Creswell draws a comparison between the last lines of “The New Noah,” in which Adonis's Noah embarks on unfamiliar waters in search of distant shores and a new god, and those of Baudelaire's “Le Voyage,” published just over a century before, in 1857, in which the traveler sets out on an odyssey into the unknown, in pursuit of that ever-elusive ideal, the new: *We yearn, so fiercely does this fire burn within us/to plunge into the void's depths, Heaven or Hell, what matter?/That we may discover at the end of the Unknown something novel!*²⁹⁸ Furthermore, when Adonis's Noah turns away from God to resurrect those who have drowned in the floodwaters, whispering to them of a “[return] from the wilderness,” one is instantly reminded of T.S. Eliot's “The Waste Land,” that seminal work of modernist poetry which Jabra deems “the key to the [modernist] movement in Arab poetry.”²⁹⁹ Indeed, the word Adonis uses in the original Arabic, “*al-tīh*,” which I have translated as “wilderness,” can alternatively be translated as “wasteland” or “desert” in English. As Creswell notes, moreover, the “wilderness” or “wasteland” in the works of Arab modernists often correlates to “the interior,” in other words, “the desertified origin of a mythical, autochthonous Arab-Islamic civilization: the birthplace of its oldest poetry and revealed religion.”³⁰⁰ This “interior wasteland” or “desert” is, in turn, often contrasted with the sea, i.e. that which is foreign or new, dynamic, and filled with promise.

²⁹⁶ Creswell, “Tradition and Translation,” 4.

²⁹⁷ Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 16.

²⁹⁸ Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 16.

²⁹⁹ Jabra, “Modern Arabic Literature and the West,” 82-83.

³⁰⁰ Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 17.

Along with the aforementioned associations evoked by the use of the word “*al-tīh*,” one might add that of the biblical and Qur’anic narrative of the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt. Indeed, while the Exodus is most often translated in Arabic as “*al-khurūj*,” an alternative translation is “*al-tīh*,” given that it serves as the verbal noun of the Arabic verb “*tāha*,” which, in turn, may be translated as “to be lost,” “to stray,” or “to wander.” This translation of the Exodus narrative thus refers to the forty years that the Israelites spend wandering the desert after leaving Egypt and before reaching the Promised Land of Canaan. In other words, Adonis’s use of the word without diacritics means that the line that I have translated here as “we have returned from the wilderness” could also conceivably be translated as “we have returned from our wanderings.” Therefore, through the use of this word, Adonis manages to evoke simultaneously a “wilderness” or “wasteland” reminiscent of T.S. Eliot and another story common to the three Abrahamic faiths, one which, like the story of Noah, may be read either as a story of divine punishment or one of man’s redemption. What is noteworthy here is the implication that, unlike the Israelites, who were consigned to wander for forty years and ultimately emerged from the desert into the Promised Land in fulfilment of God’s covenant, Adonis’s Noah and his newly resurrected companions have returned from their aimless wandering by turning away from God and His proffered covenant. In other words, they had wandered astray, not through their disobedience of God, but rather through their blind faith in and submission to Him.

Similarly, the use of the word “*al-kaḥf*,” or “cave,” in the subsequent line—*we have emerged from the cave*—evokes both secular and religious sources. On the one hand, usage of the word “cave” immediately suggests to the reader Plato’s famous “Allegory of the Cave,” which distinguishes between those who mistake mere sensory perception for truth and those who use reason in order to attain actual truth. In this allegory, three men who have never seen the outside world are trapped in a cave, facing away from the cave’s entrance; all they can see of the outside world are the shadows which appear on the cave wall in front of them as people and various objects pass by the entrance of the cave. Having never seen the outside world, the men believe that the shadows they see are, in fact, real. Only when one of the men escapes the cave and discovers the world beyond does he realize that his former view of reality was wrong, that the shadows themselves were neither real nor tangible, but rather mere indicators of a deeper reality. However, upon returning to the cave, he finds that his new discovery is not welcomed by his former companions, who do not believe him and even threaten to kill him if he tries to set them free. Adonis’s Noah, therefore, when uttering “*we have emerged from the cave*,” suggests a parallel between himself and those he has resurrected and the lone man in

Plato's allegory who escapes from the cave to discover a more beautiful, more profound reality. In turning away from what is familiar and delving into the unknown, in defying a god who would keep them in the "wilderness" or the "cave," in a world no markedly different from the one he has just destroyed, Noah and his companions reject divine authority, endeavoring rather to sail upon uncharted waters and, in so doing, seek a deeper truth than may be found on the surface or in the shadows.

In addition to Plato's cave allegory, Adonis's use of the word "cave" also suggests the Qur'anic story of the "Sleepers of the Cave"—often referred to in the Christian tradition as the "Seven Sleepers of Ephesus"—revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad in Mecca and related in *Sūrat al-Kahf*. In this legend, several young men who believed in the existence and oneness of God took shelter in a cave, fearing persecution from an idolatrous society. Having fallen asleep in the cave for what they believed to be merely a few hours, they awoke over three centuries later and emerged to find that God had protected them, evidence that "God's promise [of resurrection] is true and that there is no doubt about the Last Hour."³⁰¹ As with the previously mentioned story of Exodus, Adonis thus simultaneously evokes a well-known religious narrative and inverts the lesson it is traditionally perceived to impart. Rather than suggesting that these youth be lauded for their faith in God, which induced them to retreat from the outside world and seek refuge in a cave, Adonis suggests that such a retreat from the natural world is a type of blindness. Furthermore, rather than emerging from the cave certain of the truth of "God's promise [of resurrection]," Adonis's Noah emerges "heedless of the word of God," bound not for the Day of Resurrection, but rather for "an appointment with death." Moreover, in "The New Noah," it is not God who has resurrected the dead, but Noah himself who has "[swept] the stones/and the clay/from the eyes of the dead," "[opened] their depths to the flood," and "[whispered] into their veins."

Reference to the sea or ocean in poetry often connotes a journey into the unknown, and "The New Noah" is no exception. However, the sea is likewise a means of return; as Creswell notes, while the sea promises discovery of that which is foreign, it also makes possible the rediscovery of one's own native heritage, especially those elements of the heritage which are buried or repressed.³⁰² One might, in this light, read Noah's decision to resurrect those who have drowned as a desire to exhume those elements of the *turāth* which have traditionally been marginalized and silenced, what Adonis typically considers to be the dynamic trends within the

³⁰¹ See *Sūrat al-Kahf* 18:21.

³⁰² Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 18.

Arab-Islamic cultural heritage. In this reading, the God of “The New Noah” is analogous to the various political and/or religious despots who have historically imposed on society the orthodox version of *turāth*, with the aim of enforcing compliance and restricting individual liberty, and thus who are responsible for the various social, political, and economic ills that have festered as a result of oppression and stagnation.

If God in “The New Noah” is analogous to the static trends within *turāth*, the closing lines of the poem may be read as Noah’s desire, not simply for a new god to worship or a new religion to follow, but for a less oppressive culture and society, for one which cultivates heterodox opinions, affords individual freedom, and values creativity and innovation. The question is, perhaps, one of who might steer society along this new path. The *Shi‘r* modernists certainly saw it as part of their project both to highlight the need for this type of socio-cultural revolution in the Arab world and to contribute to it through their work. Indeed, many scholars have commented upon the conflation of the poet, the prophet-hero, the dissident and the revolutionary in Arab romantic and modernist poetry generally and in Adonis’s work more specifically.³⁰³ This perhaps explains one difference between the original version of “The New Noah,” published in *Shi‘r* and the later version which appeared in *Songs of Mihiyār*. In the initial version, Noah is accompanied by a poet and a rebel as he resurrects the unbelievers and sets out upon the unknown: *I would go to my Ark with a poet/and a rebel for freedom/and we would set out together/paying no heed to God’s word*. These two figures were edited out of the revised version, however, which indicates not only a “move away from figures of collectivity and toward a heroization of the individual,” as Creswell suggests, but also the idea that these categories might all be subsumed within the same individual.³⁰⁴ One understands this more clearly by placing “The New Noah” in the context of the larger collection of which it is part, for, ultimately, the character of Noah is merely one of the masks donned by Mihiyār, though he bears resemblance to all of Mihiyār’s other masks in two critical respects. The first is that he has simultaneously transcended and remained within the original narrative or myth from which he originated and with which he is traditionally associated. The second is that he furthers what Al-Musawi refers to as Adonis’s “underlying thesis,” namely, the targeting of authority and

³⁰³ See Creswell, “Tradition and Translation,” 14; Bassam K. Frangieh, “Modern Arabic Poetry: Vision and Reality,” in *Tradition, Modernity, and Postmodernity in Arabic Literature: Essays in Honor of Professor Issa J. Boullata*, edited by Kamal Abdel-Malek and Wael Hallaq, 222-250, Leiden: Brill (2000), 237; Jabra I. Jabra, “The Rebels, the Committed, and the Others—Transitions in Arabic Poetry Today,” in *Critical Perspectives in Modern Arabic Literature*, edited by Issa J. Boullata, Washington D.C.: Three Continents Press, Inc. (1980), 193-195; and Paul Starkey, *Modern Arabic Literature*, Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press (2006), 61.

³⁰⁴ Creswell, “Tradition and Translation,” 13.

refusal of those forces which seek to exploit tradition and religion for the singular purpose of reinforcing their hegemony.

3.2 “Eighth Heaven”

Written in 1967 and published shortly thereafter as part of the collection *Stage and Mirrors* in 1968, the poem “al-Samā’ al-thāmina” (“Eighth Heaven”) rewrites another well-known religious narrative, namely, that of the Night Journey (*al-Isrā’*) and Ascent (*al-Mi’rāj*).³⁰⁵ In the poem, the speaker embarks on a journey which mirrors that undertaken by the Prophet Muḥammad in the traditional narrative. In Adonis’s version, however, the journey concludes not with a renewal of faith and devotion to God, but rather with a resounding indictment of the dominant religious culture and an incitement to revolution. Indeed, by means of his refusal, the poet precipitates disturbance in the established order, shaking the very foundations upon which it rests: *every atom shakes/in the planet of al-Ghazālī/with refusal, with the question*. As in “The New Noah,” therefore, the poet assumes the role of prophet and transforms it; rather than a figure of piety and obedience, the poet-prophet becomes, in Adonis’s vision, a force of rebellion and cultural revivification. Moreover, given its time of publication, which came on the heels of the Arab defeat of 1967 and thus coincided roughly with the nascence of Adonis’s own literary journal *Mawaqif*, “Eighth Heaven” reflects subtle changes in the poet’s orientation. By this time, Adonis had left *Shi’r*, pivoting away from its emphasis on foreign literature towards a deeper engagement with the Arab heritage itself. As a result, the poem bears the evident influence of both Sufi and Shi’a symbolism; indeed, as Abu Deeb observes, “the fusion of Sufism with Shi’ism in [Adonis’s] poetry is one of its most distinctive single features.”³⁰⁶ While his doctoral dissertation had not yet been published, therefore, it appears that Adonis had by this time already begun to conceive of the heritage in terms of opposing orthodox and heterodox forces.

The traditional narrative of the Prophet’s Night Journey and Ascent is mentioned briefly in the Qur’an—in *Sūrat al-Isrā’* and *Sūrat al-Najm*, respectively—and recounted in more depth in the hadith literature. While precise details vary slightly among the different accounts, the basic story remains the same. One night, in approximately 621 CE, a year before his migration to Medina, the Prophet Muḥammad, facing persecution by the Quraysh and having recently

³⁰⁵ Adonis, “al-Samā’ al-thāmina,” *al-A’māl al-shi’riyya al-kāmila* vol. 2, 283-312.

³⁰⁶ Abu Deeb, “The Perplexity of the All-Knowing,” 316.

suffered the loss of his beloved wife Khadija, as well as his uncle and ally Abū Ṭālib, was guided by the angel Gabriel (Jibrīl) on a journey from Mecca to al-Aqṣā Mosque in Jerusalem, from which he then ascended through the seven heavens and ultimately convened with God. Over the course of his journey, he encounters angels and other prophets, including Abraham (Ibrāhīm), Moses (Musa), and Jesus (‘Issa), among others, and witnesses scenes from both paradise and hell. It is, moreover, during this meeting with God that Muḥammad receives the directive regarding the five daily prayers. While there is some debate as to whether the Prophet’s journey was, in fact, physical or purely spiritual in nature, many Muslims nevertheless consider the Night Journey and Ascent to be a miracle second only to that of the Revelation. In “Eighth Heaven,” just as in “The New Noah,” therefore, Adonis rewrites a familiar narrative to convey the message of refusal; in the poem, the poet becomes prophet, embarking on a similar ascent through the heavens, which ultimately culminates in its own encounter with God. However, in Adonis’s version, the experience reinforces the poet’s defiance in the face of orthodoxy, imploring God to destroy “the crown of al-Ghazālī.”

Before proceeding to a more detailed analysis of the poem, therefore, it is useful to establish one critical point, namely, that Adonis considers the Islamic philosopher and theologian al-Ghazālī to be a jurist, first and foremost, and thus emblematic of orthodox thought, despite his credentials as a mystic. Indeed, in the third volume of his doctoral dissertation, he summarizes al-Ghazālī’s views on knowledge, thought, and the intellect, implicitly criticizing what he interprets as the subordination of the human mind to religious ideology.³⁰⁷ Specifically, he rejects the notions that the proper use of the mind is conditional on the Qur’an and/or *sharia*, that true knowledge is that which does not contradict the Qur’an and/or *sharia* (which amounts, in practice, to ideas that do not contradict accepted, or orthodox, interpretations), and, finally, that the role of the intellect is to guide one “to the truth of the Prophet and the understanding of his *sunna*.”³⁰⁸ Collectively, he argues, these ideas curtail original thought, defining knowledge exclusively in relation to orthodox interpretations of the Qur’an and *sharia* and thus restricting the use of the intellect to a series of exercises in imitation. The result, he maintains, is to direct the field of thought towards “the external rather than the internal, the known rather than unknown, the created rather than the Creator.”³⁰⁹ In other words, as Issa Boullata notes, Adonis directly associates al-Ghazālī with what he considers to be the dominant, conformist trend in the Arab-Islamic cultural heritage, namely,

³⁰⁷ Adonis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil* vol. 3 (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2002), 49-55.

³⁰⁸ Adonis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil* vol. 3, 54-55.

³⁰⁹ Adonis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil* vol. 3, 55.

that which inhibits progress by confirming tradition and rejecting and/or condemning innovation.³¹⁰ Indeed, while Adonis does recognize al-Ghazālī’s contributions to Arab philosophy, describing him as the sole philosopher who was also genuinely religious, he implies that al-Ghazālī’s religiosity ultimately superseded his philosophical nature, claiming that “even [al-Ghazālī] took a backwards turn towards the end of his life.”³¹¹ Similar characterizations of al-Ghazālī appear repeatedly throughout Adonis’s poetic corpus; for instance, in “Shahwa tataqaddamu fī kharā’iṭ al-mādda” (“Desire Moving through Maps of Matter”) published in the mid-nineties, Adonis writes: *How do I persuade al-Ghazālī to enlighten his mind with Nietzsche’s light?*³¹² By juxtaposing al-Ghazālī with Nietzsche in this line, he invites a direct comparison of the two; whereas the former, in his estimation, represents blind adherence to orthodoxy and deference to prescriptive authority, the latter, he asserts, represents “the flood of meaning,” that is, the revaluation of cultural norms and values, through which culture and society adapts and evolves.

Therefore, the so-called “cities of al-Ghazālī,” mentioned both in the subtitle of “Eighth Heaven” and repeated thereafter in subsequent verses, symbolize the broader Arab world, over which, Adonis argues, the *fiqh*-centered ideology of al-Ghazālī and his ilk continues to dominate. The poem’s title, “Eighth Heaven,” refers to the aforementioned seven heavens, or seven spheres, a concept which appears repeatedly in the Qur’an, but is by no means unique to Islam. Indeed, the geocentric model involving concentric heavenly spheres, widely associated with Ptolemy, emerged in ancient Greece and was the dominant cosmological model until the Copernican Revolution in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It appears in the ancient Mesopotamian religions, as well as in all three Abrahamic religions. Traditionally speaking, the first seven celestial spheres correspond to the moon, the sun, and the five planets, whereas the eighth corresponds to the so-called firmament of fixed stars. This firmament, in other words, surrounds the other seven spheres, and is the celestial sphere in which the constellations are located; its rotation thus serves as the basic measure of time. According to Ibn Rushd, the “prime mover” directly imparts motion only to this eighth sphere, which, in turn, serves as the intermediary through which motion—and therefore time—is imparted to the other seven spheres and the earth.³¹³ Beyond the Lote Tree, which marks the boundary of the seventh sphere, sits God’s throne, or “*arsh*.” The title “Eighth Heaven” thus refers to the poet’s

³¹⁰ Boullata, *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought*, 21.

³¹¹ Adonis, “A failed century,” interview with Mohammed Al-Qazzaz, *Ahram Online*, 14 March, 2023, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/50/1205/491686/AlAhram-Weekly/Culture/A-failed-century.aspx>.

³¹² Adonis, “Shahwa tataqaddamu fī kharā’iṭ al-mādda,” *al-A ‘māl al-shi ‘riyya al-kāmila* vol. 4, 345-374.

³¹³ Charles Genequand, *Ibn Rushd’s Metaphysics* (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1986), 41.

movement beyond the seven heavenly spheres into the presence of God and His throne and, by extension, his movement towards the margin of time's dominion.

The poem begins with the poet's characterization of the "cities of al-Ghazālī" in their current state: *So begins the fall in the cities of al-Ghazālī/speech and discernment are foregone/and foreheads cling to dust—in the cities of al-Ghazālī/a spark has no place.* Adonis's choice of the word "fall" (*suqūt*) invites an association with the original fall of man from the Garden of Eden; however, in this case, the fall in question stems not from a lack of obedience to divine authority, but rather from an excess of deference towards the orthodox interpretation of religion and those who claim the authority to impose and enforce it on earth. Such deference has, one infers, eroded the capacity for critical thought and freedom of expression, while encouraging the tendency to "cling to dust." Usage of the word "dust" here is informative; while the mystical distinction between meaning and form will be discussed in more detail in the following section, it suffices here to note that the former corresponds roughly to the hidden (*bāṭin*) and the latter to the apparent (*ẓāhir*). In mysticism, dust is associated with the matter of physical forms, with nature, and thus with the apparent. Hence, Adonis implies, the religious orthodoxy which dominates the Arab world is preoccupied with the apparent form rather than with hidden meaning. Moreover, it is has made the environment inhospitable to the "spark," a common Sufi metaphor for the inner light within every individual which leads him along the path to spiritual realization. It is thus clear from the beginning of the poem that the poet's notion of spiritual attainment differs drastically from his depiction of the orthodox one; for Adonis, the latter has in practice served as an impediment to genuine spiritual exploration rather than an expedient. Indeed, the poem continues: *After a questioner falls silent or is led astray/the herb of the question draws him/He knows: every river/that originates and flows in the cities of al-Ghazālī/becomes a reservoir of tears...and the conquered homeland like a shroud/a barbary dove slaughtered in a spring.* In other words, claims the poet, those who fall silent—silence being the mark of the mystic, overcome by love—those who choose to question, to seek for themselves, perceive that the imposition of religious orthodoxy has rendered Arab culture moribund; indeed, the flow of water, the symbol of life itself, is arrested and becomes a mere expression of suffering.³¹⁴

As a result, the poet sees: *the moon severed/from the faces of children/and time inverted and dislocated/and the time to come as an earthquake.* In other words, the quintessential source

³¹⁴ Water has long been used as a symbol for life, both in Islamic mysticism and in Islam more broadly, as the Qur'an indicates that it is the source from which God made all living beings: *And We created from water every living thing (Sūra 21:30).*

of vitality and hope for the future, namely, the culture's youth, has been stripped of its connection to the "moon," another common Sufi symbol, which represents either God's self-disclosure (*al-tajallī*) or the individual heart, through which man apprehends the longing of the spirit or divine spark and is thus drawn to return to God. Thus, one infers, imposed religious orthodoxy has in fact resulted, perhaps counterintuitively, in "severing" the connection between man and God. Moreover, its preoccupation with the past has disrupted the progression of time, resulting in cultural stagnation and necessitating a future reckoning of seismic proportions. Religious orthodoxy is thus contrasted with mysticism in a subsequent verse, in which the poet observes: *the sun... is a yellow slave girl/her breasts painted with hearts/with the red stone, with sulphur and the unseen/every night she falls/into the intoxication of Isrā'/she swallows swords and years/and presents, each moment, a fetus*. The sun here represents the mysteries of reality, the hidden realm, divine light, even God Himself, though Adonis's conception of God differs decidedly from the orthodox rendering.

Moreover, it is noteworthy that the Arabic word translated here as "slave girl," might also have been translated as the active participle "flowing" or "streaming" (*al-shams... jāriyatun ṣafrā'*) thus reinforcing the sense of ongoing motion as opposed to dormancy. In any case, the meaning is clear: that which is most sacred has been enslaved in the name of religion. Furthermore, the sun or slave girl, which corresponds to a mystical, rather than orthodox, conception of God, is associated with "hearts," the "red stone" (*al-ḥajar al-aḥmar*), "sulphur," and the unseen. The heart represents in mysticism the place of transformation, of gnostic knowledge, the link between mystic lover and divine Beloved. The "red stone" and "sulphur" in turn, serve as reference to the Philosopher's Stone, a metaphor associated both with transformative power and the purified state of the mystic who has achieved enlightenment. The unseen is, of course, the hidden realm, and intoxication the visionary state of ecstatic love experienced by one who convenes with it. Finally, the presented "fetus" implies birth and new life, an allusion to Ibn 'Arabī's notion of continuous creation (*tajdīd al-khalq*) and the unseen "womb" of the imagination, which is responsible for the proliferation of images and forms. Hence, Adonis juxtaposes the moribundity and stagnation of orthodoxy with the vitality and dynamism of mysticism.

As the poem proceeds, the main text recounts the poet's journey, primarily insofar as it differs from the original accounts of the *Isrā'* and *Mi'rāj* found in the hadith, while the accompanying parenthetical text includes excerpts which largely mirror the original accounts. This allows the reader who is already familiar with the traditional narrative to follow along more easily as the poet progresses from each stage of his journey to the next, while

simultaneously inviting comparison between the original account and the retelling of it. Indeed, after the opening description of the Arab world related above, the parenthetical text relates the poet's initial encounter with the angel Jibrīl and al-Burāq, as they guide him to Jerusalem; the offering of milk, wine, or water; the ascent through the heavenly spheres; sightings of hell; encounters with other angels or prophets, such as Malik, Izrā'īl, and Musa; and, finally, the ascent into the eighth sphere, where the poet encounters God's throne. However, the main body of the text reveals that the poet's psychological or spiritual response to the journey bears little resemblance to that of the Prophet Muḥammad in the traditional narrative. Thus, the poet declares at the poem's outset: *I tear down, every moment/the cities of al-Ghazālī/I let the orbits roll in them, I extinguish the heavens*. Moreover, just prior to mounting al-Burāq, he expresses his discontent with the intractability of his culture: *In my eyelids sprouted/a bullet,/and the more I say I love the water/and the coming age, and things/And the more I've tried to build and have built/a shelter/under the water's suns,/there rises in my veins/a bullet*. While the bullet here could be interpreted as a symbol of violence, or tacit approval of revolutionary violence, it may perhaps be more accurately construed as a metaphor for the necessary death of the old in service of the new, that is, progress and modernity.

Moreover, a subsequent verse implies that the bullet emerges from the poet's mystical evolution, thereby contrasting mysticism with prescriptive orthodoxy: *As I reflected/and sought refuge in love and became embedded/like grass in the city of dust/I discover the universe and the wing/I reside in the first winds/I grew in my robe/a bullet.../a bullet.../and when I asked/the question broke down in my inner self, and I inclined/like the branch, and I resolved to wander/in the strata of the sun and the wind/yielding like water*. Here, the poet presents the bullet, the implicit target of which is prescriptive orthodoxy and the culture it has engendered, as the product of reflection, discovery, and wandering. Indeed, references to "love," the "universe" or existence, and the "sun" all allude to engagement with the hidden realm, thus positing mystical evolution as a precipitant to the refusal of orthodoxy. As the poet proceeds on his journey, he makes repeated reference to mystical evolution: *I entered into the flame of distance/I marry the distant fire in me/I uproot time/like grass/I perform ablutions – I bathed, I drowned in the glow of tears*. Fire, as explained in previous chapters, represents that inner flame which connects one to the hidden realm, analogous to the inner light which connects the mystic to God. The poet "uproots time" as he becomes purified through "tears," implying, on one level, the destruction of a history written by prescriptive authority, and, on another, the sadness experienced by the mystic who longs for God and/or the prophet who has yet to witness the realization of his prophetic message.

Indeed, Adonis implies, the Arab world is dominated not by spiritual enlightenment, but by political interest under cover of religious orthodoxy. Adonis explicitly targets oil and its nefarious impact on Arab lands: *And oil is a kingmaker/it plants its mast/it becomes over your prostitute land/a ritual of slaughter, or snares, or colored beads.* He continues in a subsequent verse: *And oil/is a sea of black/its base a fountain/of gold, and its surface filth/and the earth like a broken mirror/and the sun, susurrations.* Hence, in these verses, one infers the link Adonis identifies between oil, power, violence, and religion. Indeed, his use of the word “kingmaker” suggests that he sees the control of oil as central to the acquisition and/or exercise of power. While it is financially lucrative, generating a “fountain of gold,” it is nevertheless linked to violence, or “slaughter,” and religion, symbolized by “colored beads.” In other words, one surmises, oil profits serve as a financial incentive for political authority to maintain the status quo, endorsing and propagating narratives which afford it legitimacy and control, while disregarding the suffering of its people. As a result, the earth, that is, natural existence, which in mysticism serves as a “mirror” reflecting the divine, lies broken, while the voice of the hidden realm fades into whispers. The implication here therefore echoes the discussion of Chapter II, namely, that religion has been harnessed to the cause of political power, the orthodoxy it expounds and perpetuates an impoverished form of spirituality. Indeed, in a subsequent verse, the poet inquires: *From where does this cracked and oiled age come?/from the breath of al-Bāri’/from the plague?* Alluding to one of the names of God, most often translated as “The Maker” or “The Fashioner,” he thus implies cynically that religious orthodoxy is a virulent scourge.

It is for this reason, perhaps, that the poet chooses to identify himself with Zayn al-‘Ābīdīn, son of Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī, and grandson of ‘Alī. Indeed, he writes: *I am walking like Zayn al-‘Ābīdīn /filling sacks with bread/running from door to door/I am fanning the flames of the revolutionaries, I am curbing the hunger of the starved.* On the one hand, the frequent use of Shi‘a symbolism in Adonis’s poetry may be explained, as Abu Deeb observes, by the fact that Shi‘ism, like Sufism, was “swept outside the established tradition” and thus represents an inherent challenge to the largely Sunni, orthodox worldview.³¹⁵ It is scarcely accidental that Adonis’s pronouncement of refusal, which permeates the entire corpus of his poetry, evokes a long history of Shi‘a opposition. Indeed, the word “refusal,” or “*rafḍ*” in Arabic, is itself derived from the same roots as the term *Rāfiḍa*, a pejorative term which means “Refusers” or “Rejectors” and which has most often been applied to Shi‘a Muslims who deny the legitimacy

³¹⁵ Abu Deeb, “The Perplexity of the All-Knowing,” 319.

of the first two caliphs, Abū Bakr and Umar, in favor of the divine right of ‘Ali. Indeed, while critics have often pointed to Adonis’s disproportionate use of Shi‘a symbolism as evidence of sectarianism, he offers a different explanation: “Was Shi‘ism, in its deepest sense, not founded historically on the freedom of opinion and expression? Has it not fought, in theory as well as in practice, against the barbarities committed by old Muslim governments in the name of Islam?”³¹⁶ In other words, Adonis views Shi‘ism itself as symbolic, if not always exemplary, of the very values he advocates, such as heterodoxy, innovation, freedom of opinion, and freedom of expression. In the context of this poem, his choice to identify with Zayn al-‘Ābīdīn is particularly instructive, for Zayn al-‘Ābīdīn is perhaps remembered less for any revolutionary fervor than for his piety; indeed, the name Zayn al-‘Ābīdīn is itself an honorific, meaning “adornment of worshippers.” Having survived the Battle of Karbala, he managed to challenge injustice, not through arms, but through education, inspiration, and prayer. Moreover, as Adonis alludes to in “Eighth Heaven,” he was reputed for his charity, secretly distributing bread to those in need under cover of darkness. Therefore, Adonis chooses as the symbol of his revolution a figure known not for his violence, but rather for his patience, endurance, kindness, and devotion. And yet, as the poet’s mask, even he raises the banner of refusal. Upon being addressed by the voice of God as “My Servant, Zayn al-‘Ābīdīn,” he retorts: *I am not a servant, / I am not a cavern of moans / I am the embers of your revolution.*

As he encounters God, the poet sees *the sword of resentment, forged with blood / was hanging on the throne.* The allusion here is to a famous line in al-Ghazālī’s *al-Iqtisād fī al-‘itiqād* (Moderation in Belief), which states that “God does by means of the sword and spear what he does not do by means of demonstration.”³¹⁷ The sword, al-Ghazālī explains, is used for the conversion of infidels and the punishment of heretics, thus representing precisely the type of violence and imposed conformity to orthodoxy that Adonis condemns. By placing the sword on God’s throne, Adonis emphasizes both the essential distinction between prescriptive authority and God, as well as the fact that the two have become dangerously conflated. The poet implores God to remove the sword from his country, but God responds: *judgment has been made and fulfilled / and your people of believers shall perish like foam by stabbing / and plague.* However, He continues: *But you are the favored, the beloved... you are to me a lover / and Moses / I spoke to him and between us was a veil / And you receive me without a veil... I have split from my names / a name for you married to me, / I give you abundance / and reflection and*

³¹⁶ Adonis, “L’obscurantisme de cette lutte,” 109.

³¹⁷ Al-Ghazālī, *Moderation in Belief*, translated by Aladdin M. Yaqub (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 10.

the great intercession. This verse is particularly instructive; on the one hand, God refers to the poet as both beloved and lover, thereby establishing the divinity of man, the fundamental congruence between man and God. Furthermore, it places the poet's relationship to God above that of Moses, for the latter spoke to God only through a veil, while the former receives God through no concealment. Use of the Arabic word "*al-kawthar*," which I have translated as "abundance," identifies the poet as prophet, alluding to *Sūrat al-Kawthar*, in which God grants abundance to the Prophet Muḥammad. Therefore, this line associates the poet-prophet with the Prophet himself, and yet, in addition to abundance, the poet receives "reflection" and "the great intercession." The Arabic word that I have translated as "reflection" is "*al-khawḍ*," which refers in Islam largely to the reflection on things that are prohibited or inappropriate. The implication here is thus that God encourages the poet to engage with that which religious orthodoxy has deemed improper. The gift of intercession, moreover, further establishes the poet's prophethood, indicating that the poet's role is to intervene on behalf of the people, to promulgate the truth of existence by refuting the false narrative of orthodoxy.

As a result of this encounter with God, an "ancient rock" collides with "the face of the East," and *the creator becomes manifest in its cracks and in creation.* The angel Jibrīl instructs the poet to speak about what he has seen. Hence, the poet declares: *I became a stone acquitted like a child/pursuing al-Ghazālī./After the sign of ritual ablution/and purity/is drawn around his face/and the prayer is repeated... every atom shakes/in the planet of al-Ghazālī./with refusal, with the question.* In other words, the poet purifies the Arab world, represented by al-Ghazālī, of its orthodoxy, as the result of which every atom therein shakes with refusal; the certitude inherent in its single, fixed interpretation of truth gives way to curiosity, doubt, and inquiry. Indeed, declares the poet: *Man invents and the heavens/change their thread and their stamen and their coloring/as though they were entering anew/into the journey of development and existence.* Thus the poet asserts the idea that man has the creative power to transform reality and, by extension, the manner in which it is conceptualized and apprehended. Moreover, the desired new arrival, or new entrance, leads into "the journey of development and existence," that ever-flowing, ever-evolving path of creativity, innovation, and enlightenment, which unfolds in space and through time and which, in Adonis's view, has been interrupted in the Arab world, as a result, one infers, of the near apotheosis of prescriptive authority. In a sense, this longing to re-enter the process of creation and existence represents a yearning for unity with God and is thus analogous to the ultimate goal of the Sufi path; as such, it opposes the

orthodox perspective, which Adonis argues is characterized by “complete separation and detachment from the absolute.”³¹⁸

In the poem’s closing lines, the poet reiterates his message. Addressing the unknown and unseen, that “star inhabiting the face of the East,” which constitutes the source of his revelation, he proclaims: *I know what you wanted to say/to the East... and here I am singing/imparting what you told me.* Indeed, he resolves to spread his message *to the planet of al-Ghazālī/to this cemetery scattered with ghosts and rituals/in the death of wind and history... to this entire age, fraught/with sand and rabies and plague.* Thus emphasizing once again what he perceives as the decadence of Arab culture, proceeding from its subjugation to prescriptive orthodoxy, he evinces the conviction to induce its transformation and affirms his own immersion in the hidden realm of light: *I open every door/split open every tomb/with the fury of the creator – with hope or with despair/with prophetic revolution/possessed by the sun/possessed by the joy of being.*

3.3 “Ode of Babel”

Written in 1977 and published in 1980 as part of the collection *al-Muṭābaqat wa-l-’awā’il* (*Similarities and Beginnings*), “Qaṣīdat Bābil” (“Ode of Babel”) combines the familiar themes of refusal and transgression with layers of mystical imagery and allusion.³¹⁹ At this point in his career, Adonis had obtained his doctorate and was working as a professor of Arabic Literature at Lebanese University in Beirut. As Salma Jayyusi notes, moreover, his rejection of the prevailing socio-political order in the Arab world and hope for cultural renewal had become increasingly wedded during this period to “other universal and timeless problems of existence,” namely, “man’s eternal suffering and hope and his eternal quest for truth.”³²¹ “Ode of Babel” thus exemplifies the modernist mysticism, which ultimately becomes the poet’s signature. Indeed, Adonis incorporates mystical language and symbolism throughout the poem, along with elements of Sufi epistemology, deploying them in the battle against prescriptive orthodoxy. Moreover, one perceives clearly therein the extent to which Sufi philosophy informs Adonis’s own conception of language, knowledge, and creativity.

³¹⁸ Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 19.

³¹⁹ Adonis, “Qaṣīdat Bābil,” *al-A ’māl al-shi ’riyya al-kāmila* vol. 3 (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2014), 285-306; A French translation of “Ode of Babel” was published in 2000. See Adonis, *Le poème de Babel*, translated by Anne Wade Minkowski (Paris, France: Voix d’encre, 2000). I have consulted this translation, in addition to the original Arabic, in composing my own translation.

³²¹ Jayyusi, *Trends and Movements*, 649.

In his *Introduction to Arab Poetics*, Adonis argues that the “modern method” of poetics is characterized by the invention both “of meanings unknown to pre-Islamic orality and of a new poetic language.”³²² This assertion serves as a challenge to the assumption that excellence entails emulation, as well as to the notion that the purpose of language in the poetic context is to convey clearly a meaning which is itself unchanging and preestablished. For this reason, Adonis maintains, poetry represents a direct challenge to religious orthodoxy. Religion, he argues, views language as merely as a tool by means of which to express pre-established truths obtained through tradition, belief, or rational argumentation; language in this context is meant to convey meaning, rather than create or discover it. Words are thus assigned fixed meanings, and they convey those meanings directly and definitively. Indeed, meaning is regarded as existing prior to language, and words as merely forms through which preconceived meaning may be expressed. Such literalism denies the word the status of the image, which allows the imagination to envision new relationships between words and reality, meaning and form. By contrast, figurative speech of the type found in poetry is transformative precisely because it is ambiguous, requiring vision and imagination and inviting multiple interpretations. Indeed, Adonis argues that, in contrast to the literal language employed by religion and philosophy, metaphor liberates both reality and the words one uses to discuss reality from their familiar contexts; in so doing, it creates new “potential relationships” between words and reality, within which “many meanings are possible.”³²³ As Robyn Creswell notes, figurative speech is not unlike the exegetical process of *ta’wīl*; just as *ta’wīl* “unlocks the heritage to a plurality of interpretations,” so does figurative speech result in divergences in understanding, opinion, and evaluation.³²⁴ Conceptualizing the relationship between language and reality in this way affords one a better understanding of Adonis’s poetic project; as Howarth explains so eloquently, “transformation of reality requires transformation of the means of expression, i.e. the Arabic language,” for the transformation of the Arabic language is tantamount to a transformation of “the prism through which [reality] is seen.”³²⁵ Therefore, one understands that poetry, insofar as it employs figurative language, is dynamic because it presupposes a multitude of interpretations. As such, it stands in direct opposition to *fiqh*-centered religious orthodoxy, which is based upon a single, fixed interpretation of text. Indeed, Adonis argues, “the world existing within the boundaries of religious and philosophical knowledge is closed and finite

³²² Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 42.

³²³ Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 71.

³²⁴ Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 151.

³²⁵ Howarth, “Neo-Sufism in Modern Arabic Poetry,” 214.

because it is certain,” while the world of metaphorical knowledge is “open and infinite, because it is possibility.”³²⁶ In other words, poetry presents a direct challenge to religious orthodoxy because it denies the epistemological claims upon which it bases its authority.

The story of Babel constitutes the ideal means through which to combine the theme of refusal with an exploration of the manner in which Adonis seeks to exercise that refusal and effect change, namely, through a transformation of the language, extending to the epistemological system that dictates its usage and parameters. Indeed, the traditional narrative of the Tower of Babel related in Genesis raises questions about both man’s rebellion against God and the power of language. While this narrative is undoubtedly more closely associated with Judaism and Christianity than with Islam, given that it does not appear in the Qur’an, it is nevertheless familiar to the average Muslim. After the Great Flood, one is told, Noah’s descendants disobey God’s command to spread out and populate the earth, settling instead in southern Mesopotamia and erecting a tower meant to reach the heavens. In response to this act of hubris, God confuses their language so that they are no longer able to communicate with one another and realize their aim, thus resulting in a multitude of languages where before there had been only one. In other words, the proliferation of languages and consequent confusion created among mankind is traditionally seen as a punishment by God for man’s disobedience. In Adonis’s poem, however, man is repeatedly exhorted to rebel, and the multiplicity associated with Babel depicted as the natural, necessary, and desirable product of linguistic evolution and dynamism.

Indeed, Adonis deliberately invites a multiplicity of interpretations for the word “Babel” itself, by declining to specify its meaning clearly in the given context, thus allowing the reader to devise his own interpretation(s) of the text. The ambiguity is all the more evident in Arabic, where the word “*bābil*” may denote either Babel or Babylon. In addition to the question of whether to interpret the term as Babel or Babylon, one must also consider a number of other meanings with which it is associated. On the one hand, for instance, etymologically, the word Babel is believed to be a Hebrew derivation of the Akkadian term “*bab-ilu*,” or Gate of God. On the other, it is often used in modern parlance as a symbol for confusion more generally, derived from the linguistic confusion recounted in Genesis. Moreover, Babylon as the capital of Mesopotamia is widely considered to be the cradle of civilization, referred to in the Christian New Testament as the “great city,” and yet, also portrayed as a symbol of paganism, idolatry, and sexual immorality, a characterization decidedly rejected by Adonis

³²⁶ Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 72.

himself, who repeatedly extols it as a locus of creativity. The logical question is, of course, which meaning Adonis himself intends to convey in the poem. As will become clear in subsequent analysis, he intends to evoke all of them, for not only does he seek to enrich the text and expand its meaning by allowing for multiple interpretations, he also considers all of these possible interpretations to be inextricably related. Thus, throughout the poem, one witnesses subtle shifts in the usage of the term “Babel,” preventing one from pinning down a single meaning which applies in every instance throughout the text. However, this does not detract from the broader message conveyed; it rather reinforces it through example. Indeed, Adonis asserts repeatedly, confusion, perplexity, and multiplicity are superior to literalism, certainty, and uniformity, for the former inspire thought, creativity, and ultimately change, while the latter inevitably stifle it.

As in “Eighth Heaven,” “Ode of Babel” commences with a description of the current state of the Arab world, as perceived by the poet: *It seems that things are a herd/and ideas wolves made of silver/Cain is here, Abel lies there, still unburied.* In other words, he implies, it is characterized by a herd mentality, in which compliance rather than independent thought predominates. Moreover, one infers, the regnant ideas are directly tied to money; this is, of course, meant to allude to the argument discussed in Chapter II, namely, that institutionalized religion has historically been used by those in power as a means by which to achieve material gain. It is for this reason, in turn, that primeval fraternal enmity—i.e. sectarianism—persists. Having thus laid the terrain, the poet dons the mask of a madman and addresses the reader: *Your land is the kingdom of obedience, but you, you are rebellious./Will you remain so?... Will you continue to bake this sand and live/in the lichen of this tower?* In other words, he inquires, do you have the courage to transgress or will you opt to remain fixated on the past, frozen in time? In a subsequent passage, the poet poses similar pointed questions: *“You are alive, but you are dead o’ Ahmed,” said ‘Ali./“You will receive bread, but how will you live, covered in sand?”*³²⁷ He continues: *“You are the revolt, o’ Mariam./But will you remain hidden/behind your veil?”* Here, Ahmed and Mariam represent the Arab people writ large. The poet’s question to Ahmed is an echo of the previous question, the implication being that while one who possesses bread and yet remains buried in the past is alive only in the physical sense; his body is alive, but his mind and spirit wither. In turn, his question to Mariam serves as an exhortation. The veil here is a symbol of prescriptive authority; therefore, in posing this question, the poet

³²⁷ As Kamal Abu-Deeb notes, the symbolic figure of ‘Ali appears repeatedly throughout Adonis’s work, an interplay between the mythico-historical figure ‘Ali and the poet himself, who shares the same name.

locates women at the core of the revolution, while simultaneously evincing their subjugation. The incitement to rebel is unequivocal; indeed, the poet continues in a subsequent line: *The water that washes the mud from your paths will not flow/until.../The dawn that erases your night will not appear/until.../The Kufans are dead, those of Basra too,/and in their spirits remains something of this until...* The cities of Kufa and Basra are thus evoked as symbols of revolution, with the implication that such revolution is necessary to turn the pages of history, resume the march of time, and proceed along the path in search of spiritual fulfillment.³²⁸

The line in “Ode of Babel” that most clearly affords an understanding of what Adonis intends by his use of the word “Babel” as a symbol is the following: *Babel, no one knows her, no one is ignorant of her... Babel, no one remembers her, no one forgets her.* Here the poet alludes to a common mystical conception of God, advanced by Ibn ‘Arabī, in which “God as the Essence is contrasted with God inasmuch as He assumes relationships with the cosmos.”³²⁹ In other words, while it is not possible for man to know God’s Essence, which is itself independent of the phenomenal world, he nevertheless encounters God by means of His endless self-disclosure, that is, insofar as His attributes, as epitomized by His names, are reflected through His acts, which include everything found in the cosmos. Thus one infers that Babel ultimately symbolizes what Adonis would term the hidden realm or the unseen. This mystical orientation is reinforced elsewhere in the poem. For instance, the poet writes: *Babel, you are the bad, you are the good/and you are the orbit/My blood and your breath are two children: each erases the path of the other.* By asserting that Babel is both the bad and the good, he references the mystical notion of God as the “coincidence of opposites,” the place of non-duality. Indeed, the name Allah encompasses all the divine names, “the opposition and contrariety [of which]... explain the strife and turmoil in the cosmos.”³³⁰ In other words, while the good and the bad manifest as opposites in the phenomenal world, this distinction results from the fact that each act, or created thing, serves as a unique reflection of God’s names. However, such a distinction does not apply to God’s Essence, which knows only unity. Moreover, the word I have translated here as “breath,” and for which the Arabic term used is “*hawā’*,” evokes the notion of the Cloud, namely, Nondelimited Imagination, the Supreme Barzakh through which “immutable entities in God’s knowledge are able to find existence in the cosmos, just as through imagination, meanings without form come to be seen in the clothing

³²⁸ Kufa and Basra, both cities in modern-day Iraq, have historically been associated with rebellion, including that of the Kharijites, the Qarmatians, and the Zanj.

³²⁹ William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), 9.

³³⁰ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 59.

of forms.”³³¹ As Chittick notes, while Ibn ‘Arabī asserts that the Cloud initially came into existence through God’s Breath, he nevertheless often treats the two as identical.³³² In addition, reference to the Breath alludes to “the evanescent and changing nature of existence, or the cosmos as ever-renewed creation and never-repeated divine self-disclosure.”³³³ Hence, Adonis in the line cited above reinforces the idea that while God’s Speech is itself eternal, His spoken words are not. Indeed, as Chittick explains, “every word appears for an instant only to disappear from the created cosmos forever (though it remains immutably present in His knowledge.)”³³⁴ Taking blood as a symbol of one’s life force, one thus infers the interplay Adonis posits between life and the creative spirit, specifically, the way in which they continually erase and create the world anew.

Throughout the poem, the poet repeatedly emphasizes that those who pursue such a mystical understanding of reality are persecuted by orthodox notions of religion. Thus, he writes: *Accused,/when you say that the opening is night, at times/and the closure is dawn, at times/when you say that sadness is a spring/and poplars are tears.* The implication here is that orthodoxy condemns metaphor, that “bridge connecting the seen and unseen,” and, by extension, ambiguity and uncertainty.³³⁵ This idea is one which Adonis has iterated time and again; indeed, he maintains:

In metaphor there is only probability, and so the religious system of knowledge characterizes it as a transferring of words away from their accepted meanings, and therefore a corruption of the words. This corruption harms the language because it gives rise to error and falsehood, the more so as God created each word to express its own particular meaning, and transferring the words means invalidating the truths which God has wanted us to perceive.³³⁶

A subsequent verse articulates a similar point: *Accused/when you declare—“Babel is a wound/from its blood flow the poor/Babel is poverty/its blood engenders poets.* In order to explicate this verse, one must understand the symbol of the wound, which emerges frequently in Adonis’s work. Abu-Deeb observes that Adonis’s wound “is both a state of being and becoming... a cutting of a past, finalized life and an opening of a world of warmth and potentialities.”³³⁷ Moreover, in Adonis’s poetry, “the wound never heals, for healing brings it into a state of finality and completeness, i.e. fossilization and death.”³³⁸ In terms of how this

³³¹ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 126.

³³² Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 126.

³³³ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 19.

³³⁴ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 19.

³³⁵ Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 72.

³³⁶ Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 72.

³³⁷ Abu-Deeb, “The Perplexity of the All-Knowing,” 308.

³³⁸ Abu-Deeb, “The Perplexity of the All-Knowing,” 308.

relates to language and metaphor specifically, Adonis claims that prescriptive orthodoxy advances the false notion that “the word says the thing once and for all,” and, in so doing, “preaches the omnipotence of the word.”³³⁹ However, Adonis contends, “the word can never say a thing once and for all. I call that a wound... the wound of the world.”³⁴⁰ In other words, the word is in a constant state of transformation in relation to the image it conveys and thus the meaning it expresses, for it can never express hidden essence definitively or in its entirety. This evokes the mystical conception of the Breath delineated above, namely, that God’s Speech and Self-Disclosure occurs eternally, and yet, the individual words or “forms” themselves are transient. The wound is a symbol of this transience; hence, “its blood engenders poets” by affording them infinite opportunity to express the Unseen in new forms, most notably by means of figurative language, which “transforms reality through transforming the prism through which it is seen.” In other words, metaphor operates as does the Breath, providing ever more forms or “prisms” through which to approximate knowledge of that which is ultimately unknowable. Reference to “the poor” and “poverty” reinforce this interpretation, for poverty in mysticism refers to essential need in relation to God. Therefore, Adonis indicates that the hidden essence manifests itself in the transience of form in the phenomenal, or apparent, world. Furthermore, the nature of the relationship between created things and the unknown is defined by essential poverty, which stems from the distance between the hidden essence and apparent form; this distance may be narrowed through the intermediary of meaning, image, and the proliferation of forms, but never entirely eliminated. Therefore, this essential poverty results in longing, or “*raghba*.”

Indeed, in a subsequent line, the poet proclaims: *The custom of my voice is to penetrate the sun of longing – Babel*. He continues: *The custom of my voice/is to create Babel/in order to transform this age/in order that this nation may exonerate itself*. In other words, he seeks, through metaphorical language, to establish new relationships between words and things, between words and reality, and, in so doing, to usher in a new age in which mystery and ambiguity is valued over certainty and literalism. Moreover, he declares in a subsequent verse: *I create Babel in the species and the genera/I create Babel in prayers and desires/I create Babel in wombs and shrouds/I create Babel between the Creator and the created/I create Babel in voices, in names, in things/I remain the flame beating in things/outside of these pages of sand/I consecrate my spaces with light/with the desire to remain outside of this kingdom, rebellious*.

³³⁹ Adonis, *Violence and Islam*, 153.

³⁴⁰ Adonis, *Violence and Islam*, 153.

In this verse, therefore, the poet reinforces the previous point while evoking the mystical idea of an eternal, inner flame which fuels creation, a flame with which he directly identifies. The reference to “wombs” and “shrouds” juxtapose, notably, the renewal of life with death. Moreover, by evincing the desire to “consecrate [his] spaces with light” and “remain outside of this kingdom,” he indicates that the path of the flame and that of orthodoxy are mutually antithetical. He thus incites others to embrace refusal, as he has done: *Mobilize the lovers’ tombs/offer your life to death/Begin—don’t wait for the phoenix/Your steps are seeds*. In other words, he implores, venture forth along the path of the mystic, sacrifice your orthodox convictions in the embrace of a higher spiritual state. Do not wait for the end of the world, he admonishes, do not wait for the phoenix to save you, for it is the decision to tread a new path within yourself which gives rise to new life. In another verse, he conveys a similar message: *Rise Qays, and watch for Layla... how have you forgotten/the gazelle of time: Eros/Love/Death?* The allegorical romance of Qays—also known as Majnūn—and Layla, in which the former represents the “madness” of the lover seeking unity with his Beloved and the latter represents the Essence of God, is thus evoked; indeed, inquires the poet by implication, how has the seeker lost sight of life’s most profound, existential questions by failing to embrace them in all their mystery? This is a point which emerges repeatedly in Adonis’s poetic and critical works, namely, that the adoption and imposition of orthodox religion as “the absolute solution” has effectively “eradicated existential problems such as love, death, and freedom.”³⁴¹ As a result, such questions are viewed exclusively through the reductive lens of prescriptive orthodoxy, thus closing the door, to a large extent, on individual spiritual enquiry and exploration.

In the poem’s closing section, therefore, the poet issues a final directive: *Babel/Cease invading the cities of light without eyes/Cease marching towards desire/in a skull or a sword/Cease cutting off heads/to dress wounds*. In this line, the meaning of the word “Babel” has shifted slightly, signifying existence as conceptualized and dominated by the orthodox, rather than the mystical. Indeed, he implies, prescriptive orthodoxy encroaches blindly upon the hidden realm of mystery, sowing death and violence, and attempting to curtail the dynamism of the wound, of language, of existence, by imposing the stasis of immutable truth. Thus, he proclaims: *We have come/to give to the wise man in you/the memory of madness... we have come/to build another kingdom./We have come to declare that poetry is certainty/that transgression is order*.

³⁴¹ Adonis, *Violence and Islam*, 30.

Conclusion

In an article published in 1980, the writer and critic Jabra Ibrahim Jabra clarifies the difference between rebellion, or refusal, and *iltizām*; while the latter is “directed outwards” and “always group-propelled,” thus rendering inevitable politicization and partisanship, the former is primarily “directed inwards towards oneself and one’s own society.”³⁴² Indeed, rebellion, he explains, “is based on a moral and philosophical attitude adopted by an individual who finally aspires to effect a change in the lives of men as individuals” and “aims at a change in sensibility, in fundamental attitudes and ways of thinking consonant with man’s freedom and dignity and the all-important right to say No.”³⁴³ And yet, in the context of Arab culture, argues Abu Deeb:

The creative impulse which seeks to articulate its aspirations, fears, anxiety or its contemplation, search and discoveries outside the confines of the established socio-religious system has always provoked a frightening propensity towards oppression and the assertion of the collective will, of consensus, over the individual will.³⁴⁴

It is the battle against this propensity to which Adonis has devoted his entire career, beginning with his time at *Shi‘r* and continuing until the present day. However, while his assessment of the problem and his ultimate aim have never wavered, his understanding of how best to address the one and thus realize the other have evolved over time. Indeed, as a result of his time at *Shi‘r*, he claims, he came to the conclusion that “you cannot create something new or beautiful with a language you don’t know and whose heritage and memory you are not familiar with.”³⁴⁵ Therefore, beginning in the mid-sixties, he became increasingly committed to understanding the Arab heritage and operating from within it, an orientation which is clearly reflected in his poetry. Moreover, Adonis’s exploration of the heritage led him to the conclusion that the notion of a unified heritage was itself unfounded; the mantle of rebellion had been taken up by Abbasid poets, Shi‘a revolutionaries, mystics, and philosophers in centuries past. Adonis’s refusal thus serves, by his own account, as the continuation of a long tradition of dissidence within the heritage, in which the pressure exerted by the dominant culture to submit and conform is rejected, its authority not recognized.

At the heart of this rejection is the conviction that truth cannot be singular; indeed, he argues, “it is in the plurality of religions, cultures and ideas that the meaning of the human and

³⁴² Jabra I. Jabra, “The Rebels, the Committed, and the Others,” 195.

³⁴³ Jabra, “The Rebels, the Committed, and the Others,” 195.

³⁴⁴ Abu Deeb, “The Perplexity of the All-Knowing,” 306-307.

³⁴⁵ Adonis, “I Have Been Born Three Times: Part I.”

of the universe resides.”³⁴⁶ In other words, it is through the plurality of experience and thought that the essence of life, the essence of the human being, is expressed, for “the principal thing in life is creation” and “the essence of the human being... is in his capacity to create things that surpass him.”³⁴⁷ Therefore, Adonis maintains, while orthodoxy holds that “the invisible has spoken once and for all,” his own brand of mysticism conceives of an unseen unknown that never stops speaking, in which “every creator is a prophet.”³⁴⁸ To suppress creativity is thus to suppress that which “unites us with the essence of the world”; it is, in other words, an impediment to the individual’s union with God.³⁴⁹ Adonis’s critique of religious orthodoxy is thus not predicated upon a materialist rejection of the idea of God so much as a rejection of what he perceives to be an impoverished vision of God advanced by men who seek domination and power. Hence, in “The New Noah,” his prophet refuses to submit to their God; in “Eighth Heaven,” he asserts the individual’s capacity for union and prophecy, rejecting prescriptive authority and the world it has engendered; and, in “Ode of Babel,” he condemns their imprisonment of language and their assault on nature’s multiplicity and dynamism. As has been demonstrated through the preceding analyses, his orientation becomes increasingly mystical as his poetry evolves, his modernist refusal of religious orthodoxy increasingly defined by its embrace of mysticism, which it presents as being in alignment with modernism’s core principles. The following chapter therefore addresses the theme of madness as it is presented in Adonis’s poetry, including its relationship to refusal and to mystical conceptions of vision and the imagination. As Khalida Said writes, “if [Adonis] depicts the world through the eyes of the mad, it is because madness alone is able to see the absurdity, chaos, and contradiction... because [madness] is the schism between the mind and the unconscious and because the rejection of the conscious mind is a rejection of reality.”³⁵⁰

³⁴⁶ Adonis, *Violence and Islam*, 59.

³⁴⁷ Esber, *Conversations avec Adonis*, 12-13.

³⁴⁸ Adonis, *Identité inachevée*, 11.

³⁴⁹ Adonis, *Identité inachevée*, 11.

³⁵⁰ Said, “Bawādir al-rafd,” 95.

CHAPTER FOUR

Madness: Refusal, Vision, and the Imagination

*And we discover that what we call madness is merely the rapture of existence.*³⁵¹

Introduction

In *The Static and the Dynamic*, Adonis devotes considerable space to a discussion of the influence of Kahlil Gibran on modern Arab poetry, including, most notably, an analysis of Gibran's book *The Madman*. Madness in Gibran's depiction, explains Adonis, involves a shift in man's relationship with the universe, precipitated by a shift in his relationship with God.³⁵² Indeed, he writes, "there is a complete denial of the traditional relationship between God and man," that is, a denial of the traditional paradigm in which man is seen as entirely separate from God, in which God represents the father, firmly entrenched in and emanating from the past, and man the subservient son.³⁵³ This paradigm is replaced by the conception of man and God as two faces of a single entity, where God does not represent "a fixed, eternal law" which neither evolves nor renews, but constitutes, rather, "man's tomorrow."³⁵⁴ Thus, explains Adonis, Gibranian madness proceeds in the first instance from a position of refusal, from a rejection of God as the symbol of a law which asserts both its ahistoricism and immutability. Indeed, the madman rejects on principle all such symbols of this prevailing law, be it in the form of priest or tyrant, the *sharia*, or inherited social norms and values. And yet, at its root, this rejection stems not from a mere delight in rebelliousness, but from a profound yearning for the unknown. Hence, the madman destroys the symbols of traditional morality because he believes that they have encouraged fear of God and led to the rise of tyranny and ignorance, thus serving as barriers to freedom and creativity and fettering him in his own spiritual journey.³⁵⁵

In the eyes of both Gibran and Adonis, madness is thus, in a sense, a combination of refusal and vision, refusal of prescriptive authority and a new vision of the unseen. Indeed, writes Adonis, "madness, in Gibran's works, refers to his spiritual journey and to the tragic tension in his search for the absolute, starting with the revolution against society, traditions,

³⁵¹ Adonis, "Ḍaw' al-sham'a," *al-A'māl al-shi'riyya al-kāmila* vol. 4, 65.

³⁵² Adonis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil* vol. 4, (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2002), 155.

³⁵³ Adonis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil* vol. 4, 155.

³⁵⁴ Adonis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil* vol. 4, 155.

³⁵⁵ Adonis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil* vol. 4, 160-165.

and laws.”³⁵⁶ It is, moreover, a “means of union with the unseen,” through which the world is constantly recreated.³⁵⁷ Citing an analogy from Ibn ‘Arabī, Adonis explains that vision is like a womb; “just as the fetus is formed in the womb, so meaning is formed in vision.”³⁵⁸ In other words, vision is tantamount to creativity, where creativity denotes either the revelation of things unknown or the composition of known things in a new form.³⁵⁹ Hence, the madman is none other than the seer, who sees no longer with “the eye of the senses,” but with the “eye of the imagination” or “eye of the heart,” and who, through his capacity for vision, “presents a new image to the world.”³⁶⁰ Indeed, in the prologue to *The Madman*, Adonis notes that Gibran’s protagonist explains his madness as the product of having his “veils” stolen from him.³⁶¹ The theft of these veils, in turn, led to his union with the sun, with light, and to “the knowledge of what the veil had prevented him from knowing.”³⁶² Thus, concludes Adonis, the veil is a dual symbol, both that of a barrier to the invisible world and an invitation to it; it is, moreover, “the apparent light” which dazzles the eye of the senses but nevertheless is recognized by the eye of the imagination as “the darkness that conceals the true light.”³⁶³

Of course, Gibran is not unique in his depiction of the madman as social critic and visionary. In his book *Khiṭāb al-junūn fī-l-thaqāfa al-‘arabiyya (The Discourse of Madness in Arab Culture)*, Mohammad al-Samman argues that the voice of madness in Arab-Islamic culture has historically served as a sort of “cultural response,” a means through which to express opposition to the oppression and exploitation suffered by those who come into conflict with religious, political, and/or social authorities.³⁶⁴ Indeed, he maintains, the voice of madness has long been incorporated into the cultural practices and creative endeavors of mystics, writers, storytellers, preachers, and other intellectuals, and thus has pervaded the popular consciousness, with the result that the madman occupies in the heritage the position of “a popular wise man who voices both the aspirations of the people and their pain.”³⁶⁵ As Clara Srouji-Shajrawi notes, such “wise fools,” due to their perceived derangement, are often

³⁵⁶ Adonis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil* vol. 4, 153.

³⁵⁷ Adonis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil* vol. 4, 149.

³⁵⁸ Adonis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil* vol. 4, 149.

³⁵⁹ Adonis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil* vol. 4, 151.

³⁶⁰ Adonis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil* vol. 4, 151.

³⁶¹ Adonis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil* vol. 4, 154.

³⁶² Adonis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil* vol. 4, 154.

³⁶³ Adonis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil* vol. 4, 154.

³⁶⁴ Mohammad Hayan Al-Samman, *Khiṭāb al-junūn fī-l-thaqāfa al-‘arabiyya* (London: Riad el-Rayyes Books Ltd., 1993), 12.

³⁶⁵ Al-Samman, *Khiṭāb al-junūn*, 13.

afforded the freedom to express what others dare not say.³⁶⁶ Moreover, while madness in the Qur'an has, as Abu-Zeid notes, a consistently negative connotation, used to refer to those possessed by jinn and/or in association with poets, sorcerers, or soothsayers, it nevertheless has, in the mystic tradition, a decidedly more positive valence.³⁶⁷ In the aforementioned *Discourse of Madness*, al-Samman highlights the Arabic word “*majdhūb*”, another word for madman which is closely linked to Sufism; the designation of *majdhūb* implies, according to al-Samman, a “state of permanent attraction towards transcendence and longing to reach the state of revelation and union with God.”³⁶⁸ Hence, the *majdhūb* is one who is so absorbed in his love for God that he has lost his grip on earthly reality. The Sufi allegory of Qays—also known as Majnūn (The Mad One)—and Layla illustrates this dynamic; the lover Qays has become so intoxicated with love and yearning for his Beloved that he appears to the rest of society to have gone mad.

In the context of Adonis's poetry, Kamal Abu Deeb argues that madness is neither insanity nor the promotion of chaos, irrationality, or profanity, but rather “an intellectual position... of rejection and total commitment.”³⁶⁹ Moreover, it is, he claims, inextricably linked to the “recognition of the fluidity of things, of their affinities, [and] of their transformation,” and thus to the conviction that a static world is not ideal, even if it were, in theory, to be perfect.³⁷⁰ This is because madness in essence represents the will and capacity to create new language and new relationships between things and to assign new identities to things, all with the hope of creating a new reality.³⁷¹ The poem, for Adonis, is the space where he can give voice to this hope; as Abu Deeb explains, it “becomes the microcosm which embodies Adonis's fundamental vision... a totality within which the tensions are resolved between the most intense oppositions.”³⁷² All constituent elements of the poem “move towards a central meaning which is seen to reside in the various phenomena of the universe,” and “everything in the universe becomes yet another manifestation of [this] essential meaning.”³⁷³ This speaks, of course, to the dialectic of the hidden and the apparent. Abu Deeb argues, however, that, despite this premise, Adonis is inevitably beset by a fundamental opposition between nature and culture,

³⁶⁶ Clara Srouji-Shajrawi, “The Whisper of Madness in Najīb Mahfūz's Literary Works,” *Al-Majma'* no. 17 (2022): 464.

³⁶⁷ Abu-Zeid, “Poetry as Spiritual Practice: The Poetics of Adonis and Yves Bonnefoy,” PhD Dissertation, University of California—Berkeley (2016), 91.

³⁶⁸ Al-Samman, *Khiṭāb al-junūn*, 50.

³⁶⁹ Abu Deeb, “The Perplexity of the All-Knowing,” 320.

³⁷⁰ Abu Deeb, “The Perplexity of the All-Knowing,” 308.

³⁷¹ Abu Deeb, “The Perplexity of the All-Knowing,” 321.

³⁷² Abu Deeb, “The Perplexity of the All-Knowing,” 309.

³⁷³ Abu Deeb, “The Perplexity of the All-Knowing,” 309-310.

for, in the former, “everything responds to his will to transcend apparent contradictions,” while in the latter, “the contradictions prove to be too fundamental to be resolved.”³⁷⁴ In other words, although Adonis seeks to transcend boundaries erected by culture in an effort to resolve the contradictions he perceives therein, he finds these boundaries to be largely intractable.³⁷⁵ His response is to turn inwards, to reshape the world internally in accordance with his vision and realize what he longs for by inhabiting it within the poem.³⁷⁶ While Abu Deeb’s assessment is largely accurate, it arguably understates the gravity and implications both of Adonis’s convictions and its own argument. If the poet’s vision aligns with nature, as Abu Deeb posits, and culture orients itself in opposition to nature, then the insuperable contradictions that culture presents to this vision are themselves predicated on culture’s inherent opposition to natural reality. In other words, the world, shaped by the poet’s vision and inhabited in the poem, is, in a sense, more real than the world shaped by culture which exists beyond the poem. This is, of course, a notion to which Adonis himself often alludes, discussed in Chapter I, namely, that prescriptive orthodoxy elevates the fiction of narrative over the reality of nature. Thus, the “madness” of the poet or the madman only appears as madness from the vantage point of those who are themselves mad, for the vision it expresses aligns with natural reality and transcends the fictional narrative that they embrace. As Abu Deeb argues, Adonis’s response to this fundamental opposition is to turn inwards, to retreat into the “microcosm” of the poem as an embodiment of the reality rejected by culture; however, one would be remiss not to note that, while this movement constitutes a shift away from the world shaped by the culture of religious orthodoxy, it also represents a shift towards the world imagined by the heterodox culture of mysticism.

Madness in Adonis’s work thus comprises both refusal of the type outlined above and in the previous chapter, as well as mystical vision, made possible through intoxication and imagination, which serves as the liminal realm between the apparent world and the hidden world. In other words, Adonis employs madness as a symbol through which to express his rejection of prescriptive authority and his commitment to a spiritual path characterized by explorative authority and direct correspondence with the unseen, thus implying the prophetic potential of the individual. Indeed, the madman is, on the one hand, the dissident and heretic, who rejects the laws society imposes on him and, on the other, the visionary and seer, who is

³⁷⁴ Abu Deeb, “The Perplexity of the All-Knowing,” 312-314.

³⁷⁵ Abu Deeb, “The Perplexity of the All-Knowing,” 313.

³⁷⁶ Abu Deeb, “The Perplexity of the All-Knowing,” 316.

propelled by his longing “to reach what is inaccessible and to know what is unknown.”³⁷⁷ In other words, he is revolutionary and mystic combined, destructive in his refusal and creative in his vision. This chapter thus analyses a selection of lyric poems from the collection *Songs of Mihyār* (1961), as well as two longer poems “Baḥlūl’s Ode” (1980) and “Barzakh” (1994), making the argument that madness in Adonis’s work implies both the refusal of prescriptive orthodoxy and the embrace of a mystical notion of vision predicated on Ibn ‘Arabī’s concept of the creative imagination. Notably, the element of refusal is more evident in the earlier, more quintessentially modernist, poems, while the conceptualization of vision through a mystical lens is much more pronounced in the latter two. However, in all cases, refusal and vision invariably presuppose one another; there is no refusal without vision and no vision without refusal.

4.1 *Songs of Mihyār the Damascene*

Adonis’s use of madness as a poetic symbol is prevalent even in his earliest works. Indeed, the figure of Mihyār, who first appeared with the publication of *Songs of Mihyār* in 1961, is distinctive not merely for his embrace of refusal, but also for his embrace of madness. He seeks the destruction of the prevailing system of laws and values and envisions a world more sympathetic to individual difference and thus more conducive to creativity, a world as yet unknown and unseen. Hence, as with Gibran’s madman, Mihyār is simultaneously madman, rebel, seer, and, ultimately, prophet, the dividing lines between these categories all but entirely obscured. As Adonis himself emphasizes in *The Static and the Dynamic*, however, prophecy as it manifests in Gibran’s work—and, by extension, one might easily surmise, in his own—differs from the divine prophecy associated with religious tradition in one critical respect.³⁷⁸ In the case of the latter, the prophet himself is passive in the sense that he receives revelation from God. In other words, the “messenger” is the first recipient of the message; “he is a repository of God’s words, and there is, in what he says, nothing of his own thought, but rather all is inspired by God.”³⁷⁹ On the other hand, Mihyār represents an essentially “human prophecy,” in which the prophet is not merely the messenger of revelation, but also its source.

The direct influence of Nietzschean philosophy on Adonis is considerable, a fact Adonis readily acknowledges by citing Nietzsche’s Zarathustra as a source of inspiration for

³⁷⁷ Adonis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil* vol. 4, 154.

³⁷⁸ Adonis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil* vol. 4, 147-148.

³⁷⁹ Adonis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil* vol. 4, 147.

Mihyār. Indeed, invoking Nietzsche’s famous assertion regarding the death of God, Adonis argues that “every radical critique of religion, philosophy, and morality... leads to nihilism.”³⁸⁰ In other words, a radical critique of the existing order is by definition destructive and therefore, if successful, inevitably results in the absence of meaning and/or values. However, erasure paves the way for genesis; the death of God and the prevailing law may be followed by the birth of a new god and the creation of new values on the basis of newfound knowledge and with an eye towards the future. Hence, Adonis remarks, while Gibran in *The Madman* kills God, or at least the traditional conception of God, by exposing the errors in traditional morality and advocating for values that transcend angel and devil, good and evil, he simultaneously “affirms the validity of life and the human being” and “preaches morals which develop and liberate [man]... morals which themselves create values.”³⁸¹ Viewed through this lens, refusal and vision are thus equally necessary elements of madness, which is itself the means through which to engender a new world, for refusal without vision is tantamount to nihilism, and vision without refusal is a contradiction in terms. Hence, the recurrent figure of Mihyār and his explicit embrace of madness represent both the refusal of the world imposed by the dominant culture and the vision of another world in which spiritual exploration is unconstrained by cultural prescription.

The first poem in *Songs of Mihyār*, entitled “Mazmūr” (“Psalm”) and subsumed in a subsection of the collection entitled “Fāris al-kalimat al-gharība” (“The Knight of Strange Words”), implicitly links Mihyār with madness by distancing him from that which is known, apparent, and/or familiar and emphasizing rather his affinity for the uncharted and unseen.³⁸² Indeed, writes the poet: *he has no forefathers and his roots are in his footsteps*. He is, moreover, *the water that will not return to its source*. This disavowal of the past and, by extension, the edifice of inherited knowledge and values associated with it is evident: *His words are inscribed in the direction of destruction, destruction*. And yet, this is not a testimony of nihilism, as it may appear on the surface, but rather of creative destruction, of the idea that discovery and innovation require a willingness to surrender the old to the new, to lose in order to gain, to let one thing die so another may be born. Indeed, the Arabic word “*ḍayā*,” which I have translated here as “destruction,” may also be translated as loss, forfeiture, or death. Thus, Adonis reiterates in this poem the aforementioned notion that erasure begets genesis, that death is but

³⁸⁰ Adonis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil* vol. 4, 160.

³⁸¹ Adonis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil* vol. 4, 160.

³⁸² Adonis, “Mazmūr,” *al-A‘māl al-shi‘riyya al-kāmila* vol. 1, 243-244.

a harbinger of new life. This orientation towards the future permeates the poem: *He transforms tomorrow into prey and desperately chases it.*

Moreover, the desire to reconcile apparent contradictions noted by Abu Deeb emerges repeatedly: *Here he is announcing the convergence of extremes.* Indeed: *he is reality and its antithesis, life and that which is not life.* In a sense, this convergence is the essence of madness, as Abu Deeb observes when he asserts that “[madness] is the thing and its opposite, the dream and reality.”³⁸³ Hence, the connection between madness and mysticism reveals itself. As Adonis notes in *Sufism and Surrealism*, the vision of transcending the duality of opposites in recognition of the greater reality of union is itself a mystical vision. “The object can only explain its essence by contradicting it,” he writes; therefore, “opposites meet in complete oneness: movement and stillness, reality and imagination, the strange and the familiar, the lucid and the obscure.”³⁸⁴ The symbolic binary arguably most illustrative of this idea is that of night and day, dark and light, obscurity and clarity. Indeed, throughout Adonis’s corpus one discovers repeated attempts to blur the distinction between these two concepts; “You have to ask,” he asserts, “what is dark and what is clear? Is the light really clear, and the dark really dark?”³⁸⁵ Thus, in “Psalm,” he writes of Mihiyār: *He draws the other side of day. He forms day from his feet and borrows the shoes of night.* This is, ultimately, a reformulation of the aforementioned analogy of the sun and veils in *The Madman*; just as Gibran’s madman learns that the veil is, in truth, a shadow which both reveals and conceals the greater light of the sun, so does Mihiyār implicitly invite his audience to explore the night, suggesting it points to a deeper reality.

This is a decidedly mystical concept, an analogy through which to understand the relationship between hidden essence and apparent form, between God and the cosmos. The cosmos and its apparent forms are “God’s shadow,” each created thing a receptacle for God’s self-disclosure (*tajallī*) or self-manifestation (*ẓuhūr*) and thus luminous insofar as they reflect God’s light, but dark relative to that light. Indeed, Adonis explains in *Sufism and Surrealism* that “the image is a veil,” the product of a union between essence and form, which conveys essential meaning through the apparent form and thus directs one towards the hidden essence.³⁸⁶ In other words, meaning is an aspect of essence, viewed through the veil of the image; hence, meaning is essence, but essence is not meaning. The implication is that the approximation to essence requires the greatest possible number of images, for the light, or

³⁸³ Abu Deeb, “The Perplexity of the All-Knowing,” 321.

³⁸⁴ Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 117.

³⁸⁵ Adonis, *Conversations in the Pyrenees*, 46-47.

³⁸⁶ Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 122.

meaning, reflected in each image represents a unique variation of the light of essence, or God. It is for this reason that essential light, or God, is so often represented through the metaphor of the sun, for the light of the sun eclipses all other light, and yet, one does not stare directly into the sun; one sees it indirectly or through a “veil,” which diminishes its intensity but renders it visible. Hence, when Mihyār “draws the other side of day” by “borrow[ing] the shoes of night,” he creates new images, in order that the essential light of the sun may be apprehended in the form of new meaning.

Thus, through “Psalm,” Adonis establishes, on the one hand, Mihyār’s refusal of old images, or veils, which, one infers, have become so opaque as to conceal the greater light they were meant to reveal. In a sense, they have ceased to be images and have faded into mere form. On the other, he establishes Mihyār’s vision of this greater light, and his determination to reveal it through the creation of new images. Indeed, he writes: *Perplexity is his homeland, but he is filled with eyes*. In other words, he feels at home in mystery and uncertainty; doubt and lack of fixity do not impede his vision, but rather help him see. One should note that perplexity (*hayra*) indicates here a mystical state of bewilderment, in which “every existent thing other than God dwells in a... land of affirmation and negation, finding and losing, knowing and not-knowing.”³⁸⁷ Moreover, the “eyes” represent his capacity for vision by means of the imagination and the heart, that is, for a vision which offers gnostic knowledge of God. Mihyār’s contentment in this state of perplexity is reiterated in another verse: *Vast as the wind, he walks in the abyss and awaits what never comes*. Thus, he walks in the space between the hidden and apparent realms, exploring the unknown and unseen, conscious both of its boundlessness and of the fact that he will never be able to grasp it fully. Indeed, writes Adonis, the journey of the madman is one of “permanent disappointment,” and yet, “this disappointment is the true victory, because the madman’s purpose is found not in the search for that which ends and repeats... but rather in the eternal search for that which has no end.”³⁸⁸

In subsequent poems, Mihyār evokes madness more explicitly, consistently linking it to his rejection of the traditional order, along with its laws and values, as well as to his vision for a new world. Thus, in the poem “al-Ḍayā’” (“Loss”), Mihyār proclaims: *Lost, I cast my face into the morning and into the dust/I cast it into madness*.³⁸⁹ The Arabic word “’aḍī’u,” which I have translated here as “lost,” evokes, too, a sense of ruin or destruction. In this line, therefore, madness is linked, both to the notion of something past, as well as, through the words

³⁸⁷ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 3-4.

³⁸⁸ Adonis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil* vol. 4, 157.

³⁸⁹ Adonis, “al-Ḍayā’,” *al-A’ māl al-shi’riyya al-kāmila* vol. 1, 278.

“morning” and “dust,” to the promise of a new beginning, new light and new forms. Indeed, asserts Miḥyār: *My eyes are made of grass and flame*. In other words, his eyes, which is to say his vision, is characterized both by inner light and the flame of creative destruction as well as by its relationship to nature and new life. This positioning of Miḥyār between destruction and creation, death and life, is reinforced in subsequent lines: *I am born at the end of the path*, he declares... *o’ grave, o’ my end at the dawn of spring*. The poet thus conveys the cyclical nature of existence, the essential correspondence between the disappearance and emergence of forms. One thus infers that Miḥyār, in casting his face “into madness,” both yields to the dynamism of this natural process and participates in it.

Similarly, in the poem “al-Ṣa’iqa” (“The Thunderbolt”), Miḥyār declares: *Green thunderbolt/my bride in sun and madness,/The stone collapsed upon my eyelids/So change the map of things*.³⁹⁰ On the one hand, greenness here symbolizes life, fertility, flourishing, and renewal. The thunderbolt, meanwhile, is an image that appears both in the Qur’an and in Sufi symbolism. In the former, it is most often a punishment visited by God upon wrongdoers and disbelievers, such as the inhabitants of ‘Ad and Thamūd; however, in the latter, it may be used to denote the moment of self-annihilation (*fanā’*), that is, the moment of mystical union with God. Adonis’s intended meaning coincides, of course more closely with the mystical one; he thus appropriates the term from scripture, stripping it of any negative connotations and relating it instead to the notion of rebirth and new life. Indeed, the term “green thunderbolt” itself implies the inextricable link between vitality, vision, and refusal, a link further emphasized by its designation as Miḥyār’s “bride in sun and madness.” Furthermore, Miḥyār appeals to the thunderbolt to “change the map of things,” that is, to transform reality, to overturn the prevailing order, for, he declares: *I came to you from world without a sky*. In other words, he suggests, the old world, dominated by prescriptive orthodoxy and blinded by the opacity of its veils, has lost its vision of sunlight, rendering it unable or unwilling to pursue the mysteries of the unknown.

In “Ḥiwār” (“Dialogue”), Miḥyār resists the pressure to choose between false contradictions that he believes have been imposed by culture, seeking rather to transcend them in the search for something more profound.³⁹¹ Indeed, when the voice of culture maintains that he must choose, insisting that “the world is a choice,” he responds: *I choose neither God nor the devil/Both are a wall/Both close my eyes*. In other words, he asserts, acceptance of the

³⁹⁰ Adonis, “al-Ṣa’iqa,” *al-A’ māl al-shi’riyya al-kāmila* vol. 1, 329.

³⁹¹ Adonis, “Ḥiwār,” *al-A’ māl al-shi’riyya al-kāmila* vol. 1, 288.

proposed binary is, in and of itself, imprisoning; only through moving beyond it and freeing oneself of the limitations it imposes might one have the capacity for true vision. Hence, Adonis emphasizes, refusal precipitates vision. Similarly, in yet another poem entitled “Mazmūr” (“Psalm”), Mihyār resists the constraining dictates of prescriptive authority, along with the perceived false contradictions they produce, professing: *I am astray, I am astray and will not return./The fall is my state and my stipulation./Paradise is my antithesis.*³⁹² By using the Arabic word “*dāll*,” translated here as “astray,” Adonis repurposes a term used pejoratively in the Qur’an; while in scripture, the term is used exclusively in reference to those who have strayed from the rightful path prescribed by God as interpreted by religious orthodoxy, Adonis’s usage here refers to one for whom the veils have been lifted, one who has determined that his spiritual elevation may be realized only through his rejection of the traditional system of laws and values, rather than through his adherence to it. Thus, through this lens, the “fall” reflects not merely an espousal of disobedience, but a precondition for spiritual exploration. In referring to paradise as his “antithesis,” moreover, Mihyār implies the will to subordinate the promise of paradise to the reality of existence on earth, that is, to reclaim nature’s authority over cultural narrative. Of course, this does not suggest a strictly materialist view of reality; as has been demonstrated Adonis’s conception of vision is ultimately mystical, predicated on the presence of a hidden realm. Hence, Mihyār proclaims: *I seek a sun that resides in the eyes, eyes that see the light, all of the light.* In other words, one infers, he yearns for the light concealed—and revealed—by the transparent veil of the image, the essential light of God which may only be seen with the eye of the heart and which requires that one recognize the dual light-dark nature of the veil itself. This recognition comes not from received knowledge, but from gnostic vision. Thus, Mihyār refers directly to madness as his “lord” and “messiah” (*O’ madness, o’ my lord, o’ my messiah*), indicating his disavowal of prescriptive authority and pursuit of explorative authority as a means of spiritual cultivation.

Ultimately, therefore, as Abu Deeb notes, Adonis’s madness indicates not merely an position of rejection, but also one of commitment. In a political or cultural sense, this is a commitment to the values of modernism, most notably, the authority and freedom of the individual. However, it is also a commitment to the idea that “just as God exists beyond man’s grasp, so the world exists, not in the known, in what happens, but in what is to come, and the world’s greatness lies in the unknown and in this relationship to the unknown,” an idea Adonis

³⁹² Adonis, “Mazmūr,” *al-A‘māl al-shi‘riyya al-kāmila* vol. 1, 375-377.

himself ascribes explicitly to Sufism.³⁹³ In order to orient culture towards this idea, to maximize discovery and creativity, he believes it necessary that each individual be afforded the freedom to pursue his own path, unimpeded by the limitations imposed by prescriptive authority, which, he believes, either arrogantly or cynically proclaims itself the arbiter of truth and knowledge. In other words, Adonis's madness is, at its core, symbolic of the conviction that deviation from the prescribed path is a prerequisite for vision, because the prescribed path is paved with veils which have lost their transparency and/or because the filtered light that they transmit has become conflated with unfiltered sunlight. Indeed, Adonis explains, "In the religious sense, God no longer speaks. The invisible has been said once and for all. But in mysticism as I live it, the invisible is still speaking, endlessly."³⁹⁴ Through vision, he maintains, "we arrive at an ecstasy which connects us to the essence of the world, beyond all veils, all material restraints."³⁹⁵ Mihyār's madness is thus both refusal and vision, destruction and genesis, a state of being analogous to the mystical state of intoxication, which transports him from the apparent world of form into the hidden world of essence and meaning.

4.2 "Baḥlūl's Ode"

Written in 1977 and published in 1980 as part of the collection *al-Muṭābaqat wa-l-'awā'il* (*Similarities and Beginnings*), the poem "Qaṣīdat Baḥlūl" ("Baḥlūl's Ode") takes its name from a prominent figure in the cultural heritage.³⁹⁶ Born Wāḥab ibn Amr, Baḥlūl lived in Baghdad as a judge and scholar during the reign of the Abbasid caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (d. 809 CE). In one telling of the story, the caliph, in an effort to secure his own power and authority, sought to minimize that of the seventh Shi'a imam, Musa al-Kāzīm (d. 799 CE); therefore, he accused the imam of rebellion and demanded a judicial decree to that effect. Baḥlūl refused to issue the decree, however, and instead appealed to the imam for guidance. The imam advised him to behave as though he were insane in order to avoid the caliph's wrath. From that day forward, Baḥlūl feigned madness, dressed in rags, and lived a life of privation, which, in turn, allowed him both to escape punishment and challenge those in power. In another telling of the story, Baḥlūl, along with several others, sought the advice of the imam when the caliph signalled the intention to persecute the imam's companions. The imam responded to his

³⁹³ Adonis, *Prophecy and Power*, 128.

³⁹⁴ Adonis, *Identité inachevée*, 11.

³⁹⁵ Adonis, *Identité inachevée*, 11.

³⁹⁶ Adonis, "Qaṣīdat Baḥlūl," *al-A'māl al-shi'riyya al-kāmila* vol. 3, 273-284.

followers' appeals with the letter *jim*, which each of them proceeded to interpret differently; for his part, Baḥlūl understood it to represent "*junūn*," or madness, and thus renounced his wealth and pretended to be insane. Regardless of historical accuracy, it remains the case that, as Shereen el Ezabi notes, the figure of Baḥlūl represents the cultural archetype of the "wise madman"; he is "the shameless jester, the witty fool, the renouncer of worldly pleasures and an ascetic mystic of sorts, all at once."³⁹⁷ To this one might add, moreover, that he is a symbol of struggle against tyranny; he initially dons the mask of madness to outmaneuver the tyrant and continues to use it as a shield through which to voice dissent and call attention to injustice. In "Baḥlūl's Ode," Adonis thus alludes to this history, as well as to the history of the wise madman in the literary heritage more broadly, combining a spirit of irreverence in the face of prescriptive authority with the implicit profession of faith in a vision that allows one to see beyond the conceptual limitations imposed by that authority.

As with many of the other poems discussed thus far, "Baḥlūl's Ode" incorporates well-known Shi'a figures of resistance to signal an opposition to tyranny and prescriptive orthodoxy. Indeed, writes the poet of Baḥlūl: *He sees the world in the face of al-Ḥusayn/and he sees fire on the river, and a sailor, and an arm beckoning*. The "face" symbolizes inner light. It is, according to Ibn 'Arabī, conferred upon an entity by the "specific divine name which gazes upon it."³⁹⁸ Hence, the specific face of any individual distinguishes him from all others; it is the name by which he knows God and God knows him. In the line cited above, the poet thus implies that Baḥlūl identifies meaning in the spirit of revolution, sacrifice, and justice symbolized by the "face" of al-Ḥusayn. Moreover, he implies, such a spirit is inextricably linked to faith in the value of dynamism and heterodoxy. The river here represents the ceaseless movement of existence, the idea that the world is constantly changing, and fire the inner flame of creative destruction associated with vision and the imagination. Adonis writes in *Sufism and Surrealism*, "if it is true that the movement of existence can be compared to an unending river and horizon, then its transformations are like revelations. Inasmuch as there is no end to revelations, there is no end to the images and knowledge that they contain."³⁹⁹ In other words, refusal in the form of al-Ḥusayn is once again directly tied to notions of vision, creativity, and discovery, to the promise of a boundless unknown which "beckons." It is tied, moreover, to the promise of individual revelation, to a form of knowledge acquired through gnosis, which is

³⁹⁷ Shereen el Ezabi, "Al-Naysaburi's Wise Madmen: Introduction," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* no. 14 (1994): 194.

³⁹⁸ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 42.

³⁹⁹ Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 50-51.

vastly different from the received knowledge asserted by prescriptive authority and imposed on collective society. This gnostic knowledge relies on the endless generation of novel images, through which divine essence or meaning is apprehended, and, given that “the image is a limited evocation of what is endless,” such knowledge ultimately concedes that the unknown can never be “known” in its totality, but rather must be explored through its manifold forms and representations.⁴⁰⁰

Additionally, Adonis writes: *And why/if his sorrows were watered with ‘Ali’s water.../Why do people come out for their authorities/and disappear/if Baḥlūl enters into the liturgy of his songs...?* Here the poet makes reference to ‘Ali both as a figure of heterodoxy and as the symbolic father of Islamic mysticism, which Adonis views as being opposed to prescriptive orthodoxy. Moreover, Adonis’s use of the Arabic words “*aḥzān*” and “*saqa*,” which I have translated here as “sorrows” and “watered” respectively, further reinforce the association with Sufism and, by extension, mystical vision. The former is often used in Sufism to denote the spiritual anguish one feels with regard to his inability to know God fully, to be near Him and/or the suffering experienced in the process of realizing one’s ideals; the latter, on the other hand, evokes the image of the *sāqi*, the cupbearer and spiritual guide, who fills the mystic’s heart with the wine of divine love and longing. In this line, therefore, the poet poses a rhetorical question, suggesting that the majority of people are not only willing to submit to prescriptive authority, but to laud and defend it, and yet, they cannot bring themselves to consider, much less adopt, the explorative authority embodied by ‘Ali and Baḥlūl, with its requisite embrace of uncertainty. Indeed, the poet poses the same question in another line: *And why/when the past snaps like a branch in his hands/do people take fright and run like the wind/and return to their authorities?*

This notion that Baḥlūl is contending with the past, with history, on behalf of his people permeates the poem. Indeed, in a separate verse, Baḥlūl himself speaks in first person: *I venture now into the street like a dream/That poets may be/like a halo around the foreheads of the poor./I venture now into the street like a wound/The teeming blood is a talisman and wandering/And on the walls a history sleeps.* In this verse, notably, Baḥlūl associates himself directly with poets, indicating the close relationship between madness and poetry. Moreover, he compares himself both to a dream and to a wound, thus emphasizing the significance of vision and transience, respectively, for, as discussed in the previous chapter, the wound symbolizes for Adonis a state of becoming and impermanence. The blood from this wound

⁴⁰⁰ Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 122.

offers, paradoxically, healing and protection, as well as the promise of mystery and exploration. In this context, one infers, Baḥlūl is at once madman, poet, and prophet, capable of guiding his fellow men towards this vision, capable, that is, of offering spiritual wealth to those who have been deprived of it, trapped in a society where time has ceased its forward march and “history sleeps.”

This indictment of the current age, and, by extension, the history that has led to it, is revisited several times throughout the poem. *What can poetry do*, asks Baḥlūl, *when its legs are chains/and the tyrants’ walls are on its eyes? What can poetry do for a history that sleeps?* In other words, what course must poetry take in order to fulfill its promise of enlightenment, when it has itself been bound by the chains and imprisoned by the walls of “tyrants” who seek for their own interests the curtailment of individual agency and freedom of thought? The extended reign of prescriptive orthodoxy, he implies, has arrested the course of life, resulting in a prolonged state of unconsciousness. Invoking the name of the Umayyad governor perhaps most notorious for his bloodthirst and ruthlessness, the poet writes: *There is no one who speaks, save the rule of al-Ḥajjāj*. And yet, in spite of this, Adonis does not suggest that the situation is a hopeless one; once again, refusal is wedded to vision, which is, in turn, directly associated with poetry. Thus, in reference to the aforementioned walls upon the eyes of poetry, he writes: *Do you see [Baḥlūl] destroying the wall with a twig of arak?* In the original Arabic, the religious connotations are evident; the Arabic word “*sūr*,” which I have translated here as “wall,” and which appears in the accusative—hence “*sūra*”—recalls the word “*sūra*” as it relates to chapters of the Qur’an. Moreover, the “twig of arak,” or “*miswāk*,” as it is often called, refers to a plant advocated by the Prophet Muḥammad as part of ritual ablution before prayer, a sort of natural toothbrush. One might infer, therefore, the notion of nature reappropriated and its role in dismantling the figurative walls within which prescriptive authority has imprisoned its subjects, thus impeding their ability to see the deeper reality which lies beyond.

Such an association between tyranny, religion, and political authority is further articulated in subsequent verses. Indeed, the poet writes: *Of what is Baḥlūl accused if he observes a soldier and cries out:/o’ chain!/And would he sin by calling the Book/by the name of executioner?* In another line, he reiterates a similar sentiment: *Of what is Baḥlūl accused if he studies a history and cries out:/o’ murder! And would he sin by calling the sky by the name of man?* In these lines, Adonis thus reiterates the conviction that political and religious authority have historically been associated with oppression and violence. Moreover, he juxtaposes orthodox religion, symbolized by “the Book,” that is, the Qur’an, with heterodox spirituality, that is, “the sky.” The implication is that the former, associated with prescriptive

authority and a single, immutable interpretation of truth, places man in a position of servitude, whereas the latter, associated with explorative authority and a plurality of interpretations, restores his agency, reimagining entirely man's relationship to God. As discussed in the introduction of this chapter, this shift in the conception of God, from separation to immanence, constitutes, in Adonis's view, the initial, even definitive, step towards madness. It is, moreover, a shift which orients vision and encourages creativity, thus unlocking the possibility of union.

Emphasizing the disparity between these two paths, namely, the prescriptive and explorative, Baḥlūl thus declares: *Between the raising of a sword by al-Ḥajjāj/in the building of a great state, and the assembly of a hut by the language of al-Ḥallāj /I cast aside the sword and choose... Why is it that every time [Baḥlūl] tries to impart the truth, the words deceive him?/And why does the spring divert its course/in order to remain faithful?* In this verse, the poet once again ties political and religious authority, as symbolized by Umayyad governor al-Ḥajjāj (d. 714 CE), to the dual notions of violence and power. In other words, he implies, the marriage of religion and politics is inevitably associated with violence committed in the service of obtaining and consolidating power; religion is, in this paradigm, the mechanism of political rule. On the other hand, al-Ḥallāj (d. 922 CE), the mystic and poet best known for being condemned to death for uttering the phrase "I am the Truth," symbolizes explorative authority and is equipped not with a sword but with language. In casting aside the sword, Baḥlūl implies that the language of al-Ḥallāj is ultimately more powerful than sword of al-Ḥajjāj, the "hut" it builds more valuable in its relationship to meaning.

Furthermore, the latter part of the verse reinforces the contrast between doubt and certainty, question and answer, mystery and clarity. Adonis argues repeatedly in his poetic and critical works that the language of prescriptive authority and that of mysticism and poetry differ vastly; this difference in language, in turn, reflects vastly different perspectives of the world. Hence, the language of *sharia*, that is, of prescriptive authority, expresses things in a "complete and finite way"; it is, "a language of explanation," which presupposes a certain degree of clarity and certainty.⁴⁰¹ By contrast, mystical and poetical language speaks in images, accepting that there exist things which can neither be definitively explained nor understood. The mystic poet understands that the apparent world "lives in constant motion, disintegrating and disappearing," and thus, in order to see it and know it most clearly, we must "penetrate it to see what lies behind it, going deep into its nucleus, from where the motion of life spurts forth and

⁴⁰¹ Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 18-19.

which contains its creative abilities.”⁴⁰² Indeed, “reality is no more than revelations and representations of this nucleus”⁴⁰³ The poet, in turn, seeks to approach this nucleus, to use language to express indirectly his experience of this convergence, that is, to express his experience of the unseen, of meaning and infinitude. His expression of this is indirect, in the form of language and images, both because a direct expression of that which is ultimately ineffable is impossible and because “meaning... is not fixed but is in perpetual motion through birth and renewal.”⁴⁰⁴ Hence, *every time he tries to impart the truth, the words deceive him*, for meaning is limitless and dynamic, and words themselves are images, or veils, which invariably conceal certain aspects of essence while disclosing others. Adonis’s oft-repeated metaphor of the word as a wound is an expression of this fundamental reality. And yet, the poet emphasizes the power of mystical, figurative language to liberate one from the absolute truth imposed by the literalist language of the orthodox. *Baḥlūl fell into an apple*, he writes, *enticed by words*. The apple here evokes the familiar story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, representing both temptation and forbidden knowledge, which one may interpret in this context as gnostic knowledge; this line therefore implies that, through the imagery of figurative language and the meaning therein conveyed, Baḥlūl tasted the fruit of forbidden knowledge, of gnosis. Hence, Adonis implies, poetry is directly linked to spiritual ascension.

This emphasis on poetry and language as a means through which to express vision, to express meaning, though indirectly and incompletely, through images, underlies the entire poem. Indeed, in the opening verse, Baḥlūl writes: *The sun enters my house as butterflies and passes through/as words/And for my days at the water’s crossroads, there is nostalgia:/How do I revive a flower/ravaged by sand?* In these lines, Adonis thus conveys the notion that the deepest truth, the nuclear essence, represented by the sun, enters his house in the form of “butterflies.” In the hadith literature, the butterfly is associated with the Lote Tree, which is said to be covered in “golden butterflies” and which, in Sufism, represents the boundary between the manifest and the spiritual realms. It symbolizes, therefore, the imaginal realm, the world of images. Hence, the poet implies, the divine essence reveals itself to him in images, which then pass through his verse in words. Moreover, in claiming that he feels a “nostalgia” for the “water’s crossroads,” Baḥlūl indicates a longing to unite with the place where water, the symbol of life, exists in essence, prior to disclosure in any particular form. In the subsequent line, he evinces the desire to revivify the “flower,” which is itself a mystical symbol for the

⁴⁰² Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 185.

⁴⁰³ Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 186.

⁴⁰⁴ Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 186.

manifestation of God and beauty of existence. Indeed, Adonis writes elsewhere that “God is man’s tomorrow. Man is the root, and God is the flower of that root.”⁴⁰⁵ Thus, he implies in the poem, Baḥlūl wishes to restore the vitality of existence by reinstating the notion of God as potentiality, that is, the hidden, mysterious, ineffable, and unknown. In alleging that the flower of existence, of God, has been “ravaged by sand,” which is symbolic of aridity and thus antonymous to water, Adonis implies that the dominance of prescriptive orthodoxy in Arab culture has led to the withering of creativity and dynamism.

Indeed, “Baḥlūl’s Ode” repeatedly expresses the notion that the embrace of madness—that is, the willingness to repudiate the traditional order and expand one’s vision—opens the door to the hidden realm, which prescriptive orthodoxy has locked. In reference to Baḥlūl, the poet writes: *When the sun rests upon his forehead... he sees what instruction believed was a spider’s refuge.* This line alludes to a chapter in the Qur’an entitled *Sūrat al-‘Ankabūt*, or The Spider, in which polytheists and disbelievers are compared to the spider who seeks refuge in his web, unaware of its fragility and false promise of protection. This analogy serves as a warning to those who seek refuge in anything other than God, be it in other gods or in false beliefs, that, though they may be deceived or unaware, their abode is a fragile one, from which they will derive no benefit or security. In the line cited above, therefore, Adonis implicitly challenges this assertion, suggesting rather that through Baḥlūl’s direct relationship with divine essence, his knowledge has expanded beyond the conception of truth arbitrated by prescriptive authority, penetrating a deeper reality, one misunderstood by those who would condemn it.

Similarly, in a subsequent verse, Adonis makes reference to the story of Solomon and Bilqīs, the Queen of Sheba. In the traditional version of the narrative, the prophet Solomon discovers from his bird, the hoopoe, that Bilqīs and the people of her kingdom worship the sun. Solomon thus sends her a message, entreating her to give up her false gods and turn to the true faith. After a visit to Solomon’s palace, the queen is ultimately convinced of the error of her ways, and she repents and turns to Islam. In “Baḥlūl’s Ode,” however, Adonis, like Ibn ‘Arabī, associates Bilqīs with the unseen, with mystery, and thus with spiritual exploration, emphasizing the temptation she presents to Solomon rather than her deference to him. Indeed, he writes: *The hoopoe sits on Solomon’s lap/Solomon/is a supplication/He delves into the body of the unseen/Bilqīs is a flower/and lanterns, and Arab magic/He delves into the body of desire, and the hoopoe is an eye perplexing him.* The Arabic word “*arār*,” which I have translated here as “flower,” refers to a yellow flower similar to a sunflower; both the general notion of a

⁴⁰⁵ Adonis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil* vol. 4, 155.

flower and the specific choice of flower thus imply an association between Bilqīs and the hidden essence of God. Moreover, in this verse, the poet equates Bilqīs, who is traditionally viewed as an idolater, to the unseen, to light, and to “magic,” or enchantment, a term which is itself used almost exclusively in the pejorative sense in the Qur’an. The evident implication here, however, is that, in her worship of the sun, Bilqīs possesses direct knowledge of a light which is greater in its intensity than the light transmitted through the veils of orthodoxy, a truth more profound than the truth upon which orthodoxy bases its authority. Moreover, the hoopoe, a common symbol in Sufism, represents both vision and spiritual guide. He is “an eye perplexing” Solomon, which one may interpret to mean that he has the capacity to see the hidden realm; he thus guides one along the mystical path to perplexity, to bewilderment. Indeed, this state of perplexity, one might argue, is at the core of Adonis’s mystical vision and, by extension, his conception of madness; it is the state in which one accepts that “man’s attempts to reveal the mystery only result in a greater need of it, [for] what he knows is the merest fragment of what remains unknown, which demands to be known. The more he knows, the more ignorant he becomes, [and thus] the more desperate to penetrate the mystery.”⁴⁰⁶

Hence, in a subsequent line in the poem, the poet writes: *Baḥlūl entered the season of vegetation and resurrected/the madness of the land/and it was festival... Verily is Baḥlūl /in his nuptials/a king—/his throne is the earth/and the winds bestow his sceptre*. In this line, the word vegetation symbolizes life, growth, and fertility; thus, Adonis asserts, Baḥlūl restores vitality to nature through his refusal, through his resurrection of vision. In so doing, he has become his own sovereign and a guide to others, firmly grounded on this earth, in a world defined by nature rather than false narrative. And yet, his commitment to natural existence is not strictly materialist; his authority is bestowed upon him by “the winds,” symbolic of the Divine Breath, the “substance of the universe,” evocative of “the evanescent and changing nature of existence, or the cosmos as ever-renewed creation and never-repeated divine self-disclosure.”⁴⁰⁷ The notion that Baḥlūl in his role as madman and seer has the ability not merely to witness reality, but also to shape it, reinforces the idea of human prophecy as active rather than merely passive. In other words, it is a notion which emphasizes man’s capacity for creation. Indeed, Adonis writes: *What awaits Baḥlūl if he names his hands two shores/What awaits Baḥlūl if the river wears him, and he is the sail?* As previously mentioned, water is symbolic of life, and the river represents the ongoing movement of existence. By assuming the power to name things, Baḥlūl

⁴⁰⁶ Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 116.

⁴⁰⁷ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 19.

assumes the power to assign meaning; as Adonis explains in reference to al-Niffarī's work, to give new names to things is to give "new meaning to the images in which they are used and the relationships in which they are involved."⁴⁰⁸ Through this lens, language is inextricably linked both to existence and creation.⁴⁰⁹ The implication in this line is thus that Baḥlūl participates in shaping existence; he holds life between his hands and envisions new images, new relationships, new meanings. He is the vessel carried by the unending river of existence, and yet he is the sail steering the vessel's course, listening and responding to the forces of the wind, to the breath of the unknown.

4.3 "Barzakh"

The poem "Barzakh" was written in 1991 and included in the collection *Abjadiyya thāniya (Another Alphabet)* published in 1994.⁴¹⁰ In Islamic mysticism, the term "barzakh," which may broadly be translated as "isthmus," refers most often to the intermediate realm between the spiritual and corporeal realms. It is, in other words, the imaginative realm, also referred to as delimited imagination, and, as Chittick explains, considered more real than the corporeal world, given its relative proximity to divine essence and Being.⁴¹¹ Things in this imaginal realm have a status that is both intermediary and ambiguous, which is to say, they are "neither luminous nor dark, spiritual nor corporeal, neither subtle nor dense, neither high nor low," but somewhere in between.⁴¹² Thus imaginal existents are "luminous in relation to visible things, but dark in relation to unseen things."⁴¹³ Moreover, as Henry Corbin explains, the imaginative realm "is the scene of visionary events, of symbolic visions, and of the archetypal persons to whom the esoteric meaning of Revelation refers."⁴¹⁴ In other words, it is the liminal space between the hidden and apparent realms, a plane of consciousness dominated by an infinite number of symbols and images—meaning in the cloak of form—all of which are subject to interpretation. Furthermore, the presence of an imaginative realm presumes a correspondence between divine essence and the human being through the First Intellect, from which the human soul emanates and which constitutes the source of its existence and its light.⁴¹⁵

⁴⁰⁸ Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 156.

⁴⁰⁹ Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 189.

⁴¹⁰ Adonis, "al-Barzakh," *al-A'māl al-shi'riyya al-kāmila* vol. 4, 387-408.

⁴¹¹ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 14.

⁴¹² Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 15.

⁴¹³ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 15.

⁴¹⁴ Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabī*, translated by Ralph Manheim (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 13.

⁴¹⁵ Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 11.

The significance of this realm as it relates to Adonis is therefore evident. First, the knowledge conferred by means of imaginative vision derives not from the intellect, but the heart; it is not received knowledge, but gnostic knowledge. Second, given the intrinsic connection between the human being and the celestial or spiritual realm, man need not rely on ecclesiastic authority to mediate his relationship to or knowledge of God. This allows for what Corbin refers to as “the radical autonomy of the individual,”⁴¹⁶ and thus aligns both with Adonis’s commitment to modernist individualism, as well as his repudiation of prescriptive authority. One understands, therefore, that Adonis’s conception of vision is mystical insofar as it applies not to the apparent, phenomenal world, but rather is exercised in this liminal, imaginative realm and directed towards the interpretation of images and symbols. Indeed, it denotes the capacity to decipher meaning through an exploration of the relationship between essence and form, hidden and apparent, and thus to engage in a sort of “*ta’wīl*” of existence.

The concept of the *barzakh* thus further illuminates Adonis’s notion of madness, which comprises both the element of refusal and the element of vision and considers the two mutually dependent. If, as Adonis posits, religious orthodoxy is defined by its emphasis on the essential distinction between God and man, as well as by its insistence on a single truth based on a single, fixed interpretation of text, and imaginative vision within the *barzakh* entails the perception of manifold interpretations, made possible by means of the individual’s direct connection to God, then religious orthodoxy and mystical vision are contradictory. The acceptance of one implies the denial of the other; hence, the capacity for vision by definition indicates one’s refusal of a dogma which contravenes it. Through this lens, therefore, while one might theoretically refuse and yet not see, it is impossible to see and not refuse. Only the second case constitutes madness. Furthermore, the notion of a symbolic, imaginal realm accessible beyond the apparent world, not subject to the limitations of space and time, illuminates the assertion made by Khalida Said and recounted in the introduction of Chapter III that Adonis’s refusal is not merely a “partial” refusal directed towards culture, but a “total” refusal directed towards existence as it is commonly understood. This conceptual foundation facilitates explication of “Barzakh,” for, while the term does not appear explicitly therein, the poet’s “madness” is implied by the very premise of the poem itself. In the poem, the poet exists in the liminal *barzakh*, between essence and form, where the apparent becomes transparent and essential light visible through the veil of the image.

⁴¹⁶ Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 11.

Prior to commencing analysis of the poem itself, one need be familiar with the way in which “names, “things,” and “words” are conceptualized both in Adonis’s thought and that of Ibn ‘Arabī, from whom Adonis borrows essentially his entire framework. First, the divine names serve as the link between Being and the cosmos; they constitute not entities or existing things, but relationships between Being as Essence and created things.⁴¹⁷ Each divine name comprises both the Essence and a unique meaning or “reality,” which determines its “effects” in the cosmos, that is, the way in which it is reflected in the cosmos through manifestation as things, entities, or forms.⁴¹⁸ In addition to the divine names, moreover, there exist the names of engendered things, which include “every noun that denotes something existing in the cosmos in every language of the world,” and all of which must also be ascribed to Being, insofar as every name refers to a divine act or “thing,” which is itself ultimately a property and effect of the divine names.⁴¹⁹ Therefore, as Chittick notes, the term “thing” ultimately equates both to the philosophical term “possible thing” and the theological term “entity.”⁴²⁰ It may be used in reference to anything but God, or Being Itself, for it denotes a “locus of manifestation,” through which Being discloses itself in accordance with the unique attributes, properties, and thus receptivity of the thing itself.⁴²¹ Significantly, this means that, while Being is indivisible, its self-disclosure takes a variety of forms. The logical deduction is that existent or created “things” are both a means of access to God because they constitute the loci of His self-disclosure, the reflection of His names in a multitude of forms and combinations; however, they are indeed “veils,” in the sense that they serve both to obscure essential meaning and reveal it.⁴²² Through this lens, one understands refusal as the conviction that the extended dominance of any particular system, with its accordant laws, symbols, and messages, inevitably entrenches and fossilizes certain relationships between Being and creation at the expense of others; the veil of the image loses its transparency, becomes opaque, and thus conceals an infinite expanse of meaning otherwise ripe for discovery.

With regard to words, Adonis explains that “the alphabet... allows for the creation of a sphere in which divine abstraction conforms to the expressive abstraction of words, and linguistic signs conform to divine signs.”⁴²³ Poetic language deviates from familiar language, however, in that it continually renews the meaning attached to a given word, that is, poetry

⁴¹⁷ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 34.

⁴¹⁸ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 34-38.

⁴¹⁹ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 42.

⁴²⁰ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 88.

⁴²¹ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 91.

⁴²² Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 45.

⁴²³ Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 164.

strips the word of previous meanings and context, of everything save its constituent letters and musicality, thus preparing it to pass from the realm of the apparent into the concealed, opening it to an infinite number of potential relationships.⁴²⁴ Indeed, such language “allows separation from the field that the names have already exhausted and... communication with what has not been named, with the unseen”; by creating new relationships between words and between words and things, it “reveals the obscure relationships in the endless universe, which is [itself] infinitely obscure.”⁴²⁵ Therefore, the word in the context of poetry serves as a vessel of meaning, and yet, the meaning it carries is not fixed, but rather shifts through use of imagery. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Adonis contends that “the word can never say a thing once and for all,” an idea he frequently represents in his poetry with the symbol of the wound.⁴²⁶ This choice of symbol is not arbitrary, but rather proceeds from the fact that the Arabic term “*kalima*,” or “word,” originally derives from the same root as the verb “*kalama*,” which means “to injure,” or “to wound.” This derivation, Adonis would contend, is not coincidental.

If the “word” is a neutral vessel, the “name” of an engendered thing is, by contrast, the prior ascription of meaning and context to an existing thing or entity and thus the very thing poetic language seeks to extirpate. It is in this sense that the poet becomes creator; indeed, argues Adonis, “poetic creation is naught but an image of cosmic creation.”⁴²⁷ As Abu Deeb notes, just as God, upon creating Adam, “taught him all the names,” Adonis “starts by *renaming* everything, and thus changing the relationships between the elements of the universe, creating a new universe.”⁴²⁸ Through each shift in these relationships, the poet presents new images of the unseen, revealing new meaning, which, in turn, is tantamount to the revelation of new aspects of Being Itself. This implies a conception of existence which aligns with Ibn ‘Arabī’s theory of self-disclosure and infinite possibility, in which “Being alone remains unchanged, while all existence displays Being’s infinite properties in kaleidoscopic variety” and “at each successive moment, each thing undergoes fluctuation, transformation, and transmutation.”⁴²⁹ The capacity for creation by one who has vision similarly aligns with Ibn ‘Arabī’s conception of the creative imagination, as explained by Henry Corbin, in which the operation of the human faculty of imagination is ultimately an expression of God’s imagination, which comprises the entirety of the created cosmos:

⁴²⁴ Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 187.

⁴²⁵ Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 156.

⁴²⁶ Adonis, *Violence and Islam*, 153.

⁴²⁷ Adonis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutahawwil* vol. 4, 141.

⁴²⁸ Abu Deeb, “The Perplexity of the All-Knowing,” 322.

⁴²⁹ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 96.

To the initial act of the Creator imagining the world corresponds the creature imagining his world, imagining the worlds, his God, his symbols. Or rather, these are the phases, the recurrences of one and the same eternal process: Imagination effected in an Imagination, an Imagination which is recurrent just as—and because—the Creation itself is recurrent. The same theophanic Imagination of the Creator who has revealed the worlds, renews the Creation from moment to moment in the human being whom He has revealed as His perfect image and who, in the mirror that this Image is, shows himself Him whose image he is. That is why man's Active Imagination cannot be vain fiction, since it is this same theophanic Imagination which, in and by the same human being, continues to reveal what is showed itself by first imagining it...

For the entire universe of worlds is at once He and not-He (*Huwa/la Huwa*). The God manifested in forms is at once Himself and other than Himself, for since He is manifested, He is the limited which has no limit, the visible which cannot be seen. This manifestation is neither perceptible nor verifiable by the sensory faculties; discursive reason rejects it. It is perceptible only by the Active Imagination at times when it dominates man's sense perceptions, in dreams or better still in the waking state (in the state characteristic of the gnostic when he departs from the consciousness of sensuous things).⁴³⁰

Therefore, "Barzakh" begins with the following verse: *For the myths that embrace my days and the dream that understands me/I cleanse history – what it said, and what it denied/with the signs sent to me by the dawn./He who I bring out of the abyss/is not I/He who I carry into the abyss/is not I.* This line indicates the poet's presence in a realm of "myth" and "dream," that is, the imaginative realm of the *barzakh*. History, subject to time, characterizes the apparent world of forms, which petrify in the absence of imaginal renewal; hence, the poet "cleans[e] history" with "signs." Moreover, the poet implicitly acknowledges the essential relationship between God and man, in which man as a created being is both He and Not-He (*Huwa/la Huwa*). In other words, imaginative vision reveals to the poet his own dual nature, composed of a self, who is "I", and an other, who is He. The poet proceeds: *The present leaves its names/The thing revolts against its names – I do not name it, but/the rose graced the poet's hand and he surrendered to the water which followed the river of longing.* Adonis thus indicates in these first lines the aforementioned shift in relationships that comes when words are emptied of prior meaning. And yet, in choosing not to rename things immediately, the poet lingers briefly in the liminal realm before "surrender[ing] to the water" and "follow[ing] the river of longing," reflecting the unending movement of Being's desire to express itself. Indeed, he writes in subsequent lines: *I will revive a rose carried by poetry, I will continue/to ascend the clouds, and I will continue/to pull the horizon by a thread/and draw in the sun by its sleeves.* In other words, Adonis implies that his task as poet is to breathe new life into Being through his poetry, specifically through his use of figurative language and capacity for vision, to give new expression to essence, through the creation of new images which convey new meaning. As a result, he will explore the open expanse of the sky and unravel the mysteries of the frontier, thus drawing ever closer to Being Itself, to the ineffable unknown. In subsequent lines, he echoes these sentiments: *Things leave their names, I do not name them, but/I innovate what the*

⁴³⁰ Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 188-189.

past codified, and reinflect it/I alter its declension/and its conjugation. In other words, he strips words of everything save their form, thus preparing them to serve in a novel capacity, as vessels for new meaning.

In a subsequent verse, the poet describes the experience of one who enters in the imaginal realm: *my body is parchment – a book/written by the alphabets of the stars and clouds/My body is a night journey to the light and its limbs are paths/my body aches for the secret.* In this line, Adonis implies the capacity of the poet, the madman, the seer, to explore the unknown through his creative imagination—associated here with the body—to acquire knowledge which is not received but rather gnostic. Indeed, he suggests, through the creative imagination, one experiences a journey (*'isrā'*) akin to that of the Prophet Muḥammad, which places him in contact with essential light and affirms the legitimacy of explorative authority. This notion of convening with the unknown pervades the poem. Indeed, the poet writes: *Shall I call a thousand perplexities a key, and the ya of despair a door?* Perplexity denotes the state of spiritual bewilderment, of simultaneously knowing and not-knowing, and the Arabic word “*ya's*,” which I have translated here as “despair,” indicates the hopelessness one feels who has temporarily lost sight of God, or Being. In these lines, therefore, the poet posits uncertainty and longing as the point of entry into the unknown. In a subsequent line, he writes: *Do you see my lot of pebbles which I cast with/the horse of the secret and the ladder of the skies?/In bubbles of silence which pollinate the air with death/the poet delves into his terrors/The light has no brother save the vast unknown.* Through use of the words “horse” and “ladder” (*mi'rāj*), Adonis once again alludes to the well-known story of the Prophet's night journey and ascent; his usage of these terms simultaneously distances him from the traditional narrative and converges with its mystical interpretation, namely, an ascent from the appearance of form to the secret of essence. Moreover, the poet embraces both death and terror in his journey, that is, the attenuation of what is known and the accordant anxiety with respect to the unknown, for, he asserts, the space of potentiality, “the vast unknown,” is merely the brother of light. Indeed, Adonis explains in *Sufism and Surrealism*, “the mystery transcends man but simultaneously encloses, surrounds and moves him. It is the horizon that his existence can realize only by journeying towards it.”⁴³¹ And yet, this horizon is itself unmoored, for as one travels towards it, it appears to move further away; thus “man appears to reach the limits of what is possible,

⁴³¹ Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 127.

as if he has not yet been created, and his profound desire for death, that is, for birth, comes from this.”⁴³²

The notion that death is the other face of life, a necessary means of regeneration, likewise reappears throughout the poem. Indeed, Adonis writes: *al-Ma'arrī did not forget/to say that death too is planted/in the earth/just as the rose is sown/Everything follows the path to its desert, leaving no trace.* In other words, all that appears in this world must eventually disappear, all existent things must pass into non-existence, for this is how life is ultimately restored. When applied to society and culture, this concept has embedded within it a spirit of refusal, for it is predicated on the belief that, in order to thrive, a society must seek continually to renew itself, to relinquish its attachment to the old order so that a new one may be born. Hence, the poet writes: *Ask the East: Will he not grow weary of mixing his footsteps/with the blood streaming from his brothers/with the intoxication of it/with sleeping upon their remains?... Verily is mankind – slaughtered on the chest of a prophet.* Adonis here invokes the idea explored in previous chapters that the domination of prescriptive orthodoxy in Arab culture and its alliance with politics has historically led to widespread violence. Moreover, he directly associates this violence with divine prophecy, insofar as divine prophecy as construed by prescriptive authority represents the notion of a singular, absolute truth, imposed and enforced at the expense of both individual freedom and respect for alterity.

Thus, the poet evinces both his refusal of such an order and his vision of a resurrected culture: *My covenant extends to wandering towards the dawn of Damascus/and to her belongs my fire.* Through use of the word “*ahd*,” or “covenant,” which appears repeatedly in the Qur’an in relation to man’s covenant with God, Adonis further emphasizes his allegiance to explorative authority over prescriptive orthodoxy; in other words, he makes no promise to the God of prescriptive orthodoxy, but to “wander,” along a path that will bring new light to “Damascus,” or Arab culture. Indeed, he writes: *I read the sand and am at ease with the wind which scatters and remains distant/And I say that the dream is light and pollen.* Thus, he implies, he is comfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity, with the dual notion that revelation is never-ending because the essence of God, of Being, discloses itself in an infinite number of forms, and yet remains distant, because it is infinite, because no number of forms could exhaust its meaning. Furthermore, the equation of the dream with “light” makes reference to dreaming as an imaginative state, in which the transparency of veils makes visible essential light.

⁴³² Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 128.

Additionally, the equation of the dream to “pollen” indicates that this imaginative state facilitates new life, representing the encounter between hidden and apparent, essence and form.

In subsequent verses, Adonis makes further reference to the generative potential of the imagination. *Things leave their names*, he writes, *I do not name them, but/I will speak the thing I revere/Behold, it takes my depths into its unity/and it shelters me... and I speak: the thing – how learned this ignorance, it recounts/the language of existence, and it knows not the horror of a language cleaved*. The “thing” Adonis reveres is, of course, the realm of imagination, or the *barzakh*, from which the poem takes its name, the place of transformation, of images and revelation. As Chittick notes, “the most specific characteristic of the things found within the domain of imagination, on whatever level it is considered, is their intermediary and ambiguous status.”⁴³³ Hence, the *barzakh* derives unity from the fact that, by its very nature, it unites things which are seemingly in opposition, namely, the spiritual and the corporeal, Being and existence, essence and form. This notion of resolving contradiction and unifying opposites has remained central to Adonis’s work over time. It is a notion which ultimately echoes Ibn ‘Arabī’s conception of the cosmos as He/not-He, in which “true knowledge of the nature of things” entails acceptance of the idea that “ambiguity is an ontological fact, inherent in the nature of the universe.”⁴³⁴ Indeed, Chittick affirms, “the continual creation and constant transformation of the cosmos are nothing if not the appearance of the reality of He/not-He.”⁴³⁵ This is because all things exist in the cosmos by virtue of Being; thus one affirms Being by affirming the reality of the thing, and yet, in no case is Being equivalent to any one thing.⁴³⁶ In other words, the image carries meaning, which is an aspect of essence, but no image exhausts essential meaning because essence is infinite. Moreover, not only does the truth of this reality appear as “ignorance” in the sense that it defies rationality, it is difficult to describe with recourse to everyday language, for “the more one discusses this situation, the more language becomes convoluted and the observers and listeners confused and bewildered.”⁴³⁷ Placed in this context, the verse cited above becomes more clear; the *barzakh* provides refuge to the poet by resolving those contradictions inherent in existence. It is apparent “ignorance,” insofar as it is seemingly paradoxical, and yet, “learned” insofar as it is, in fact, knowledge regarding the fundamental nature of existence.

⁴³³ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 15.

⁴³⁴ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 112.

⁴³⁵ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 118.

⁴³⁶ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 112.

⁴³⁷ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 112-113.

Moreover, Chittick notes that “the clearest access shared by all human beings to the nature of existence... is our own imagination,” for “the more deeply we delve into our own imagination, the more clearly we see that its characteristics coincide with those of existence itself.”⁴³⁸ This echoes Corbin’s explanation, provided at the beginning of this analysis, of the relationship between man’s imagination, operative within the imaginative realm and God’s imagination, which comprises the entire cosmos. Indeed, Chittick explains the link between the imaginal realm, which he refers to as Delimited Imagination, and God’s imagination, which he refers to as Nondelimited Imagination, in the following way: That which we observe within ourselves on the microcosmic scale of Delimited Imagination—namely, the combining of spiritual and corporeal, meaning and form—corresponds to that which takes place in Nondelimited Imagination with regard to Being as Essence and the created cosmos.⁴³⁹ In other words, just as in Nondelimited Imagination, created things are endowed with attributes of Being, in Delimited Imagination, sensory forms are endowed with meaning. Once again, this notion of correspondence between man and the cosmos is critical to Adonis’s worldview; indeed, he argues, “man... participates in divine creation, and poetic creation is merely an image of cosmic creation.”⁴⁴⁰ What he means by this is that cosmic creation involves, as Chittick explains, a process of “never-repeated divine disclosure” and, by extension, of “ever-renewed creation,” in which God’s Speech is eternal, but not His spoken words as such.⁴⁴¹ Indeed, each divine word, that is, each created “thing,” “appears for an instant only to disappear from the created cosmos forever.”⁴⁴² Similarly, in the case of poetic creation, the created “thing” is essentially the novel image and consequent knowledge derived from joining the form of a word to a heretofore unrelated or unfamiliar meaning. In other words, the image is produced by uniting the apparent with the hidden, and its power and richness lie in the relationships it creates or reveals between the two.⁴⁴³ Poetic creation is in this way a reflection of cosmic creation, predicated on the idea of continual renewal, where figurative language ensures that words are repeatedly stripped of prior meanings and invested with new ones, which in turn engenders new relationships and correspondences between meaning and form.

In this context, the following verse becomes more clear: *All of my things unite with me in the thing that I oppose/All of my things return to me in the thing that I unite with/And I know*

⁴³⁸ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 113.

⁴³⁹ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 113.

⁴⁴⁰ Adonis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutahawwil* vol. 4, 140.

⁴⁴¹ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 19.

⁴⁴² Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 19.

⁴⁴³ Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 135.

that the thing does not listen, but/how I cry out for it to attend the wedding of words/And how I cover the tomb of the dead age with a robe of words... And I spoke with the thing to convey my sorrows/to nothingness – linked by a thread of words/And I know that the thing is a key that opens only words. In this verse, the poet emphasizes once again the intermediary nature of the *barzakh*, or imagination; all of existence, including opposing or contradictory things, unites in this intermediate realm. Moreover, the “words” referred to here are the words of the poet, the words of figurative language, which unite form with meaning and thus constitute the “secret paths, horizons, and symbols” through which the poet seeks to explore the unknown.⁴⁴⁴ In other words, the poet cries out in the hope that “the wedding of words” which he himself convenes will be sufficiently powerful in their imagery to reveal new meaning. Similarly, in “covering the tomb of the dead age” with words, he alludes to the notion that figurative language has the capacity to transform reality. It has, that is, the ability to assert a new vision of vital plurality, to revive an age of sterile singularity. Through the *barzakh*, moreover, the poet speaks to “nothingness” through the intermediary of the “thing.” As Chittick explains, everything aside from Being Itself merits the designation “thing”; therefore Being is the “not-thing,” the “nothingness,” with which the poet communicates through the *barzakh*, the image, the word. He expresses his “sorrows,” that is, his longing to convene with Being and the attendant lack of fulfilment which derives from the fact that it is infinite and unknowable, through a language full of images, through poetry, the most powerful tool he has to explore the unknown and participate in the shaping of existence. Indeed, Adonis claims, poetry is “the imaginative dimension that restructures the exterior world in the image of its creator.”⁴⁴⁵ Thus, the line between the *barzakh*, a realm filled with images, and poetry, a language filled with images, is all but elided.

Conclusion

Ultimately, in the poetry of Adonis, madness is both a sociopolitical and a spiritual statement. On the one hand, it is predicated on a position of refusal with regard to the dominant culture of prescriptive orthodoxy, namely, religion, prescriptive law, and the notion of truth based on a single, fixed interpretation of scripture; on the other, however, it indicates the embrace of a hidden realm and the capacity of the individual to access this realm by means of

⁴⁴⁴ Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 96.

⁴⁴⁵ Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 137-138.

the creative imagination. Indeed, writes Adonis, the madman is the seer who seeks to transcend the world of the apparent, of “monotony and habit,” and enter into the world of the unseen, which is, in turn, a place of “continuous renewal” and “permanent possibility.”⁴⁴⁶ Therefore, Adonis argues, “madness... is a kind of vision of the unseen,” which, as a poetic symbol, affords the poet “freedom to express the supernatural and the extraordinary, starting from that which is natural-ordinary.”⁴⁴⁷ As Adonis notes, such a conception of madness is thus inextricably linked to the poet’s own “spiritual journey” and “the tragic tension in his search for the absolute, starting with the revolution against society, traditions, and laws.”⁴⁴⁸ In other words, it implies the necessity of explorative authority and gnostic knowledge, and thus of individual freedom and creativity.

Indeed, Adonis’s conception of madness assumes that “the world is not a finite, created thing, but rather an endless, moving impulse.... [which] is constantly being born.”⁴⁴⁹ Man serves as the *barzakh* between the hidden and apparent realms, his imagination a microcosmic form of the macrocosmic Nondelimited Imagination which constitutes the entire created universe. As such, man is by definition a creative being, a participant in the act of creation, which is defined as the ongoing genesis of new relationships between hidden essence and apparent form, that is, the generation of new images from which meaning is derived. The poet participates in creation by creating new images within the context of language. Indeed, Adonis argues “poetic creation is an image of cosmic creation.”⁴⁵⁰ Hence, the poet assigns new names to things, reimagining the meaning of words, dissipating veils that no longer reveal the light, but only conceal it, because time and usage has rendered them opaque. In so doing, the poet, like the mystic and the madman, demonstrates his vision, that is, his intoxication with the unseen, rejecting stasis in favor of dynamism and singularity in favor of multiplicity, out of the conviction that the divine, hidden essence is infinite and thus ultimately ineffable and unknowable. For this reason, one draws closer to it and probes its mysteries only through the embrace of the never-ending cycle of creation, destruction, and renewal which is, in turn, both the product of imagination and a prerequisite for it, as well as the very basis of existence.

Chittick explains that, in the context of Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought, “to find God is to fall into bewilderment,” namely, “the bewilderment of finding and knowing God and of not-finding and

⁴⁴⁶ Adonis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutahawwil* vol. 4, 150.

⁴⁴⁷ Adonis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutahawwil* vol. 4, 153.

⁴⁴⁸ Adonis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutahawwil* vol. 4, 153.

⁴⁴⁹ Adonis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutahawwil* vol. 4, 141.

⁴⁵⁰ Adonis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutahawwil* vol. 4, 141.

not-knowing Him at the same time.”⁴⁵¹ Expressed differently, to find the unknown is to accept that its secrets are endless, to understand that it both permeates the known world and transcends it, “to admit,” in Chittick’s words, “that the veils are infinite and that every instant in life, in this world and for all eternity, represents a continual lifting of the veils.”⁴⁵² This is the idea encapsulated by Adonis’s notion of madness. Along the path of spiritual discovery, therefore, the madman faces, in a sense, a dual exile. On the one hand, his refusal of the established order results in an internal estrangement from those around him, if not a more literal alienation of the type imposed by political authority. On the other, the madman contends with a profound sense of exile in the mystical sense, rooted in a longing to become one with the unknown, to experience union with that which is infinite by journeying ever further into existence and into himself. Hence, for the poet who embraces madness, poetry serves as a form of gnosis through which the poet moves in his exile, even if he is ultimately unable to transcend it. The relationship between poet and language mirrors the mystical relationship between lover and beloved, between self and other, between spirit and nature; writing itself constitutes a creative act of love.

⁴⁵¹ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 3.

⁴⁵² Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 3.

CHAPTER FIVE

Love: Masculinity, Femininity, and Creativity

*I have named language woman and writing love.*⁴⁵³

Introduction

If madness constitutes a state in which one recognizes the dialectic between hidden essence and apparent form as one defined and enriched by the multiplicity of images to which it gives rise, then love may be understood as the creative energy that generates said images, that is, the desire, or longing, to know and be known on the part of he who creates, which is alleviated only through the act of creation. In order to understand the concept of love as it appears in Adonis's poetry, it is useful to summarize and expand upon four key points raised in the previous two chapters. First, according to Ibn 'Arabī, the created cosmos, or existence, which might also be referred to as "the Breath," "the Cloud," the "Supreme Barzakh," or Nondelimited Imagination, is equivalent to God's imagination and is the product of the sadness felt by God in his solitude and His "yearn[ing] to be revealed in beings who manifest Him to Himself insofar as He manifests Himself to them."⁴⁵⁴ In other words, the created cosmos, or Nondelimited Imagination, is the product of God's desire and longing, an expression of divine love. This is the first fundamental premise, namely, that creativity is inextricably connected to love.

Second, God reveals Himself in Nondelimited Imagination through manifesting to Himself the effects of the divine names, which themselves denote "relationships, attributions, ascriptions, or correlations... envisaged between God and the cosmos," in differentiated form.⁴⁵⁵ Thus, Nondelimited Imagination, insofar as it is receptive to the effects of the divine names, is considered the "Greatest Nature," the "highest and greatest mother."⁴⁵⁶ Within Nondelimited Imagination, the First Intellect corresponds to the first letter articulated by God's Breath; it acts upon "the daughter of the Greatest Nature," or "second mother," depositing meaning into form.⁴⁵⁷ This union between the Intellect and Nature, which may alternatively be referred to either as the union between First Intellect and Universal Soul or between the "pen" and the "tablet," results in the birth of the image. This is a simplification of Ibn 'Arabī's

⁴⁵³ Adonis, "Shahwa tataqaddamu fī kharā'it al-mādda," *al-A'māl al-shi'riyya al-kāmila* vol. 4, 345-374.

⁴⁵⁴ Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 184.

⁴⁵⁵ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 35.

⁴⁵⁶ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 140.

⁴⁵⁷ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 140.

complex cosmology, but nevertheless serves the purpose of this analysis, the operative idea of which constitutes the second fundamental premise, namely, that at both cosmological levels, the creation of “images” occurs through an interaction between essence and form, spirit and nature, where the former is conceptualized as the masculine element and the latter the feminine. Importantly, one should take care not to infer a direct application to the human male and the human female, but rather to conceive masculinity more broadly as implicative of undifferentiation and singularity and, femininity, by contrast, as suggestive of differentiation and therefore multiplicity.

Third, things existing within Nondelimited Imagination are both He/not-He (*Huwalla Huwa*). Insofar as the existent thing is a product of His imagination, a manifestation of the effects of His names, it is He. However, its existence is an image within the Nondelimited Imagination, and no single image is exhaustive of essential meaning; the image is a veil which simultaneously reveals and conceals. Fourth, and finally, the human being, made in the image of God, is unique among existent things in that he possesses the faculty of imagination. The imaginal realm, or Delimited Imagination, is both a reflection and expression of Nondelimited Imagination. As Corbin explains, man’s exercise of the imaginative faculty “is a moment, an instant, of the Divine Imagination that is the universe... and it is in this sense that we call it ‘creative.’”⁴⁵⁸ Indeed, in order for man to arrive at the knowledge of existence as God’s self-disclosure, or epiphany, he must experience his own imagination as “responding to the same creative need, the same creativity,” which is to say, the same longing to know and be known, the same love, which engendered God’s creation of the cosmos.⁴⁵⁹ Hence, one returns to the initial premise, namely, that love is the generative force of creation and thus intimately related to, if not synonymous with, creativity.

In addition to these four premises, one need understand the mechanism of man’s creative imagination, including the role of the heart, the nature of knowledge conferred, and the individual’s experience of annihilation (*fanā’*) and subsistence (*baqā’*) as spiritual states representing the pinnacle of gnosis. Just as God’s creativity stems from desire, or the longing to know and be known, so does the mystic’s creativity stem from the longing to know and be known, the longing, in other words, for union. The mystic’s heart is the organ of gnostic knowledge (*ma’rifā*), a knowledge which transcends the limitations of logic and reason and cannot be received but only experienced firsthand, which Ibn ‘Arabī refers to as a knowledge

⁴⁵⁸ Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 214.

⁴⁵⁹ Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 194.

of “taste” (*dhawq*). The heart, in other words, is the “eye” of imaginative vision, through which God reveals Himself to Himself through His creature; it serves as a mirror which reflects, in the microcosm of Delimited Imagination, images of the forms in which God manifests Himself moment by moment. Moreover, it receives these forms and their disparate “colors,” or “modalities,” in accordance with its own capacity, which corresponds to the mystic’s level of knowledge and aptitude (*isti’dād*). It is in this respect that one might speak of the “creativity” of the mystic himself, for the nature of the images reflected by his heart and “created” in the imaginative realm are influenced by the inherent qualities, attributes, and capacities of the individual mystic. Thus, the heart of the mystic with the greatest knowledge of God receives and reflects all of the forms and colors of theophany, while the heart of one without gnostic knowledge might receive only a single one.⁴⁶⁰ Mystical union with God might thus be understood as the state in which the mystic’s heart is receptive to all forms of divine disclosure, for it is in this state that the mystic’s revelation or knowledge of God, and God’s reciprocal knowledge of him, reaches its apogee.

The state of annihilation, in turn, refers to an instant in which the mystic experiences the passing away of individual forms, that is, the momentary suspension of discrimination between the attributes of Creator and creature, which allows the mystic to witness the intrinsic similitude of said forms’ composing substance. This experience does not signify the disappearance of the mystic’s individuality or a merging with divine essence, nor does it persist indefinitely, but rather leads to a state of subsistence, in which the mystic, having knowledge of what he has witnessed, reintroduces “authentic discrimination... between Creator and creature” while simultaneously being “preserve[d]... ever after from false discriminations.”⁴⁶¹ Therefore, if the uninitiated witnesses existence as not-He (*la Huwa*), that is, entirely separate from God, then annihilation may be construed as the state in which one witnesses the totality of existence as He (*Huwa*), perceiving the essential congruity of all things, and subsistence as the state in which one witnesses existence as He/not-He (*Huwa/la Huwa*), perceiving things as variable manifestations of fundamental congruity. Through this lens, one might better understand the perceived disparity on the part of Adonis and many mystics between religious orthodoxy and mysticism. While the latter receive God in many forms and thus have knowledge of truth as plural and differentiated, the former receive God in one form, the truth of which

⁴⁶⁰ Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 196.

⁴⁶¹ Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 227.

they might mistake as singular, leading to the rejection of other forms and the denial of plurality.

On the basis of the ideas outlined in the previous two paragraphs, one might understand the concept of love as it appears in Adonis's poetry. Indeed, Adonis applies the aforementioned cosmology and epistemology in various ways not merely to the relationship between man and God, but to the relationship between man and woman, self and other, poet and language. He imagines the physical act of love as a spiritual act, a creative act, in which the lover discovers his beloved through the suspension of his qualities and subsistence in hers, a discovery which ultimately leads to knowledge of his own true nature, his deeper self. Similar to the way in which the mystic's heart transforms in accordance with the forms received of God, reflecting the images it has created, so does the lover's heart transform in accordance with the forms received of the beloved, reflecting images it has created. Love reaches its culmination at the moment in which the lover becomes aware of essential congruity between himself and his beloved, at the moment in which he understands that his deeper self is the same as the deeper self of the beloved. This deeper self is the "internal other," the humanity at the core of all beings, despite apparent differences. Thus the dynamic between lover and beloved is applicable on some level to the relationship between any two human beings. Furthermore, just as the lover's differentiated (and thus feminine) self cedes to his deeper, undifferentiated (and thus masculine) self to find creative expression in the differentiation of the beloved, so does the poet find creative expression in the differentiation of language. Indeed, the relationship between poet and language reflects the cosmological notion of "pen" and "tablet," cited above, in which the former represents the spirit and the latter the differentiation of nature. In all of these cases, the dynamic at play is one between essence and form, spirit and nature, singularity and multiplicity, with the movement between the two constituting the creative act of love.

This chapter thus makes this argument through an analysis of three poems, namely, "Transformations of the Lover," "Body," and "History Torn Apart in the Body of a Woman." The first reflects most clearly the aforementioned relationship between lover and beloved, and the second the relationship between poet and language; however, these two ideas often merge in Adonis's poetry and thus appear in both poems. The third poem, in turn, through the story of Hagar, reflects Adonis's perception of Arab culture as one in which this critical dialectic between essence and form has been corrupted, positing what he perceives as the subjugation of women and of femininity as exemplary of a broader denial of nature itself and, by extension, multiplicity and imaginative creativity. The circumscription of sexuality and subordination of women in religious law is thus posited as part of a broader circumscription on

innovation, creativity, and freedom of thought, which helps perpetuate the notion of fixed truth and consolidate the spiritual authority of prescriptive orthodoxy.

5.1 “Transformations of the Lover”

Published in 1965 as part of the collection *Kitāb al-taḥawwulat wa-l-hijra fī 'aqālim al-nahār wa-l-layl* (*The Book of Transformations and Migration in the Regions of Day and Night*), “Taḥawwulat al-‘āshiq” (“Transformations of the Lover”) arguably remains Adonis’s most celebrated love poem. Spanning approximately thirty pages, it departs from the shorter lyric verse predominantly found in his earlier collections, including in *Songs of Miḥyār*, in favor of the more expansive and innovative prose poem for which he is so well-known. One of the poem’s English translators, Mirène Ghossein, notes that the “continuous shift in registers,” “repeated displacements,” and the “fairy-tale quality” imparted by its use of figurative language result in a “fragmentation of perception” on the part of the reader, an effect which seems intentionally designed by the poet to disrupt the reader’s awareness of chronology and thus to transform “the relationship between Time and Space.”⁴⁶² Indeed, in “Transformations,” Adonis invites the reader to venture beyond the world of natural laws and material limitations into the surrealistic landscape of the dream. As Ghossein argues, this use of the dream as a referential frame has the dual effect of increasing the poet’s control or “sorcery” over the material and producing in the reader a sense of chronic bewilderment as he attempts to orient himself in an ever-shifting terrain of imagery and metaphor.⁴⁶³ Moreover, one might add, the dream serves in mysticism as a direct conduit to the liminal realm of imagination, meaning that this state of bewilderment induced in the reader invites him into the imaginal world of the poet. Through his own vision, he perceives the meaning conveyed by the images the poet has created, some of which may be articulated more or less clearly, and some of which may only be “tasted” or felt. Adonis transports the reader into this space through an exploration of the relationship between lover and beloved and the moment of physical union, declaring the sanctity of the body itself as the place of the creative imagination. Indeed, the subject of the poem is generally agreed upon where it appears in the academic literature. Abu Deeb, for instance, argues that the poem “explores the ritualistic moment of unison between the bodies of two lovers,

⁴⁶² Mirène Ghossein, Introduction to *If Only the Sea Could Sleep: Love Poems*, by Adonis (Copenhagen: Green Integer, 2003), 18.

⁴⁶³ Ghossein, Introduction, 18.

declaring the total purity of the body.”⁴⁶⁴ Similarly, Ma‘louf observes that the poem is devoted to the act of physical love between man and woman, as well as to a celebration of the body.⁴⁶⁵ What is lacking in the literature, however, is a detailed analysis of the poem’s content which explains both Adonis’s framing of the relationship between eroticism and mysticism and the way in which his conceptualization of sexuality relates to themes prevalent in his wider body of work, such as creativity, dynamism, and renewal.

In *Prophecy and Power*, Adonis posits that both eroticism and mysticism imply a spirit of exploration and innovation. Indeed, he writes, “sexuality is a sort of embodiment of discovery,” and “mysticism,” in turn, is essentially “eroticism on a cosmic scale.”⁴⁶⁶ Clarifying his meaning further, he explains that, in the context of love, repetition is eschewed in favor of creativity, for, he asserts, “all that is great loathes repetition.”⁴⁶⁷ This line of thinking runs parallel to his view on religious orthodoxy and the sociocultural systems he believes it has produced, namely, the view that prescriptive orthodoxy, in revering submission to authority while simultaneously discouraging or even sanctioning independent thought, has resulted in a culture which finds its progress impeded by a tendency to favor imitation over innovation. I would argue, therefore, that just as Adonis understands mysticism in terms of its opposition to such religious orthodoxy, so does he view eroticism and love through this lens, for, as noted, he sees mysticism as tantamount to eroticism in the macrocosm; both are considered creative acts, driven by the underlying principle of love. In *Violence and Islam*, he argues that the same mentality responsible in religion for negating spirituality and ceding it to mysticism has likewise deformed sexuality and distorted the relationship between “the feminine self and the masculine other.”⁴⁶⁸ In both cases, he argues, love itself has been denied, for both mysticism and eroticism are founded upon the embrace of experiential knowledge, exploration of self and other, and mystery, all of which contradict religious orthodoxy as he understands it. Indeed, he claims, from the perspective of religious orthodoxy, knowledge is received, not experienced; truth “resides in the text and not in the reality of experience.”⁴⁶⁹ Authority is thus conferred not upon the individual, but upon the collective by way of the jurist. In consequence “the spirit is condemned the moment it expresses a desire to understand the mystery of the transformations

⁴⁶⁴ Abu Deeb, “The Perplexity of the All-Knowing,” 311.

⁴⁶⁵ Fadi Ma‘louf, “The Textual Dialogue between Adonis and Al-Niffari in Adonis’s Poem ‘The Transformations of the Lover,’” *International Journal of Literature and Arts* 10, no. 2 (2022): 76.

⁴⁶⁶ Adonis, *Prophecy and Power*, 130.

⁴⁶⁷ Adonis, *Prophecy and Power*, 130.

⁴⁶⁸ Adonis, *Violence and Islam*, 71.

⁴⁶⁹ Adonis, *Violence and Islam*, 80.

of the universe.”⁴⁷⁰ The critical distinction between religion and mysticism is therefore that the latter welcomes mystery rather than condemning it, having knowledge of the world as “passionate love”⁴⁷¹ and the accordant understanding that love “is always in motion and in endless transformation.”⁴⁷² What follows is that the world itself is infinitely mysterious, ceaselessly moving, and endlessly transforming. It is in this sense that “life... is always pregnant with death.”⁴⁷³ This is, of course, Ibn ‘Arabī’s concept of “the renewal of creation in every moment,” which implies the ongoing dialectic between essence and form and maps directly onto Adonis’s modernist conviction of the need for cultural dynamism.

Similarly, Adonis argues, “the sexual drive is essentially linked to death.”⁴⁷⁴ The act of love, he writes, is the one experience in which the material and the spiritual converge entirely, conferring a sense of timelessness; in it, the self is extinguished in the body of the beloved and in its death feels more alive.⁴⁷⁵ Both lover and beloved are therefore absent in the union, and “love is in relationship with a being whose existence never ceases to begin again as if [the lover] were longing to find himself in the absent beloved.”⁴⁷⁶ Hence, to view the sexual act as merely physical in nature is to trivialize it; Adonis describes it rather as “the apex of a great journey of two people into the depths of the secret of body,” not an end in itself, but “[comprising] part of a whole, connected to the fate of the species, the universe, to the tragedy of man who is destined to die.”⁴⁷⁷ Moreover, it is a journey which, existing in a state of timelessness, involves continual death and rebirth, perpetual exploration of self and other, and the internal transformation that inevitably results from the erosion of the line between the two.

It is through this lens that one understands the title of the poem, “Transformations of the Lover,” in which the term “lover”—construed in both the erotic and mystical sense—denotes a self repeatedly transformed by means of its relationship to the other, the beloved. As Ma‘louf observes, the poem enters into dialogue with poetry by the 10th-century mystic al-Niffarī, mirroring both al-Niffarī’s poetic language and his imagery. Unless the reader is already familiar with al-Niffarī, this dialogue might well go unnoticed, as no attribution is given; however, those familiar with Adonis’s work will be aware of his long-standing admiration for the Sufī poet. In *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, he writes that al-Niffarī’s

⁴⁷⁰ Adonis, *Violence and Islam*, 80.

⁴⁷¹ Adonis, *Prophecy and Power*, 126.

⁴⁷² Adonis, *Prophecy and Power*, 132.

⁴⁷³ Adonis, *Identité inachevée*, 65.

⁴⁷⁴ Adonis, *Identité inachevée*, 65.

⁴⁷⁵ Adonis, *Identité inachevée*, 71.

⁴⁷⁶ Adonis, *Prophecy and Power*, 132.

⁴⁷⁷ Adonis, *Identité inachevée*, 73.

poetry “eliminates the gap between the human and the sacred, humanizing the sacred and sanctifying... the human being.”⁴⁷⁸ And yet, he asserts, al-Niffarī “tells us... that the transcendental cannot be known; it remains essentially a longing for the transcendental... which from time to time emits a gleam of light, but remains hidden, remote and incomprehensible.”⁴⁷⁹ While Ma‘louf rightly observes that Adonis alters al-Niffarī’s original text as a means of sanctifying the body and elevating the relationship between man and woman, he contrasts Adonis’s text with that of al-Niffarī by claiming that the use of Sufi terminology in the latter reflects a spiritual experience, while expressing in the former an experience of human love.⁴⁸⁰ Similarly, he argues that Adonis alters al-Niffarī’s language in contradiction of its intended meaning, substituting, for instance, the word “body” for “light,” drawing the conclusion that Adonis has employed “the aesthetics of Sufi expressions” in the service of a meaning which is humanistic.⁴⁸¹ While not inaccurate, the implicit suggestion is that Adonis’s meaning is humanistic *as opposed to* spiritual or mystical; this analysis contends, on the other hand, that the two are not mutually exclusive, indeed, that Adonis’s dialogue with al-Niffarī relies on a reading of al-Niffarī in particular and Sufi poetry more broadly in which the two are closely intertwined. In other words, Adonis does not merely substitute the physical body for spiritual or celestial light; he rather presents the body as a conduit for light, emphasizing the very point that the body cannot be reduced to mere matter.

Adonis begins “Transformations of the Lover” with the following line: *Her name was walking in silence through forests of letters/And the letters were arcs and creatures like velvet.* Here, at the outset of the poem, he introduces the female without giving her form; more precisely, he introduces what may be deemed “femininity” or Nature, a sort of primordial receptivity. In order to understand this conception of femininity, which undergirds the entire poem and serves as the foundation for Adonis’s outlook on masculinity, femininity, and the relationship between the two, one need look to Ibn ‘Arabī, upon whose mystical philosophy Adonis’s entire system of thought as relates to these concepts is based. Importantly, in this framing, conceptions of the masculine and the feminine are interwoven with conceptions of language, and, by extension, of letters, words, and names, all of which have metaphysical significance. As explained previously, the entire cosmos takes shape within the Cloud, which is also known the Supreme Barzakh or Nondelimited Imagination; the Cloud is, in essence,

⁴⁷⁸ Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 64.

⁴⁷⁹ Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 64.

⁴⁸⁰ Ma‘louf, “The Textual Dialogue,” 80.

⁴⁸¹ Ma‘louf, “The Textual Dialogue,” 78-80.

God's imagination, which gives imaginalized form to the immutable entities existent in God's knowledge. Moreover, it is "the Breath of the All-Merciful," or God's Breath, which is sometimes equated with the Cloud and sometimes considered its direct precursor, which serves as the medium for God's speech.⁴⁸² God's speech, in turn, gives rise to creation. In a sense, therefore, the Breath of God sustains the world; indeed, in his analysis of Ibn 'Arabī, Chittick notes that God's Breath defines the dynamic interrelationship between God as the Nonmanifest (*al-bāṭin*) and God as the Manifest (*al-zāhir*).⁴⁸³ The metaphor of exhalation and inhalation applies to the now-familiar concept of "the renewal of creation in every instant," corresponding respectively to the manifestation and reabsorption of forms, to life and death.

Moreover, every creature constitutes a "word" of God's speech, and every word is comprised of a combination of "letters," each of which "manifests Being in a specific mode" and "is connected to a specific divine name."⁴⁸⁴ Just as there are twenty-eight letters in the Arabic alphabet, there are twenty-eight of these cosmic "letters" which may combine to form "words," thus producing variable disclosures of the divine names.⁴⁸⁵ Otherwise stated, "letters" and "words" may be differentiated from one another in that the former denotes an essence or modality absent particularities, while the latter implies individuation. Importantly, in Ibn 'Arabī's cosmology, the production of "letters" occurs through the interaction between the First Intellect, or "pen," and the Universal Soul, or "tablet," which respectively correspond to the masculine and the feminine. In this paradigm, the masculine is light and the feminine is nature, the locus of transformation; light speaks, nature listens, and the product of this union is the image, which gives form to meaning as an aspect of essence and serves as its veil. Lest one think that this reflects an elevation of "active masculinity" over "receptive femininity," Chittick explains that Ibn 'Arabī presents two levels of Nature, one, known as the "second mother," which is receptive to the aforementioned First Intellect *within* the Cloud or cosmos, and another, known as the "highest and greatest mother" which is roughly synonymous with the Cloud and receptive to the effects of the divine names.⁴⁸⁶ Therefore, insofar as it is itself a form of the Cloud, the First Intellect is itself a form of Nature and thus further than Nature from the Real, which is God.⁴⁸⁷ Furthermore, it is important to restate the point that masculinity and femininity should not be conflated with man and woman, but should be understood in reference

⁴⁸² Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 126-127.

⁴⁸³ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 129.

⁴⁸⁴ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 128.

⁴⁸⁵ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 128.

⁴⁸⁶ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 140.

⁴⁸⁷ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 140.

to lack of differentiation and differentiation, respectively. In the context of Adonis's poetry specifically, to assume the elevation of masculinity over femininity, simply because the former is associated with activity and the latter with receptivity, is to accept the validity of the very premise he rejects, namely the subordination of plurality to singularity, of nature to abstraction.

In the line cited above, therefore, the female symbolizes Nature, receptive to the divine names, through which all engendered things acquire form. Here "name" refers not to the name of an engendered thing so much as her essential position relative to the divine names which act upon all things through her. As Chittick notes, "each thing other than God is a name of God,"⁴⁸⁸ and her name walks "in silence" through "forests of letters" because she exists in the space where those letters have not yet been arranged into words, spoken, and thus made manifest. She is prior to existence because she is necessary to it. Moreover, the equation of letters with arcs implies Arabic letters in their base form, unadorned with diacritical marks or consonant marking (*i'jām*) and prior to utterance, as well as the Sufi conception of the arc as spiritual journey by which one travels between unity with God and the manifest world. "Creatures" in this space are "like velvet," evoking femininity and eroticism, but also a softness or pliability of form. The poem continues: *the air was kneeling and the sky outstretched like hands/Suddenly/a strange plant leafed and the stream behind the forest drew near/I saw fruits clasped at the waist like links in a chain/and the flower began to dance*. Here the first line implies that everything opens to her influence; new life appears, and the water of knowledge, that is, creation itself, draws near in the form of the stream. Fruits imply both harvest and the means of further reproduction, and the dancing flower the movement of God's manifestation, of existence. Importantly, the Arabic word "*zahr*" also serves as the masdar of the verb "*zahara*," which may be translated as "to bloom," but also as "to radiate" or "to shine." The impression produced by these first few lines, therefore, is one of fertility, vitality, and genesis, where the female is the matrix of all things. And yet, it also implies the radiance of the cosmos as images within Nondelimited Imagination, revelations of God's light. As Mersal observes, the female in question may symbolize Ishtar, lover of Adonis and goddess of sexuality and fertility, but she is also, in a sense, language, the antecedent of existence and the system through which meaning is expressed in form.⁴⁸⁹

As the poem progresses, the speaker finds himself pursued by a snake, which may be interpreted in a number of ways. On the one hand, the snake may be associated with Iblīs and

⁴⁸⁸ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 94.

⁴⁸⁹ Mersal, "Reading the Qur'an in the Poetry of Adonis," 18.

thus evil and/or temptation; however, it has also historically been symbolic of wisdom, rebirth, fertility, transformation, and, particularly in Sufism, of the self, which hampers one on his journey to God. Critically, in the context of “Transformations,” the speaker first seeks protection from an old man, who claims to be too weak to help, directing him instead to a mountain: *Before you is a mountain filled/with the deposits of life. There for you lies deliverance and protection.* The speaker then hears a voice issuing from the mountain, instructing him to “raise the curtains and behold,” at which time he observes that: *the mountain is windows/and the windows children and mothers.* A young girl banishes the snake, and the speaker is drawn into the mountain, where he encounters his beloved. The old man, representative of the past, thus advises to the speaker to look not to him for refuge and protection, but to the mountain. In a sense, the mountain, filled with “life,” “children,” and “mothers,” is the future; additionally, however, it is the place of nearness to God (*qurb*), the mystical Mount Qāf, its “windows” symbolic of the soul’s windows, through purification of which the mystic is touched by light and beholds God. Furthermore, Adonis explains in *Sufism and Surrealism*, the mystical relationship between father, mother, and child as it relates to the concept of the image; in this relationship, the father is the First Intellect, the pen, the spirit, the speaker, and the mother is the Universal Soul, the tablet, nature, the listener.⁴⁹⁰ As a result of their union, “meaning inhabits...letters, as the spirits of children inhabit their bodies.”⁴⁹¹ The union between mother and father is creation, which is the word, and the product of the union, the child, is the image of said word, namely, that which the listener—the mother—understands from the father’s speech. In other words, the mother is the matrix, or womb, through which new forms arise in the image of her understanding; it is in this sense that she is the place of transformation.

It is, moreover, in this sense that Adonis speaks of “the feminine self and the masculine other.”⁴⁹² Indeed, as previously explained, masculinity and femininity are seen as respectively equivalent to man and woman only in symbolic terms. In reality, each human being contains both qualities, and the self is feminine in the context of love insofar as the lover, whether male or female, loves not the beloved, but the image of the beloved, which he/she has shaped in accordance with what he/she “hears” or “understands” from the beloved’s voice.⁴⁹³ The lover is transformed by love for the images he/she creates by “listening” to the voice of the beloved

⁴⁹⁰ Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 124.

⁴⁹¹ Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 124.

⁴⁹² Adonis, *Violence and Islam*, 71.

⁴⁹³ Adonis, *Prophecy and Power*, 132.

“other,” which is light. This is a reformulation of the notion stated in the introduction that the mystic’s heart takes the form(s) in which God manifests Himself *in accordance with the mystic’s own knowledge and capacity for vision*. It is thus important to keep in mind that the lover in “Transformations” is male insofar as he constitutes man as the human symbol of masculinity, but feminine insofar as he represents the self, the place of transformation; likewise, the poem’s beloved is female insofar as she constitutes woman as the human symbol of femininity, but masculine insofar as she represents the other. This is a point seemingly overlooked by Abu Deeb, Mersal, and others who have proffered analysis, but critical nonetheless, for the apparent transformations of the beloved are, in fact, transformations of the lover himself, who is subject not to “the rule of the beloved,” but to “the rule of love.”⁴⁹⁴

After the snake pursuing him has been banished, a hand reaches out to the speaker: *It enticed me, leading me to a place whose age I did not know./A bed awaited me. Seated at its head was a vision who arose/like a breast, clothed in buttocks and bosom and all the rest./And my body was aroused, falling captive to the pores and the rims of the eye/and the navel and the other nature in which different forms of poppy, mandrake and other male and female plants/reproduce,/And my skin began to prepare for the fall of another star in its creases*. The lover is thus drawn into a place which seems ageless, where time ceases to exist, that is, the imaginative realm, which is not subject to history of chronological time. Indeed, in his discussion of the poetry of Abū Nuwās, Adonis writes that the symbol of wine, which represents intoxication, but also, importantly, love, constitutes a “power,” which “makes the ordinary logic of time meaningless,” and involves “the encounter with the self.. [and] the joining of the self with the world.”⁴⁹⁵ He likens it to a “fire,” the vessels that hold it to “lamps and stars,” and its place of consumption to “a celestial sphere where people die and are born again,” a “descent into the depths of the soul,” which is simultaneously a “descent into the depths of nature.”⁴⁹⁶ The awaiting bed, the mention of feminine body parts and his own body’s arousal, as well as the reference to reproduction, all presage the forthcoming physical union. The juxtaposition of “skin” with “star” emphasizes the role of the physical body in the process of enlightenment, and specific reference to poppies and mandrakes suggest, on the one hand, an altered state of mind, of dreaming or slumber, and, on the other, myth, magic, and fertility. Moreover, the “vision,” for which the Arabic word “*tayf*” is used, suggests the Arabic phrase “*tayf al-khayāl*,” which is often translated in poetry as “vision of the beloved,” though it might

⁴⁹⁴ Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 80.

⁴⁹⁵ Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 60.

⁴⁹⁶ Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 60.

be translated more literally as “apparition of the imagination.”⁴⁹⁷ As such, it conveys the idea that the vision is itself created in the imagination of the one who is visited by it.

In the succeeding verses, the reader accompanies the lover and his beloved in their exploration of the primordial realm unlocked by their union, for which the physical body serves as threshold. The refrain “*Thus says the Lord Body*” emphasizes its sanctification and authority, and countless verses reinforce the notion that it serves as a *barzakh* between the material and the spiritual, the seen and unseen, evidence and mystery. *I break through the vessel of my body to you*, writes the poet, *I explore the mysterious land in the map of sex*. In subsequent lines, he compares his own body to the horizon and the date palm: *Aspirant, my body is like the horizon and my limbs a date palm*. One infers that the body is a horizon insofar as it constitutes an ever-retreating boundary of discovery. Moreover, the poet’s use of the word “horizon” recalls its usage in *Sūrat Fuṣṣilat* (41:53), which advises that the signs of God may be revealed “in the horizons and within themselves,” that is, in the exterior world and in the human soul. Adonis therefore uses it here to imply that the body is itself one of the books in which signs may be revealed and understood. The accompanying reference to the date palm connotes both fertility and oasis or paradise.

The poet equates the beloved’s body, meanwhile, to sea and wave: *Your body is a sea and every wave a sail*. His meaning here may be understood with reference to his discussion of mysticism in *Sufism and Surrealism*. Man, he writes, in his longing for union with the ineffable, “becomes increasingly aware that in the depths of his being there is a mighty ocean, which is walled and reined in by obstacles and dams of every description.”⁴⁹⁸ If he dives into this ocean, breaking down these barriers, “a world will open up to him that is unlimited by things and whose only boundaries are thought and imagination.”⁴⁹⁹ Moreover, this submersion in the ocean is tantamount to the act of physical love, in which “man and woman emerge from their individual selves and become one, in a form of unity in which they believe they mean more together than they do separately... real and absolute, existing and transcendental,” in which “the one becomes the other.”⁵⁰⁰ Hence, the beloved’s body constitutes this vast expanse of water into which the lover dives, seeking unity with the universe itself, constrained only by his own imagination. The “waves” of this sea serve as “sails,” or guides, in this quest. Importantly, therefore, the physical body in the act of love transcends the merely physical; it is

⁴⁹⁷ Renate Jacobi, “Ṭayf al-Khayāl,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam Online*, ed. by P. Bearman, <https://referenceworks.brill.com/display/entries/EIEO/SIM-7467.xml?rskey=KRdG4T&result=1>.

⁴⁹⁸ Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 13.

⁴⁹⁹ Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 13

⁵⁰⁰ Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 13

the vessel for the creative imagination, for the heart, which in turn connect the lover not merely to the beloved, but also to the other, to the wider universe. Indeed, writes the poet: *The body has left/Transformation has touched it*. In other words, the veil of the body has become transparent through the activity of the creative imagination, which has transformed it. It is no longer present merely as a physical form in the apparent world, but exists rather in the imaginative realm. Similarly, in another line, he juxtaposes body, light, and love: *In our bodies, light raises its hills and its banners/and the flame extends across pillows*. In other words, through the creative imagination, through physical union, the lovers exercise their capacity to see hidden light through the transparent veil of the image.

Another refrain in the poem, “*liber, libera, phallus,*” which appears several times, establishes the fundamental connection between language, freedom, and sexual vitality—while simultaneously invoking the masculine and feminine Roman deities of wine—equivalent to love and intoxication—and fertility. Collectively, these constitute the poem’s major themes; however, it is the repeated reference to language—in the form of letters, words, spelling, writing, reading, ink, book, voice, etc.—and its relationship to the other two concepts which is perhaps most difficult to grasp upon first reading. If considered through the mystical lens outlined above, in which each letter is connected to a divine name or mode of Being and each word is a created thing, interpretation becomes much easier. Moreover, in this paradigm, one will recall, the masculine is “pen” and “speaker,” the feminine “tablet” and “listener,” and both masculine and feminine are essential for creation.

In the beginning of “Transformations,” therefore, as he is being pursued by the snake, the speaker proclaims: *I pleaded and confirmed— I have no voice*. In other words, prior to encountering his beloved, which is to say, prior to union with the feminine, he has no language with which to create words. This creative dynamic between man and woman permeates the text, and the role of the body in uniting them is constantly reiterated: *Oh woman written with the lover’s pen/walk where you wish between my limbs*. Similarly, elsewhere, the lover declares: *I inscribed your limbs with the embers of mine/I wrote you on my lips and my fingers/I engraved you on my forehead, varied the letter and the spelling, multiplied/the readings*. Therefore, it is he who writes, but she who gives him language, and the writing itself is the act of love. Moreover, he writes himself on her body and writes her on his own, thus signifying their union; in the variation of letters and multiplication of readings, he implies the infinite capacity for creation and interpretation.

Similarly, in another passage, the poet writes: *You bear fruit in me/I reap the harvest under your breast, I desiccate, and you are my bounty and water/Each fruit is a wound, and a*

path to you/I pass through you and you are my home, I live in you, you are my waves. Here, the words “fruit,” “harvest,” and “bounty” indicate fecundity; the essential relationship between masculine and feminine, “I” and “you,” self and other is likewise reinforced. Furthermore, the appearance of the word “wound” points to language. In Adonis’s corpus, “the word is a wound,” that is, an image, which both reveals and conceals and thus is in a constant state of becoming, for it can never capture the essence of meaning entirely or definitively. Therefore, in the context of this line, the speaker implies that each word, each image, each thing created through the union of masculine and feminine, is such a wound, representing both proximity to and distance from meaning. Similarly, each “wave” is a unique representation of the wider sea; in this analogy, the waves are indistinguishable from one another in essence, but different in form. Hence, the wave is not the sea, nor is the sea the wave, and yet, neither exists without the other.

Elsewhere in the poem, this connection between language and creation enters directly into relationship with imagination: *We dream, and from the depths of eternal things we declare love./We dream that our eyelashes are inkwells and the day is an open book.* In other words, the imaginal realm, indicated by the dream, is the place where one delves into the hidden, into “the depths of eternal things”; it is, moreover, the source of creation itself, of rebirth and renewal, for that which is first seen through the eye of imagination may be written into the book of existence. The declaration of love serves as a declaration of this dynamic between hidden and apparent, a declaration, that is, of creativity. Similarly, near the end of the poem, the poet writes: *I see my leaves exude narcissi and streams/I see water become a book and the book realms and shores/I lack another land to add new words to my language/I lack/death.* In this line, “leaves,” which may also be translated as “papers” or “pages,” may be interpreted as the creative output of the writer. The flowers which issue forth from these leaves or pages are “narcissi,” which, on the one hand, given the word’s etymology, connotes a dream state, and, on the other, recalls the Greek myth of Narcissus, who fell in love with his own image, similar to the lover in the poem, who falls in love not with the beloved, but with the images he has created of the beloved. Indeed, the speaker declares in a separate line: *I encountered you and I saw myself.*

In other words, the lover experiences his beloved, the other, as essentially congruent with himself, similar to the way in which the mystic perceives the essential congruence of forms at the moment of annihilation, acquiring knowledge of existence as He/not-He (*Huwa/la Huwa*). Moreover, although his love has resulted in creation, although his writing becomes a book, the poet declares the need for death “to add new words to [his] language.” Thus, the poet

implies, creativity is dependent upon the cycle of death and rebirth, for meaning can never be exhausted in any form or image. “What cannot be said,” explains Adonis, “is part of the language of death.”⁵⁰¹ In other words, that which has not been created resides still in death. For this reason, the lover, in his longing for union, in his love, seeks death to draw closer to his beloved, to advance into the infinite abyss between the known and the unknown. Thus, writes the poet: *Between me and my self there is a distance/from which love gazes upon me, and death/and the body is my baptism.*

5.2 Singular in a Plural Form: “Body”

In 1977, Adonis published the long poem *Mufrad bi-ṣīghat al-jam‘* (*Singular in a Plural Form*), which was written between 1973 and 1975 in the years immediately following his doctorate and during the early part of his tenure at Lebanese University in Beirut. The poem itself spans over two hundred pages and is divided into four sections—*Takwīn*, *Tārīkh*, *Jasad*, and *Sīmiyyā’* (Genesis, History, Body, and Semiology)—which collectively reflect the poet’s worldview as it relates to the nature of existence and the creative cycle. The third section of the poem and focus of this analysis, “Body,” comprises approximately one-third of the entire text, and, as its title may suggest, emphasizes the role of the body as the bridge between the apparent realm of form and the hidden realm of meaning.⁵⁰²⁵⁰³ In this context, therefore, use of the word “body” may refer to the human body, the “body” of language, or to both simultaneously. Indeed, as explained in the introduction of this chapter, the act of love and the act of writing in Adonis’s poetry are often conceptually interchangeable, as are the notions of “woman” and “language.” To make love is thus to “write” the body of the beloved, an act of creation whereby images formed of the beloved serve not merely as mirrors for the beloved, but also reflect one’s own capacity for vision, constituting discovery of the self through discovery of the other; likewise, to write is to “make love” to language, another act of creation which ultimately serves the same purpose by different means. In either case, the body serves as *barzakh*, the liminal space between form and meaning, the place of creative imagination.

While some readings of “Transformations of the Lover,” such as those by Abu Deeb and Ma‘louf, arguably emphasize the significance of “woman” and romantic “love” as the subject of analysis at the expense of “language” and “writing,” the opposite may be argued in

⁵⁰¹ Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 90.

⁵⁰² Adonis, “Jasad,” *al-A‘māl al-shi‘riyya al-kāmila* vol. 3, 91-168.

⁵⁰³ An English translation of “Body” may be found in *Adonis: Selected Poems*, translated by Khaled Mattawa (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 125-172.

the case of “Body.” Huda Fakhreddine devotes a chapter to Adonis and *Singular in a Plural Form* in her recently published book *The Arabic Prose Poem: Poetic Theory and Practice*; however, she focuses exclusively on the concept of language as the poem’s thematic subject.⁵⁰⁴ Thus, her analysis largely disregards the significance to the text of love and the relationship between masculine and feminine, as well as the mystical foundation upon which all of these concepts, including language, are based. Although Mersal acknowledges the correspondence between woman and language, her treatment of this particular poem is brief, limited to two pages in the context of an article more broadly focused on the relationship between Adonis’s poetic language and Qur’anic language.⁵⁰⁵ However, her principal argument with regard to the poem is apt and quite useful, namely, that “the whole poem revolves around a fundamental matrix... of ‘union’ and ‘separation,’” challenging the notion that the two are antithetical.⁵⁰⁶ While Mersal does not acknowledge this explicitly in her analysis, the notion of union and separation as constituent elements of the same phenomenon applies, of course, not merely to the experience of lovers, but to the nature of reality more broadly. In other words, it applies to the interaction between self and other, but also self and self, hidden essence and apparent form, spirit and nature, masculinity and femininity. Therefore, it is an expression of the fundamental mystical thesis that existence is He/not-He (*Huwa/la Huwa*), as well as a declaration of love as the creative force which sustains this dialectic.

“Body” begins with the following verse: *The earth was not a wound/It was a body/How does one travel between the wound/and the body/How does one reside?* To understand this line, one need first remember that, in Adonis’s poetry, the wound connotes the word. Moreover, the wound/word is analogous to the form in the apparent realm, that is, the locus of manifestation. And yet, through vision, every wound/word is a veil, a symbol of being, becoming, and transience, which discloses “a unique combination of attributes and properties” of hidden meaning.⁵⁰⁷ Meanwhile, the earth is analogous to woman, to nature, and to femininity, as well as to language. Thus, the first line of the verse indicates that existence, of which the feminine is matrix, is not limited to disparate, apparent forms, but is, rather, “a body,” imbued with essential meaning. It is, in other words, a body of images. It has already been established that the word “body” implies both the human body and the body of language; the pertinent question is therefore what separates the body in either case from mere form. As Adonis explains, in

⁵⁰⁴ Huda Fakhreddine, *The Arabic Prose Poem: Poetic Theory and Practice* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 86-101.

⁵⁰⁵ Mersal, “Reading the Qur’an in the poetry of Adonis,” 25-26.

⁵⁰⁶ Mersal, “Reading the Qur’an in the poetry of Adonis,” 25.

⁵⁰⁷ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 91.

mysticism, the image is a space, a relational structure through which meaning writes.⁵⁰⁸ In mystical writing, metaphorical language is the means of expressing the hidden realm “perceived and captured” by the mystic’s own imagination, which itself serves as the *barzakh* between the spiritual and material realms, that is, between interior and exterior, hidden and manifest.⁵⁰⁹ The creative imagination, therefore, constitutes the place of convergence between the perceptible and imperceptible; it is the macrocosm “in the microcosm of the human being.”⁵¹⁰ Through gnosis, the creative imagination opens itself to meaning, becomes meaning, and “the body becomes an element for the creation of the imaginary structure of the place, a mystical and lyrical dimension of the interior that is reflected in the exterior space recreating it according to its own form.”⁵¹¹ In other words, the mystic experiences his body as “foundation and origin,” for the microcosmic body “becomes anteriority of the place, of the universe,” the medium through which interior meaning is reflected in variable exterior form, a reflection which itself constitutes “the transfer of witnessed knowledge.”⁵¹²

Therefore, in the previously cited verse, the earth, which is to say, both feminine nature and language, is not mere form, but “foundation and origin” of the forms. The question posed is one of how to move between the realm of meaning and the realm of forms, how to “reside” in the space between hidden and apparent. This movement, a creative gesture which might be characterized as the longing for unity and/or the desire for perfect expression, is itself love. In a subsequent line, the poet writes: *O’ physicians, apothecaries, magicians, soothsayers/O’ readers of the unseen/I am practicing your secrets*. In other words, the poet places himself in the company of those who move between the seen and the unseen, those with the capacity for vision and creation. *I gasp*, he writes, *like one who settles in his exile/I am made blind with love = (my form disseminates and I possess nothing of it/my interior is aflame and I find for it no shade)... There is something separating me from myself/How do I make my body known to myself?* Hence, one infers that movement in the space between hidden and apparent constitutes a form of exile. Indeed, in an interview with *Ibraaz*, Adonis explains that, for a poet, language is both homeland and exile, “homeland because in the end a poet really only finds himself in his language” and “exile because inevitably and invariably, language fails to say what he wants.”⁵¹³ In the context of mysticism, moreover, Adonis maintains that the “movement

⁵⁰⁸ Adonis, “The Sufi Aesthetic Dimension,” *Quaderns de la Mediterrania* 12 (2009), 42.

⁵⁰⁹ Adonis, “The Sufi Aesthetic Dimension,” 42.

⁵¹⁰ Adonis, “The Sufi Aesthetic Dimension,” 42.

⁵¹¹ Adonis, “The Sufi Aesthetic Dimension,” 42.

⁵¹² Adonis, “The Sufi Aesthetic Dimension,” 42.

⁵¹³ Adonis, “A Life in Language,” interview with Laura Allsop, *Ibraaz*, 28 February, 2012, <https://www.ibraaz.org/interviews/13>.

between the visible and the invisible” is likewise a form of exile, into which one forces himself as a means of understanding hidden reality.⁵¹⁴ Furthermore, the Arabic word that I have translated here as “I am made blind with love”—*uhayyamu*—derives from the verb “*hayyama*,” indicating a state of blind or mad wandering attributable to passionate love. One thus infers that the exile in which one attempts to reconcile hidden and apparent is associated with love; in other words, this attempt at reconciliation necessitates creativity. Similarly, the poet’s use of the Arabic terms “*zāhirī*” and “*bāṭinī*,” which I have translated respectively as “my form” and “my interior,” further establish the presence of the dialectic between the exoteric and esoteric dimensions. Specifically, the notion of form disseminated and an interior “afame” and without “shade” indicate the state of annihilation (*fanā*’), in which there is suspension of discrimination among forms. One infers that the body, as microcosm and place of the creative imagination, serves as the key to achieving subsistence (*baqā*’), that is, the aforementioned reconciliation of hidden and apparent, and thus the dual nature of the self.

Subsequent lines reinforce this notion of the body as the liminal space of the imaginal realm: *Narcissus inhabits a vessel of ice/he dreams that love is a face/and he its mirror/The stone is a rosebud, and the cloud a butterfly/and on the threshold is a body, a spark by which to read the night.* Here as in “Transformations,” Narcissus suggests the dreamlike state of imagination, recalling the Greek myth of Narcissus, who falls in love with his own image and dies in contemplation of it. The implication here, however, is that of man’s relationship to the unseen. He is the water of knowledge in material form; he is the “mirror” which reflects love’s light. Between “stone” and “cloud,” between the “rosebud” of earth and the “butterfly” of the heavens, between the material and spiritual realms resides the “threshold” of the body, the “spark” which constitutes the place of gnosis whereby that which remains hidden may be seen. Moreover, at this point in the poem, the feminine appears, signalling her role in the creative process, where undifferentiated essence finds expression in differentiated form: *We come together, we separate/Separation is not a wing and meeting is not a shadow... The luggage of migration has opened/Your body is a wilderness/I depart/and you are the journeys of my departure.*

The continuous cycle of encounter and separation represents the endless process in which the masculine and feminine merge to create novel images. This process is reflective of Ibn ‘Arabī’s claim that there is no repetition in divine self-disclosure, as well as his ideas

⁵¹⁴ Adonis, “A Life in Language.”

regarding the perpetual renewal—and thus perpetual death—of all creation.⁵¹⁵ In Adonis’s poetry, moreover, this process of continuous creation is the same mechanism by which the self engages with the other in the ongoing creation of identity. By referring to the body as a “wilderness,” which might also be translated as a “wandering,” the poet indicates that it is the place of exploration, because it is the place of vision and creativity. The separation of masculine and feminine is not a “wing,” and thus does not imply spiritual elevation, nor does the encounter between the two indicate darkness or “shadow.” On the contrary, he asserts, the woman constitutes “the journeys of [his] departure”; significantly, the Arabic word “*asfār*,” which I have translated as “journeys” might also be translated as “books” or “volumes.” Moreover, it calls to mind other definitions of the verb from which it derives, namely, “to unveil” or “to shine.” Thus, the encounter between hidden and apparent, between masculine and feminine, constitutes a creative process of continuous unveiling. In closing the verse, the poet writes: *You are beyond distances, you are beyond wilderness/You are where and what and how and when and you are/not you.* This line reinforces the notion of the feminine as the basis for existence, both necessary to and separate from the aspects and qualities which give rise to individuation.

In subsequent verses, the unity of masculine and feminine and the process of creation and discovery is further explored: *I penetrate the foundation, the origin/where the ovules hide and the stilet of the stigma ends/I gather myself as pollen gathers itself/I remove you/I wear you/I shed you/I unite with you/and I create between you and me...an illusion that breaks time branch by branch/Who are you?* Here the poet reinforces the notion of continuous meeting and separation, using language which indicates the correlation between the act of love and fertility and vitality more broadly. He indicates, moreover, through “removing,” “wearing,” “shedding,” and “uniting,” the dynamism of this relationship, each encounter of which results in a new image, the revelation of new meaning. Furthermore, he asserts the body as that which confers a state of madness, or vision, and, by extension, the medium through which one enters the liminal, imaginal realm: *the body is the priest of madness.* And yet, neither lover yet knows or sees the other in his or her entirety, hence the question “who are you?”, which morphs in subsequent verses into “who are we?” and finally “who am I?”. The trajectory of this question reflects the trajectory of the self in its engagement with the other, namely, from the point of departure towards exploration of the other, followed by the recognition of the fundamental congruence between self and other, and ultimately the re-examination and evolution of the self

⁵¹⁵ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 97.

in light of this awareness. This is, of course, reflective of the progression from separation to annihilation and, finally, subsistence.

The dynamic of this interaction is explored further in subsequent lines: *Here is the body-father, the body-mother/moving towards/we are moving towards/the bells of desire revive us... We come together=we separate=we erase our faces=we discover our faces/on the bed are two phantoms/one reveals itself, one conceals itself/and the two bodies are four—/half for the absent/half for the present.* Here the opening line reinforces the mystical idea of union between essence and form—alternately imagined as father and mother, but also as hidden and apparent, masculinity and femininity, pen and tablet—the product of which is the image. Also reinforced is the fact that said union is characterized by continual movement, repeated encounter and separation, that is, discovery and erasure, creativity and destruction, stimulated by the impetus of creative desire, which is love. The final lines of this verse, moreover, reflect Adonis's understanding of the dual nature of the self, that is, the notion of two selves within each individual, one of which is the feminine, differentiated self, and the other of which is the deeper, masculine, undifferentiated self (the internal other). Indeed, "the self," he writes, "travels towards its deepest being only insofar as it travels towards the other and to its deepest being, given that, in the other, the self finds its most perfect presence. [Hence] the self is, paradoxically, the nonself."⁵¹⁶

In other words, in union and "through the relationship with the unknown and the invisible," the self recognizes itself in and as the other; "it is no longer the individual self which speaks, but the super-self, the universal self hidden in the individual."⁵¹⁷ In the moment of union, therefore, subject becomes object; the "immanent transcendent" macrocosm is, in fact, recognizable as "no more than the particular subjective experienced in its plenitude and specificity."⁵¹⁸ From this perspective, Adonis explains, the lover witnesses the universe as an "integrating sphere-vault in which the singularities of creation embrace each other."⁵¹⁹ In the lines cited above, the four bodies present on the bed of union thus represent the two individual, differentiated selves of the lovers ("the present") and the two universal, undifferentiated selves ("the absent"), the latter being essentially congruent.

The distance between individual self and universal self, between self and other, between feminine and masculine, is traversed, repeatedly, by desire, by creativity, by love, which

⁵¹⁶ Adonis, "The Sufi Aesthetic Dimension," 43-44.

⁵¹⁷ Adonis, "The Sufi Aesthetic Dimension," 44.

⁵¹⁸ Adonis, "The Sufi Aesthetic Dimension," 44.

⁵¹⁹ Adonis, "The Sufi Aesthetic Dimension," 44.

nonetheless never fully closes it: *Ever/there remains/between us/a distance... we said/it is erased by the flame that we name love... and there remains between us/a distance*. Similar to the verse cited above, these lines indicate the nature of union as an ongoing, dynamic process, constituting the aforementioned cycle of encounter and separation, creation and dissolution, life and death. Indeed, the poet writes in subsequent lines: *Extinguish yourself [fem.], extinguish yourself [masc.]/so that we may know the blessing of embers/We erase our faces/we discover our faces/premonitions/seashells/mirrors/we pass through them to our other selves*. These lines simultaneously reinforce the vital role of erasure in discovery, death in revival, as well as the notion that the discrimination associated with the lovers' individual selves need be suspended for them to discover the other within, the deeper, undifferentiated self.

In a subsequent verse, the poet emphasizes further the dynamic between masculine and feminine: *I am your question/and you are not my answer/I defined you with my longing/I brought you tidings of it and tied you to my self/ALI/ADONIS*. The first line of this verse reinforces the notion that essence imbues form with meaning to create the image, and yet, no form or image is exhaustive of either essence or meaning. Indeed, the Arabic word “*arraftu*,” which I have translated here as “defined” but could also be translated as “announced” or “specified,” supports this interpretation, suggesting that, in his longing and through his love, the masculine lover participates in the endless generation of the various images through which the feminine reveals herself to him and he to her. In this generative process, the two become “tied.” Subsequent lines in the same verse likewise imply this dynamic: *you are the dot/and I the script and the shape... you are from and what follows it/about and what belongs to it*. Hence, the masculine constitutes unseen, universal, undifferentiated meaning, while the feminine represents meaning in all its specificity and vitality; this echoes the previously cited line which casts the feminine as “where and what and how and when.” Significantly, moreover, the poet’s use of both birth name and pen name indicates the participation in the union of both universal and individual selves. As he explains in *Violence and Islam*, “Adonis is foreign, the other in me” (the so-called “absent,” internal other), while the name ‘Ali “recognize[s] something intimate, very personal, something connected to a cultural space and time” (the so-called “present,” individualized self).⁵²⁰

Hence, one notes once again that lover and beloved both possess masculine as well as feminine natures; the latter must be subdued, if only temporarily, to “confirm the essence of

⁵²⁰ Adonis, *Violence and Islam*, 136.

[the] beloved and exist in this essence.”⁵²¹ Otherwise, the persistence of the lover’s own qualities will mean that he/she “will continue to be veiled from [the beloved]” and thus “will remain in opposition to [him/herself].”⁵²² In other words, the lover suppresses his/her feminine, individual self in order to understand the feminine, individual self of his/her beloved, and in turn to see the feminine, individual self of the beloved as a reflection of his/her masculine, universal self. When this occurs on the part of both lovers, it leads to the realization that the masculine, universal self of each is ultimately one and the same, constituting, in other words, what may be understood as a mutual experience of annihilation (*fanā’*). Subsistence (*baqā’*), meanwhile, is achieved when the knowledge of this congruence persists once suspension of discrimination has been lifted.

As the poem draws to a close, the poet returns once more to the idea of the creative imagination as the liminal space between hidden and apparent, the “exile” of creativity in which he exists and by which he is defined. Indeed, the poet writes: *Between the machine of death and the creature of the word/I am planted/I am rooted*. As Adonis explains, death is the moment when the self “is delivered from its individuality.”⁵²³ Death is “present in the meaning” and “absent in the form,” which is to say, death correlates to the universality of essence and life to specificity of form.⁵²⁴ The lover is “planted” or “rooted” in this space between the two. Indeed, his presence in this space is reinforced in the following verse: *And his spirits said—In the name of your dead-alive, alive-dead body... you are/the fall/the revival/the moment that breathes them and repeats itself/word, no word/thing, no thing/Absent yourself, remain absent/and enter into the weddings of erasure and thunder... Be the place which has no place/the time that defeats time/Be desire, desire, desire*. Here the poet reinforces the essential correspondence between life and death, indicating that the body, the creative imagination, becomes the place in which universality and specificity converge. The lover is both “fall,” symbolic of death, and “revival,” symbolic of life. Moreover, he is “the moment that breathes them”; just as the exhalation of the Divine Breath results in the creation of the cosmos, so does the lover’s “breath” result in the creation of the world. The lines immediately following indicate the generative process as an ongoing cycle, where “word” and “thing” correspond to the created forms of nature, to speech, and “no word” and “no thing” correspond to the realm of unindividuated essence, to silence. The lover’s spirit impels him to “absent [him]self” from his qualities so that he might

⁵²¹ Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 89.

⁵²² Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 89.

⁵²³ Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 89.

⁵²⁴ Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 93.

participate in the “wedding” of essence with form, so that he may exist in the timeless space of the imaginal realm, so that he may “be desire.” Indeed, the incitement to “be desire” is an incitement to creativity and to love.

The poet indicates that both lover and beloved have arrived at this transcendent space: *In the name of my dead-alive, alive-dead body/my body has no form/my body has as many forms as it has pores/and I am not I/and you are not you.* Thus the lover has succeeded in absenting himself from the qualities of his individual self; he has recognized the universal self of the beloved, which is his own universal self. He has, in other words, recognized the other in himself. As a result, his body is not defined by a single form, but rather by every form, and the line between self and other has been elided. The concluding section of the poem reinforces this message: *And in her name, in your name, in my name/Through you I became substance/and aspired to dissipate/I unlocked you with my body, but/how do I close you?/Though I am afflicted with you/I am a thing based on no thing... I am the injured uninjured/the barzakh of sex.*

In this line, the lover addresses essential light, suggesting that, through the medium of the body and the creative imagination, he has unlocked the door between absence and presence. Indeed, he maintains, “I am a thing based on no thing,” that is, he is created form, but he is also that which creates forms. Similarly, he is both “injured” and “uninjured,” for insofar as he is created form, he is the word, which is the wound, but insofar as he is light, he transcends differentiation. He exists in the *barzakh*, as the *barzakh*, the place of creation and differentiation. The poem concludes with the following line, also addressed to light: *I say in your name/I am water playing with water.* In other words, in union and through love, the lover becomes the very substance of creation, which can take the shape of any vessel, the light of meaning, which veils itself in countless images and forms. However, he forever remains *both* water and vessel, light and veil, meaning and form. He is He/not-He (*Huwa/la Huwa*). Ultimately, therefore, “Body” conveys the message that love is inextricably connected both to life and to death, to creation and dissolution; it drives the creation of new forms and the articulation of new words, and yet, each “word” is a “wound,” inherently transient and subject to erasure. Indeed, the poet writes: *Love also wounds life/it uproots and exiles.*

5.3 “History Torn Apart in the Body of a Woman”

In 2006, some forty years after the publication of “Transformations of the Lover” and thirty years after that of *Singular in a Plural Form*, Adonis published *Tārīkh yatamazzaq fī jasad imra’a* (*History Torn Apart in the Body of a Woman*), a long poem spanning more than

one hundred pages, in which he rewrites the story of Hagar (Hājar), mother of the prophet Ishamel (Ismā'īl) and thus, according to tradition, matriarch of the Arabs.⁵²⁵ In the Biblical narrative, Hagar was the slave of Sarah (Sāra), wife of Abraham (Ibrāhīm); she was offered to Abraham as a concubine by her mistress when the latter failed to bear him a son. Subsequently, she and her son were cast out by Abraham and Sarah, who had since given birth to a son of her own. Forced to wander the desert in search of water, she was rescued in her despair by God, who opened her eyes to a nearby well and sent word to her that her son would be the father of a great nation. The Islamic narrative differs slightly, portraying Hagar as Abraham's second wife and her exile as a commandment by God to which both she and Abraham submitted, rather than the immediate consequence of Sarah's contempt and jealousy. Moreover, the well she discovered in the desert is generally believed by Muslims to be the sacred Zamzam Well in Mecca, and the *sa'i*, in which pilgrims walk seven times between the hills of Safa and Marwa during *hajj*, serves as a ritual reenactment of Hagar's own desperate search for water. In the Islamic tradition, therefore, Hagar is widely revered, both as mother of the Arab people, through whom the Prophet Muḥammad traces his lineage to Abraham, as well as for her demonstrated courage, resilience, steadfast faith in and submission to God.

Similar to his recasting of the figure of Noah in the poem "The New Noah," previously discussed in Chapter 3, Adonis in *History Torn Apart* transforms the character of Hagar as she is represented in scripture, challenging and reinterpreting the traditional narrative, rewriting the story through the lens of her personal experience, retelling it in her own voice. Just as Noah is transformed from a figure of obedience into one of rebellion, so is Hagar transformed from a figure of apparent submission into a political and spiritual revolutionary. Indeed, *History Torn Apart* recounts the story of Hagar's inner turmoil in the face of exile and her consequent spiritual evolution, through which she serves as a symbol of opposition to the prevailing religious narrative. In this casting, therefore, she is not an exemplar of orthodoxy, but rather its victim and its critic; her voice represents the voice of women more broadly, who have, Adonis argues, been largely subjugated by a prescriptive orthodoxy which elevates masculinity over femininity and power over love. Indeed, he argues, the "history" indicated in the poem's title, which is "torn apart," is that of monotheism; the poem represents a critique of the monotheistic vision which considers man alone to have been created in the image of God.⁵²⁶ "This vision,"

⁵²⁵ Adonis, "Tārīkh yatamazzaq fi jasad imra'a," *al-A'māl al-shi'riyya al-kāmila* vol. 6, 431-549.

⁵²⁶ Adonis, *Conversations in the Pyrenees*, 15.

he writes, “incarnated by the entire history of the three monotheistic religions, is what the poem tries to revise, by giving to woman a voice to criticize it radically.”⁵²⁷

In his view, monotheism effectively diminished the role of women in thought, society, and life more broadly, by “separat[ing] the human into a body and a soul” and casting the body as “the dwelling place of sin.”⁵²⁸ In so doing, it converted woman into “a form of property... not raised to the rank of dignified human being.”⁵²⁹ While his focus typically centers on his own culture and society, neither Judaism nor Christianity escape criticism here; “In Judaism,” he notes, in reference to a common recitation, “man thanks God for not making him a woman,” and, “in Christianity, the fact of conceiving a pregnancy without sin says a lot about the cancellation of woman.”⁵³⁰ Islam, meanwhile, maintains that “woman was not created in the image of God... categorically den[ying] women freedom and anything that touches on their bodies or desires.”⁵³¹ Moreover, he maintains, the very institution of Islam, beginning with the first caliphs, relegated woman to a secondary role in relation to man, minimizing the role played by women like Khadīja and ‘Ā’isha in the advent of Islam in an effort to raise the importance of Muḥammad himself.⁵³²

History Torn Apart thus attempts to restore the natural dynamic between masculine and feminine, which Adonis believes was upended by monotheism. To this end, the poem emphasizes the body once again as a place of sanctity, rather than sin, and invokes a number of feminine deities from mythology—including Artemis, Isis, al-Lāt, al-‘Uzzā, and Manāt—in order to make the point that, prior to the advent of monotheism, woman was afforded equal importance relative to man in “the foundation not only of daily life, of society, but... also the foundation of thought.”⁵³³ There was, he asserts, no hierarchy promoting the value of the latter at the expense of the former. In addition to its effective disenfranchisement of woman herself, he argues, this shift in favor of the masculine constitutes spiritual disenfranchisement, in which all that is feminine, including nature, “instead of being an enigma or a mystery, has become... a landscape created by God for the pleasure of the faithful,” in which, furthermore, “the reality of experience” is denied, and “the spirit is condemned the moment it expresses a desire to understand the mystery of the transformations of the universe.”⁵³⁴

⁵²⁷ Adonis, *Conversations in the Pyrenees*, 15.

⁵²⁸ Adonis, *Conversations in the Pyrenees*, 23.

⁵²⁹ Adonis, *Prophecy and Power*, 116.

⁵³⁰ Adonis, *Prophecy and Power*, 116.

⁵³¹ Adonis, *Prophecy and Power*, 116.

⁵³² Adonis, *Prophecy and Power*, 102-103.

⁵³³ Adonis, *Conversations in the Pyrenees*, 20.

⁵³⁴ Adonis, *Violence and Islam*, 80.

In other words, one infers, the subordination of woman to man is symbolic of the broader subordination of feminine multiplicity to masculine singularity. Significantly, however, Adonis does not deny the presence of a non-religious discourse present in culture which serves as counterpoint to the dominant religious trend; this discourse, which he associates, predictably, with poetry and mysticism, “depict[s] a magnificent image of the woman.”⁵³⁵ Indeed, he stipulates, “we must bear in mind the existence of these two discourses: the religious discourse, which goes against the human and condemns women, and the other, non-religious discourse, which is subterranean and marginalized, of course, but which is more human. Magnificently human.”⁵³⁶ Arguably, therefore, *History Torn Apart* serves not merely as a critique of the former, but also an effort to appropriate the character of Hagar, along with her story, as a champion for the latter, to reinstate in her rightful place what he calls “the figure of woman-nature,” which is “absent” from the religious discourse, having been usurped by the so-called “woman commanded by the Text, the woman-*shar*’.”⁵³⁷

The poem begins with the following lines: *This is the story of a slave woman and her son./She was banished, merely for having/broken her chains. And it said/that she was married to a prophet,/and that her son too/became a prophet. However/nowhere was it reported in his teachings/that she was freed.* Thus, at the outset, the poem establishes context, indicating that the woman in question is Hagar, wife of Abraham, mother of Ishmael. Significantly, it suggests that she was cast into exile as a result of her resistance to subservience, a departure from the traditional narrative. Moreover, it implicitly suggests that marriage does not, in and of itself, constitute freedom. This is in alignment with Adonis’s claim that marriage in the context of religion is less a matter of love and more a transaction for the purposes of male pleasure and reproduction.⁵³⁸ After the initial setting of the scene, the poem traces Hagar’s gradual spiritual awakening, proceeding in a much more evidently chronological manner than either “Transformations” or “Body.” She first appears holding her child, but otherwise alone, having recently been cast out into the desert: *Moon, its sweet secret overwhelms me./Moon, the fullness of my cells streams forth. No indecency and no misstep./Semen moon./My moon, my creator./Moon, not of jinn/Moon, not of God./Merciful moon. Free womb.... Moon, I seek refuge in its appearance and in its halos/I am united in it, and I reconcile myself in it.* The moon, which reflects the light of the sun, routinely serves in Sufism as a symbol of the heart, through

⁵³⁵ Adonis, *Violence and Islam*, 82.

⁵³⁶ Adonis, *Violence and Islam*, 82-83.

⁵³⁷ Adonis, *Violence and Islam*, 79.

⁵³⁸ Adonis, *Prophecy and Power*, 121.

which the light of the spirit is transmitted to the relative darkness of the self. On the one hand, therefore, Hagar declares here her faith in her own heart and, by extension, in experiential knowledge as opposed to mediated knowledge. Furthermore, given the aforementioned correlation between masculinity and “light” as well as femininity and “soul” or “self”, these lines also speak to the interaction between the universal masculine and individuated feminine, hence the use of the words “semen” and “womb.”

Significantly, Hagar finds refuge and self-actualization in this union; the light by which she herself is created, which she perceives in her heart by means of the creative imagination, is also what grants her the freedom to create. She is the created and the creator; in other words, she is the *barzakh*. Indeed, she asserts: *O’ planet of the night... take me/so we may return to Isis in her nakedness/and write the languages of the sky/with the hand of freedom – the language of love and poetry and alchemy*. Here, the “planet of the night” to which she refers is, of course, the moon, the heart; hence, she beseeches it to take possession of her so that together they may “return to Isis,” goddess of love and magic, fertility and motherhood. She urges it to receive her so that they may, in freedom, “write the languages of the sky”; significantly, these languages are love, poetry, and alchemy, all of which Adonis associates not with religion, but with mysticism. Subsequent lines reinforce the notion that the moon, by which light is perceived, serves as the place of love, desire, and creativity: *Moon of stone/in which love reads/the faces of mankind/Moon of femininity, of sex, of whims, of youthful desire/Moon of neither earth nor sky./Moon of life*. Moreover, the heart is “neither earth nor sky”; it is, rather, the nexus between them, the intermediary between nature and spirit, and thus the basis of life itself.

Similar to in “Transformations” and “Body,” Hagar becomes aware that her body, symbolic of nature and femininity, is not the “dwelling place of sin,” but rather that of the heart, and thus serves as means by which one experiences love and unites with the unseen: *I travel on this body of mine/and I see everything./And I say to myself:/This city is not a ram/And so, I presented it to my child as an offering of refusal, and I announced the death of paternity... Why did it cast us here?/So that we may be cleansed by prophecy’s snake or man’s rod of all humanity,/of all love?/So that nature is in us extinguished – its sparks and its lanterns?/What is the city, if not love’s door to the cosmos?* In these lines, Adonis draws a correlation between body and city; the city, he asserts elsewhere, is a form that “facilitates connections,” “enriches the vision,” and deepens insight.⁵³⁹ It is simultaneously surface, depth, and expanse, “a

⁵³⁹ Adonis, “I Have Been Born Three Times: Part I.”

provocation to knowledge, to chasing a new horizon of knowledge.... open unto different and varied readings.”⁵⁴⁰ In other words, the city correlates to femininity, to the diversity of images, forms, and connections found in nature, each of which constitutes a unique disclosure of divine light. Indeed, Hagar asserts, the city is not a “ram”; it is “an offering of refusal” which accompanies “the death of paternity.” In this context, the refusal in question denotes a refusal of the orthodox narrative, associated with masculinity and thus “paternity,” which, Adonis argues, denies plurality in its obsession with unity and, in so doing, denies femininity and nature. This position is reinforced through reference to “prophecy’s snake” and “man’s rod,” which invoke the prophet Moses as a symbol of religious orthodoxy, which is itself directly contrasted with “humanity,” “love,” and “nature.”

Indeed, Hagar implies through her questioning, the representatives of prescriptive orthodoxy have exiled her to “extinguish” nature and its various forms and images, which serve as “lanterns” or veils through which to see light. This is a reformulation of the mystical idea of the veil as that which limits light, but, in so doing, makes it less blinding to the naked eye, which is ill-equipped to behold its full radiance; the veil thus serves not merely to conceal, but also to reveal. It is in this sense that Hagar asserts that the city, the body, constitutes love’s conduit to that light, the “door to the cosmos.” Indeed, she proclaims: *My body is my creator, and my love is its creator./My body is my sedition,/My body is my blessing.* In other words, the poet implies, the body is the place of creative imagination, which serves to unite spirit and nature, the place where identity is created, where the self is formed. The body, in turn, is shaped by love, that is, by the desire to explore, discover, create, and renew. For this reason, it is a “blessing,” but, from the vantage point of prescriptive orthodoxy, also “sedition.” Indeed, the Arabic word “*fitna*,” which I have translated as sedition, might also be translated as “temptation,” “disorder,” or even “magic,” and is often associated specifically with women. While the concept typically carries negative connotations in the religious context, Adonis’s use of it here is clearly a challenge to this perspective. In his rendering, the heresy implied by *fitna* is cast in a positive light. Indeed, Hagar attests: *My body once said:/I presented my love as an offering of wandering/to God.* The implication here is thus that man both creates and is created through “wandering” or exploration; moreover, this creative process depends upon the physical body, which unites spirit and nature and is the place of the heart and the imagination, the place of experience. Love as the creative energy which fuels this process, conceived of as longing and/or desire, is one’s offering to God, the ultimate basis of spiritual experience.

⁵⁴⁰ Adonis, “I Have Been Born Three Times: Part I.”

Furthermore, the poet reiterates in *History Torn Apart* the notion presented in “Transformations” and “Body” that there is both self and other contained within the body, that is, the individual self, corresponding to nature and femininity, and the universal self or internal other, corresponding to spirit and masculinity. This is, of course, analogous to the notion of man as He/not-He (*Huwa/la Huwa*). *My exile*, declares Hagar, *is between myself and myself/and my question about myself has no answer./Another body moves inside my body/I am no longer certain that I am I*. Hence, the poet implies, one’s attempt to understand the unseen, the light of the spirit, the internal other, is a continual journey of discovery in the service of a question which has no definitive answer. The distance between spirit and nature, ineffable meaning and articulated form, is, in fact, Hagar’s true exile, the exile forced upon her in the phenomenal world merely its image, and yet, it is in this true exile between individual self and universal self that she finds freedom. Freedom, therefore, may be defined as the freedom of the self to create new forms, words, or images in accordance with what it has “heard” by means of its heart when the light of meaning “speaks” to it.

This interaction between individual self and universal self, feminine self and masculine other, nature and spirit permeates the poem, as Hagar undergoes her spiritual evolution. Elsewhere she attests: *Another body moves inside my body./I will meet him... I will meet you, you to whom I will give my body to do with as you will./Maybe I should change my form,/Maybe I should change my skin*. Here the reference to another body suggests the interaction between masculine and feminine, between light and form. Indeed, Hagar speaks of yielding to this light, permitting it to “change [her] form,” to “change [her] skin.” In other words, Hagar, symbolic of femininity, here affirms her role as “the matrix of existence,” as nature, which assumes myriad form in manifestation of meaning. Similarly, in another verse, she proclaims: *I disclose from the light my night... The hidden becomes apparent... I see you, I breathe in you. My wandering and my meeting with myself/you, and my freedom. We become congruent with one another. And I uncover my divisions with your breath. Create me as though I were poetry or a painting*. In the first line of this verse, “night” recalls the notion that forms, which are feminine, constitute darkness in relation to the relative “light” of meaning. However, given, as previously explained, that it is in the nature of the veil both to conceal and reveal, the “night” is, in fact, itself merely an “allusion” to light.⁵⁴¹ Hence, in “disclos[ing] from the light [her] night,” Hagar implies that she is creating forms in which meaning manifests; indeed, she attests, “the hidden becomes apparent.” Moreover, she sees the hidden and lives in it through the creative

⁵⁴¹ Adonis, “The Sufi Aesthetic Dimension,” 31.

imagination, which is to say, through the body, and, in so doing, she encounters both self and other, which is merely the universal self, as evidenced by her statement that “we become congruent with one another.” In the final line, she reinforces the dynamic between masculine and feminine, other and self, implying that the former breathes her divisions into being; in other words, the breath of spirit infuses nature’s forms with meaning, language’s words with life.

As explained previously, however, this dynamic is necessarily ongoing, an endless cycle of life, death, and renewal. The form is meaning, but meaning is not the form; stated differently, each form is merely a single disclosure of meaning. Therefore, to mistake any given form for meaning as a whole is to mistake the apparent for the hidden to which it alludes. This, the poet implies, is the error of religious orthodoxy. Indeed, Hagar declares: *My concern is that [prophecy] touches only the foam of the body and the soul and the words,/that it remembers my robe and forgets my life.* In other words, she suggests, prophecy, symbolic of orthodoxy, extends only to the “foam” of the sea, which appears and disappears with the waves. It concerns itself merely with the physical body rather than the imagination and heart contained within, with the individual self rather than the universal self, with apparent words and forms rather than hidden meaning. In so doing, it addresses man only on his surface, issuing prescriptions, but disregarding or condemning that which confers upon him his humanity and vitality and renders him exceptional, namely, his ability to convene with light, to see it, to hear it, and to shape it. In other words, it denies his status as the *barzakh* and arrests or ignores the ongoing revelation which is creation.

More so than either of the previous two poems, *History Torn Apart* represents a direct repudiation of religion and prescriptive orthodoxy. Thus, Hagar exclaims: *His teachings banished us. Is that revelation?/Do they see me seeking an apple? Do they see me pulling time with the question’s rope, shouting: O’ father/everything between us is hell?/And now I am exiled in your name.* In other words, she implies, the teachings of religion have cast her into exile, condemned her for questioning, for seeking wisdom and knowledge, for indulging desire and temptation. The term “father” here is used in the broad sense of forefather; in other words, she addresses herself to those who have shaped the society which has ultimately rejected her, those in whose name she has been exiled merely for having embodied qualities condemned in their “teachings.” Indeed, she asks in a subsequent line: *O’ father/How does God not turn away from what you have done, tell me: How does he not fall into anger?* Significantly, therefore, there emerges in this poem as in others the notion that man does not speak for God and that religion is thus the purview not of God, but of man. The worldview proffered is thus not a

denial of the existence of God, but rather of man's claim to definitive knowledge of God and/or authority based upon singular and/or immutable interpretations of revelation.

In subsequent lines, Hagar advances similar criticism of the orthodox conception of God and its advocates, specifically with regard to their devaluation of femininity. She attests: *They claimed that I was created to be nothing but that vessel/to embrace the seed as though I were merely field and tilth... why then does the cosmos write its secrets/with the lover's hands?/And why then are the prophets born/in the bed of a woman?* In this line, Adonis uses the Arabic term “*ḥarth*,” a Qur’anic reference. The implication is, as he has argued elsewhere, that insofar as the religious culture conceives of the woman as the *ḥarth*, “she exists only for reproduction,” with the effect that “her femininity, all her revolutionary dimension, all her beauty as an essential element of existence, of the cosmos, are... eclipsed or disappear altogether.”⁵⁴² Similarly, in a subsequent line, Hagar inquires: *What do I say to my forefathers now? That if there were one lord, the One and Only, then why/does he not say to his children: You are all the same?... Why is one allowed to dominate, and the other commanded to be his servant and slave.* Adonis’s use of the Arabic term “*salaf*,” which I have translated here as “forefathers,” is an implicit denunciation of those who might argue for a return to life as it was lived in the time of the Prophet Muḥammad, that is, those who move toward the past rather than the future. Moreover, the following lines represent a condemnation of any religious interpretation that justifies and/or perpetuates inequality among humanity, such as, Adonis argues, has been the case between man and woman. Indeed, through the voice of Hagar, the poet heralds the death of a culture steeped in orthodoxy: *I feel as though... the place is dissolving and its heritage... as though the paint that covers our prophecies is fading.*

In the embers of its death, Adonis imagines a culture in which the primordial, mystical relationship between feminine and masculine, self and other, has been restored. Indeed, Hagar implores: *Why/o’ luminous absent one who illuminates/only our illusions/only that which is not illuminated, why/does it not come to us/the moment of love – sex.... And why is it not considered, how we delve into our bodies/how we are united... As though I were/in your splendor, the secret of splendor/Where there is no difference between this earth and that sky?* In this verse, the poet reinforces the notion that the union between masculine light and feminine veil is reflective of love, and yet simultaneously implies that this union, which unites spirit with nature, has, in the dominant culture, been interrupted. This interruption is tantamount to an absence of love. Moreover, Hagar proclaims: *I do not want you – I rush toward you, and I cry out: You do not*

⁵⁴² Adonis, *Violence and Islam*, 70.

come/You do not come, o' awaited one/And I echo in these moments the words that the air did not say/to the despair of the trees. In these lines, therefore, Hagar assumes the voice of the feminine in addressing the masculine, accusing him of failure to attend their union. The Arabic verb “*hafā*”, which I have translated here as “to rush toward,” carries an even stronger connotation than in English and might thus be translated also as “to be starved of”; alternate definitions suggest the falling into error, as well as the violent beating of the heart. All of these definitions apply here, though “error” in this context, is, of course, subversive in the positive sense. The essential message is that the masculine has abandoned its rightful role; in so doing, the breath of the masculine, the “air,” has ceased speaking to the “trees.” The symbolism in this last line reflects the mystical concept of despair, the moment at which lover loses sight of the beloved and which the poet invokes directly through his usage of the term “*ya ʻ*”. Thus the poet implicitly posits the disconnect between man and woman within culture and society as analogous to the mystical state of despair or hopelessness experienced by the mystic relative to the divine. Indeed, Hagar proclaims elsewhere: *O' man, cross-legged in the lexicon of revelation, who are you?/Remove heaven's robe, and come to me/in the robe of nature.*

In the poem's final verses, Hagar has attained spiritual awakening, embracing her femininity and thus her role in nature, as nature. *I awaken, she attests: combing my hair; turning my face to my beloved./The roots that are rooted in this/earth, these are my roots. The water of Zamzam flows/through my veins as another blood. I lock existence in my face now... I witness that I belonged to nature first,/and I belong to nature last.* In other words, she has achieved union with the beloved, notably without man as her interlocutor; rather she has discovered the masculine other within herself, that is, the light which speaks to her nature and completes her. Significantly, while Adonis has provided diacritical marks which impose the literal translation of “combing my hair,” one need note that, without them, this phrase might be translated as “searching my poetry,” thus implying the centrality of poetic language to spiritual experience. Moreover, reference to the water of Zamzam symbolizes the water of knowledge, of creation, which courses through her veins, conferring both vitality and sanctity.

Ultimately, therefore, this verse suggests, she has “lock[ed] existence in [her] face”; in other words, she has become its matrix. However, her awakening has coincided with a rejection of Abraham, her husband, as a symbol of that masculinity which simultaneously condemns and imprisons her. In addressing him, she declares: *I wonder/Are you alive/in your book or in your life/or are you dead?... My concern is that my head is filled/with your emptiness... My concern is that you are a suffocation.* In these lines, therefore, the poet implies that one who, like Abraham, is bound by the “book” of revelation, the dogma of prescriptive orthodoxy, is not, in

fact, truly alive. He is, rather, a “suffocation,” which smothers the breath of life and stifles the impulse for creation. Moreover, Hagar rejects the notion that the purpose of her body is merely to be the place of his pleasure, or the role of her being merely the guard of his honor: *How do I persuade my body to be merely an oasis/through which your body strolls, persuade my self/to be for it mere sentry?*

Alas, the final scene in the poem finds Hagar in the middle of a village square, charged with sorcery and seduction, stoned to death by a crowd at the behest of man. The implication of this scene is thus that man, who elevates himself at the expense of woman, through the derivation and enforcement of laws which are based not in nature but in narrative, ultimately succeeds not merely in extinguishing the feminine, but also himself. Indeed, in this final scene, it is not just Hagar who is stoned to death, but also her child, Ishmael, father of the Arab people. Her death symbolizes, moreover, what Adonis deems a circumscription on freedom of thought and creativity writ large. On the brink of her murder, a voice from the crowd cries out: *Do not roam, o' imagination, over our land... Do not roam among us.*

Conclusion

Ultimately, an analysis of love as a theme in Adonis's poetry reveals that it is not merely restricted to romance, nor is it defined in exclusively spiritual terms, though it incorporates both eroticism and mysticism. Rather, Adonis's poetry proffers a vision of love as desire, a longing for the unknown, which serves as the catalyst for creative activity, including but not limited to the contexts of sexual union and writing. As such, it constitutes the animating force driving his broader worldview, in which life is inextricably linked to growth, development, innovation, dynamism, and renewal. This vision, though modernist in nature, is heavily influenced by mystical thought. Any comprehensive analysis of his love poetry must therefore take into consideration all of these dimensions. Indeed, just as Adonis posits woman as the foremost image of nature, so does he present physical love as the foremost image of creativity, rivaled, arguably, only by the writing of poetry. In sexual union, the woman symbolizes femininity, plurality, while the man symbolizes masculinity, universality, and yet this dynamic does not imply a hierarchy between the two, but rather a symbiosis which serves as the basis for existence itself; similarly, in writing, language represents femininity and the poet, masculinity. In both cases, this interplay between masculinity and femininity serves as the creative mechanism by which the individual self, or soul, draws closer to the unknown, for it

is also the mechanism by which the unknown reveals itself. One who seeks knowledge of the unseen is thus propelled by love, that is, the longing for discovery and union into an endless journey of “unveiling,” through which he comes to see all created things, all forms, as faces of God, that is, vessels of meaning, and through which he comes to participate in creativity and revelation. Fundamental to this capacity for vision is the creative imagination, which allows him to subsist in the space between the spiritual and phenomenal worlds.

In his analysis of Adonis’s work, Abu Deeb draws a distinction between his own interpretation and that of Khalida Said, Adonis’s wife, arguing that “[Adonis’s] movement towards dramatic effect and multiplicity of rhythm, meters, moods, images, voices, and visions of reality is, possibly unconsciously, an expression of his deeply rooted search for unity.”⁵⁴³ I would argue, however, that this disparity in interpretation is largely conceptual, or, perhaps, merely semantic. Abu Deeb is right to note that unity must first proceed from multiplicity and that a longing for unity of a sort is palpable in Adonis’s poetry; likewise, Said rightly emphasizes Adonis’s commitment to plurality and, by extension, his critique of the orthodox, monotheistic insistence on absolute unity. These ideas are not mutually exclusive, however; Adonis’s conception of unity derives from his interpretation of mystical ontology, whereby the universe constitutes an “integrating sphere-vault in which the singularities of creation embrace each other.”⁵⁴⁴ Indeed, a central message in Adonis’s poetry is the idea that the transcendent is immanent in creation and thus plural in nature; while meaning is not exhausted by any one form, indeed, by any finite number of forms, nor is it present, save in a theoretical sense, distinctive of and beyond form. It derives, in other words, from the fundamental mystical notion of He/not-He (*Huwa/la Huwa*). Hence, Adonis’s aversion to the notion of unity applies merely to unity insofar as it construes meaning as the pinnacle of a hierarchical structure from which it is largely separate, such as one finds, for instance, in religious orthodoxy as he perceives it. By contrast, the unity he espouses is one in which meaning is diffuse, more web than pyramid, the various “singularities of creation” integrated in their disparate manifestations of it.

Through this lens, one arrives at a better understanding of Adonis’s emphasis on the significance of the human as *barzakh*, the physical body, and the critical relationship between masculine and feminine in relation to spiritual experience and existence. As previously explained, the human being, insofar as his body unites spirit with matter, constitutes the

⁵⁴³ Abu Deeb, “The Perplexity of the All-Knowing,” 309.

⁵⁴⁴ Adonis, “The Sufi Aesthetic Dimension,” 44.

barzakh, the liminal space between spiritual and physical realms. The creative imagination, through which he accesses the spiritual realm, renders the body “transparent,” meaning that the body itself “becomes an element for generating the imaginative structure of the [interior] place... which [then] reflects upon the exterior place, restructuring it in its image.”⁵⁴⁵ In other words, through the creative imagination, the human becomes a “two-sided mirror” between the spiritual and the physical realms, the hidden and the apparent, and, as such, reflective of the macrocosm in microcosm.⁵⁴⁶ To subsist in the body made transparent is thus to elide the dividing line between the perceptible and the imperceptible. Furthermore, it is by means of the interaction between masculine and feminine, meaning and form, light and nature, that these two realms continue to reinforce one another through ongoing processes of creation.

In the context of physical union, the beloved serves for the lover as the symbolic other through which the self unites with the spiritual realm and ultimately discovers and creates itself. The lover is forced to “absent” himself from his own qualities—that is, to suppress the feminine, individuated self—in order to recognize and exist within his beloved, in order to recognize, in other words, the other as himself. Ultimately, this process is reciprocal; both lovers absent themselves from their individual selves in their mutual love, thus discovering within themselves the universal self, or internal other, which is fundamentally congruent. Recognition of this congruence and ongoing exploration of the other, in turn, results in the evolution of the individual self. This maps directly onto the mystical progression from annihilation to subsistence. In this paradigm, therefore, masculinity refers to lack of individuation or singularity rather than “male as man,” and femininity to differentiation or multiplicity rather than “female as woman.” Man is a symbol, or image, of masculinity, rather than its sole proprietor, just as woman is the image of femininity in the context of the natural domain. In the context of writing, on the other hand, the poet, irrespective of gender, is the image of masculinity, which breathes meaning into form, and language that of femininity, which assumes multiple forms in the constitution of meaning, for mystical ontology regards the process of linguistic development as reflective of the process of creation writ large. Hence, for Adonis, language is “woman,” and writing the creative journey deemed “love.”

Ultimately, therefore, “Transformations of the Lover,” “Body,” and *History Torn Apart in the Body of a Woman*, all serve to illustrate the way in which Adonis understands love in relation to these particular ideas and within the overarching context of his emphasis on cultural

⁵⁴⁵ Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 137.

⁵⁴⁶ Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 137.

dynamism. “Transformations of the Lover” explores primarily the relationship between lover and beloved in physical union, along with the sanctity of the body and the creation of the self. Similarly, “Body” emphasizes the essential correlation between lover-beloved and poet-language, the body as the place of creative imagination, and the notion that the dialectic between hidden and apparent is intrinsically characterized by its dynamism, which is love. *History Torn Apart*, as a creative adaptation of the story of Hagar, interweaves these themes with a more explicit criticism of religious orthodoxy and the ensuing status of women in a society wherein, Adonis argues, religious orthodoxy has presided over the devaluation of femininity and nature more broadly. Indeed, he contends, “it is an extreme injustice towards women and everything related to them” that their essential purpose is reduced to motherhood.⁵⁴⁷ Of course, Adonis himself recognizes the woman as the foremost image of nature and femininity, for the very reason that the female womb symbolizes the “creative wellspring.” A more precise explanation of his position is therefore that prescriptive orthodoxy adopts the form and neglects the meaning; in so doing, it denies the form the status of the image, thus ignoring the fundamental relationship between essence and nature and denying the inherent divinity of femininity, or nature, which is, in turn, tantamount to the denial of creativity itself.

⁵⁴⁷ Adonis, *Violence and Islam*, 80.

CONCLUSION

The central message of Adonis's poetry, from the earliest stages of his career until the most recent, is that life is defined by creativity and transformation, that the essence of man lies in his capacity to create. This is, of course, a message of humanism, of modernism, which places the human being at the center of the world and seeks to shape the world in accordance with that perspective and in the interest of individual freedom. In Adonis's case, it is a message that enters into direct dialogue with religion, aimed at opposing the prevailing orthodoxy which he deems responsible for Arab cultural stagnation. More specifically, it is a message that opposes the conception of God as separate from man and of revelation as final and immutable, as well as the idea that man should be subject to the authority of laws derived from a single, fixed interpretation of scripture which is itself based on those conceptions. This iteration of God, he argues, like the many that preceded it, was a magnificent human creation, meant to assist man in his life and serve as an answer to the question of the invisible and the unknown.⁵⁴⁸ Adonis's criticism of the answer does not deny the validity of the question; indeed, it does not even condemn the answer itself so much as the notion that there is a definitive answer which precludes all others and thus obviates the need for further questioning. For religion to serve man and his evolution, his needs and concerns, Adonis maintains, scripture must be dynamic, just as life itself is dynamic.⁵⁴⁹ In other words, interpretation of the text must follow the movement of life, for to impose upon life a fixed interpretation is to strip it of its vitality. In practice, this means that the individual must be afforded the freedom to think and the authority to question and that man's creativity be regarded as an instrument of revelation rather than a source of heresy.

While this message has remained central to Adonis's poetry throughout his career, the conceptual frame through which he presents it has evolved. In the early stages of his career, during the late 1950s and early 1960s, he conveys modernist themes of fertility, renewal, and transformation primarily with recourse to mythological symbols and religious references; however, while these symbols remain prevalent in his poetry, the influence of the Arab heritage and of mysticism in particular becomes increasingly evident beginning in the mid-1960s. Indeed, from the end of his tenure at *Shi'r* until the present day, his poetry has presented modernist themes through the lens of mystical cosmological processes, specifically, the notion

⁵⁴⁸ Esber, *Conversations avec Adonis*, 163.

⁵⁴⁹ Esber, *Conversations avec Adonis*, 175.

of the dialectic of hidden and apparent realms and, by extension, the distinction between essence, meaning, and form, as well as the notion of the creative imagination and the so-called “renewal of creation in every moment.” This influence renders his poetry ostensibly more difficult to parse, requiring a certain familiarity with mystical cosmology and terminology on the part of the reader. Upon analysis, however, it becomes clear that the message itself has not changed, nor have the original themes; creativity, renewal, and transformation are at the core of every poem Adonis has ever written. Over time, they have simply become indistinguishable from these mystical processes.

Indeed, the purpose of this thesis has been to make this argument, namely, that a comprehensive study of Adonis’s poetry must incorporate into its analysis the mystical framework that underlies it, for this framework constitutes both the foundation and justification for his thought, including the modernist ideas which preceded it and for which he is best known. The five preceding chapters, therefore, are structured around the themes which, collectively, best explain the structure and nature of this framework and, by extension, the way it informs Adonis’s critical views on history, culture, and religion. Hence, Chapter I demonstrates that Adonis’s criticism of religion is founded largely upon what he regards as its emphasis on a singular vision, which, in turn, leads to the elevation of narrative and ideology over nature and consensus, of received knowledge over independent thought. In so doing, he argues, it is inextricably linked to violence, at the psychological level, in the form of the erasure of subjectivity and the circumscription of creativity, as well as, at the sociopolitical level, in the form of sectarianism. The purpose of this chapter is to highlight the essential difference Adonis identifies between religion, which he associates with *fiqh* and thus with prescription and singularity, and mysticism, which he associates with gnosis and plurality. While the former accepts as valid a single, fixed interpretation of revealed texts, derives its authority from that interpretation, and uses its authority to impose conformity, the latter regards revelation as fluid, open to interpretation, and privileges authority derived not from the text itself, but from the hidden realm, which precedes and transcends the text and which confers knowledge on the basis of direct experience. Moreover, the status quo, which elevates the former over the latter, amounts to the suppression of “explorative authority” by “prescriptive authority” and, in Adonis’s view, may also be conceived of as an attempt to deny, or even arrest, the cosmological process of transformation, by imposing a poverty of vision which fixates on established forms and meanings rather than on the creation of new ones. An analysis of a variety of poems spanning from the 1960s to 2012 demonstrates that this essential criticism in Adonis’s work has remained constant over time.

Building on the points raised in Chapter I with regard to religion, Chapter II argues that Adonis considers political authority to be the second pillar of “prescriptive authority,” united in an historic alliance with religious orthodoxy to perpetuate a singular vision of truth in service of maintaining its own power. Thus, it confers upon itself the authority both to impose text-based religious precepts and to curtail freedom of thought and expression. In other words, it is largely the mechanism by which the singularity of vision established by religious orthodoxy is enforced. Analyses in this chapter demonstrate that, similar to his views on religion, Adonis’s criticism of this alliance is long-standing and largely unchanging. The analysis of *Al-Kitāb* demonstrates that Adonis locates the origin of this alliance between religious and political power in the creation of the first caliphate. Moreover, the analyses of poems directing criticism at the Ba‘ath Party demonstrate his conviction that the essence of the problem as it relates to religion is less the content of religious belief and more the religious mentality of singularity. Indeed, in cases where the political power is nominally secular, he argues that the same insistence on singularity and conformity is reflected in its treatment of the individual and thus indicative of the more fundamental religious mentality of singularity ingrained in the culture. Therefore, the collective analysis of Adonis’s poetry in Chapters I and II indicate that he views this relationship between religion and politics, or “prescriptive orthodoxy,” in which singularity is respectively imagined and enforced, as the fundamental cause for cultural stagnation.

The analysis of poems in Chapter III demonstrates the principal concepts of prescriptive orthodoxy Adonis seeks to dismantle, namely, that of a God who is separate from man, who demands above all submission and obedience; that of a human authority, who confers upon himself the role of arbiter and spiritual intermediary and thus precludes explorative authority; and, finally, that of singularity, either in vision, interpretation, or form, from which, arguably, the former two derive. Notably, as demonstrated by the three poems included in this chapter, Adonis advances these concepts by rewriting and subverting familiar cultural narratives, thus demonstrating the openness of each narrative to interpretation and, by extension, the inherent multiplicity and dynamism of truths which present themselves as singular. Moreover, by highlighting the mystical lens through which he rewrites the narratives, particularly “Eighth Heaven” and “Ode of Babel,” which were published later than “The New Noah,” one understands that Adonis’s espousal of mysticism largely stems from the fact that he interprets mystical concepts, such as repeated divine self-disclosure, divine immanence, and gnosis as being in direct accord with his own modernist principles of humanism, individual freedom, creativity, dynamism, and renewal. Thus, his posture of refusal is defined by both a negative and positive vision of Arab culture; in other words, it is indeed a rejection of religious

orthodoxy, but, equally important to note is the fact that it constitutes an embrace of mystical heterodoxy, which is no less a product of the same culture, though, by his own admission, less dominant in it.

Chapter IV expands upon fundamental ideas introduced in Chapter III, making the argument that Adonis defines madness as a combination of refusal and vision. As stated in the previous paragraph, refusal applies, of course, to the prevailing religious orthodoxy as well as to the state which lends it authority and enforces its prescriptions, but also, and more fundamentally, to its emphasis on singularity, which effectively denies and condemns the image and, in so doing, denies and condemns the imagination itself. Thus, this chapter demonstrates, vision serves as the complement of refusal, and may be understood as insight into the interior world of essence and meaning, accessed by means of the imagination, which serves as the *barzakh* between the hidden and apparent realms. Indeed, Chapter IV aims to establish the significance to Adonis's thought of the mystical concept of the creative imagination, which serves as foundation upon which he bases his understanding of the nature of the man in relationship to God and/or the hidden realm, man's creativity, the notion of prophecy, and even the nature of language and the role of poetry. It also seeks to establish the progression of Adonis's presentation of these ideas, from the early 1960s, in which he published *Songs of Miḥyār*, to later in his career when he published "Baḥlūl's Ode" and "Barzakh." While mystical terminology does indeed appear in the former, it appears much more evidently in the context of a complete mystical epistemology in the latter two. Collectively, however, these three poems indicate that, for Adonis, madness begins with the refusal of prescriptive authority, which he associates with the conviction that revelation has ended and thus with stasis, and proceeds with imaginative vision, through which one penetrates the hidden realm and gains, through explorative authority and gnosis, the awareness that revelation is ongoing, that existence is defined by the never-ending creation of new relationships between hidden essence and apparent form, and, therefore, by the generation of new images and thus new meaning. It is in this way that life is renewed and culture rendered dynamic; hence one sees quite easily how mystical vision aligns with his advancement of modernist ideas of rebirth, renewal, and dynamism.

Finally, Chapter V advances the argument that Adonis presents love as creativity's generative force, a tautology which may be simplified as "love is creativity." Existence as Adonis understands it is based upon the dialectic of the hidden and the apparent, which serves as the basis for creativity or "movement," which is love. It is worth noting that the earliest poem that clearly and directly presents love in this mystical framework appears only in the mid-1960s. Indeed, most of his earlier work scarcely mentions the theme of love at all,

centering squarely on the theme of creativity. In other words, love becomes a more prominent theme in his poetry only after he conceptualizes it within the framework of mysticism and equates it to creativity. Adopting this framework, Adonis applies the mystical dialectic of the hidden and apparent to the relationship between man and woman, self and other, poet and language, presenting it as a dynamic interaction between masculinity and femininity, of which all these relationships are exemplary. Moreover, Adonis's conceptualization of this dialectic, as well as his interpretation of the mystical states of annihilation and subsistence, directly align with his criticism of religion and prescriptive orthodoxy. As explained in Chapter I, two of Adonis's principal criticisms of religion in relation to its perpetuation of violence include its denigration of nature and its failure to recognize the other, both of which stem from an insistence on fixity and singularity and thus, in his view, constitute a denial of love. Through the lens of mysticism, Adonis maintains the immanence of God in nature, including in man himself, and conceptualizes the "other" as something internal, an integral part of the self's own identity. This aligns, of course, with a commitment to modernist humanism.

Ultimately, therefore, Adonis's poetic project is a modernist one, characterized by themes of fertility, rebirth, and renewal and guided by principles of humanism and individual freedom. Over the course of decades, this has never wavered; from the earliest stages of his career, these values have informed his criticism of religious orthodoxy, the state, and the relationship between the two. However, it is the argument of this thesis that, notably from the mid-1960s onwards, Adonis's poetry reflects mystical notions of the hidden and apparent, gnosis, vision, creative imagination, and love which coalesce with previously-held modernist principles of individual freedom, humanism, creativity, and renewal. Therefore, any comprehensive analysis of his poetry must reflect this fundamental correspondence between modernism and mysticism, which serves, arguably, as its defining feature, for mystical cosmology and epistemology has provided Adonis with a conceptual framework which he uses to express and defend modernist values. Indeed, his criticism of prescriptive authority casts religious orthodoxy as that manner of thought which separates God from man, drawing an unequivocal distinction between Creator and created, declaring an end to revelation while simultaneously conferring upon itself authority to adjudicate based upon a fixed interpretation of the known. Political power serves as its ally and its complement, insofar as it provides religious orthodoxy with the means to impose itself and enforce its prescriptions. Analyses of his poetry that fail to highlight the mystical element might encounter little difficulty in parsing these ideas; however, they are unlikely to address comprehensively the reasons he considers prescriptive orthodoxy so problematic beyond the level of culture and society, nor are they

likely to address entirely the justification he provides for his criticism. Indeed, only when read through the lens of mysticism does one perceive in his poetry that his criticism is rooted not merely in cultural and social objection, but in a prior, more profound objection, which is ontological, existential, and epistemological. In other words, his rejection of a singular, immutable notion of truth as deleterious is based not merely upon modernist principles, but upon an understanding of the very nature of existence and essence of man which is inherently denied by singularity and immutability.

This aim of this thesis is therefore to demonstrate that an understanding of Adonis's commitment to modernism requires an understanding of his commitment to mysticism. Modernism appears first in his poetry; however, within ten years of his career, he identifies mysticism as the system of thought which best explains and justifies modernism's values and principles. Thus, while modernism is "prior" in his poetry chronologically, mysticism is "prior" in the sense that it serves as the conceptual foundation. While this thesis has provided analysis illustrating this argument, the analysis is by no means exhaustive. Adonis's poetic output spans more than seven decades and hundreds of poems, many of which are dozens of pages long. The poems mentioned in this analysis constitute merely a fraction of the broader corpus. In isolating only five themes for the purpose of analysis, many other prevalent, and relevant, themes have been mentioned only briefly and/or omitted entirely from the scope of this thesis, all of which provide the basis for future study.

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