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Issa J. Boullata

TEXTUAL INTENTIONS: A READING OF ADONIS' POEM 'UNINTENDED WORSHIP RITUAL'

In his long poem entitled "Quddās bi-lā qaṣd" (Unintended Worship Ritual),¹ the well-known Syrian–Lebanese poet Adonis (Dr. ʿAlī Aḥmad Saʿīd) celebrates a love relationship with a young woman he came to know while he was a professor at the Syrian University in Damascus. He mentions two dates and two cities at the end of the poem, suggesting perhaps that he began writing the poem in Damascus in January of 1976 and that he finished it in Beirut in August of 1978. He had moved to Damascus from Beirut during the early years of the Lebanese Civil War and accepted a teaching position at the Syrian University, but he later returned to Beirut, where his home had been since he had left his native Syria to become a Lebanese citizen in 1956. The same young woman also inspired him to write a much shorter undated poem entitled "Awwal al-ijtiyāḥ" (The Beginning of Sweeping Annihilation)² in which his passionate love is expressed in terms of a deep desire to be natural, to give vent to the powers within the self, and to remove what he considers to be the constraints of hypocritical, repressive sociocultural conventions in Arab society.

Though the shorter poem is easier to understand, perhaps because of its stronger lyrical appeal, it is as involved in broader societal considerations as the longer poem, but is without its complexity and depth. I have enjoyed reading both poems, but I felt that the longer one was more challenging. What follows is "a map of reading," in which I present an analytical interpretation of the longer poem and a number of critical observations, in an attempt to explore the poet's textual intentions and understand the deeper dimensions of his poem.

Before doing this, however, I should like to pose this question: Does it really matter to know that Adonis wrote his long poem "Quddas bi-la qasd" to celebrate the love relationship he experienced in Damascus while he was a professor at the Syrian University?

There are those who would judge poetry by insisting on the text as the ultimate reality of literary structure and the real and sole object of literary criticism. To them, only matters that are intrinsic to the poem can be taken into consideration. The poem should be studied as an aesthetic structure and its success should depend on the poet's ability to combine the various elements of this structure in a manner that produces harmony among them as he expresses

meaning. Attention should therefore be paid to the poem's sounds, its vocabulary, its phraseology, its grammatical constructions, its rhythms and cadences, its imagery and ideas, and how all these elements are put together in relation to one another in order to produce semantic effect and create an artistic mode of existence. This detached, impersonal, almost antiseptic critical attitude to the poem has its advantages, and it has been quite legitimate when it has been practiced by the Russian formalists in the 1920s, and later by the New Critics in the United States and some of the Yale critics and Structuralists. But when carried too far it may produce strange poets and critics who forget that language, after all, is a social phenomenon whose basic role is to communicate, to convey meaning, and not merely to create new forms or indulge in enjoyable play, as children might do when blowing soapsuds into bubbles of various forms and colors.

On the other hand, there are those who believe that a poem is a matrix of relations and connections, and that these include the social and cultural influences on the poet by his society. For them, matters extrinsic to the text can be taken into consideration, and often should be. A poem is not only the verbal structure—for the circumstances that created it are imbedded in it and are therefore part of it. This critical attitude to the poem has its advantages, and it is quite legitimate, as when practiced by certain Marxist critics. But it may also produce strange poets and critics when carried too far, as it was in the Socialist Realism school in the Soviet Union under Stalin; for it may make its votaries forget that literature is an art which, among other things, seeks to create beauty and harmony, and not merely reflect the influence of society and its putative need to propagate ideological commitment to a cause, however noble.

As for my interpretation of Adonis' poem, my method attempts to avoid the polarity of these two opposite attitudes. I recognize the validity of the biographical detail imbedded in the poem as the point from which the poem takes off. The love relationship is a strictly private matter and should not concern me as a critic. A future biographer of Adonis might want to explore it further: perhaps to know who that woman was; what her name, her age, and her background were; what the nature of the poet's relationship with her was and what happened to it when he left Damascus; etc. But that is not the concern of the critic.

What is of concern to me in studying this poem is to see how the poet expresses his love, and what he does with it as a theme that, though basic to the poem, is made to transcend the limitations of private personal feeling and reach out to basic things in contemporary Arab society. The poet's private consciousness, in this case, has been enlarged to involve collective Arab consciousness. Yet, however noble or commendable this act may be, I am not concerned with it as only an idea, but as an aesthetic structure as well. How the poet manipulates the Arabic language, how he creates the metaphors and symbols to convey his meaning, how he uses his cultural heritage and history—these are essential matters for the critic, and I will give some consideration to them in my interpretation.

The following "map of reading" is, of course, one of possibly several readings. Other readers may well find other meanings in the poem or further meanings that I missed, depending on their approach and the individual cultural baggage each brings to his or her reading.

Unintended Worship Ritual

ADONIS

He: Will you be embarrassed
if I dedicate a poem to
you?

She: On the contrary, this will
be glory to me.

I

And thus, she was an unintended worship ritual,
a blend of probabilities,
and he was dissipating himself
on what resembled a path, an alley
in the Naqqāshāt neighborhood
or in al-Qaṣṣā^c
reading the tree trunks of history,
going towards a woman who read the branches.

“This [poem] is for her.”

The landlord appeared like a rainbow
that he had seen in some forest.

“She will come tomorrow.”

Peace be to that house, silent bell that it was,
penetrating the bosom of night.

Hail to this stray poet
twinkling like a star about to fall.

For some time,

he had been expressing exultation
but experiencing desperation.

[Now] it is another fortune to study her,
it is another anticipation to be beleaguered by her,
to surge in her, to look up:

“Are you from my abyss and my chaos?”

“Come to me, to my arena,
O dissipated man.

I will be the one to surprise you;
you, the one to conquer my interior.

Both of us will be a war, other than this war.”

But why is he filled only by a love he waits for?
And why has this love not come?

In a love that has not yet come,
he paints his face on the clouds
and grants his body to the shades of memory.

Life is a flute of dust
and the willows of sadness extend their shade to the horizon.

Here are the stars above al-Ḥamīdiyya,
guided by the balconies of al-Muhājirīn.
They stretch their hands to Qāsiyūn,
leaving their thighs in obscure beds.
It is the city: a soldier made of snow
with a hole in his left side, the rest belongs to us.
It is history: a sick horse whose legs
drip of brackish water.
O salt, grow in the wounds like deer horns.
Hunger is a birth,
and the earth is too narrow for the earth.

How will he read you, O woman,
how will he read you, O city?
What are his intentions, what is his goal?
His goal is thunder, his intentions are the flood.

The air determined words for the poet he did not understand.
The poet was being charmed, turned into a tender twig for the city.
The horizon sniffed at him and was refreshed by him—

Your sun is new, O day,
the shade extends itself and is obsequious
the plants adorn themselves and are fertile—
the erigeron, the speedwell—
the sky curves and the air is thin.
Silence.

We hear nothing but the sound of the lungs:

“Blended in you,
I sigh you,
I write you in every one of my cells,
I speak you,
and I surrender to you, O my language.”
“A reed bowing to you,
a blade of grass intoxicated by you,
I scatter myself in your features, [O poet,]
I take root in you and say to my body:
Ploughed are you by his body,
we are transformed into one field. And I say:
Wait for me on the farthest side of the harvest,
be my autumn—
 spring is a preparation,
 summer is a thirst,
 winter is a waiting—
and ripen me, O poet-autumn,

and I will sweep time away
like a fierce river
and I will cry: I am life,
perish in me,
burn,

O you who have cropped up in my eyes,
let us inaugurate the kingdom
of our two bodies,

and declare:

I love you and I shake loose the bounds of the body.
I love you and I grow in you as a magic plant.
I love you and I say your love transcends me.
I love you and I say: My love is a river
and you will never cross a river twice.”

II

And thus
he was a tower of light
as high as the horizon.
He filled space with space,
connected time with time.
And thus she called him
the sweetheart who exiled her to him.
And she whispered to herself:

“Adorn yourself with him, he is lightning,
stand in his way,
jostle him,
hold your ground and be diversified . . .
We are each other’s sacrifice,
we are each other’s worship ritual.”

Make me deserve relationship with you, [O poet,]
my members overflow with intoxication
and I believe you are the last horizon
that contains me.

I believe that you are the last body I contain,
that is why I am afraid of you, [O woman-city,]
but

take me to yourself,
O house of seduction, desire, ecstasy.
Whisper to me tenderly of your invisible world,
fuse me in you, join me to you,
make me wade in anxiety,
and make fear surge upon me.

III

(Her body being his language by which he spoke,)
 he listened to her body speak
 about travel betwixt ink and paper,
 between member and member,
 countering—
 talking of the body's coup, establishing its power,
 talking to build up the regime of blood
 between their two bodies,
 talking to institute a writing as even as her body,
 to remain high at the very level of death,
 thinking that . . .

Is this why the poet says:
 I create/uncreate nothing but splits and cracks?
 Is this why he says to the woman-city:
 I write in order to be yours,
 my face is a meteor and you are space?

And her body asked itself:
 Am I an allusion to his knowledge?
 Is it his meaning that is constellated around me or is it his image?
 And her body wrote:

Say: His face has been transformed into dew
 dripping from the balconies.
 Say: His face went out to accompany time
 and here are the tribes of grass
 improvising an attack on distance
 with him.

Thus they declared:
 We are the two primal bodies, death is our third body.

Thus she was writing:
 "Time is twain: a silent one and a speaking one.
 The speaking one is the body; the silent one, death."

Thus he was reading:
 "O tailor, I have a ripped love, will you stitch it?"
 "[Yes,] if you have threads of wind."

Then, what remains is that we love
 and do not know why,
 what remains is what no regime can grant,
 what remains is what no power can forbid.
 What remains is the freedom that I kiss you,
 the freedom that you surrender.
 I become incarnate in you and profusely sing your praises,
 you become incarnate in me and profusely sing my praises.
 We beautify the crust of the earth.

We sexualize the universe.

IV

The poet went on reading the city's fortune,
wherever its star fell on his papers.
He is writing to you, O star,
and he says he is one of your infantry
in the camp of desire,
and he calls upon the elements to fight.
But how will he read you, O city,
how will he get out of your green basin
overflowing with epidemics
tasting of antidote and jasmine innocence?
Truly, you are the navel
and in you is the vagina of the earth.
How will I read you, O woman-city?

Sweetly, you cut up my body, vein by vein.
There is nothing for me to offer
but a little joy
and much sorrow.
However, I grant your children all my anger
and all my strength
as I teach my life to be one way: the body,
and as I tell my language to be one word: freedom.

V

In the language that learns to be freedom,
the poet asked the Baradā river:
 "Barada, is there a face left, just one face,
 that really frowns when he frowns,
 that really smiles when he smiles—
 just one face
 with which to exchange
 the naturalness of rock and the truthfulness of the wind?"

In the naturalness of rock and the truthfulness of the wind
the night, while looking at the poet,
made a star of another lineage with some resemblance to violets
and some resemblance to a woman in love
to whom he clung.
His soul hated war
but his body loved destruction
and he was muttering to himself:
 The sky is for the stars,
 the earth for the rock,
 where is your place, O my like,
 O you whom they have called man?

For history thinks with its feet
and here it is,
struggling to float between rock and rock,
here it perishes like thunderstruck birds
whistling around windows that do not open,
raving and vanishing.

For the city snows words
and every house goes in a different direction.
Every word has a tombstone
rising above the cracking ice guarded by moss,
and time underfoot
is s-p-l-i-t-t-i-n-g.

Falling leaves have warned the poet.
A barren countryside has threatened his breaths.
For fields have haunches adorned with blood stones
and the pure soil becomes worn out
and its members are perishing iron.
The poet asked:
 "O wind that backbites the perfume,
 what confuses you about the sigh of roses?"

VI

Like the sigh of roses,
she emerged from the basin of infatuation
to her destiny. She was musk
being crushed between two lips,
the rest of her members being stingily ceded.
How strange this woman in love is:
a trunk of a tree snaps off in front of her,
a corolla of a flower takes possession of her.
Here he is burning up again, his depths are on fire,
and here are his members
branching out into luxuriant thickets.

How strange this man in love is:
a trunk of a tree snaps off in front of him,
a corolla of a flower takes possession of him.
He risks his rituals,
and among what remains of him are Imru^ḡ al-Qays
and a friend on his way to al-Niffarī
offering him the cup of intoxication;
hallucination may have an aureole
and tears may have a halo of waves,
a bed that conveys us
or a ship that distills our two bodies.

The aroma of the two bodies
may change into coveys of birds
that run the affairs of the air.
We may part,
with nothing between our two bodies
but our two bodies.

For this is the habit of his limbs,
O you whom he has called his sweetheart,
and you are the custom of his eyelashes.
Then, otherwise, however . . .

VII

Then, otherwise, however . . .
The lust of the skin, the pleasures of the muscle,
and her star began to fall on his papers:
Is the sun, this year,
better than last year, O star?
Are the clouds more reproductive?

But obscurity is married to the ashes
and coincidence is recalcitrant even in backgammon.

His body was more than he could speak,
his action was more than he could imagine,
chased as he was by some theology or more,
embraced by some heresy or more.
Conjure up your proofs, O present time,
O faucet that rhymes with the water of abasement.
You are the firewood bundle, and you are the law of burning;
you are the disease, and you are immune:
you are not feeble, you are not faint.
He falls in you, O present time,
guided by the balconies—
It once happened that he took the streets
as he would newspapers,
seeing them drawn out as letters
and seeing the letters getting fleshy
and full of fat,
then turning into nets and shop-signs . . .
It is for the rays of the sun
to pick up a woman's body and ask:
How many centuries deep is your wound, O body?
And it is for the sidewalks
to hug the women, forest after forest of them,
and let the outcast ambush the departure of the breasts.

The poet began clamoring as if he was rinsing his interior:
 O checkered city, your backbone has been broken
 and I have been soiled with your spray.
 Break up in splinters and scatter me in your several directions;
 it is serene weather for me to be a cloud in you,
 it is brightness when you darken my paths.
 Welcome to you, O sacrifice-body,
 O good footnote in the text of a watcher
 that dominates and whispers evil.
 Hail to you, O sexual history.

Night was withdrawing like a mystic poppy
 and entering the forest of the limbs.

VIII

A moment of lust, a moment of rapture.
 Drunkard time is intoxicated with your name,
 O woman-city. But my thirst is a solar oven
 and your eyes have no match,
 O abyss that mingles with me,
 that my infatuation gives to my eyes,
 that my members steal—
 I am the horizon adorned with your passions.

And in the night withdrawing like a mystic poppy
 and entering the forest of the limbs,
 we heard, you and I, a whispering of trees,
 an exhalation of underground vaults,
 the narrow lanes being cells of raw embers
 wherein time becomes effeminate in a masked ball
 and flowers exude an adopted masculinity.

[Man,] yours is this healing evil impregnated with lilac and mandrake.
 [Woman,] yours is this muscle embellished with time's lacework.
 You[, woman,] are the foundry of the forbidden.
 You[, man,] are the cellar of pleasures.

O copulative hymn, concatenate uninterruptedly
 in a wildness as smooth as muskmelons;
 and you, *thuluth* calligraphy,
 penetrate the *kūfī* and the *dīwānī* scripts
 on front windows that record
 the history of the furrows of desire.
 You and I were muttering:
 The oxeye whinnies,
 the thorns turn into roses.

We need to abide in another body and gather up our harvest,

we need to ravish the civility of language and shout:
We are the two green wild animals
roaring as a kindness from the sea . . .

Like transmission nerves, our words were spreading
between Qāsiyūn and Jaramānā.
Time in our bodies was a vast land on fire,
sorrow in our features had mountains and lakes.
But the earth was diversifying itself
and the ploughing was getting deeper.
Thus, under the authority of the trees we advanced,
our two mediating face panes reconnoitering,
wearing the forms of night.
And I noticed your quiet temperament
entering its beautiful ruin.
I repeated:

In sorrow I give you my name,
in exile I grow in you.
Droop above us, O trees;
fill us, fear not, O invisible world.

IX

And we exhausted you, O other night
that hangs like a bell from the necks of the streets,
and we refreshed you, O other wakefulness
that hangs like a trellis in our bodies.
Our disclosing talk began to open up and branch out
as if it had become our enemy and the friend of space.
And I saw how any plant would scratch you
in my movable forests,
and how the erigeron belongs to the family
of your composite flowers.

An erotic touch
and cells are swept away—
I exclude you from
how, why, and where,
and I practice my inimitable miracle.
Wine-like, fine pubescence
and I add my alcohol to your liquor
and betake myself with you towards deep waters
that absorb my body parts.
Fill them both, fear not, O invisible world.
Once again, O poet,
soothsaying clouds given up to rain

cover you and prophesy:
He will marry a cloud
so that he may not know in whom to take shelter.
O thunder, say his home is your home.

x

O thunder, say his home is your home,
and choose your name:
Damascus.
In the memory of his days, the millstone of your ravaging
is still being engraved,
sounds bearing the power of funerals
are still being inscribed;
but here is your name being doubled now
and, by the glory of your other name,
it is now poetry
that recasts you letter by letter
in order that you will be within people's reach,
in order that you will be at hand so long as there is poetry.
He often covered his wound—aching for her—with anger
but it was not healed.
In her ebbing, he was often brushed aside
but was not defeated;
in her niggardly reserve and coolness,
he dug in, he pecked and pecked,
but did not retreat.
By what right do you deny me yourself?
says the poet.
You are the ray and he is your reflection,
you are the directions and all travel is towards you.
Your body is a state-owned garden burdened with taxes
and his heart has the bliss of collecting.
You are the leaven of the paths
leading to infatuation and extremes of splendor,
and you are seduction.
By what right do you deny me yourself?
says the poet.
By what right can we have discord with each other?
Out of the question!
I am possessed by you,
straying toward you,
delegated to you by the wind.

Damascus, January 1976–
Beirut, August 1978

Translated³ from the Arabic
by Issa J. Boullata

A MAP OF READING

I

And so, there was the poet in love with a young woman, and there was a worship of a beloved he did not intend and a blend of probabilities that dissipated him. And like Arab poets of old who mentioned the encampments of their sweethearts, he mentions the Naqqāshāt and the Qaṣṣā^c neighborhoods of Damascus that lie on his way to the young woman's home. He also mentions the stars above al-Ḥamīdiyya and Qāsiyūn, and the telltale balconies of al-Muhājirīn that guide the stars instead of being guided by them, the poet himself being like a twinkling star about to fall.

He thinks to himself before seeing the woman at her home, beleaguered by her as he was. This woman will bring him out of his desperation, out of his abyss and chaos. She will bring wonder and surprise back to his life as her interior stands there for him to conquer. Theirs will be a war, but not like the Lebanese Civil War. It will be one of joy in anticipation, of exultation in discovery.

Meanwhile, Damascus, as a paragon of the contemporary Arab world, is a cold, heartless city, like a soldier made of snow with a hole in his left side. Arab history is at a low point: it is no more the ebullient, galloping horse that conquered lands between Andalusia and Samarqand; it is rather a sick horse whose legs drip with brackish water. The contemporary Arab world is all but dead. A rebirth is needed. The yearning for rebirth, for new life, kindles the poet's spirit and excites him as this woman's intriguing self. For him, she is the Arab city, she is Arab history and civilization, she is Arab life:

How will he read you, O woman,
 how will he read you, O city?
 What are his intentions, what is his goal?
 His goal is thunder, his intentions are the flood.

Here, then, is the poet's goal: a thunderous poetry followed by the flood that brings about a sweeping annihilation of old, unfulfilled living, only to usher in a beginning for a new and full Arab life. The poet's tool for change is language, and Adonis is definitely in love with his Arabic language, deeply in love. His love for the young Arab woman is fused with his love for his language. He says:

Blended in you,
 I sigh you,
 I write you in every one of my cells,
 I speak you,
 and I surrender to you, O my language.

As a man surrendering to the woman who has completely overwhelmed him, he has the same sensation as the poet surrendering to language. This surrender is not totally passive, however. It is the shaking loose of the bounds of the body, the freeing of the self so that it may act as nature intends it to. The woman also surrenders in the same manner. She says:

A reed bowing to you . . .
 I take root in you and say to my body:

Ploughed are you by his body,
we are transformed into one field.

Having taken root in him, the woman grows in him as a magic plant, as poetic language grows in the poet's craft. They are both one field as they inaugurate the unified kingdom of their two identities. Love for them is a continuous flow of new experience. There is no repetition. Every sensation is a new discovery, for love is a river whose running water is never crossed twice. Poetic language, like running water, remains fresh only as it keeps flowing with new ideas, emotions, and images. Once it stops flowing, it becomes brackish and develops all the ills of stagnant life. This is what has happened to Arab life. Love alone can redeem it.

II

For that to happen love must be true, it must be free, it must be comprehensive, all-encompassing: filling space with space, connecting time with time. The two lovers must be each other's sacrifice, each other's worship ritual. They must enter the love relationship knowing it is their last chance, their last horizon. Fear and anxiety must govern them as they hope to be fused in each other and to enter the invisible world of ecstasy.

III

As they begin to enter this invisible world, body language becomes supreme. Her body is his language and he listens to it talking of the power of poetry, the power of a new writing as even as her body. The poet begins to ask whether what he creates or uncreates is nothing but splits and cracks, for language to him—like this woman—is heavenly space, and all he can be is a bright but ephemeral meteor in it. The woman also begins to ask whether her existence—like that of language—is nothing but an allusion to the poet's knowledge and meaning, and whether the constellations around her are real stars in her space or reflections of the poet's image. They agree, however, and they declare that theirs are the primal bodies. Man and woman, like poet and language, must act on each other if there is going to be life. Love-making between them is essential for this purpose. Otherwise, there is silence and no language—there is death and no life. Love is therefore inevitable for those who would live. It cannot be stitched with threads of wind: it can only be entered into with the vigor and powerfulness that are its own nature—and also in freedom. Consequently, the poet says:

What remains is the freedom that I kiss you,
the freedom that you surrender.

He therefore becomes incarnate in her and she in him, both singing the praises of each other profusely. The earth, as a result, is beautified. Sex unifies man and woman, and their act of union sexualizes the whole universe. As when poet and poetry are one, their power renews the world and recreates life.

IV

The poet recognizes that woman mothers new life and that the city, in like manner, is the navel of civilized life and in it is the vagina of the earth. He declares himself to be one of the infantry of the city's new fortune, calling upon the elements to fight. He desires to rid the city of its overflowing epidemics that history engendered as he desires to rid the woman of her overwhelming historical injustices. There is much anguish in deciding how to read the situation, but he surrenders to the woman, to the city, to be cut up vein by vein in the fight. He has little joy and much sorrow as the anguish is suffered. But he undergoes it in order to eventually grant the children of the woman-city all his anger against the ills of history and give them all his strength to fight. As a result, only two things are of worth: the human body and freedom. The repression with which the body is treated must be replaced by the naturalness that frees its faculties, and the rigidity with which the Arabic language is used—like that of other Arab conventions—must be replaced by the freedom that helps full and creative expression.

V

The poet turns to the River Baradā that flows through Damascus and denounces to it the hypocrisy and repression he sees everywhere—not even a smile or a frown is genuine. All behavior is sham and does not have the naturalness of a rock or the truthfulness of the wind. Morals are repressive, politics coercive. His soul hates war but his body is moved to fight, to destroy in order to renew. Old morals, old politics must go for they don't belong in Damascus which, as a paragon of the contemporary Arab world, deserves better stars, stars of another lineage, stars resembling violets and women in love. Arab history is struggling to come into its own, to be its own self, to regain its submerged nature. But repressive, coercive Arab society defeats it:

here it is like thunderstruck birds
whistling around windows that do not open,
raving and vanishing.

Damascus is cold, dead: it snows words, each of which has a tombstone. The contemporary Arab world as a whole is in disarray: every house in it, every state in it goes in a different direction. But rising above the ice, guarded by moss, are the words that have learned to be freedom. The ice is cracking—

and time underfoot
is s-p-l-i-t-t-i-n-g.

Time cannot remain the same for long. The Arab future will bring a breakthrough. The poet knows this from the falling leaves and the barren countryside that await the spring. The pure soil is worn out with infertility, and the wind hardly believes that roses will bloom again when it hears their sigh.

VI

And like the sigh of roses aspiring for fulfillment, the woman emerges from infatuation to her destiny as a part of a relationship. The woman in love—like contemporary Arab life and civilization on the brink of a breakthrough—begins to surrender to the possibility of fulfillment. Like the Arabic language beginning to be pliant on the lips of the poet, she is like musk that has to be crushed to diffuse its perfume fully. The poet kisses the woman as she allows herself to be loved, to love back; her lips are ceded generously and then other parts of her body, stingily. To the poet, this is strange: for here is a man and here is a woman, both as solid as a trunk of a tree, yet they both snap off in front of each other, they begin to surrender to each other when their lips touch. Lips that appear as fragile as the corolla of a flower take possession of them in love. He is overcome by a sensation of growing and branching out into what he calls luxuriant thickets. His depths are on fire and he becomes impulsive, responding to natural instincts, not social rituals. He feels he is transformed, and what remains of him is in part a bold, free, and impassioned spirit like that of Imru^ḡ al-Qays and an intoxicated, mystical, and deep feeling like that of al-Niffarī who, in stances of love ecstasy, could also experience the divine. The two lovers are transported over waves of joy as their bodies unite in a passionate embrace.

Then what?

VII

Then . . . the lust of the flesh takes over. The poet asks whether his fortune now is better than it was in the past. There is a certain obscurity about the ashes that don't turn into fire, a certain recalcitrance even in the rolling fortune of dice. But the poet's body is beyond restraint and, in spite of accusations of heresy and unbelief, he flouts prevailing morals, which he considers to be nothing but a loosely running faucet of abasement. Society and its morals are unfair: they make the law that burns a rebel, and yet they are the cause of evil that remains unpunished. Victim of the present-day city, the poet reflects on how he used to scrutinize the passersby in city streets, trying to read their mind as he would newspapers. He observed a lot of suffering on which the rays of the sun shone daily, but mostly abused women—forest after forest of them—who for centuries endured deep wounds passively. Reflecting on this, the poet shouts from the depth of his soul:

O checkered city, your backbone has been broken
and I have been soiled with your spray.

He wants to be a rebel and does not mind being broken up in splinters and scattered in all directions like the city. Opposition to the prevailing morals of the city is worth his while; for if he is considered a cloud in the city, it is only serene weather for him, and if the city morals darken his path, he considers that to be brightness. He welcomes his and the woman's body as a sacrifice to effect change. Sexual assertion is historic rebellion, and thus he hails sexual history in

which the greatest event is the removal of repression. The lovers' night is now entering the forest of their limbs, penetration being deep and creating mystical, ecstatic feeling.

VIII

This is the moment of lust and rapture. The bright, expectant future is satisfied in the present act of the couple who are making sexual history. Yet the poet's thirst is burning. The woman's matchless eyes make his loving eyes see her as an abyss mingling with him, enveloping him, at the same time as the other impassioned members of his body steal away this sensation and make him feel he is a horizon adorned by her starry passions. As they penetrate each other, abyss and horizon, they hear primeval whisperings and exhalations rising from the depths of underground vaults: the mysterious power of the sexual organs flows with a murmur in narrow lanes, which are like cells of raw embers. The man's organ is that healing evil impregnated with the firm tenderness of lilac and the abundant fertility of mandrake. The woman's is that muscle embellished with time's lacework, with the delicate openwork of fine tissue, which is the gateway of time and life. Woman is the foundry of the forbidden, and man the cellar of pleasures. Yet the two are in need of each other: the healing evil and the embellished muscle, the foundry of the forbidden and the cellar of pleasures. The poet therefore hails the harmonious intercourse, the copulative hymn, which he bids to concatenate without interruption in a natural abandon, in a wildness as smooth as muskmelons. The virile Arabic calligraphy known as *thuluth* is bidden to penetrate the primordial *kūfī* script and the exquisite chancery *dīwānī* script in the recording of sexual history on front windows that publicize this great event.

As the earth is beautified by sex, the oxeye whinnies like a horse in joy, the thorns turn into roses in self-fulfillment. The two lovers need now to inhabit another body and gather their harvest for which they have worked hard. They need another language to express their joy and self-fulfillment. They need to ravish the civility of language and shout:

We are the two green wild animals
roaring as a kindness from the
sea.

Their words travel fast in Damascus between Mount Qāsiyūn and Jaramānā. Their bodies are still on fire as they experience mountain-high peaks and lake-deep chasms of sorrow, and as time speeds by. The earth is beautified further by diversifying itself and the sexual ploughing gets deeper and deeper. As they progress towards the climax of primal instincts, the poet notices the quiet temperament of the woman beginning to enter its beautiful end. He repeats to her:

In sorrow I give you my name,
in exile I grow in you.

He invokes the primal instincts to descend upon them, and the invisible world of ecstasy to fill them.

IX

The night, hanging like a bell from the necks of the streets of Damascus, is exhausted, but the wakefulness, hanging like a trellis in the lovers' bodies, is refreshed. The words exchanged in the last moments of the sex act sound remote, as if they were external to them and friends of distant space. The poet sees that the woman has now reached a sensitive point at which any touch will bring about finality, and he recognizes the same in himself: his erigeron belongs to the family of her composite flowers. He therefore imparts the final erotic touch and the cells of her body are swept away without any how, why, or where: he practices his inimitable miracle. Sensing the winelike, fine pubescence, he adds his intoxicant alcohol to her liquor and betakes himself with her towards deep orgasmic waters that absorb his body parts. He calls upon the invisible world of ecstasy to fill them both up, without fear.

Meanwhile, the rainy clouds foretell that the poet will marry a cloud so that he may remain without shelter. The poet addresses thunder and bids it to say that his home is its home, i.e., the clouds.

X

The poet's goal is thunder, right from the beginning of the poem, and his intentions are the flood. His aim is to create a thunderous poetry that will flood the old, unfulfilled life and sweep it away in order to bring about a new and full Arab life.

Now that he is inhabiting the clouds, the home of thunder and flooding rain, he calls upon thunder to choose Damascus as its name. His beloved Damascus, paragon of the contemporary Arab world, is the subject of his poem. The woman he loves is fused with Damascus, and he addresses this woman-city—her ravage still being engraved in his memory, and her funereal sounds still being inscribed, and recalling the repression and the coercion that have governed relations with the woman (sex) and the city (politics). But now, this is different. The name of this woman-city is being doubled as the poet has given her another identity; and it is by the glory of her other name that she is being recast letter-by-letter through poetry. For this is the function of the poet: to destroy in order to rebuild, to demolish in order to renew, to wreck in order to recast, to annihilate in order to recreate. And the poet's tool is language, which he puts at the service of the new name of the woman-city in order that she may be within people's reach so long as there is poetry.

The poet recognizes the difficulty, not the impossibility, of his goal. Aching for her, he often covered his wound with anger but it was not healed. She often brushed him aside in ebbing moods, but he was not defeated:

in her niggardly reserve and coolness
he dug in, he pecked and pecked
but did not retreat.

The poet believes she has no right to deny him herself. She is the ray, and he is her reflection. She is the cardinal directions, and all travel is towards her. She is

a tax-burdened garden, and his heart's is the bliss of collecting. She is the epitome of splendor and seduction. The poet asserts that she has therefore no right to deny him herself and that they have no right to be in discord. Indubitably, he is possessed by her, straying toward her, delegated to her by the wind. He cannot help but love her. And love is his salvation and hers.

SOME CRITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This poem of Adonis, like much of his poetry, is difficult to understand. He is known to be fond of quoting the answer of Abū Tammām who, on being asked “Why do you say what is not understood?” replied, “Why do you not understand what is said?”⁴ I do not mean that Adonis likes obscure or difficult language for its own sake, but it is his concept of what constitutes poetry that is responsible for the quality of his language. I have dealt elsewhere⁵ with Adonis's poetics and it may suffice here to remember that he is a poet who calls for “an explosion of language from the inside.”⁶ His constant concern with freshness and creativity is not only a linguistic and literary preoccupation of his, but indeed an existential imperative that manifests itself in his total attitude to life and the universe and his deep understanding that they are constantly changing.

I must admit that I read “Unintended Worship Ritual” in its original Arabic text many times before I began to discover its coherence. At every reading, a new meaning was added and—I must hasten to say—a new joy too. There were times when meaning was so elusive that it only beckoned and shimmered, then quickly disappeared as incoherent or unintelligible. I had to reread in order to capture it again, often to discover that I came to capture another meaning that fitted the total intention of the poem. There were gaps in my understanding of the poem, but at every subsequent reading some of them were filled. There still are minor gaps that I decided I must overlook and reserve for future readings and for other readers. I wanted to share my experience with others, and I felt that they might need a map to guide them through the maze that the poem would appear to be at first reading.

It is obvious that we have here a multi-dimensional poem. Like great literature of all time, it has several levels of meaning, some of which I explored and attempted to chart with the map presented earlier. The basic level of meaning is the poet's love relationship with the young woman, whether real or fictitious. The other levels of meaning include the poet's attitude toward language and the literary creative act, his insistent belief in the much-needed renovation and revitalization of contemporary Arab life and civilization, and his criticism of repression and coercion in present-day Arab society and culture. At each of those levels, there are several themes and subthemes which the poet treats in various degrees of attention and which contribute to the building up of the intention of the poem as an organic whole.

The most arresting feature of the poem is, perhaps, the way in which the poet has succeeded in fusing two or more of these levels of meaning with each other at one point or another as the poem unfolds. The woman, for instance, has become

the poet's language without which he cannot express himself. The woman and the language are blended in him. They are both in every one of his sighs. He writes them both in every one of his cells. He speaks through their power and surrenders to them both. At the same time, this woman is also the city and, like language and the city, is a manifestation of the poet's culture and civilization as expressed in Arab history.

The love relationship is presented in terms of a gradually growing involvement that begins with wonder, then goes on to expectation and anticipation, and moves to yearning for possession, then progresses to readiness for surrender, and arrives at the passionate kiss and embrace, then goes deeper into physical and emotional rapture, and deeper still into ecstatic union through the sex act. In all aspects of this relationship, there is equality between the two lovers as they both surrender to each other and undergo deep but subtle change. There are differences in the functions of man and woman in love, but there is parity also. The greatest difference is expressed in the man's practice of his "inimitable miracle," his *i'jāz*.

The most important outcome of the poet's love experience is the recognition of the human body and the necessity of freedom. These two things, however, are deeply implicated in the value system of the culture. For society, they are both related to what the poet calls "the foundry of the forbidden" and "the cellar of pleasures." They have to be regulated, restricted, subjugated to conventions and traditions, contained by religious and ethical sanctions and permissions, and, hence, by civic and political means of repression and coercion.

The words "civic" and "political" bring to mind Latin *civitas* and Greek *polis*, meaning the city and the state. One is reminded of their legal and moral systems, which purport, not only in the classical context, to keep social decorum and preserve societal integrity, to induce what is deemed to be civil and polite. This brings to mind also the Arabic noun *madīna* (city)—which lies at the root of *madaniyya* (civilization)—and the Arabic verb *addaba*—which means to refine, to educate, and bring up in good manners and social graces, but also to punish, to chastise, and discipline unseemly conduct that breaks with the decorum of *madaniyya*.

The woman in the poem is said to be the woman-city—a hyphenization used by Adonis which does not exist in the Arabic language but can be grammatically acceptable as an apposition in the sense that the woman is the city or the city is the woman. The poet's love relationship with the woman is not merely symbolic of the love that the poet has for the city of Damascus (a synecdoche for the whole Arab world and a metonymy for Arab culture and civilization), but rather is itself his relationship with the Arab homeland, its culture, and its civilization. And in the same manner as his love for the woman transforms him and her gradually, up to the point of ecstasy, the poet's relation with his Arab homeland, its culture, and its civilization is meant to transform him and them gradually, up to the point of renovation and revitalization. The poet's highest characteristic of difference, which brings about the final transformation, is his *i'jāz*, his "inimitable miracle." This he practices as a poet by composing what he considers to be inimitable poetry.

The term *iʿjaz*, as is well known, is a technical term used in Islamic religious writings and in Arabic rhetoric to denote the inimitable and therefore miraculous character of the Qurʾān, referring to its sublime and unmatched style and contents, and proving its divine source and authority. Adonis uses the term to denote the poet's final touch that brings about ecstasy and the sweeping annihilation ushering in a total creative transformation in the woman-city. As far as societal reality is meant, the poet's *iʿjaz* refers to his incredibly fresh language and explosive content. Kamal Abu Deeb speaks of Adonis in the following words:

A rebel and force of destruction ("A mine for civilization: this is my name"), but also a force of positive rejection with a tormenting love for his culture and his country, he is certainly one of the greatest poets in the history of the language, and one of the finest makers of a poetic phrase since al-Buhturi in the ninth century.⁷

This is the thunder that the poet says is his goal, and this is the flood that he says constitutes his intentions: to annihilate in order to recreate—language included.

Adonis' language is in constant flux. For him, words transcend their meaning in the creative act of the poet because of the associational power with which he charges them as he composes them in ever new and evocative patterns. The national language is, thus, in a constant state of becoming. The poet has to make language say what it has not learned to say, and capture what it has not been accustomed to capture.⁸ A word must be emptied of its inherited meaning and charged with new meanings in poetic structure. A word for Adonis thus becomes "an activity without a past, a mass which radiates uncustomary relationships."⁹ This concept of words as fields of semantic radiation and psychological association opens up infinite ways of combining them but it also makes for unfamiliar usage and may become a factor of obscurity. The images thus created destroy the usual bridges between objects and establish new ones. This is meant by the poet to reveal the reality of things more aptly and deeply by shocking the normally complacent readers and, consequently, making them more intimately aware of the world. Change in the world can only be captured by a constantly changing language. Poetry, for Adonis, is a vision, which—by its very nature—is "a leap outside the established concepts."¹⁰

Poetry, for Adonis, is very serious business and his poem "Unintended Worship Ritual" is a good example. It is a visionary poem, a poem that foresees the future; but it is also a poem that senses the pulse of the present and captures the rhythm of contemporary Arab life.

Adonis has no illusions about the difficulty of realizing his vision. It is not easy to transform his woman-city by his *iʿjaz*. But he does not cease to love her and ache for her. He believes he has a right to her love and to the bliss of continually seeking the ecstasy of union with her, for that is his destiny and in it lie both his salvation and hers. Meanwhile, it makes him write new poetry that is currently the most original and influential in the Arab world, though perhaps not necessarily the most widely read or the most easily understood.¹¹

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NOTES

¹Adonis (ʿAlī Aḥmad Saʿīd), *Kitāb al-qaṣāʾid al-khams talī-hā al-muṭābaqāt wa-l-awāʾil* (Beirut, 1980), pp. 85–114. See my English translation below.

²Adonis, *Kitāb al-qaṣāʾid al-khams*, pp. 226–31.

³Naqqāshāt, al-Qaṣṣāʿ, al-Hamīdiyya, al-Muhājirīn, and Jaramānā are localities in Damascus, Syria. Qāsiyūn is the mountain overlooking Damascus and Baradā is the river flowing through it. Imruʿ al-Qays is an Arab poet noted for his love escapades in Arabia before Islam. He died in about A.D. 550. Al-Niffarī is an Arab mystic who believed God could be known and seen in this world in stances (*mawāqif*) of love. He died in about A.D. 965. *Source*: Adonis, *Kitāb al-qaṣāʾid al-khams*, pp. 85–114. The poem is entitled “Quddās bi-lā qaṣd, khalīl iḥtimālāt. . . .”

⁴Adonis, *Muqaddima li-l-shiʿr al-ʿarabī* (Beirut, 1971), p. 43; citing al-Ṣūlī, *Akhbār Abī Tammām* (Cairo, 1937), p. 76.

⁵See Issa J. Boullata, “Adonis: Revolt in Modern Arabic Poetics,” *Edebiyāt*, 2, 1 (1977), 1–13.

⁶Adonis, *Zamān al-shiʿr* (Beirut, 1972), p. 200.

⁷Kamal Abu Deeb, “The Perplexity of the All-Knowing: A Study of Adonis,” *Mundus Artium*, Special Arabic Issue, 10, 1 (1977), 165–66; reprinted in Issa J. Boullata, ed., *Critical Perspectives on Modern Arabic Literature* (Washington, D.C., 1980), pp. 307–8.

⁸Adonis, *Zamān al-shiʿr*, pp. 20–21.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 200.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹¹For a comprehensive study of Adonis’ views on Arabic literature and culture, see Mounah A. Khouri, “A Critique of Adonis’s Perspectives on Arabic Literature and Culture,” in *idem*, *Studies in Contemporary Arabic Poetry and Criticism* (Piedmont, Calif., 1987), pp. 13–41.