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# Adonis: A Poet in Lebanon

By SAMUEL HAZO and MIRENE GHOSSEIN

In 1944 Syria became independent, and Shukri al-Kuatly was elected the first president of the new republic. One of his initial acts was to tour the country in order to develop a first hand acquaintance with the people. President al-Kuatly's tour was to have a decisive effect upon Said's future. Hearing of the president's prospective visit, Said told his father that he would write a poem for the occasion. "My son," replied his father, "who are you to speak before the president of the country?"

The boy, nevertheless, wrote the poem. On the day the president was to appear in Jableh, which was as close as he would come to Kassabin, Said left his home at dawn for Jableh where he managed to see the mayor, show him his poem, and plead to be given a chance to recite it for the president. The mayor agreed and put the boy's name at the very end of the list of speakers. When, hours later, the boy's turn to speak arrived, the president himself rose and began his own remarks. With some embarrassment the mayor interrupted him and said, "Mr. President, excuse me, but there is a boy from the mountains here who has written a poem in your honor, and his turn was bypassed." The president nodded, returned to his seat, and looked on, together with the thousands of Syrians in the audience, as the fourteen-year-old boy strode to the rostrum and recited his poem from memory.

The poem itself was an appeal for cooperation between the newly elected president and a people never before permitted to participate in the running of their own country. Both sides, urged the young poet, needed trust, patience, and a sense of civic values. The people, the poet said, were extending a hand. . . . When Said had concluded, the president left his seat for the second time, approached the boy, kissed him, and asked, "Tell me, what do you want?"

"I want an education."

Within a week a message from the president arrived at Said's home in Kassabin. The boy had been enrolled in the lyc ee and was asked to proceed to Tartus, a small town on the Mediterranean coast fifty miles south of Latakia. Said remained there for three years and subsequently attended a public school in Latakia where he received his "baccalaureat" at the end of five years of regular schooling instead of the usual twelve.

During his years in Latakia, he was active in politics, organizing demonstrations against the French forces still stationed in Syria. He also published his first poems at that time. In 1950 he enrolled at the University of Damascus and continued publishing his poems in local newspapers and magazines. His main concern at that time was renewing the style of contemporary Arabic poetry. This was quite a formidable challenge since Arabic poetry tended to be stratified according to traditional rules of prosody. But Said persisted, writing highly nationalistic verses together with acerbic poetic criticisms of the Syrian social structure.

Said graduated from the University of Damascus with a master's degree in literature. (Arabic mysticism was the subject of his dissertation.) In 1956 he married Khalida Saleh, a Syrian girl who shared both his political and literary ideas. Later she

would earn a doctorate in Arabic literature from the Sorbonne and become a literary critic of no small importance in the Arab world. Shortly after his marriage, Said left Syria for Lebanon, where he continued writing under the pen name of Adonis, a name he had occasionally used previously. It is somehow fitting that in Lebanon, where the mythical Adonis is said to have lived, loved, and died, Said chose to sign his writings with the name of the god whose legend of death and annual resurrection he had always regarded with special and symbolic favor.

In cooperation with Yussef el-Khal, a young Lebanese poet, Said founded *Shiir*, a magazine of poetry. Through *Shiir* the two poets hoped to enlighten their readers on the problems facing modern Arabic poetry and bring the work of new poets to public attention. The work fructified. Indeed, many of the most significant poets in the Arab world today were first published in *Shiir*.

In 1960 Adonis received a scholarship to study at the Sorbonne, and upon his return to Beirut, he chose to become a citizen of Lebanon. Several years later, Adonis dissociated himself from *Shiir*, which had become fraught with internal problems, and contemplated the publication of his own journal. For financial reasons he accepted various jobs in the field of journalism, including the editorship of a Beirut newspaper, but he never ceased to write poems. During this period he also issued his definitive "Anthology of Arabic Poetry."

By 1968 his literary ambitions were ripe, and he launched a monthly magazine called *Mawaḳeḳ* in which he could express the full spectrum of his ideas along with, and beyond, poetry. In the introduction to the first issue he stated the credo espoused by himself and the other contributing poets when he wrote that the magazine "is our expression, a living part of us, our complement; therefore, it is simultaneously a truth and a symbol; it represents the shattering of an Arabic generation which experienced only what was broken; in this journal we will search and start building anew." True to that credo, *Mawaḳeḳ* remains today one of the very few truly independent publications in which Arabic writers can express themselves freely on all subjects.

But it is poetry of Adonis that reveals the essential vision of man. In studying his works to date, one finds a certain number of themes evolving according to the perspectives characteristic of the time of their enunciation together with the ineluctable figure of Mihiyar the Damascene. Sketched in two books, developed as a character in one entire book, and constantly present in subsequent books and publications, Mihiyar the Damascene is the counterpart of Adonis. But we shall hear more of Mihiyar shortly.

In 1957 Adonis' first book appeared under the appropriate title, "First Poems." The themes of poverty, childhood, and death are dominant in the book. In many of the poems Adonis suggests that there is a strong kinship between childhood and poverty since childhood is not only a time of simplicity and proximity to nature but also a state of nonpossession. He writes of the poor as simple, decent, and beautiful, reminiscent of the villagers of Kassabin. It will be such people whom Mihiyar the Damascene will summon to change the world since their closeness to nature has left them undeceived and uncorrupted. Death, for example, is a simple and natural event to these people, a return to the earth which they know and love. This communion between the poor and the earth in "First Poems" is a preparation for the more mystical tone of the subsequent Mihiyar poems. Here is one example of his early work:

*Tree of Fire*

The tree by the river  
 is weeping leaves.  
 It strews the shore  
 with tear after tear  
 It reads to the river  
 its prophecy of fire.  
 I am that final  
 leaf that no one  
 sees.

My people  
 have died as fires  
 die—without a trace.

“Leaves in the Wind,” published in 1958, dwells more on the theme of death as seen from a Christian perspective, but the underlying tone of “First Poems” is transmuted rather than abandoned. If death is really the start of a new life, says the poet, it is only because it is a reunion with the earth, which is the starting point of all life.

Poverty, simplicity, proximity to and communion with nature emerge as the most formidable themes in “Songs of Mihyar the Damascene.” Mihyar personifies the poet’s ideas, hopes, and dreams. A life symbol, Mihyar is in perpetual movement. He comes as a “pagan sword” to shake a society which, shaped by religion, has become passive toward its real destiny. He is a “revolutionary refusing the Imam,” damning what is obsolete and unjust, prophesying a world where religion is not fear and where man is both God and servant. He is a king who lives in “fire and pestilence” as well as in the “darkness of things, in their inner secrets,” in a “garden of apples,” in the “hands of Eve.” He is a magician who knows the secret of “walking on the roof of a spiderweb,” of guessing what is unsaid, of hearing what crosses the mind. Although Mihyar is heard, loved, and followed, he cannot forget having once read his name in the “book of failure.” So he lives thereafter in the book that teaches “secrets and defeats,” forever together, forever inseparable. Confronted by gods and devils, Mihyar chooses the earth, for devils and gods “come and go,” but the earth “remains.” He wishes to transform the earth into a heaven, confident enough of its own values to eschew a heaven to be. So he travels the world, singing in a mute and “strangled voice” his faith in man’s ability to guide his own destiny. And he travels beyond the world, for his dreams exceed the planet, as evidenced by the conclusion of “Remembering the First Century”:

Drawn forth to silence  
 by the drum of words, I am  
 a knight riding the horse  
 of all the earth.

My song  
 is everything I see and all  
 I breathe.

Under thundering  
 suns, I pace the foaming  
 shore.

I sing my way  
 to death, and, having sung,

I leave this elegy to burn  
 for poets, birds and everything  
 alive from here and now  
 until the end of heaven.

Mihyar's steps come to rest in "The Book of Changes and Immigrations into the Regions of Day and Night," which appeared in 1965. While Mihyar travels the "space without," the poet in this book dwells in the "space within." He fluctuates between the dark region of the body and the light region of the spirit. His is a world of hunger and suffering, of love, and, above all, of change. This is a world where "doors hear but do not open," where "tears become laughter" and the "sun, black," where "innocence is a tomb," where love is death, and death, birth. To live in such a world one needs the "patience of stones." Nevertheless, the temptation is always strong to "fall back into one's soul, since this is where the journey begins and where it ends." Adonis seems to want a more peaceful and rewarding life than Mihyar's, whose kingdom has yet to be established. Consequently, the tone of "The Book of Changes" is a mixture of sadness and nostalgia: "O if I could dream the earth not as the boundary of my world but as the wind. . . O had I remained a dream."

The interiority of "The Book of Changes" is less solitary in Adonis' most recent book, "The Stage and the Mirrors," published in 1968. Here he confronts the world of history as seen in a mirror which both reflects the past and projects it onto the stage of the present. Both past and present meet in man, the incarnation of the actual and the historical. Such a man is the figure of Ghifari, a disguised Mihyar but still recognizable as the first socialist revolutionary in the history of Islam. Through Adonis' contemporary vision, language, and sensitivity, this seventh-century figure revives and speaks. He condemns the socio-cultural values of the Arab world, claiming that such values are burdened by the "weight of centuries, driven by madness and pushed into us." Nevertheless, despite all, there survives a hope that is the hope of Mihyar, the hunger for redemption as well as change, a "tower of light" for the "ship of darkness."

One of the main contributions of Adonis to contemporary Arabic poetry is liberty—a liberty with themes, a liberty with words themselves through the uniqueness of poetic vision. As a result of this, it is possible to talk of an Adonisian vision of the world where mysticism and existentialism, socialism and individualism, and poetry and reality actually coexist since none of these is exclusive or blind or forever "rooted in its own steps."

Finally, Adonis' solid knowledge of the Arabic language, together with his feeling for words, has enabled him to forge a new poetic style. His use of certain Arabic letters in association with certain sounds and meanings which are then repeated at more or less regular intervals has acted as both stabilizer and background music for many of his poems. This is but one of the techniques he has initiated and perfected.

Recently Adonis' work has shown more innovative and declarative tendencies. After a trip to the United States in 1971 to receive the Syria-Lebanon Award of the International Poetry Forum and to be present at the first translation of his work into English (*The Blood of Adonis*, University of Pittsburgh Press), he composed a long epic entitled "The Funeral of New York." The poem reveals his sensitivity to the more obvious inconsistencies in American life vis-à-vis the races, the war in southeast Asia,

and the contradicted vision of Whitman. In some parts it is both mystical and somewhat Marxist in outlook, but it never degenerates into mere polemic. In any case, it is his most recent work.

Here  
 on the moss on the rock of the earth  
 I know and say what I know.  
 I remember a plant called life.  
 I remember my land as I remember death,  
 a robe of wind  
 a face that murders me for no reason  
 or an eye that shuns the light.  
 Against you, my country,  
 I still create to make you change.  
 I stumble into hell and scream  
 while poisonous drops revive my memory of you.  
 New York, you will find in my land  
 a bed and silence,  
 a chair, a head,  
 the sale of day and night,  
 the stone of Mecca  
 and the waters of the Tigris.  
 In spite of all this,  
 you pant in Palestine and Hanoi.  
 East and west  
 you contend with people  
 whose only history is fire.  
 Since John the Baptist  
 Each of us carries on a plate his cut head  
 and waits to be born again.

But his style, though “rooted in his steps,” has continually evolved. As a result, one is frequently surprised at new combinations and contrasts—surprised and pleased. Moreover, his influence upon other poets of the Arab world has not been negligible; one detects Adonisian echoes in the works of Jalil Haidar, Moayad el-Rawdi and other poets of Iraq, François Bassily of Egypt, and Mahmoud Adwan of Syria.

Apart from his purely linguistic contributions to contemporary Arabic poetry, Adonis has constantly striven to relate Arabic poetry to the world without having it lose its identity. This problem had for generations been at the very heart of Arabic literature; it was either diluted by Western influence, mainly British and French (the language came along with the troops), or was consigned to folklore. Adonis has done much to solve this problem; by dwelling upon the specific and assuming it, he has been able to establish a dialogue with the outside world and persist in being specific in spite of it. Thus, while remaining “rooted in his steps,” his identity has stayed free to beat with the pulse of the world.

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