

# From ‘Alī Aḥmad Sa‘īd to Adonis: A Study of Adonis’s Controversial Position on Arab Cultural Heritage (*turāth*)

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## Abstract

The goal of this study is to explore the cultural worldview of the prominent contemporary Arab poet and critic, Adonis (b. 1935). Adonis was one of the first thinkers to question the notion of *turāth* (cultural heritage) and to consider it the main cause behind the backwardness of the Arab people of today. Better known as a poet, Adonis’s role as a cultural critic deserves to be highlighted. The present study aims to remedy this by analyzing and criticizing his position on *turāth* which was based on a deconstructive reading of foundational texts. His goal was to prove that *turāth* was illogical and a hindrance to modernity or creativity. To better understand Adonis’s view on *turāth*, this study investigates it against his intellectual and ideological background, and analyzes it in the light of primary texts. It concludes that, as a secular deconstructionist, Adonis sees inherited *turāth* as a “text” retaining a static/dynamic dualism, and tries to show that the static elements of *turāth*, which always appear stable, logical and capable of achieving progress, actually make it otherwise. He argues that divine revelation is responsible for the predominance of the static aspect of *turāth* and hence represents an obstacle to human creativity and progress. For this reason, it must be deconstructed, paving the way for replacement of the static, i.e., religious elements, with dynamic or secular elements, which alone can enable the reconstruction of civilization. But, in the process, Adonis may, by replacing the religious with the secular, merely be setting in place a new static dimension.

**Keywords:** Adonis, Contemporary Arab thought, Arab culture, Arab-Islamic heritage

## Preface

We [the Arabs] are becoming extinct in terms of our civilization, like the Sumerians, the Greeks, the Pharaohs, the Romans, and all those great civilizations that have become extinct. We no longer possess the creative capacity that would allow us to establish a great human society, and at the same time, to take part in building the world. (<http://www.memritv.org/clip/en/1076.htm>)

The above passage reveals Adonis’s anxiety and an evidently cynical view of modern Arab culture. As an intellectual and poet committed to the issues of his nation and civilization, he has devoted all his writings to exploring, analyzing and criticizing the status quo of Arab culture, with the goal of transforming it in a way that will help it not only survive but also contribute effectively to the building of human civilization. To achieve such an end, Adonis calls for deconstructing, if not in fact dismantling, what he describes as the static elements of its *turāth* over which God, *wahī* (revelation) and religion stand supreme. The religious outlook, in his view, causes modern Arabs to move backwards, i.e., in the direction of their “sacred past.” Thus, for an Arab, the past becomes the best place to inhabit or find refuge and thereby neglect the present and its affairs — a situation that is described by Adonis as being mired in decay and grief over a withered past (Adonis, 1989, p. 293).

However, in his attempt to contribute to resolving this “crisis,” he insists on the need for radical change by transcending the *wahī* and the overall religious mind-set. In pursuit of this, he calls for a cultural revolution consisting in liberation from all atavism and advocates the elimination of all attribution of sanctity to the past. This is because he sees it as impossible to build a new culture if one does not shake up, at least critically, the structure of the old one. For him, the old culture revolved strictly around revelation, hence around religion or Islam — a truth that led to them both being considered as the only source of knowledge and progress and the

generator of all values and customs that still dominate in the reality of today's Arabs. (Note 1) Therefore, if the Arabs of today seek progress and improvement in their lives, it will be necessary, in his analysis, to eliminate God and religion, not only from society and the state but also from the minds of individuals, and to substitute them eventually with reason. This stance reflects his inclination towards a comprehensive secularism and atheism. In fact, this Adonisian worldview is of great importance, since it reveals the starting point of his thought and reflects his intellectual and ideological persona. Therefore, rather than explore his position on *turāth* in itself, an attempt will be made to trace the key elements responsible for the formation of his secular-modernist outlook.

To understand better this position, the present study will be divided into three parts. The first part will explore Adonis's intellectual and ideological formation, as he himself describes it in his autobiography and as it is recorded in other important biographical accounts. Here, we will mainly explore Adonis's journey (mental and physical) both from his already-given identity to his self-made one, and from the small, simple and traditional environment of his village to a wider, more complex world where he was exposed to new horizons. Among the many elements that have influenced Adonis, special attention will be given to the influences of surrealism, (Note 2) Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), and Anṭūn Sa'ādah (1904-1949), (Note 3) for (I argue) they all greatly contributed to and reinforced his rebellious, secular character. Therefore, in the second part we will be exploring the general premises of the so-called secular tendency and particularly its position on Arab culture and *turāth*. Here, special attention will be paid to Sa'ādah's philosophical argument in advocating secularism, given its apparent impact on Adonis's perception of atheism and secularism and its influence on his overall position on *turāth*. The latter will be the focus of the third and last part of this study, where an attempt will be made to explore, analyze and criticize his stance on the issue. In doing so I will refer mainly to his major work, *Al-Thābit wa-al-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ittibā' wa-al-Ibdā' 'inda al-'Arab*, (Note 4) since it not only represents the fullest expression of his position on *turāth* but also reveals his distinct method in reading and deconstructing it.

## 1. Adonis: Intellectual and Ideological Formation

### a) From 'Alī Aḥmad Sa'id to Adonis

'Alī Aḥmad Sa'id Esber was born in 1930 in the little 'Alawī village of Qaṣṣābīn in the north-west part of Syria. Due to the difficult financial circumstances of his family, the young boy could not enroll in any formal school before the year 1944. He did frequent an open-air traditional school (*kuttāb*) from 1935 to 1944, where he learned reading and writing. However, as he tells us, his father was his first teacher in that he provided him with a profound informal education, mainly in religion and literature. Indeed, he opened up for him the realm of classical Arab-Islamic culture and started him on the road to poetry, particularly that of the Sufi tradition with its liberating vision of the world (Boullata, 2004, p. 31-46; Abū Fakhr, 2000, p. 194). He credits his father not only with his early culture but also with his way of thinking independently and of choosing his way freely. 'Alī continued this kind of informal knowledge and education in his village, isolated from any feature of what may be described as "modern life." As he tells us, "in the village, I went to the fields until the age of thirteen. And until that age, I had never known electricity, nor seen a radio or a car. I was completely a part of nature, like a cloud, like a tree" (Abū Fakhr, 2000; Adonis, 2004, p. 31-46).

Nevertheless, a great opportunity presented itself to the life of the thirteen-year old 'Alī when the first president of the newly independent republic of Syria, Shukrī al-Quwwatī (1891-1967), visited a nearby town. There, 'Alī insisted on reading out loud a poem he had written for the occasion. The president appreciated the talented boy and asked him what he wanted. 'Alī's response was "I want to go to school." Within a week, the president had arranged for him to attend a French-run high school, the Lycée Français Laïque in Ṭarṭūs, which was followed by a series of scholarships that enabled him to continue his education. He studied at the Lycée from 1944 until it closed in 1946 following independence and the departure of the French (Abū Fakhr, 2000). It was the first time that 'Alī had set foot outside the village; on doing so he found a new universe to explore, a new language to learn, and, certainly, new knowledge and awareness to acquire. Therefore, the experience at the Lycée opened up new horizons to the village boy, not to mention a number of questions concerning his identity, ambition and destiny.

My enrolment in one of the most important foreign schools at the time ... and putting on my traditional robe (*qunbāz*), made me become more aware of my distinct identity, and reinforced my conviction that a [poor] villager too can reach a highly cultured, intellectual status in his country. This made me feel so proud ... Indeed, I used to believe that it was due to my intellect, learning and knowledge [not wealth] that I would one day occupy an

appropriate, notable position ... Therefore, although I used to feel that this was my lot in life, I nonetheless set out to change such luck, striving to create a new fate for myself. (Abū Fakhr, 2000, pp. 20-21)

This, in fact, tells us something about Adonis. He has always enjoyed a consciousness of free will and of his ability to participate in and contribute to the cultural and intellectual development of his culture and society. Likewise, he has long been aware of the proper means to reach this position. One of the first steps that he took in this direction was to change his identity. As he tells us, in choosing Adonis for his new name he opened for himself unexpected horizons. His new name not only liberated him from his given name, but also from a religious identity. In his view, the name Adonis granted him a “definitive, non-relative identity,” made him more open to “what is human,” and forced him to choose an “absolute identity.” Right from the very beginning, he wanted to be liberated from what he calls “a ready-made identity determined in advance.” He always, even as a child, “loved being alone and free.” Freedom, for him, is a consciousness, where “one must have consciousness of being free” (Adonis, 2004, pp. 48-49).

In view of this, ‘Alī sought to create his identity and remove himself from any constraint, particularly that of religion, in the belief that everything must be created with an absolute individual force. Although at the very beginning he was not yet completely conscious of the dimensions of his newly selected name/identity, he eventually began to be aware of it (Adonis, 2004, p. 49; Abū Fakhr, 2000, p. 23). After he fully understood the meaning hidden in his new name, he came to realize an important “truth” about identity: it is “to be constantly created and re-created.” This awareness — of the dynamic quality of identity — compelled him to continue the process of creating his own. Associating this with his fondness for words and writing, he embarked on the creative process using the medium of poetry. As he maintains, the process is eternal and “does not end with one’s death, especially when one leaves something after death.” In fact, Adonis alludes here to texts in particular, arguing that, “after death, texts are open to infinity,” where “time will define and redefine them.” As texts/words reflect the identity of their creator, the latter is also “a movement and cannot be stopped or kept in a fixed position.” Therefore, moving from ‘Alī Aḥmad to Adonis meant for him that he had moved to “the opposite end of [his] original identity” (Adonis, 2004, p. 49).

In creative art a man cannot be himself unless he can escape from himself, and his identity is always in dialogue between what he is and what he is to be. Identity in this perspective is always ahead of the human being and not behind him for he is a project of creativity and change. In that sense identity is a creation too; we create our identity as we create our life. (Adonis, 2002, v. 1, p. 25)

In fact, this way of thinking and liberal spirit or temperament must be taken into account when exploring Adonis’s position on *turāth*. This is because his entire creative and critical oeuvre, as well as his furious denunciation of Arab culture, is nothing other than a serious attempt to transpose this sense of liberation and transfer it to others, aiming at creating new foundations for Arab culture on which to construct above and beyond the oppressiveness of religion and sacredness. This conviction was reinforced when, after much study, he was exposed to the ideas of a number of philosophers, ideologues and/or movements that stood for revolutionary, innovative and absolutely secular and atheistic principles, as we shall see in due course.

Adonis’s profound consciousness of freedom and independence was developed as he progressed through school and was exposed to broader influences. As we saw earlier, he began his journey at the Lycée Laïque in Ṭarṭūs, where, on learning French, he discovered a new world of French writers and poets such as Baudelaire (1821-1867) and Rimbaud (1854-1891), opening his eyes to the realm of free verse and innovation in poetry and life. After the school was closed in 1946, he attended a Syrian middle school in the same town, from which he obtained his *brevet* in 1947. After that, he moved to Latakia and joined a high school there, from which he graduated in 1949. Throughout his high school years he stood out as a poet (first publishing his poems in 1948 under the pen name Adonis), but it was not long before he became an activist, joining the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, founded by Anṭūn Sa’ādah (Abu Deeb, 1998, v. 1, p. 57-58; Abū Fakhr, 2000, p. 194-196). Although Adonis met Sa’ādah two times only (1947 in Latakia and 1949 in Beirut), the latter left a great impression on him, particularly his reformist principles, which emphasized the importance of renovation on all levels, while at the same time promoting secularism (Abū Fakhr, 2000, p. 39-43). (Note 5) Most likely, it was the young man’s relentless quest for liberty and freedom from every form of atavism that took him in that direction, driving him to work on both the poetical and political levels to effect the desired transformation. However, in Adonis’s view, such a goal was unattainable without learning and knowledge. This is because, he admits, it is impossible to improve or achieve progress if one is surrounded by ignorance. The only way to reach

this end is by gaining knowledge and surrounding oneself with it. This is simply because “genuine intellect cannot grow in an environment of ignorance: it needs an intellectual environment to grow and improve” (Abū Fakhr, 2000, p. 19-24).

Not only partial to learning and very much aware of the importance of knowledge, but also having a “feeling of knowledge distinction,” as he puts it, Adonis’s only ambition was “to be within a knowledge framework” where he could improve gradually (Abū Fakhr, 2000, p. 22). For this reason, he chose to enroll at the Syrian University in Damascus, whence he graduated in 1954 with a degree in philosophy. In fact, Adonis’s early exposure to European philosophy, and particularly the German variety with its key ideologues and philosophers, can be attributed to this period of his life. At that time, he was exposed to different kinds of knowledge and new perspectives on being, especially through the works of Nietzsche, which significantly influenced his overall position on man, God and the world. Not only this, but his position seemed to intersect with and be reinforced by the surrealist outlook, as we shall see in the following.

#### *b) Nietzsche and surrealism*

As we saw in the opening part of this study, Adonis was soon convinced of the need to replace God with man and to set up a new culture on the basis of this principle. I argue here that such an idea came not out of a vacuum but from Nietzsche’s philosophy, particularly, his famous declaration of the “death of God.” Hence, it was Nietzsche’s notion of atheism that impacted on Adonis the most and left its imprint on his rebellious, antireligious nature. Indeed, it is this way of thinking and the implications of its principles that have since preoccupied Adonis, causing him to hunt for the best means to instill in people a new system of knowledge, capable of establishing a dynamic, secular culture — following Nietzsche’s footsteps in eliminating God’s role from people’s lives.

Nietzsche was one of the first philosophers to challenge the foundations of Christianity and traditional morality in the late nineteenth century. He believed in life, creativity and the realities of the world we live in, rather than those situated in a world beyond. In fact, in declaring the “death of God,” Nietzsche aimed at stressing the positive opportunities of life without God. In other words, renouncing belief in God would open the way for human creative abilities to be fully developed. This is because, in Nietzsche’s eyes, God, with His arbitrary commands and prohibitions, would no longer stand in the way. Only then might human beings stop turning their eyes toward a supernatural realm and begin to acknowledge the significance and value of this world. In his eyes, the recognition that “God is dead” would be like furnishing a “blank canvas.” It would provide the freedom to become something new, different and creative, namely, the freedom to be something without being forced to accept the effects of the past. (Note 6) Certainly, the notion of “God’s death” is echoed in Adonis’s worldview, where he too aimed at replacing God with man, considering belief in God to be the main obstacle to human freedom and creativity (Adonis, 2002, v. 1, p. 146).

In fact, it was not only Nietzsche’s belief in eliminating God’s role in favour of man’s that had a great impact on Adonis, but also the broader principles of surrealism. These can be viewed, at least in this context, as the practical embodiment of Nietzsche’s premise, applied in reality while developing other related, radical ideas. As such, one may readily argue that surrealism came to reinforce Adonis’s already formed mind-set, especially that aspect of its nature that called for the destruction of all traditional knowledge and ways of thinking. Indeed, advocates of surrealism have always attempted to fuse social and cultural revolution, an objective that seems to have both affected and corresponded to Adonis’s notion. Therefore, due to its relevance, it would be useful to trace some of its main principles as formulated by André Breton (1896-1966) (Note 7) in the first manifesto on surrealism in 1924 and in his lecture on surrealism given in Brussels in 1934 to a public meeting organized by local Belgian surrealists (Breton, 2009).

In the 1934 lecture, Breton reemphasized surrealism’s status as a revolutionary movement standing for an absolute freedom, advocating more than ever before the necessity of radical change. He called for a revision of values and the revolutionizing of human experience, including its personal, cultural, social, and political aspects. This was to be done by, primarily, freeing people from false rationality, restrictive customs and structures. To better express the movement’s principles, the manifesto included numerous examples of the application of surrealism to poetry and literature, but it makes it clear that the tenets of surrealism can be applied in any circumstance of life, asserting that surrealist activity follows no set plan or conventional pattern and that surrealists are ultimately nonconformists. In this respect, the surrealist project claimed to be going beyond the limits of space and time, which “can contribute to the efficacious reunification of all those who do not despair of the transformation of the world and who wish this transformation to be as radical as possible” (Breton, 2009). In keeping with this line of thought, the surrealists were exclusively preoccupied with a campaign of systematic

refusal, annoyed by the conditions under which they were forced to live. But their refusal, as Breton maintained, was voracious and knew no bounds. It was directed against the whole gamut of intellectual, moral, religious and social obligations, regarding them as obligations that lie at the root of man's horror and his destructive whim (Breton, 2009).

As such, the solution, in the surrealists' eyes, was to effect nothing less than a revolution, seen as essential to liberating man and helping him transcend his gloomy reality. It is therefore clear that surrealism (and before it Nietzsche's groundbreaking principles) were able to provoke new states of consciousness and "overthrow the walls beyond which it was immemorially supposed to be impossible to see" (Breton, 2009). Indeed, for a naturally-born free, revolutionary soul like Adonis — who even refused his pre-determined religious, traditional name and/or identity — such ideas and such a philosophical outlook would have held an irresistible appeal. With his relentless quest for freedom and creativity and for ways to transcend current reality and found a new one, he continues to explore the surrealist sphere and adapt its vision. In fact, Adonis's vision not only appears to intersect with Nietzsche's overall rebelliousness but also with Sa'ādah's (himself influenced by Nietzsche), particularly his notion of "man's transcendental function."

Beyond doubt, Adonis is among those critics and thinkers who believe in the complete independence of the individual and his/her ability to transcend entirely the weight of religion, culture and *turāth*. Here we agree with Mark Bevir that "a faith in such autonomy often draws support, explicitly or implicitly, from strong empiricism. Empiricists generally argue that people arrive at webs of belief as a result of pure experiences (Bevir, 2000, p. 30). This is very true for Adonis since, as we have thus far observed, he believes in absolute freedom and in man's autonomous nature and his ability to create his own sets of beliefs and values that are not only right for him but also variable according to his experience and ever-changing identity and reality. For him, man, not God, should be the source of truth and the architect of culture and civilization, since it is only through human experience that knowledge can be brought about (Abū Fakhr, 2000, p. 134; Adonis, 2005, p. 39).

Believing in his competence and potential as an individual to effect a meaningful transformation in his life, Adonis desired to change his reality, for he was discontented with it or about what he describes as the "conformist, uninspiring sociopolitical and cultural reality in Damascus" (Abū Fakhr, 2000, p. 61). Therefore, after his graduation from the university and subsequent to fulfilling his term of military service — during which he was imprisoned as a result of his political antigovernment activities — he left Damascus for Beirut, seeking a new reality, freedom, inspiration and perhaps a healthier soil not only for his creativity but also his perceived cultural mission.

#### *c) Beirut: A new reality, a new mission*

Adonis's arrival in Beirut in 1957 marked an important turning point in his life, for it was here, he says, that he found his poetic identity (Adonis, 1993b, p. 36-37). At that time Beirut was considered a haven of freedom and cultural diversity, and thus a paradise for Arab activists and artists.

When I first saw Beirut and started to roam its streets I felt that it was not the land of endings like Damascus but the land of beginnings. Not a land for certainty but a land for searching and a space open to possibilities ... The difference between Damascus and Beirut was very evident and clear in the streets, in people's behavior, in relationships, in cultural activities and in newspapers and magazines. (Adonis, 1993b, p. 31-32)

As he saw it, the difference was due to a tendency towards adopting new, modern ways of thinking on all levels, and of taking a neutral position with respect to values from the past and culture in general. While Damascus seemed to him "like a big closed box, Beirut appeared like an open horizon, experiencing great motion in old fields, forcing any free individual to live only what is transitive and impermanent" (Adonis, 1993b, p. 33).

Therefore, he seized the opportunity offered by Beirut to transmit his free way of thinking and attitude to everybody else. In doing so he aimed at opening up Arab culture to a more liberated identity, because, in his analysis, Arabs enjoy no freedom, given that everything for them is dominated by religion. As he argues, religion for Muslims is not only restricted to ritual and faith; it is, indeed, the language and the whole culture and system of values, in other words, their *turāth*. In view of this, he tells us that he set out to liberate the culture and its language by his own liberation (Adonis, 2004, p. 49), which means to liberate it from its religious features just as he was liberated from his earlier existence as 'Alī. Reaching this critical end was certainly impossible without having such ideals promoted and spread among the people, so that they might start asking new questions and begin reconsidering their inherited values and way of thinking. Thus, certain

cultural avenues were needed to effect the looked-for change. This he mainly achieved by founding two important journals, *Shi'r* (Poetry) in 1957 and *Mawāqif* (Positions) in 1968. (Note 8)

In fact, *Shi'r* was launched in partnership with Yūsuf al-Khāl (1917–1987), a well-known man of letters who, in turn, held the same broad goals and dream of founding a new, free Arab culture. Together, Adonis and al-Khāl founded the *Shi'r* group, as well as publishing the periodical of the same name, which remained a rallying point for avant-garde Arab poets until it ceased to appear in the early 1970s. Influenced by the surrealists, they published a manifesto, which contained a poetic profession of faith, including a call for liberation from traditional rules (in form as well as in thought), criticism and re-evaluation of existing Arab poetry and openness to foreign literature. (Note 9) In fact, *Shi'r* quickly became a forum for experimentation for the new generation of modernist poets and certainly left its imprint on modern Arabic poetry. (Note 10) As Adonis tells us:

all the poetry in the Arab world in this period was either traditionalist or nationalist ... What we were trying to achieve was a rediscovery of the self, against the tribe, against the *ummah*, against all these ideological forms of culture. And though we were often boycotted... everyone acknowledges today that all that is true and real in Arab poetry comes from *Shi'r*. (Adonis, 1993b, p. 37-38)

It is important to keep in mind here that Arabic poetry, from Adonis's point of view, resembles the individual Arab's life. He argues that, in poetry as in life, an Arab's entire range of actions comes from his submitting to everything that surrounds him, even if he rejects it. Thus Arabs, in both poetry and life, practice nothing but imitation and submit to tradition instead of seeking to innovate (Adonis, 1974, p. 27-29). To change such an attitude, creative rebellion against this reality is needed. In fact, in making this link between life and poetry or literature in general, Adonis was greatly influenced by the writings of Sa'ādah, particularly his book *Al-Ṣirā' al-Fikrī fī al-Adab al-Sūrī*, (Note 11) where he discusses his view of literary renovation, emphasizing that the relationship between the poet and his surroundings ought to change. In such a perception, the poet is no longer a mirror reflecting the events around him but a lighthouse that lightens up the reader's life in a new way, showing all points of strength and beauty. This, in Adonis's view, will be the central effect of poetry on the reader: not showing him his everyday existence but presenting him with new horizons for a new life (Adonis, 1993b, p. 107).

In this way, literature becomes the result of renovation in feelings and ideas and is given a new mission; that is, it presents a new conception of life. From this perspective, the intellectual dimension becomes a basic element of any literary or artistic work. A poem, for example, should not simply be an emotional expression, but an emotional intellectual attitude. As a result, Adonis believes that Sa'ādah founded new standards for Arabic literature, as well as for the poet, poetry and the socio-cultural role of literature and art in general.

This was my understanding of Sa'ādah's book at that time... [which] had a great influence on me and my poetry... I can paraphrase the main ideas of the book... as the following: literary renovation in general and poetics specifically are not just expressions of feelings, emotions or ideas but are the result of an original comprehensive view of the human being and of life. This view enables the poet... to come up with new production according to his originality and creativity. (Adonis, 1993b, p. 106-108)

In his attempt to effect change in the traditional way of writing poetry and in the process finding a new one, Adonis started with his own writing. From now on, writing was to be an act of constant transformation, creation and recreation of the world and not a mere portrayal and narrative of what already exists (Adonis, 1971, p. 3-7). Therefore, his writings have provoked a great deal of literary and intellectual debate. As Issa Boullata puts it,

his detractors may be as numerous as his admirers, yet there is no doubt that he has influenced the direction and quality of Arabic poetry in this period and has awakened a lively discussion about the nature and essence of modernity and modernism in the thinking of Arab intellectuals. (Boullata, 2004, p. 31)

In fact, it is important to mention at this juncture that Adonis's position on *turāth* should not be divorced from his position on poetry or on arts and literature in the general sense. This is because it is his broader human, secular modernist vision of the world, man and God that informs his overall position, which is based on the notion of creativity and transformation. In this, he was not only influenced by Sa'ādah (as we have just learned),

but also by the surrealist special perception of the role of arts and poetry in people's lives and their organic relationship with society and culture. Indeed because "transforming life is the aphorism that a surrealist holds on to" (Adonis, 1992, p. 28), poetry in itself and writing in general become, in surrealist eyes, the means of transforming mankind and of creating life" (Adonis, 1992, p. 30). In fact, being himself a poet before anything else, Adonis takes on a like position. He insists that a poet must not only have an artistic and/or aesthetic vision but also a particular vision of the world, where one's words and language should aim to change the world according to one's overall vision (Adonis, 2002b, p. 37; Khan, 2004, p. 312-313; Adonis, 2008, 121). In fact, one should admit that Adonis is consistent in his thought about the relationship between poetry and culture. Indeed, his critique of Arab culture and its *turāth* was a product of his examination and critique of the Arab poetic heritage.

His observation that the Arab poetic taste was governed by a strict conformist aesthetic led him to embark on a systematic investigation of Arab culture as a whole, particularly in its formative first three centuries following the rise of Islam, in order to discover its ethos and the extent to which the latter might still exercise power over the Arabs of today. (Boullata, 1990, p. 27)

In view of this, we suggest that any attempt to understand Adonis's position on *turāth* should take into consideration his role as a poet with a special secular, revolutionary vision of the world. Indeed, this was the message conveyed and the standard employed in *Shi'r*. It planted the seeds for poetic and cultural revolution in the Arab world and, undoubtedly, reflected Adonis's original plea for radical cultural transformation. This plea became more intense and accelerated soon after the 1967 Arab defeat by Israel, leading him to express more overtly his cultural position and to spread it, this time via *Mawāqif*, the journal he founded in 1968.

#### *d) The defeat of 1967 and the position of Mawāqif*

The time between the first issue of *Shi'r* in 1957 and the first issue of *Mawāqif* in 1968 was a period of hardship and confusion in the Arab world (marked by the Egyptian–Syrian unification in 1958, the Egyptian-Syrian separation in 1961 and the coming into power of various Arab military regimes), which culminated in the tragic defeat of June 1967. In fact, during that time, Adonis had a leading role in criticizing the social and intellectual infrastructure that had led to this defeat, attempting to answer the urgent question at that time: Why were the Arabs defeated? As a committed poet and thinker who was eager to explore and analyze the reason/s behind the devastating loss, Adonis founded and began editing *Mawāqif*, a significant literary and cultural quarterly. He wanted very much to enlarge the focus of *Shi'r* by addressing the politics — and the illusions — of the Arab nations after their defeat, believing that literature by itself cannot achieve the renewal of society and that it should be related to a more comprehensive revolutionary movement of renovation on all levels. In this he "was completely drawn into Sa'ādah's sphere, particularly, its civilizational dimension" (Adonis, 1993b, p. 30), which was reflected in the editorial to *Mawāqif*'s first issue in October 1968. There, Adonis frankly reveals the objectives of *Mawāqif*, underlining its aim to call into question not only poetry but all culture and history in order to renew Arab thought and its system of knowledge. "Articles and poems are not just pieces of art; they are active, changing work. [*Mawāqif*] is the culture of struggle ... aiming at examining and explaining the world, humanity and life for one fundamental revolutionary purpose: changing the world, humanity and life (Adonis, 1968, p. 4).

In short, the ambition of *Mawāqif* was to be an initiator, and as such, in Adonis's eyes, a creator. For him, "every initiation is creation and every creation is an attack." Thus, in *Mawāqif* he aimed at "destroying" what it rejected and "establishing" what it wanted (Adonis, 1968, p. 4). He rejected the customary way of thinking and the predominating culture, which together restrict creativity and freedom and thus stand as an obstacle before progress and civilization. In *Mawāqif*, he not only rejected such a dogma but insisted that civilization itself is creation: "it is not using tools but creating tools." Likewise, culture, "is not using language as much as creating and reconstructing language" (Adonis, 1968, p. 4-5). But to be creative, one must be perfectly free, since absolute freedom is the quality vital to opening all closed doors.

Freedom is not only the right to live and move within the known standards and limits but it is the right to search, create, reject and overcome. It is the practicing of what we never practiced. This is *Mawāqif*. It is a space for and an act of confrontation ... This act goes beyond all devotion and all authorities. It is a constant criticism, which will light up every thing, it is the opposite of acceptance and it is the initiative to dive into the unknown. (Adonis, 1968, p. 5)

Due to its revolutionary nature and free-thinking outlook, *Mawāqif* had to overcome a certain number of problems, including censorship by governments less open than Lebanon's, financial difficulties that its independent nature entailed, and the problems that came in the wake of the Lebanese War. However, in spite of these difficulties, the review was able to survive until quite recently. Indeed, since 1968 some of the Arab world's most unrestrained commentary has appeared on its pages — independent of all regimes, of all institutions and of the dominant culture. Perhaps the only such organ to enjoy this degree of freedom in the region, *Mawāqif* became a crossroads. (Note 12) During the twenty-five years of its life, *Mawāqif* witnessed many events and changes in the Arab world (Note 13) that turned this region upside down, leading to the disappearance of grand dreams, vast political projects and the great national cause. All of this has made Adonis suspicious of a culture that he feels is on the brink of extinction. (Note 14) However, intrigued by the phenomenon of this “declining culture,” Adonis set out to discover the hidden causes responsible for the situation, above all by exploring the very foundations of this culture, i.e., the forces and values that created it and bequeathed to it a problematic cultural and intellectual heritage. For him, this would not be an easy task, but seeing himself as an Arab intellectual with the responsibility to “undertake theoretical revolution,” and thereby “fill the hearts and minds of Arabs with the new light of change” (Adonis, 1968, p. 3), he decided to deepen his formal knowledge of Arab-Islamic culture and thought. To this end, he joined the Jesuit-run Université St-Joseph in Beirut in 1970, from which he obtained his doctorat d'état in 1973 (Abu Deeb, 1998, v. 1, p. 58).

Finally, driven by the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon to abandon Beirut, he decided to settle in Paris, choosing freedom “in exile over being a prisoner (metaphorically speaking) in the Arab countries” (Shatz, 2002). But as he tells us, the earthly comforts of life in exile came with a painful sense of isolation, aggravated by the ever-present threat of the *fatwās* issued against him due to his anti-religious views (Shatz, 2002). But, despite all such problems and worries, Adonis (now intellectually and ideologically established) has continued to write and speak in his characteristically subversive way, denouncing religion in all its expressions. Thus, we may say that Adonis, far from acknowledging Islam or religion as the solution, upholds atheism and absolute secularism as the means to unlock the future and recreate the individual and civilization as a whole.

## 2. Secularism: The Impact of Anṭūn Sa'ādah

Like all secularists, Adonis refuses to believe that nature and history are governed by external, supernatural forces, and rejects guidance from religion in any aspect of life, be it political, social, educational, moral, economic, etc. Instead, secularists maintain that political and legal norms are to be derived from ethical codes — not religious ones. In general, what matters for secularists is not the elimination of religion *per se*, but their trust in the “epistemological independence of human reason in all fields of knowledge and research, including religion” (Dāhir, 1993, p. 38). In fact, as expressed by its architect George Holyoake (1817-1906), secular knowledge has, since its introduction, been “founded in this life, relates to the conduct of this life, conduces to the welfare of this life, and is capable of being tested by the experience of this life” (Cline, 2008; Holyoake, 1876). Therefore, secularists assert the independence of both human reason and actions, and, consequently, man's responsibility for the latter. In keeping with this, not only political power but also any form of religious power (social or cultural) loses its sacred character, making all-embracing change essential. For this reason, secularists favor modernization, progress and utilitarianism, believing that all values (including religious and moral ones) are relative. In other words, secularism constitutes a socio-political ideology wherein religion or supernatural beliefs play no role in exploring the world, and indeed, represent a danger to the temporal realms of governance and reasoning. Its advocates always strenuously promote science, reason, and naturalistic thinking. (Note 15)

When these universal secular premises penetrated the Arab-Islamic world, they left a noticeable impact on several modern and contemporary intellectuals. Of course, such ideas were not welcomed by most in the religiously and traditionally-oriented elite, and they gave rise to furious debate between the advocates and opponents of secularism (Yared, 2002, p. 9). (Note 16) However, despite this hostile reception on the part of clerics and traditionalist intellectuals, secularism soon began to appear in the writings of many contemporary Arab authors who saw its aptness to solve most of, if not all, the problems facing the modern Arab reality. (Note 17) Here we will limit our exploration of secularism to Anṭūn Sa'ādah's point of view, as it was among the earliest sources that inspired Adonis, alerted him to the key elements behind the backwardness of present-day Arab culture and gave him ideas as to the best way of resolving the problem. The first and foremost of these was absolute secularism, as we shall see in the following. In recommending secularism, Sa'ādah argues that a secular stance is something that is necessitated by human progress and by a true philosophical understanding of the nature of religion and human values. In fact, his approach to secularization,

as described by one scholar, was of “a high level of complexity,” for he intended to reach a certain level of philosophical understanding by which a total break might be achieved between religion and values, between the metaphysical or theological and the existential (Dāhir, 2007, p. 284). To arrive at such an end, he based himself on three philosophical premises: a) humanistic rules; b) the relativity of values and c) the nature of God. How he did so will be shown in the following.

Arguing from the humanistic point of view, Sa‘ādah alludes to its key premise, i.e., that man represents the supreme arbiter. Accordingly, values are not to be regarded as natural objects in the world, nor are they to be considered as a gift from any supernatural source. On the contrary, it is only man who may coin them. Therefore, he concludes, nothing can assign value or refuse to assign it except on the basis of human consciousness (Abū ‘Amshah, 1995, p. 157). In view of this, he dismisses the notion of values as immaterial objects. Indeed, they cannot be such, because, as he tells us, if they were they would be discoverable empirically and also subject to universal agreement in theory. He also maintains that it is impossible for values to be derived from some supernatural being or God. The logic used here is that such a being would have to be judged according to values before being considered as the right source for our values. If this is true, then values must find their source in human beings first (Dāhir, 2007, p. 291-292). As is evident from this humanistic argument, Sa‘ādah aimed at validating man and not God; to make man supremely autonomous of any supernatural influence. As such, man turns out to be the ultimate source of his own values. Thus, man himself possesses definitive accountability when it comes to determining his existence and managing his affairs.

This, in fact, brings us to Sa‘ādah’s second argument, for, while identifying man as the ultimate source of values, he sees this responsibility as falling only on society as a whole, and not on the individual. This means that values are the product of organized social forces, an expression of man’s social life within a specific cultural context at a certain point in history. No single value system should be regarded as right for every culture in every age. Indeed, each system, he maintains, expresses the eccentricity of the culture that generates it, reflecting its identity (Dāhir, 2007, p. 300-302; Abū ‘Amshah, 1995, p. 158). At this juncture, it becomes important to understand how Sa‘ādah draws on this idea (the relativity of values) to justify a secular position on the world and its logical necessity. In his analysis, since universalism — the notion of addressing all cultures in all ages — is an essential quality of religions, adopting a secular outlook becomes the only means of reconciling the relativity of values with it. This is because in its institutional form religion is bound to acquire a socio-political content to represent a particular value system. However, preserving such universalism entails for religion either one of two things: absolutizing its value system or breaking with it, i.e., jettisoning its socio-political content. However, as we said earlier, the absolutizing of its value system is regarded by Sa‘ādah as irrational because of the relativistic nature of values. Thus, the only rational choice is for religion to discard its socio-political content. The bottom line here is that if religion is to abide by its socio-political content, it has to relativize itself. But as such, religion would be deprived of its so-called universal essence. Hence, for the universalism of religion to be reconciled with the relativity of values, secularism is the only option (Dāhir, 2007, p. 302-305; Abū ‘Amshah, 1995, p. 162-163).

Despite his argument on behalf of a secular outlook, Sa‘ādah draws on the nature of God to prove his point, although in this context he alludes merely to Christian and Muslim perceptions. In their view, he explains, God is an absolutely perfect and rational being, the creator of everything, which He created for a reason. Such a stance, however, leads to self-contradiction. This is because from a religious (anti-secular) point of view, all human endeavors, whatever their nature, are subject to rigid religious criteria and not to rational ones. Yet God — being what He is — could not have intended for man not to exercise his rational faculty. To enslave man or his thought by a rigid system, thus rendering the rational faculty redundant, would be self-contradictory. Sa‘ādah is particularly eloquent on “the eventual implications” of what he calls “the traditional conception of God.” As he explains it, God created everything for a reason; thus, the creation of man’s rational faculty was also made for a reason. And as for the rationale behind any created thing, Sa‘ādah identifies this as the function that its creation is supposed to fulfill (Dāhir, 2007, p. 306-308). Analogously then, the rationale for creating a rational being (man) is the function that the latter’s rational nature is expected to fulfill, i.e., to think, to reason, to perceive and to transcend. Indeed, such a function is not limited to thinking and reasoning about reality in its facticity; rather, being limitless, it is also capable of finding out what reality ought to be (Dāhir, 2007, p. 292).

Moreover, because God in both Christianity and Islam is regarded as a supremely rational being, His actions, in Sa‘ādah’s analysis, cannot (logically speaking) be subject to conflicting reasons. If so, they would be arbitrary, without any rationality. In Sa‘ādah’s logic, God cannot give man a rational faculty and at the same time force him to follow a rigid system of legal and moral rules, bypassing his ability to exercise this faculty. Therefore, in his final judgment, he concludes that it is illogical for God, who supposedly raised man above all creatures and

gave him reason, thereby freeing him from enslavement to nature, rigid laws and animalistic instincts, to then relegate him all over again to the level of other creatures and enslave him by means of an unbending system. For all these reasons, by adopting a secular outlook, one cannot only restore to man his true position as God's most respected creation but also give back to God His true essence as an absolutely perfect being (Dāhir, 2007, p. 300-307; Abū 'Amshah, 1995, p. 137-138).

Clearly, this philosophy and line of thought had an impact on Adonis and formed his overall awareness of the significance of secularism and its necessity. It became for him the central creed in his ideology of progress. Thus, to achieve progress man ought to fulfill his role as a free creator and arbiter/judge, capable of instituting a comprehensive system suitable to his own time and place and of transcending his reality in the search for an enhanced one. However, as Adonis tells us, man cannot reach this end unless he purges himself completely of persisting supernatural beliefs. Convinced by Sa'adah's logic, Adonis in his turn insists that man should be liberated from every kind of religious knowledge and should become an absolute sceptic if he really wants to make progress and to contribute to human civilization. The first "truth" to suspect is the function of God as the Supreme Being responsible for all human activities and fate. Instead, Adonis affirms that man ought to be the active agent in all matters, including his fate and destiny, leaving no room for God, religion or revelation (Abū Fakhr, 2002, p. 140). Clearly, such an outlook — one that combines Nietzsche's philosophy with the main principles of surrealism and those of Sa'adah — left an impression on Adonis's overall perspective and his absolute secular-modernist standpoint on *turāth*, which may ultimately be reduced to a position on religion.

### 3. Adonis: A Secular-Modernist Position on *Turāth*

In justifying his call for cultural revolution, Adonis argues, as do his like-minded contemporaries, that the process of change that came about in the Arab World did not accomplish the goals it set out to achieve. In short, as others have argued, changes did not lead "to a cultural transformation in the sense of a complete change, or one that is essential, in composition and structure" (Zurayq, 1979, p. 9-17). Given this fact, they all, including Adonis, attack purely religion-based change, holding it accountable for the presumed ongoing cultural retreat. He therefore calls for a radical break with past religious tradition, insisting that "we cannot establish a new Arab thought unless we discover and criticize the old one." In fact, for Adonis, this amounts to deconstructing the basis of the culture and rethinking the unthinkable by questioning its very core, i.e., the revelation, arguing that "the criticism of revelation in a society built on revelation is not only the first condition for all criticism but also the first condition for freedom and progress" (Abū Fakhr, 2002, p. 138; Adonis, 2002, v. 1, p. 131). Certainly, such logic (I argue) harmonizes with the way the term "modernism" is described in English lexicography and modern encyclopedias and, in some respects, intersects with its corresponding modern Arabic term *ḥadāthah* (modernism), as will be explained in the following.

As it is generally defined, modernism is a tendency or movement towards modifying traditional beliefs and doctrines in accordance with modern ideas and scholarship. Hence, believers and advocates of this method, i.e., modernists, always stand for a self-conscious break with the past, reject supernatural elements and search for new forms of expression and knowledge. In this they generally reveal a propensity for creating "culture shock," by abandoning traditional conventions of social and cultural behaviour. (Note 18) In fact, this general description is analogous to the counterpart terms in Arabic, i.e., *ḥadāthah* and *ḥadāthī* (a modernist), which will be explored in more detail below, since it will better illustrate why Adonis is often designated as (or accused of being) داعي حداثة (a herald of modernism).

Linguistically, the word حداثة is derived from the trilateral root ح د ث (ḥ d th), which yields in Form IV the verbal noun الإحداث (al-*iḥdāth*). This term is identified in classical Arabic dictionaries as a synonym for other, equivalent verbal nouns such as الحدثان (al-*ḥadathān*) and الحدوث (al-*ḥudūthah*). These verbal nouns are used to indicate, when employed as nouns or adjectives, any novelty, new thing, innovation, something not known before, or originality (Ibn Manẓūr, 1955, v. 2, p. 131-132; Al-Bustānī, 1927, v. 1, p. 164; Al-Zabīdī, 1994, v. 3, p. 191; Ṣalībā, 1971, v. 1, p. 454). However, this terminology is very much associated with Islam, particularly with matters of religious doctrine, practice and the like. As such, حداثة (*ḥadāthah*) and its cognates signify محدث أمر (*amr muḥdath*), an unprecedented thing or issue, or its plural, محدثات الأمور (*muḥdathāt al-umūr*), hinting at "innovations of people of erroneous opinions" which appear "inconsistent with the doctrine, practice of the righteous of preceding times or what is not recognized in the revealed scripture, the Sunnah, or in the general conventional tenets of the Muslim scholars." Therefore, *ḥadāthah* or *iḥdāth* and its active participle *muḥdith* came to signify an innovation that is disapproved, not agreeable with custom, or usage, by reason of not being identified in earlier traditional and/or religious texts or views (Lane, 1984, v. 1, p. 528; Ibn Manẓūr, 1955, v. 2, p. 131-132).

Not only this, but the other meaning for أحدث (*aḥdatha*), i.e., its synonym أبداع (*abda'a*), means to create, originate or excel, while its Form VIII equivalent ابتدع (*ibtada'a*), among its other meanings, denotes creating or originating a heresy. Thus, its active participle مبدع (*mubdi'*) implies both a creator and a heresiarch (Ba'albakī, 1987, p. 20 & 228). (Note 19) As interchangeable terms in the Arabic language, *aḥdatha*, like *abda'a* or *ibtada'a*, became a sign not only of creativity but also of heresy and deviation from what is regarded as the mainstream cultural and/or religious “straight path.” In this sense, حداثة (modernism) and إبداع (creativity) appear to connote negative associations, and so have turned, in Adonis’s view, into objectionable concepts in the Arab mind. This is because they are taken to imply the production or commencement of a new state, case, attitude, method, in short, an anti-traditional system of thought and culture; and not the continuation, repetition, imitation or even renewal of a standard established custom considered valid and reliable due to its supposed religious origin (Adonis, 1993, p. 76). Given this perception, any herald or advocate of modernism in Arab culture has been regarded by other more traditionalist thinkers as nonconformist, rebellious, deviationist, destructive or even apostate. Notwithstanding this prejudiced judgment, the present study tends to regard Adonis’s secular position on Arab culture and *turāth* as a modernist one (حداثي), given that his stand-point “flies in the face of traditional Islamic views of man, the world and God” (Boullata, 1990, p. 30).

If I say that it is necessary to critically review the past ... the culture ... and devalue the sacred, they would say you are a destructionist, destroyer... And if I stand for the rationality of the atheist movement... [in the Arab culture] ... for it was also critical of the culture and the religion ... they would say you are destructionist, destroyer ... Well, since I say nothing but the truth, then it is approved, I am destructionist, a destroyer. (Adonis, 2005, p. 58)

Taking a secular-modernist position in describing early Arab-Islamic culture, Adonis argues that, among its chief features was the fact that it did not emerge from interaction between rational activity and reality, but was merely a collection of beliefs that originated from a text, i.e., revelation. Therefore, the text was given priority over both reality and reason, elevating it to the status of being the only source of knowledge, out of which the early Muslim’s system of knowledge and thought were produced. In this way it came to be regarded as the first source of human knowledge — an unquestionable, absolute, ultimate source. Indeed, as he maintains, a society that finds its basis and ultimate reason in revelation develops a bond with what he calls *al-thābit* (the static), “which, in religious terms, is ‘the face of God,’ so that anything other than this becomes imperfect” (Adonis, 2002, v. 1, p. 23-24, 72). Given that it is founded on revelation, Arabic culture, in his analysis, is inclined to *ittibā'iyah* (conformity) and, as such it is more likely to reject and condemn *ibdā'* (creativity); hence, it cannot achieve progress. From this perspective, any attempt at change and innovation becomes a deviation from the static, i.e., the perfect. Thus, the opposite of the static, i.e., *al-mutaḥawwil* (the dynamic), appears to encompass a negative connotation. (Note 20) In fact, it is through this model of *al-thābit wa-al-mutaḥawwil* (the static and the dynamic) that one should explore Adonis’s overall position on *turāth*, especially the fact that *turāth*, for him, appears to allude to the “customary inherited static elements” that shape the prevailing Arab culture (Adonis, 2002, v. 1, p. 14; Adonis, 2005, p. 46). Although this definition brings with it noticeable problems, among them a narrowing of *turāth* to one aspect of the culture, it will be necessary to explore first of all his analysis of “the static and the dynamic” so as to understand better not only his definition but also his biased position on *turāth*.

In fact, in his analysis of the development of cultures and societies, Adonis maintains that the process of rejection and acceptance is the most normal phenomenon in culture and in political and social life in general. He argues that every society has a system that represents the values and interests of certain groups and a notion of another system that represents the interests and values of other groups, such that the development of any society depends totally on the conflict and the interaction between these groups (Adonis, 2002, v. 1, p. 51). Therefore, in his attempt to study Arab culture as a phenomenon and to reveal the progression of conflict between the two conflicting currents, i.e., the static and the dynamic, he concludes that the characteristics that prevailed in Arab society were a result of the domination of the static. In this way, he argues that the first division in the Islamic community occurred during the first caliphate and was basically political, but was soon afterwards converted to religious conflict as each party justified its position on a religious basis and interpreted religion according to its ideology. Since that time, he concludes, “the ideology of the winning party became the official ideology (interpretation) for the society, while the defeated party had its own interpretation too” (Adonis, 2002, v. 1, p. 67-68). He asserts that, for one reason or another, the dynamic party was not only defeated but was afterwards constantly suppressed, with the result that its followers were either imprisoned or

killed or accused of deviation from the right dogma. Indeed, this “reality,” in his view, led to the absence of controversy in Arab society and the beginning of the latter’s deterioration (Adonis, 2002, v. 1, p. 57).

In view of this, one can regard Adonis’s “static and dynamic” as the two contending worldviews in Arab culture, with the static representing, on the one hand, the values and interests of the traditional, conformist religious groups, and the dynamic, on the other, constituting the revolutionary, anti-traditional elements. In other words, the dynamic reflects the forces of change, while the static reflects the forces of continuity. As he defines it, the static is the current or line of thought that is “based on a permanent text,” i.e., Qur’ānic revelation, which imposes its own interpretation of the text as the only valid interpretation, attributing to itself a priority of claim to authority based on its sole interpretation of the text (Adonis, 2002, v. 1, p. 13). The dynamic, by contrast, is the current or line of thought “which is also based on the [Qur’ānic] text but with new understanding that enables the text to adapt with changes in reality” (Adonis, 2002, v. 1, p. 13). Refusing to submit to the authority of the static, it thus depends not on the text and/or transmission as its reference point but on rationality and reason (Adonis, 2002, v. 1, p. 13-14). Before proceeding with his analysis, however, it would be useful to draw attention to a potential problem in his definition.

This may be seen from his position that both the static and the dynamic share a common ground. They both depend on the Qur’ānic text even if they interpret it differently. In support of this claim, let me re-quote Adonis’s earlier statement where he argued that “a society that finds its basis and ultimate reason in revelation develops a bond with the static” (Adonis, 2002, v. 1, p. 72). In view of this and of Adonis’s overall vision, one understands that the culture that depends on a divinely revealed text cannot progress or achieve any creativity, for it rotates in the orbit of the permanent and static knowledge encoded in the text. But since the dynamic also takes its point of departure from the text — regardless of its rational and perhaps antithetical approach to interpretation, i.e., in not taking “the text and/or transmission as its reference point”— it still (theoretically speaking) revolves around the permanent and the static knowledge encoded in the text; thus, it cannot be truly free or creative, a conclusion that certainly places his analysis and definition at risk. Perhaps, he did not want to sound too radical at the very start, and so he retained the text/revelation as his basis even for the revolutionary current. Nonetheless, in going back to the revealed text (as origin) Adonis distinguishes between two types of readings: the dynamic, which reads it in an open, revolutionary and rational way, and the static, which reads the text literally, interpreting life and history within that frame. However, in both cases, Adonis describes the prevailing reading of the religious text as ideological, converting the text into a battlefield, i.e., into a political text (Adonis, 2002, v. 1, p. 25). Yet, while he tends to disapprove of such methods in reading the text, his own reading of *turāth* gives rise to a similar situation by overtly taking the dynamic side.

As a modernist who has adopted a deconstructive methodology in order to understand the objective and subjective incentives behind that reading, and as a follower of Michael Foucault (1926-1984), Adonis holds that ideological reading requires a claim to power, such that knowledge becomes power and power becomes knowledge. Not only this, but such ideological-political reading will inevitably, in his view, enhance other readings that drive the religious text onto a battlefield of contending interpretations, where anything in accordance with these readings is seen as executing God’s will (Adonis, 2002, v. 1, p. 24-26; Adonis, 1993d, p. 38-40). In view of this, he argues that one of the basic problems in this context is that Arab culture, whether in the form of literature, poetry or intellectual issues in general, has always been measured against the static scale of religion, which happens to be the representative of the authority. Thus, “religious knowledge became the standard for general knowledge” (Adonis, 2002, v. 1, p. 18). Such a religious standard, in Adonis’s view, was essentially responsible for nourishing the roots of the backwardness of the culture. Among the truths it imposed were: a) that truth is to be found not in nature, the world or the human being but only in the text, so that reality could only be understood according to the text; b) that there is only one truth and that it transmitted on the authority of the guardian of the text; and c) that (accordingly) any progression means going back to the original text (Adonis, 2002, v. 1, p. 19-21). In this case, “a text can be so comprehensive and inclusive that it can include and comprehend complete existence and complete knowledge.” This feature, Adonis maintains, leads to the problem of absolute dogma, i.e., claiming complete and final knowledge in presenting the reality of things and rejecting any other truth (Adonis, 2005, p. 43-46; Adonis, 2002b, p. 64-73).

In fact, this observation confirms our earlier proposal that Adonis’s position on *turāth* is absolutely related to his vocation as a poet and to his position on religion. Here we see how, as a poet, obsessed with words and their magic and power, he tends to appraise the Arab *turāth* in terms of its relationship to words, for these were accountable for its emergence. Since those words are, collectively, divine words, i.e., *wahī*, he looks at the culture as revolving only around the revealed, absolute, comprehensive and eternal text (the origin), leaving no room for any human contribution or creativity. On the contrary, he maintains that this *wahī* instituted a

conformist mind-set and culture which, in turn, produced a *turāth* in its image. Therefore, he insists on the importance of studying the Qurʾān, because in his view, “this text is the key to understanding the Islamic world,” to the extent that he maintains that nobody can ever understand Muslims and their thought, history and *turāth* unless one starts from comprehending this text and grasping its relationship with and impact on Muslims (Adonis, 1995d, p. 36).

Islam is not only the main material and component of the old thought but also its animated, active, permanent core ... Even if some people claim that “religion is only an illusion,” we admit that this illusion is the main driving force, moving the Arab Muslim people, and it is the main source of their thought ... We do not need to explain this illusion or deny it, what we really need is to analyze it and to study its function in relation to the mind and to life. (Adonis, 1981b, p. 6-7)

This statement makes it clear that Adonis set out to study, describe and observe Arab culture and/or *turāth* as a phenomenon. He asserts that his criticism and rejection of religion is not directed at religion *per se* but at its power over man and society. In measuring the impact of the text (revelation) on the shaping of the Arab mind and *turāth*, he argues that, from an Islamic point of view, revelation and God’s words (i.e., religion) have no past or deficiency; therefore, it has complete continuous presence, cannot be changed and is in no need of simulation or renovation — for the text is always new and perfect (Adonis, 2002, v. 1, p. 325, 68-69). Looked at it in this way, one can recognize the progress of religious knowledge as “moving within the original comprehensive light” i.e., the light of the text, making a Muslim’s relation with it neither historical nor one between the past and the present. Indeed, as he maintains, the text is not a part of the Muslim’s heritage or past but an absolute presence and, accordingly, history is not moving from deficiency to perfection, since perfection already existed in the Prophet’s era. By this logic, all history may be considered as decline and deterioration (Adonis, 2005, p. 39-40). In other words, due to its alleged eternity, revelation transcends time and categories wherein time (past, present and future) is subsumed. In such a case, “revelation is at once the past in so far as it is a continuum and the future in so far as it is the eschatological endpoint.” Hence, “time becomes subservient to revelation,” so that what pertains to religion comes to be beyond both time and history. This sort of time, in Adonis’s analysis, turns into what he calls a prophetic time, where “the future is transformed into the past.” This is because the Prophet does not proceed towards the future; rather, “he remembers it” (Adonis, 2002, v. 1, p. 68-71). Accordingly, Adonis concludes that prophetic time takes one back to the past by placing it in the future, where the latter becomes merely one of the forms of the past. In this case, an individual lives as a stranger to his own self and time (Adonis, 2002, v. 2, p. 72; Adonis, 1993, p. 73). To put it in Adonis’s poetic language, “everything yet to come is old so avoid the company of this madness and be prepared to stay a stranger” (Adonis, 1985b, p. 72).

كل شيء سيأتي قديم  
فاصطحب غير هذا الجنون  
تهيأ كي تظل غريباً

In view of this, due to the dominance of religious knowledge (the static), progress became only an elevated form of maintaining the original. Therefore, regardless of how wide or diverse the world may be, the original remains wider and even more diverse. In this sense, progress is perceived as an endowment from above and not as a product of human thought and action. Indeed, “it is measured in terms of its subordination to heaven” where the human contributions carry no value except in their association with and adaptation to the original (Adonis, 1974, p. 27). This worldview, in Adonis’s eyes, is incapable of generating any new lifestyle or thought and, in itself, plays a crucial role in hindering the maturation of the objective conditions for revolutionary change and even opposition to it. For him, this is a scary “fact,” since this way of thinking prevents the Arabs not only from living their present reality but also from producing any new, original thing. This is because they have always been rotating in the orbit of the divine, the past and the customary; hence *turāth* itself (I argue) becomes both the vehicle and the producer of such a customary, inherited static mind-set, revealing, in Adonis’s view, the “structure of the Arab-Islamic mentality” (Adonis, 2002, v. 1, p. 62-63).

While it seems that the static represents the problematic of the Arab culture and the Arab mind-set, and therefore the problematic of *turāth*, the dynamic appears as the solution, “revealing the possibilities of change or progress in the Arab’s life” (Adonis, 2002, v. 1, p. 56-57). Indeed, these two aspects (the static and the dynamic) are closely related in Adonis’s thinking, for, in his analysis, one cannot anticipate the destiny of any nation unless one understands the cultural origins of that nation, and, indeed, one cannot expect any future

unless one fully comprehends the *turāth* and the past reality (Adonis, 2002, v. 1, p. 64; Adonis, 1995, v. 1, p. 10). This “reality” (or *turāth*) in his view, reflects four important interrelated features of customary Arab culture that impacted on and shaped the Arab mind-set and in effect caused the current state of backwardness. These are: *lāhūtānīyah* (theologism), *māḍawīyah* (obsession with the past), negation of modernity, and division between the meaning and the word (Adonis, 1974, p. 27-29; Adonis, 2002, v. 1, p. 57-63).

As for the first quality, Adonis argues that, on the ontological level, so-called *lāhūtānīyah* controls the Arab mentality. It is “a tendency to exaggerate the separation between man and God and between nature and God,” making the religious conception of God the origin, centre, and aim of everything. In this prospect, man, for example, does not come to earth from earth, but from heaven because he, originally, is neither a natural development nor a part of nature and to succeed he must surpass nature – which is impossible (Adonis, 2002, v. 1, p. 58). It was through this perspective that concepts arose and values were established, from which emanated the principles of theory and practice in Arab society. On the theoretical level, this means that revelation is regarded as the first, irrefutable, absolute and ultimate source of human knowledge. Similarly, on the practical level, it means that society must be formed on earth to meet the requirements of this revelation, since the latter aims at the salvation and happiness of people on earth. For that reason, human life ought to be regulated in particular ways to guarantee that the goal is realized in the most perfect manner (Adonis, 1974, p. 27-29). What is more, theologism, in Adonis’ analysis, made the Arab mind-set receptive only to abstract oneness and absolute metaphysics, the earthly dimension of which was reflected in socio-political life, in the reification of the community and the state. And since theologism is a type of man’s existence outside of his self, then on the social level, for example, the tie of the individual to an abstract structure is also a type of man’s existence outside of his self. In other words, man does not exist by himself, but by God, and hence, in the world, he only exists by virtue of religion, by the state and by the family (Adonis, 2008, p. 120). In other words, man’s life, thought and action are predetermined as they are enslaved in such a system, which he deems to be patriarchal.

Every patriarchal system is both ideal and authoritarian. Its idealness, on the one hand, derives from its indifference to living experiment and historical change, given that it is concerned with the original established prototype. It is authoritarian, on the other hand, because it bends behaviour and thought to the demands of this ideal, preventing any kind of departure from it. Therefore, whoever breaches what his/her ancestors decreed or established appears to have killed these forbears themselves. Whence, the attachment to the past in Arab life. It is only a manifestation of the attachment to the father’s authority and his commandment. (Adonis, 1974, p. 28)

Therefore, man cannot practice his human essence as an individual, for he does not have freedom of creativity and innovation. At this juncture, we could better understand Adonis’s earlier view that progress and moving forward is only an elevated form of maintaining the original, where progress is measured in terms of its subordination to the “father,” be this God, the text/s, and/or *turāth*, which embraces all and transmits the presumed ideal knowledge.

In view of this, one can better understand Adonis’s second suggested characteristic of the Arab mind-set or culture, *māḍawīyah*, by which he means its inclination to and obsession with the known, the past and/or the old, combined with fear and hostility towards the new and the unknown. For him, this explains what he sees as the Arab conviction that man can adapt himself only to things and thoughts that his imagination can be in accord with and allow. Anything that he is unable to give an explanation to, he rejects and refuses to face. Therefore, he argues that when an Arab encounters something outside his *turāth*, he first tries to recognize it by comparing it with what he understands. But, if there is nothing to compare it with, this new thing becomes to him confusing, frightening, and dangerous. Thus, as far as the Arab is concerned, “clarity”— what he understands and what allows him to face up to nature and culture, life and society — has traditionally been the most important consideration. Indeed, Adonis sees that the Arab, both in action and thought, starts from the certainty that he is, functionally, incomplete if he has no cultural models to follow, or at the very least he will lose his sense of direction and fall into a daze. This means that he perceives his existence as based on the continuity of past symbols in their given order, which causes him to tend, in this case, towards opposing whatever threatens them by either doubting or rejecting it. In view of this, in seeking knowledge, particularly religious knowledge, the Arab relies merely on his *turāth*; anything this *turāth* does not approve is of no regard and may even lead him astray (Adonis, 1974, p. 28; Adonis, 2002, v. 1, p. 58-59). Indeed, if this is correct, such a perception leads us to the third feature of Arab culture identified by Adonis, i.e., its inclination to oppose modernity.

The very “fact” that the old constitutes a power that gave rise to cultural roles, whence, in Adonis’s view, other roles are generated (both social and psychological), “means that the personality of the Arab, like his culture, revolves around the past-the old,” as they formed around the fixed, conformist ultimate knowledge given in the revealed Qur’anic text. Therefore, the Arab feels he cannot change direction and, as we said earlier, trusting nothing outside his own *turāth*, tends instead to oppose innovation and modernity. This is because modernity, to use Adonis’s language, is an “adventure of discovering the unknown and accepting it for the sake of greater domination over nature and world change” (Adonis, 1974, p. 28). It is “an endless struggle to transcend oneself, to go beyond the accepted and known world, and thus to revolt against prevailing practices and belief, and always create new and better ones — and the individual must be completely free to do that” (Boullata, 2004, p. 43). But since this is not the case, Arabs, in his view, take an inconsistent position on modernity (Western modernity). What he means is that they borrow its accomplishments while refusing the intellectual premises which gave rise to them. However, since “real modernity is in creation, and not in the accomplishments themselves,” the Arab cannot, in his view, appear to stand for it, particularly as it assumes a lack of knowledge at various times in the past. As such, “modernism will be creating a new discourse that never existed in our *turāth*, and at the same time granting the infinity of knowledge” (Adonis, 2002, v. 1, p. 18-19). But because the latter position seems not to concur with the prevailing static cultural system and mind-set — which assumes perfection in the revealed text and *turāth* — it certainly leaves no place for modernity/creativity (Adonis, 1995d, p. 107-109; Adonis, 1974, p. 28-29).

Still, due to revelation and its own focus on the divine, the Arab mind-set, in Adonis’s eyes, reflects a fourth feature, that is, a tendency to introduce a division between meaning and speech, considering divine revelation (meaning) as having a prior existence to that of speech, where the word constitutes only a sign or illustration of meaning. Therefore, innovation can take place only at the formal level but not at that of ideas (Adonis, 2002b, p. 21-24).

In all cultural development, form and function agree, so that a change in function will have, as a consequence, a change in form. But although the function of poetry in Arab society changed in Islam from what it had been in the pre-Islamic period, its form did not change. (Adonis, 1974, p. 29)

This tradition, in Adonis’s analysis, was one of the things that gave rise to a division between words and meaning, form and content, forcing poetical expression into a kind of conformity with older meanings. “This meaning was the truth – Islam and its values. (Note 21) This attitude, in turn, imposes conformity with the ancient and the religious, which constitute a complete source; hence, whatever follows is obliged to adapt to it and express it, maintaining not only moral but also linguistic conformity. On the moral level, Adonis argues that the scope of the successor’s behaviour must conform to the original past model, whereas at the linguistic level, the individual’s expression must conform to the original rhetorical model of expression (Adonis, 1971b, p. 9-27, esp. 9-10).

Clearly, Adonis’s four suggested features of the Arab mentality are related to the supposedly divine-based origin of Arab culture and its perspective on God and revelation. He is convinced that this very “reality” produced a conformist outlook and the static elements in *turāth*. It seems that such conformity with the old (be it in literature or culture) derives from the acceptance of certain premises that Adonis associates with the prevailing Arab culture. Chief among these are the notions that the old alone is truth, that truth is firmly fixed and does not change, that truth is clear (so its expression must be clear), and that truth is reasonable and logical, not emotional, so that it is necessary to keep imagination at a distance, for it produces fancy and error. Therefore, metaphor in literature, for example, must be put aside, since expression must not be allowed to divert the words from their original meaning (Adonis, 1974, p. 29). In fact, the elimination of metaphor is the linguistic, rhetorical equivalent of the elimination of interpretation on the intellectual or philosophical-religious levels. Adonis sees this as responsible for a curious relationship between the old and the new or between the prior and the subsequent (Adonis, 2002, v. 1, p. 60-61).

Ancient Arabic poetry, and this is true of Arab culture in general, stands in relation to modern poetry as the “sum total” in relation to the parts. So too, the Qur’an in relation to religious thought is like the “sum total,” what comes after it is like the “details.” The details are expressions of the “sum total.” They are translations, explanations, and reflections. Detail then is not a creation, but an explanation of the whole and one of its manifestations. (Adonis, 1974, p. 29)

In fact, this view best explains Adonis's judgment that Arab culture is always inclining to the old/past, regarding what is older and prior as necessarily better and more learned than what is newer or subsequent. In view of this, one can readily conclude that Adonis's overall stance is as follows. For the Arab the source of enlightenment is one, its religious beginning is revelation, and its poetic beginning is pre-Islamic poetry. As such, distinction, in both culture and literature, is ranked in keeping with closeness to the beginning, continuing in its steps and not confronting or transforming it. And as a result, to use his "sum-total" logic, the Arab's life, thought, and action become nothing except an attempt to simulate the superior, known past and its models, steering clear of any independence or creativity. However, perhaps aware of the problems that his position may generate, he claims that his judgement is meant only to describe the "prevailing inherited thought," not the entire culture. This means that he acknowledges that "Arab culture is not devoid of creative thought which is prone to doubt, examine and seek" (Adonis, 1974, p. 29). Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that it is the static features that form the target of Adonis's attack and criticism of Arab culture. In fact, he maintains that these elements reflect "the infrastructure (*al-bunyah al-taḥtīyah*) of the dominant group in the first Arab-Islamic society" (Adonis, 2002, v. 1, p. 22). In other words, these were not the characteristics of the Arab mentality as a whole but the mentality of the mainstream groups who were in power. Their system of knowledge, which represented the static mode, literally had no future as it constantly held to the old and stood in the way of any innovation (Adonis, 2002, v. 1, p. 62-63).

Thus far, it should be clear that *turāth* for Adonis revolves in the orbit of revelation, which is responsible for the very structure and composition of Arab identity and culture. As such, neither the identity nor the culture is acquisitive, but rather based on a group of beliefs from a divine source. Therefore, practicing those beliefs is not voluntary or critical but constrained and approving of revelation. This is why Adonis maintains that "in spite of all the changes ... during the last fourteen centuries in Arab society," the culture is "still repeating the same history for one purpose, that is, reviving the prophetic era and the revelation culture" (Adonis, 2002, v. 1, p. 22-23). This is why, to effect real change, he chooses to go beyond any explicit and implicit factors by, first and foremost, questioning the culture's original structure and deconstructing its very roots. In other words, Adonis seeks to tear out the roots of the static elements in *turāth* by devaluing God as the source of knowledge and fixed truth, explaining that its very existence leads to subservient, uncritical, dependent, conformist, slavish and uncreative thought. Convinced of this view, and rejecting the religious (anti-secular) logic while accepting and valuing the secular, modernist alternative, he came up with the following conclusion:

since Arab culture is based on religious structure which emphasizes imitation and rejects and condemns creation, we can expect that this inherited culture will form an obstacle to any real progress. Therefore, the traditional structure of the Arab mentality has to be destroyed, and all the views [hence, *turāth*] that were behind this mentality have to be changed. (Adonis, 2002, v. 1, p. 63-64)

Adonis seems to view Arab culture as containing the seeds of both the dynamic and the static, meaning that it has not only one origin but many. But, as we saw earlier, the prevailing origin is the static, which appears not to contain the power of change in itself unless it overcomes the traditional religious structure. However, while such an end cannot be attained through the conformist nature of its forces, it could certainly be realized through the anti-traditional dynamic forces in the same culture. This means that Adonis aims at transcending and deconstructing the culture by the culture itself, arguing that the dismantling of traditional structure requires "tools from inside the culture and not from the outside" (Adonis, 2002, v. 1, p. 64-65). In other words, Adonis's plan is to transform the Arab culture by exploring the marginal revolutionist origins of *turāth*, so as to use them innovatively. These origins represent the dynamic direction which, he thinks, were given no chance to emerge in the past, given their presentation of new notions about God, the world and human beings as represented in the thought and actions of various avant-garde movements such as Sufism, the Mu'tazilites, the Qarāmiṭah and atheists (Adonis, 2002, v. 1, p. 124-129).

In his view, the importance of these movements lay in their effort to give life, politics and religion new dimensions, by stressing individuality, justice and freedom, among other related "modern" principles. He, for example, values highly the rationality and atheism of both Ibn al-Rāwandī (d.910 or 912) and al-Rāzī (d.925 or 935) because, for him, "they represented the first form of modernity" (Adonis, 2002, v. 1, p. 129). As he sees it, they dared not only to go beyond the norms and to revolt against prevailing beliefs, but also to challenge and criticize the revelation itself. Were it not for such a challenge and far-reaching efforts, there would be no new, rational, modern and innovative vision (Adonis, 2002, v. 1, p. 128-130). I think that Adonis's interest in such dynamic currents, particularly the atheist, derives from what appears to be his axiom, i.e., that the "dynamic"

alone carries an innovative, modernist manner which contains the seeds of progress and civilization. According to this vision, no civilization can be built where minds still focus on same old static system of knowledge. Thus, Adonis insists, “we will remain slaves on earth so long as we have a lord in heaven” (Adonis, 1981, p. 9), or as he expresses it poetically: “We die if we kill not the Gods” (Adonis, 1985, v. 1, p. 389). *نموت ان لم نقتل الالهه*.

In conformity with such secular modernist principles, Adonis stands for transforming the present-day Arab from a conformist religious being into an innovative, secular being. He asserts that this is the only way for a new Arab civilization to be built and sustained for future generations. To use Freud’s (1856–1939) language, combined with Adonis’s logic, the Arab has to kill the past *turāth* in the image of the father in order to gain the image of the son. Only then can the Arab create a new *turāth* of freedom and creativity, though without overcoming his entire past. Therefore, believing in the necessity of a theoretical revolution, he appeals to all Arab intellectual and cultural critics not only to contribute to the struggle but also to adopt a constructive intellectual approach, i.e., to seek inspiration from the dynamic element and to go outside the dominant circle by surpassing the text and the past, fundamentally and comprehensively. Otherwise, there will be no change at all, but simply an echo and a reproduction of the past itself (Adonis, 2002, v. 1, p. 66, 157-158).

In conclusion, Adonis wants the dynamic to characterize the ways in which *turāth* is understood and appreciated (i.e., to welcome and popularize its non-conformist elements), new and modern challenges are faced and the search for progress is pursued. This should be so even if the changes that result are not consistent with the precedents established in the past, for the goal here is simply to surpass the past and all its conventional values. Hence, if Arabs want to rescue their “dying” culture and to contribute to the world, they have to relate only to elements of dynamism as they embody the force of both creativity and the future. As such, the dynamic elements become the crucial part of Arab culture; they hold the solution to its problems and must thus be raised to revivify contemporary Arab life by having their deepest significations adopted. To give an illustration:

it is not Sufi thought and institutions of the past that must be recreated in modern times, but rather the Sufi attitudes of self-improvement and transformation, the Sufi desire to search for truth and to rise to higher stages of knowledge ... and the Sufi affirmation of freedom and of the wholeness of being. Only these values of the past [*turāth*] that illumine the present and the future should be preserved inasmuch as they help the Arabs not only to keep their identity and specificity but also to build a better future. (Boullata, 2004, p.44)

After presenting what we may call now the side effects of the “customary inherited static elements” of culture (*turāth*) and the reward derived from restoring the marginal dynamic elements, Adonis declares his own position, affirming that “all our relationships with *turāth* have to revolve around the future [i.e., the dynamic] and not around the past [i.e., the static]” (Adonis, 2002, v. 1, p. 65). For that reason, as a secular modernist, he aims at exploiting the dynamic facet in the same *turāth* as it alone leads to skeptical, critical, autonomous and rebellious rational thought. However, although he believes that such elements are compatible with present, modern Western values, they do not, in his view, derive their significance and weight from the present *per se*, but rather from their dynamic, rebellious nature. It is this nature that can challenge the foundations of the traditional line of thought and the dominant *turāth* in any place or time, paving the way for man to transform his role from that of a passive heir to that of a creator and an innovator (Adonis, 2005, p. 18-19).

Although there is much that is convincing and promising in Adonis’s study of *turāth*, yet, there is room for some criticism. In fact, one may agree with a number of his contemporaries in their disparagement of his dependence on historically marginal personalities and views in Arab culture as the only valid elements of change. However, one cannot agree with their analysis that this reflects his misunderstanding of the power of mainstream culture. This is because it was Adonis’s understanding of the authority and power of mainstream culture that drove him in the first place to attack the overall culture, calling for a radical break with it. In addition, Adonis’s interpretation of both mainstream and marginalized elements has been dismissed by the same group as totally out of context, particularly in the way he is said to have misread and distorted the original intentions of the texts he studied, even to the extent that he is accused of having been influenced by Orientalists hostile to Islam and of lacking the very qualities that he calls for, rationalism and objectivism. (Note 22) However, one may argue that Adonis’s hostility is not to Islam *per se* but to any religion, because as a secular modernist he tends to devalue any religious elements while promoting absolute human-based principles. In any case, his standpoint is ideological and non-objective as will be shown in the following.

As has been shown thus far, Adonis assumed the Arab mind-set to have a fixed nature, making it an enemy of freedom and creativity, an obstacle in the way of progress. This is because he sees that this was the mind-set that had produced and shaped Arab culture and its *turāth* in the past, giving birth to infertile, conventional structures and getting in the way of any attempt to move forward. Obviously, he takes this as his point of departure and assumes the correctness of his premise to justify his call for its destruction. As such, we may detect here that his position on *turāth* is entirely associated with his stance not on the Arab mind-set *per se*, but on the religious grounds accountable for its static formation, which in his view, have caused the stagnation (or even extinction) of Arab civilization today. In other words, Adonis's position on *turāth* is a position on religion. This is because his entire discourse focuses on revelation, religion and the conformist *turāth*, to the extent that *turāth* for him becomes equal to the customary inherited static elements, i.e., text/s (origin/s) that shape the prevailing Arab culture (Adonis, 2002, v. 1, p. 14; Adonis, 2005, p. 46).

This brings us now to Adonis's definition of *turāth*, which has been intentionally left to be discussed at this stage. It is to be observed that he failed to introduce a systematic, coherent definition of *turāth* and that it has to be deduced from his overall cultural position. Although Adonis's role as a critic of *turāth* should not be divorced from his position as a poet, *turāth* is the main obsession behind his critique and the richest subject for his examination, analysis and investigation in his prose writings. Therefore, it could have been defined in a more systematic and coherent way, especially as he himself, in his attempt to explore the Arab-Islamic *turāth* (through its main foundational texts), insists on the importance of providing and "understanding the meaning of words and terminology and on asking questions about them before analyzing them" (Adonis, 2002, v. 1, p. 50-51). But, in his most important text on *turāth* (*Al-Thābit wa- al-Mutahawwil*), he neglects to apply this method; hence, his proposed definition of *turāth* appears feeble and reveals an apparent ambiguity and contradiction. This is because the inherited static elements, for him, are based on divine revelation and the knowledge and sciences generated by it, which, in turn, had an impact on the formation of the Arab *turāth*. Such a logic, however, exaggerates the effect of what he calls static elements, for it limits *turāth* to the realm of the divine and its generated conventional intellectual sciences, neglecting all its other significant elements. Not only this, but his logic overlooks man's role in understanding the divine, since everything according to him is due to divine revelation and its absolute presence and impact, regardless of any human contribution or creative impulse. Such an outcome clearly contradicts at least his own (theoretical) view of *turāth* as a "human creation" (Adonis, 2002, v. 3, p. 29-30). However, I argue here that Adonis did not intend to reach such a conclusion, but it is his fervent position on God and religion and his evident bias towards secularism and atheism that led him to confuse his overall position on *turāth* with his position on God and religion. Seemingly, *turāth* is being exploited by him and used as a cover to screen his real goal: criticism of religion. In other words, it is his position on religion and on established traditional political power, not on *turāth per se*, that leads Adonis to deliver such an incoherent definition of the term, causing noticeable confusion and inconsistency.

Indeed, such confusion becomes clearer in his other attempt at defining *turāth* as "the products or manifestations of conventional religious origins" (Adonis, 2002b, p. 46), which (in this case) became the "*turāth* of the authority, supporting and strengthening the cultural system that institutes and rationalizes its power" (Adonis, 2002b, p. 46). Thus, when Adonis calls for questioning the origins of the Arab-Islamic *turāth*, he seems to allude to questioning not only the origins *per se*, but also the legitimacy of the established authority because (as we said earlier) it had built its power on the basis of the text/s. Hence, to be conformist, in this context, means to conform to God and authority, while to be a modernist means to revolt against the same; and this renders his position, obviously, subjective and ideological. Furthermore, another related, somewhat contradictory note in Adonis's thought may be detected. This is when he states that "an Arab cannot be creative and develop his life unless the present traditional bases of the Arab intellect are destroyed" (Adonis, 1974, p. 29). This statement reveals Adonis's attitude towards *turāth*, because what he describes as "the traditional bases" constitute the same "customary inherited static values."

By examining this statement carefully, one sees that it reflects a tendency towards generalization, considering that all Arab culture was established in consequence of the divine revelation. This leaves no place for communication with this culture or leaves only one solution for modern Arabs (according to Adonis), that is, deconstructing and abandoning it, although he still manages to find a few positive, creative aspects to that same culture. However, as we saw earlier, these creative sides represent the dynamic in that apparently static *turāth*. On this basis we can offer the following concise assessment: Adonis sees that Arab culture is conformist, and asks for the destruction of its *turāth* in order to penetrate a different space. At the same time he adopts some "dynamic" elements of the same *turāth* considering them to be exceptional and different. So while

insisting on generalization, he ends up with exceptions, and he presents these creative exceptions while emphasizing the domination of the conformist elements of *turāth* at all stages.

Last but not least, Adonis's idea of the "static and dynamic" hints not only at the content of *turāth*, but also at his method of studying it. Therefore, while, on the one hand, he divides *turāth* into static and dynamic elements, on the other hand he takes a position on these two, regarding them respectively as criteria for retreat or progress. Thus, according to his modernist standards, backwardness itself became a "tendency to revolve around the past," searching for salvation in earlier *turāth*, imitation, and conventional knowledge. Progress, on the contrary, became a "tendency to revolve around the future" (Adonis, 1974, p. 27), looking for freedom, creativity and infinite knowledge, which is not provided in mainstream Arab culture (Adonis, 1974, p. 29). In his view, the only way out of such a difficulty is by restoring or fostering the dynamic spirit until it prevails and eventually takes the place of the long-established, static one. If one follows Adonis's analysis to its logical conclusion, one is led to believe that the dynamic has to become the only fixed new reality in Arab life and that the static has to be deconstructed. Therefore, theoretically speaking, deconstructing the static and moving it from one state to another makes it open to change and potentially dynamic. By the same reasoning the dynamic becomes static, for it is (in theory) the potential fixed ideal that should eventually prevail if, in Adonis's opinion, Arabs really want to achieve progress and be active in the civilization of the modern world. Indeed, this result undermines Adonis's method, where neither *al-thābit* (static) nor *al-mutahawwil* (dynamic) seems to denote any longer what it originally means.

Let me explain this in the form of a concluding remark to this study. Theoretically speaking, for the static to be eliminated and transformed from its current rigid state into that of another form or state — even a state of non-existence — it should carry the roots of transformation and adaptation so as to be able to move and become something else or even be completely removed, where the very act of elimination is to transform a thing from one state to its opposite, i.e., non-being. However, the same thing goes for the dynamic, which, according to Adonis should be the dominant, fixed, ultimate reality. I argue that such an end has become possible for him because his description of *turāth* departs from the original/classic meaning, for he exploits the term to express his own ideological principles, thinking of atheism and secularism as absolute values and axioms on whose basis man can achieve creativity, progress, and thus, civilization. Therefore, its "true" principles must prevail and substitute for traditional values. Consequently, instead of having traditional, religious, fixed (static) and absolute values, we will have in their place modern, secular, fixed (static) and absolute values!

Finally, it is evident that Adonis himself follows a rigid methodology, which consists in dividing *turāth* into two rival elements, one based on God, and hence, religious, and the other on man, and thus, secular. As a secular modernist himself, he tries to penetrate the past and search for answers in the light of new standards. In this context he states "criticism is a vertical penetration of *turāth* with a new view that overcomes all the previous structures in all forms" (Adonis, 1991, p. 161). This moves one to question the reasons behind Adonis's sharpness in dealing with *turāth* and how big a role the present has played in forming his views about it. Here one can say that, for Adonis, the present (the new) was the main criterion in his investigation and evaluation of the past, to the exclusion of *turāth* itself. In this situation he is not adopting the past as a whole; on the contrary, he subjectively tends to select parts of it that support his present attitudes and ideology, while neglecting other elements that do not fit into his preconceived, secular modernist frame.

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## Notes

Note 1. See, for example, Adonis, 1989, p. 296-297 and Adonis, 2002, p. 64.

Note 2. Briefly, surrealism was a revolutionary movement that developed in Paris, partly in response to the carnage and futility of World War I. Calling for a revision of values, it was a reaction against positivism,

realism, reason, logic, and the nineteenth-century belief in progress. For two or three years its activities and members coincided with the Paris followers of dada (a European artistic and literary movement (1916–1923) that flouted conventional aesthetic and cultural values by producing works marked by nonsense, travesty, and incongruity. Indeed, its advocates were united by a rejection of conventions in art and thought, seeking through their unorthodox techniques, performances and provocations to shock society into self-awareness). However, the publication of Breton's *Manifeste du surréalisme* in 1924 finally established its supremacy and its greater creative potential. The term *surréaliste* had been used by the French poet Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918) in 1917 to indicate an attempt to reach beyond the limits of the "real." For more details see, for example, Gale (1997) or King (2010).

Note 3. Anṭūn Sa'ādah was a Lebanese nationalist thinker and founder of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party in opposition to the French division of the region and having as its main goal a push for unity. From 1935 on, he was repeatedly harassed and imprisoned by the French mandatory authorities. As a result, he left for Brazil and later for Argentina, but after the country gained its independence from the French, he returned to Lebanon in 1947. Two years later, the party declared a revolution in Lebanon in retaliation for a series of violent intimidations staged by the government of Lebanon against party members. Due to the failure of the revolt he went to Damascus so as to meet the President of the Republic of Syria at the time, Ḥusnī al-Za'īm (1897-1947). The latter was supposed to support Sa'ādah (as previously agreed). However, it seems that al-Za'īm reneged on his word. Thus, Sa'ādah was handed by him to the Lebanese authorities, who executed him and many of his followers in 1949. During his lifetime, Sa'ādah published many books, treatises and articles on a wide range of topics. He was very keen to emphasize the role of philosophy and social science in the development of his social ideology. He viewed social nationalism (his version of nationalism) as a tool to transform traditional society into a dynamic and progressive one. Furthermore, secularization plays an important role in his ideology and was taken by him beyond the socio-political aspects of the question into its philosophical dimensions, as will be explained later on in this study. For more details about Sa'ādah, see, for example, Beshara, 2007.

Note 4. This work was originally Adonis's two-volume Ph.D. dissertation published in 1974. Issa Boullata translates the title as "Continuity and Change: A Study of Conformity and Creativity among the Arabs" (Boullata, 1990, p. 27). However, in the present study the antonyms "static and dynamic" will be used for the Arabic origins *al-thābit* (static) and *al-mutaḥawwil* (dynamic), since "static" in English "refers to something that is fixed and unchanging," and "dynamic" is "characterized by continuous change, activity, or progress." As we shall see, Adonis's usage of the terms conforms fully with the sense of these suggested English terms.

Note 5. For a detailed account of these principles see, Anṭūn Sa'ādah, *Al-Āthār al-Kāmilah*, 4 vols. (Beirut: 'Umdat al-Thaqāfah fi al-Ḥizb al-Sūrī al-Qawmī al-Ijtīmā'ī, 1975), 2: 83-103.

Note 6. See, for example, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [online], available from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nietzsche/> (accessed 20 February 2008); Gabriel Vahanian, *The Death of God: The Culture of Our Post-Christian Era* (New York: G. Braziller, 1961); Lewis White Beck, *Six Secular Philosophers* (New York: Harper, 1960).

Note 7. André Breton was a French poet, essayist, critic, and one of the founders of the surrealist movement. It is said that his manifestoes of surrealism (1924, 1930, and 1942) are the most important theoretical statements of the movement. See, for example, "André Breton Biography" [online], available from <http://www.duke.edu/web/lit132/bretonbio.html> (accessed 20 January 2008).

Note 8. In fact, after the closing of *Shi'r* in 1970, Adonis had tried to launch a new review, *Āfāq* [Horizons], but this only lasted for three numbers.

Note 9. *Shi'r*'s policy of openness to the outside was realised in a translation program, which included writers as diverse as Juan Ramon Jimenez, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Saint-John Perse, Yves Bonnefoy and Edith Sitwell, to mention only a few. For a detailed study of *Shi'r* and its role in founding a new modern Arab poetry and a modernist view of culture, see Abū Sayf, 2005.

Note 10. See, Adonis, 1993b, p. 37-38; Abū Fakhr, 2000, p. 193-198; Boullata, 2004, p. 31-46; Abu Deeb, 1998, v. 1, p. 58; Abū Sayf, 2005, p. 21-26.

Note 11. The book is composed of a group of articles that were originally published in *Al-Zawba'ah* magazine by Sa'ādah himself during his residence in Buenos Aires in 1942. These articles were later published as a collection in Beirut in 1947.

Note 12. From an interview with André Velter for *Le Monde* [Online] available from <http://www.arabworldbooks.com/authors/adonis.htm> (accessed 10 March 2008).

Note 13. This includes: the rise of the Palestinian Revolution 1965; the attempt to suppress it in Jordan in September, 1970; the October war 1973; discovery of oil in the gulf area; the civil war in Lebanon in April 1975; the visit of President Anwar al-Sādāt (1918-1981) to Jerusalem in 1977; the Iranian Revolution in 1979; the Iraqi Iranian war in 1980; the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982; the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990; the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991; and the initial treaty between the Israelis and the Palestinians signed at the White House in 1993.

Note 14. One exception to Adonis's pessimism regarding the Middle East in general was his enthusiastic reception of the Iranian Revolution in 1979. Although Iran re-established itself as a religious state, Adonis stood up for it, setting aside his secular principles. He most likely saw it as a bright light in the (hitherto) "downtrodden" and "backward" East, giving hope for progress and a new Eastern power in the face of Western domination. For a detailed account of Adonis's position on the Iranian Revolution, see Adonis, 1979, p. 149-160.

Note 15. See, for example, Vincent P. Pecora, *Secularization and Cultural Criticism: Religion, Nation, and Modernity* (Chicago and London: the University of Chicago Press, 2006); David Martin, *A General Theory of Secularization* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978); Graeme Smith, *A Short History of Secularism* (London, New York: I. B. Tauris, 2008); David Martin, *The Religious and the Secular: Studies in Secularization* (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1969); John Milton Bonham, *Secularism: Its Progress and its Morals* (New York; London, G. P. Putnam's sons, 1894).

Note 16. For more details about secularism in the Arab world see, for example, Abū Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought*; Azzam Tamimi, John L. Esposito, eds., *Islam and Secularism in the Middle East* (New York: New York University Press, c2000); Muḥammad Jābir al-Anṣārī, *Al-Fikr al-'Arabī wa-Ṣirā' al-Addād* (Beirut: al-Mu'assasah al-Arabīyah lil-Dirāsāt wa-al-Nashr, 1996); Muḥammad Kāmil Dāhir, *Al-Ṣirā' Bayna al-Tayyārāyn al-Dīnī wa-al-'Almānī fī al-Fikr al-'Arabī al-Ḥadīth wa-al-Mu'āṣir* (Beirut: Dār al-Bīrūnī, 1994); Muḥammad Quṭb, *Al-'Almānīyūn wa-al-Islām* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1994); Ali Bassam Jarbawi, "Modernism and Secularism in the Arab Middle East" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Cincinnati, 1981).

Note 17. For a detailed account of some key modern and/or contemporary Arab secularists see, for example, Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*; Majid Khadduri, *Political Trends in the Arab World: The Role of Ideas and Ideals in Politics* (London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1970); Muḥammad al-Khayr Abd al-Qādir, *Ittijāhāt Ḥadīthah fī al-Fikr al-'Almānī: Fu'ād Zakarīyā, Ḥusayn Aḥmad Amīn, Sa'īd al-'Ashmāwī, Faraj Fūdāh* (Khartoum: al-Dār al-Sūdānīyah lil-Kutub, 1999); Fahmī Jad'an, *Fī al-Khalāṣ al-Nihā'i: Maqāl fī Wu'ūd al-Islāmīyīn wa-al-'Almānīyīn wa-al-Librālīyīn* (Amman: Dār al-Shurūq, 2007).

Note 18. See, for example, *Oxford English Dictionary* [Online] available from: [http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00313103?query\\_type=word&queryword=modernism&first=1&max\\_to\\_show=10&single=1&sort\\_type=alpha](http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00313103?query_type=word&queryword=modernism&first=1&max_to_show=10&single=1&sort_type=alpha) (accessed 19 April 2008); *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* [online], available from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/modernism> (accessed 19 April 2008); Thomas Vargish, "Modernism," in *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* [Online] available from: <http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/N033> (accessed 21 April 2008); Astradur Eysteinnsson, *The Concept of Modernism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

Note 19. See, for example, Rawḥī al-Ba'albakī, *Qāmūs al-Mawrid* (Beirut: Maṭābi' Naṣr Allāh, 1987), 20 and 228.

Note 20. For another perspective on the issue of *ittibā'iyah* as opposed to *ibdā'* see, for example, Barakāt, 1984, p. 458-463 and Jad'an, 1988, p. 25-28.

Note 21. Adonis argues that the reason why the Arab began to regard pre-Islamic language and poetry from a religious point of view was the notion of the inimitability (*i'jāz*) of the Qur'an, which in some of its primary aspects is based on pre-Islamic inimitability. In fact, when the Qur'an challenged pre-Islamic poetry, it challenged it on literary grounds, i.e., the Qur'an presented itself as the perfect example of clarity and eloquence. "Consequently, pre-Islamic poetry and language acquired a religious dimension and the Arab began to express religious feelings toward his pre-Islamic cultural past." For more details, see, Adonis, 1974, p. 29 and Adonis, 2002b, p. 21-27.

Note 22. See, for example, Jihād Faḍīl, "Ṣadmat al-Ḥadāthah li-Adūnīs: Ṣadmah li-Uṣūl al-Baḥth al-'Ilmī wa-li-Rūḥ al-Ḥadāthah," *Al-Fikr al-'Arabī* 1, no.2 (July-August 1978): 291-297; Muṭā' Ṣafaḍī, "Al-Mustashriq

Adūnīs wa Ba‘th al-Shu‘ūbiyah al-Jadīdah fī-al-Thaqāfah al-Mu‘āṣirah,” *Bayrūt al-Masā’*, October 4, (1974); ‘Abd Allāh Ibrāhīm, *Al-Thaqāfah al-‘Arabīyah wa-al-Marji‘iyāt al-Musta‘ārah* (Beirut: al-Mu‘assasah al-‘Arabīyah lil-Dirāsāt wa-al-Nashr, 2004), 134-153; Al-‘Ālim, *Al-Wa‘y wa-al-Wa‘y al-Zā‘if*, 91-100.