

The exile's burden

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THE EXILE'S BURDEN

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Abstract

Adunis, the most famous of the Arab poets living in the West, is a very productive author. His poetical works have undergone an important evolution since he decided to live in Paris in the 80's. He is known to be a promoter of the spread of European culture in the East, and his translations were considered to be important in the evolution of poetic style. When he moved to France his reading of Western poetry somehow had more influence on his own production, still we can find important intertextual references to Arabic literature in it; this is also due to the fact that he has promoted the translation of Arabic classical masterpieces into French. Another reason must be found in the condition of life in the diaspora; maybe this is the most important reason, according to what he said during an interview: living far from his own country somehow forces the poet to live exclusively in a new dimension – that of his native language.

Every exile has a burden to bear – the burden of whatever it was that drove him from his native land, and the responsibility to make good the aspiration that led him on. For the great Italian poet Giuseppe Ungaretti it was a deep emotional wrench to leave Alexandria, and his nostalgia for his beloved Egypt emerges powerfully in the poem “Il Nilo” (The Nile). The Egyptian poet Aḥmad Shawqī also went into exile at a certain point in his life, and indeed many literary figures of the second half of the twentieth century pulled up their roots and came to epitomise this new, exiled condition so characteristic of modern man.

Adunis (i.e. ‘Alī Aḥmad Sa‘īd Isbir, *1930) is an exile par excellence. Doomed to the harsh fate of those who come up against very different socio-logical and environmental situations, the poet sublimates the pain of being torn between the memory of a troubled past and an unaccommodating – if not hostile – present.

Adunis arrived in Paris in 1985. He had already visited the city on various occasions and met a number of French intellectuals; indeed, some of his work had been translated into French and found appreciation among publishers and academics alike.

Nevertheless, his first years were marked by a condition of divided self, which we might simplify by saying that he lived with his head in Paris and his heart in Beirut. So much is attested by the first work he produced abroad,

*Shahwah tataqaddam fī kharāʾiṭ al-māddah.*¹ The poet felt the need to provide Western readers with the means necessary to approach the classical Arabic tradition, avoiding the traditional channels of Oriental Studies, in the form of a collection of critical essays introducing readers to Arabic literature. At the same time he was making further advances in his exploration of Western poetry. He then returned to Arabic poetry, retracing his experience in Lebanon and preparing a new kind of work. The poem he produced was new and different, on the one hand owing much to the Western tradition of poetry but actually still more deeply rooted in the most genuine didactic-aphoristic tradition of Medieval Arabic poetry.²

Before going on to analyse Adunis's work it is worth mentioning some of the historical events that propelled the evolution in his poetics. Such historical upheavals have led some intellectuals to radical revision of their approach to realities, to the extent of exploring new paths, abandoning any traditional role as an acclaimed spokesman for the sentiments of the many. Shifts of this kind will, at least initially, result in a wedge being driven between the exponents of this current and the public at large. While the majority of poets indulged in the rhetoric of nationalism, some dedicated themselves to the poetry of resistance.³ Other poets, driven into exile, like the Iraqis and like Adunis, chose to hammer out new forms from the ancient traditions.

1 ADONIS, *Shahwah tataqaddam fī kharāʾiṭ al-māddah*, Casablanca: Dār Tubqāl lil-nashr, 1987.

2 S. MOREH, *Modern Arabic Poetry: 1800–1970*, Leiden: Brill, 1976; S. Kh. JAYYUSI, *Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry*, 2 vols., Leiden: Brill, 1977; K. KHEIR BEIK, *Le mouvement moderniste de la poésie arabe contemporaine*, Paris: Publications Orientalistes de France, 1978; ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz BŪ MASHŪLĪ, *Al-Shiʿr waʾl-taʾwīl. Qirāʾah fī shiʿr Adūnīs* (Poem and Exegesis. Reading in Adunis' Poetry), Beirut: Ifrīqiyā al-Sharq, 1998; ʿĀdil DAHIR, *Al-Shiʿr waʾl-wujūd. Dirāsah falsafiyah fī shiʿr Adūnīs* (Poem and Existence. A Philosophical Study on Adunis' Poetry), Cyprus: Dār al-Madā liʾl-Thaqāfa waʾl-Nashr, 2000; ʿAlī al-SHARRAʿ, *Bunyat al-qaṣīdah al-qaṣīrah fī shiʿr Adūnīs* (The Structure of the Short Poem in Adunis), Damas: Manshūrāt ittihād al-kuttāb, 1987; M. CAMUS, *Adonis le visionnaire*, Paris: Éditions du Rocher, 2000; Abdelwahhab MEDDEB, "Le nom du poète", in: *Détours d'écriture. Adonis. Le Temps des Poètes*, Paris: Noël Blandi, 1991:237–40.

3 An important role has been played in this by the Palestinian poet Maḥmūd Darwīsh, see Sh. BALLAS, *La Littérature arabe et le conflit au proche-orient (1948–1973)*, Paris: Éd. Anthropos, 1980.

Adunis's poetry at the very beginning was politically and culturally oriented. He had espoused the ideology of Anṭūn Sa'ādah⁴ who invoked ancient Syrian myths of resurrection and rebirth to express the need for reviving the ancient culture to create a new Syrian cultural identity.⁵ The use of the myth of Tammuz, Adunis, the phoenix showed the possibility of transcending stagnation. The hero sacrifices and dies in order to be born again; by doing so he fuses the tripartite division of time into past, present and future into one continuous renewing temporal continuum.

The poems written in his first phase (*Qaṣā'id ūlā*, First poems, 1957, and *Awrāq fī 'l-rīḥ*, Leaves in the wind, 1958) are strongly related to this ideology and to the political need for national rebirth. In the symbolic references to the myth it is easy to recognize the present, his country, his leaders and the hope of possible change. The death of the leader and political repression led the poet to exile in Lebanon.

In the lands of emigration, poetry tends ever more to the metaphysical plane, transcending reality and projecting hope in the future into a dimension hovering between the surreal and the oneiric.

The background

The complex changes that society went through in much of the Arab world during the 1970s help to account for the reasons that led Adunis to exile. Adunis had already been the exile of an autarchic country, Syria; in Beirut, by contrast, he had found a multi-party political system and an economy run on free market lines. Lebanon had become the major trading centre for the economy of the area,

4 Anṭūn Sa'ādah (1904–49), intellectual and writer, created the National Syrian Party in 1932; he emigrated to Lebanon where he taught at the American University in Beirut and was murdered for political reasons. See Anṭūn SA'ĀDAH, *Al-muḥāḍarāt al-ashar*, Damascus, 1948; ID., *Mabādi' al-Ḥizb al-Sūrī al-Qawmī al-Ijtimā'ī wa-ghāyātuh*, Damascus: al-Ḥizb al-Sūrī al-Qawmī al-Ijtimā'ī, 1935 (4th ed. 1997).

5 Joseph ZEIDAN, "Myth and Symbol in the poetry of Adunis and Yusuf al-Khal", in: *Journal of Arabic Literature*, X (1979):70–94. In his reading, Zeidan tries to demonstrate that Syrian symbolism harked back to the philosophy of the socialist nationalist leader Anṭūn Sa'ādah more than to the influence of T. S. ELIOT. It is worth mentioning that later Adunis, in his reform of the verse and the composition of the prose poem, was partly stimulated by reading Susan BERNARD'S book, *Le Poème en prose de Baudelaire jusqu'à nos jours*, Paris: Librairie Nizet, 1959.

attracting both capital and intellectuals lured by the new dynamics generated by a happy chapter in the country's history. However, the germs of disaster were there, feeding on the discontent produced by the uneven distribution of wealth and welfare between town and country; the malaise was to reach fever pitch with the expulsion of Palestinians from Palestine and Jordan after 1967.

The presence of political organizations of the Palestinian community on Lebanese soil stimulated intellectual debate but also aroused the violent Israeli reactions. Israeli armed intervention triggered the explosion of religious and social conflict within the Lebanese community. An authoritative witness, Maḥmūd Darwīsh, writes that in those years for the first time Arab intellectuals felt they exerted influence on public and political decisions. This happy season proved all too short, however, since the expectations of the avant-garde clashed with the political and economic interests of the regional governments as well as the strategic interests of the great powers.

In itself the war did not generate culture but death and destruction; “the propaganda leading up to it is not art,” observed the Lebanese critic Yumnā al-ʿĪd, “but the intellectuals cannot ignore the war. It is a matter of conscience, the need to register all that brings destruction; their duty is to keep alive the memory of what has happened.”⁶ The annihilating force of war carried in its wake the fragmentation of verses into splinters; poets plumbed the pain searching for fresh life in symbols and mysticism. The shock generated by the drama and the scenes of ruin led some to more intimist paths, eschewing the new rhetoric and all formality.

Trials of such proportions had lasting effects on the lives of the authors, leaving indelible marks on their very existence and thus on the tissue of their texts, affecting both structure and content. Prosody lost its bearings, and the poet's voice mingled with other voices that had a story to tell: all melted into a mass of faceless shadows, voices howling the tragedy to be read in incredulous eyes.⁷

The unutterable grief and anguish of war pervade the work of the more mature generation of writers, giving expression to rage and despair. Hopes and dreams have died away, buried in dust and rubble, silenced by the cry of mourning echoing endlessly from house to house. As a witness to the Lebanese massacre Adunis wrote:

6 Y. al-ʿĪd, *al-Kitābah: taḥawwul fī 'l-taḥawwul*, Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1993:15–17.

7 Ibid.:60–5.

<i>Ghayyara 'l-qatlu shakla 'l-madīnati – hādhā 'l-ḥajar</i>	Murder has defaced the city – this stone
<i>ra'su tiḥlin –</i>	a child's head –
<i>wa-hādhā 'l-dukhhānu zafīru 'l-bashar.</i>	and this smoke the moaning of mankind.
<i>Kullu shay'in yurattilu manfāhu / baḥru</i>	Each thing chants its place of exile / a sea
<i>min dimā'in wa-mādhā</i>	of split blood – and what
<i>tatawaqqa'ū hādhī 'l-ṣabāḥāt ghayr</i>	do these mornings expect to see if not their
<i>sharāyīnihā mubaḥḥar</i>	arteries flowing with brine
<i>fī 'l-sadīm, wa-fī lujjāti 'l-majzarah?</i>	in the haze, and in the turmoil of slaughter?

From the rubble emerges a poetry of broken syntax: the lines fall into hemistiches as in the old verses, but the discourse is now disjointed, broken like the mutilated bodies it speaks of:

<i>Wajadū ashkhāṣan fī akyāsin:</i>	They found people in bags:
<i>shakhṣu lā ra'sa lahu</i>	one person with no head
<i>shakhṣu dūna yadayni, wa-dūna lisānin</i>	one person without hands or tongue
<i>shakhṣu makhnūqu</i>	one person strangled
<i>wa 'l-bāqūna bilā hay'ātin wa-bilā asmā'</i>	and the rest had no features, no name
<i>A-juninta? Rajā'an</i>	are you crazy? Please,
<i>lā taktub 'an hādhī 'l-ashyā'</i>	don't write about these things. ⁸

All this violence and injustice has left aching wounds; in Adunis' poetics they translate into a new, singular form of writing in the "Book of the Siege", from which the verses quoted here are taken. It was a critical moment, wrote the Lebanese poet Etel Adnan, and Adunis's poems expressed "un moment-limite de sa poésie, et de la poésie arabe".⁹

The civil war came to an end, but without a glimmer of hope of rebirth, and Adunis left the country to search for new vitality elsewhere; once again he had to tear up his roots, and this time it was to be a more radical and far-reaching operation.

Together with him a conspicuous number of intellectuals (fleeing from authoritarian regimes) went into exile, anticipating the migratory flows of today by a few decades. The poets gave voice to the feelings of estrangement and malaise experienced by all exiles who set out in pursuit of freedom and more tolerable conditions.

8 F. CORRAO, *Adonis. Nella pietra, nel vento*, Messina: Mesogea, 1999:155–171.

9 E. ADNAN, "Textes pour Adonis", in: *Détours d'écriture. Adonis. Le Temps des Poètes*, Paris: Noël Blandi, 1991:224.

Elsewhere

Place and space affect creativity, and the new environment generated a sense of disorientation. In the first phase the poet reacted to the new landscape with a long poem, “Desire advancing in maps of matter”,¹⁰ into which he distilled both the fascination and the sense of estrangement experienced in the places of his wanderings. He returned to the composition of prose poems, and between the lines we sense the influence of Saint John Perse.¹¹ In this poem, however, he experimentally introduced a parallel path: alongside the main poem is a second poem, with the effect of two monologues or, rather, an interior dialogue between the poet and his alter ego, revealing the existential divide within self.

Far from the fighting the memory of battle becomes surreal: it ceases to churn the guts, but takes on the perspective necessary to trace out the story. From the margins of his own world the poet’s gaze is distant but more searching. In the work entitled “In honour of light and shade”¹² he does not recount facts – he is not a reporter – but through his metaphors the tragedy takes on universal resonance. He no longer describes the horror directly; the drama assumes abstract features, becoming impersonal:

*Ashlā’u rusūm ‘alā jasadi ‘l-hawā’
Innahum atfāl lubnān
yuzayyinūna kitāba ‘l-ard
wa-yunaqqiḥūna ‘l-ufuq*

Débris de dessins sur le corps de l’air:
ce sont les enfants du Liban
Ils embellissent le livre de la terre,
et corrigent l’horizon¹³

- 10 *Shahwah tataqaddam fī kharā’iṭ al-māddah*, op. cit.; for further references see fn. 1.
- 11 Adonis translated into free Arabic verse the works of Saint John Perse (Sān Jūn Bīrs). *Al-‘māl al-Shī’riyyah al-Kāmilah wa Qaṣā’id Ukhrā*, Damascus: ed. Wizārat al-thaqāfah wa ‘l-Irshād al-Qawmī, 1978. In those days the translation was criticized for the modern style the poet adopted in translating, and more recently because of the free interpretation of certain verses, see Kāzīm JIHĀD, *Adūnīs muntaḥilan*, Cairo: Maktabat Madbūlī, 1993.
- 12 ADONIS, *Iḥtifā’an bi ‘l-ashyā’ al-wāḍiḥah al-ghāmidah*, Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1988; ID., *Célébrations*, French trans. by ADONIS et A. Wade MINKOWSKI, Paris: Éditions de la Différence, 1991; ID., *Celebrazione del chiaro e dello scuro*, ed. and Italian translation by F. M. CORRAO, Milan: Archivi del 900, 2005. For further readings see: K. ABU-DEEB, “The perplexity of the All-Knowing: A Study of Adonis”, in: I. J. BOULLATA, *Critical Perspectives on Modern Arabic Literature*, Washington: Three Continents Press, 1980:305–23; K. SKARZYNSKA-BOCHENSKA, *Adonis. Rycerz dziwnych słów*, Warsaw: wiat Literacki, 1994; EAD., *Adonis*, Warsaw: Akademickie DIALOG, 1995; R. SNIR, “A Study of ‘Elegy for al-Ḥallāj’ by Adūnīs”, *Journal of Arabic Literature* 25 (1994):245–56.
- 13 ADONIS, *Célébrations*:16–17.

Translating some of al-Ma'arrī's verse,¹⁴ Adunis discovers answers in the wisdom of his tradition to the unnerving challenges arising from confrontation with the Western poetic universe. It is through the sapiential philosophical tradition of classical Arabic culture and mystical reflection that he finds the way towards the new vitality he needs to feed his creativity. He goes right to the core of existential values to communicate on a higher spiritual plane where East and West meet. Universal values and sentiments that readers of all countries can recognise as their own emerge from the collection entitled "In honour of light and shade". The elements of nature and life forces do not delimit contrasting identities but are integrated into one scenario – a scenario in which all can see themselves reflected. Western forms and Eastern contents meet in the text to merge in novel ways.

On the level of form, Adunis seems to look to Rimbaud and early Éluard, teasing out highly evocative words rich in rhythmic timbre and surreal images à la Breton. On the level of contents, on the other hand, we find the metaphors of al-Ma'arrī:

<i>Wa'l-jismu ka'l-thawbi 'alā rūhihi</i>	Le corps sur son âme est comme un vêtement –
<i>Yunza'u in yukhliq aw yattasikh</i>	S'il s'abime ou se salit, on le jette ¹⁵

The sense of precariousness and lightness conveyed by the metaphor of the body and life is evoked by Adunis thus:

<i>Min al-nawāfidh tatadallā ashbāhun</i>	Les spectre suspendus au fenêtres
<i>Laysat ajsāman wa-laysat thiyāban</i>	Ne sont ni corps ni vêtements ¹⁶

The body – lifeless garments hanging at the windows – here alludes to the scenes of death witnessed in Beirut during the civil war.

Adunis goes on to extend the metaphor of the body-clothing of a soul to the relationship between grass and the earth, writing, in the same poem:

<i>Ḥadīqatun, imrā'atun</i>	jardin – femme
<i>jasaduhā 'l-turāb</i>	dont la terre est le corps
<i>wa-thiyābuhā 'l-'ashab</i>	et l'herbe le vêtement ¹⁷

14 ADONIS, *Rets d'éternité*, trans. Adonis et A. Wade Minkowski, Paris: Fayard, 1988.

15 ADONIS, *Rets d'éternité*:59; Abū 'l-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī, *Dīwān luzūm mā yalzīm*, ed. Kamāl al-YA'ī, Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1961, vol. I:308.

16 *Célébrations*, op. cit.:14–15.

17 *Célébrations*, op. cit.:140, 141.

The need for a new start on a different path emerges directly from the author's philosophy, which had already found expression in other writings of his; for Adunis the creation of the world remains unfinished, open to the perpetual impulse to start again. The poet's work of creating and renewing realities through language is ceaseless, and in his universe rebirth remains a possibility for even the worst ruins in nature. In his creative endeavour the poet does not withdraw from nature and the world: indeed, he achieves virtual identification with them.

This aspect emerges to a certain extent in some verses by al-Ma'arrī, imagining nature endowed with human faculties:

<i>Law ta'qil-i 'l-arḍu waddat annahā ṣafīrat</i>	Si la terre raisonnait,
<i>minhum, fa-lam yara fihā nāẓirun shabaḥan</i>	Elle voudrait se débarasser des hommes ¹⁸

Adunis writes:

<i>Law takallama 'l-nahāru</i>	Si le jour parlait
<i>la-bashshara bi'l-layli</i>	Il annoncerait la nuit ¹⁹

His poetry is never contingent or descriptive, as is often the case in European poetry: rather, his language moves in a vertical, metaphorical dimension; the world is transformed, its very image transcended by the word, which penetrates it, passes beyond and enfolds it.

In order to learn to love life again a new start must be made from the essential elements, and Adunis reformulates the landscape poetry of his youth and subjects it to metaphysical interpretation. A hymn praising the wind, the trees and life seeks to face the ruined reality of the present with the urge to start again from the essential elements of life itself, which can revive the senses and heal the wounds of memory inflicted by the sheer folly of the present. Adunis points the way to an initiatory path lying through positive sentiments recovered in a process of self-rediscovery, and leading to renewed respect for one's own and others' lives.

It is in the creative kindling of love that Adunis identifies the answer to the crisis of values bound up with the false myths of the past. A simple gesture will suffice, an invitation to speak or listen, as Adunis does when, for "the other" he uses the metaphor of the rose called upon to enter into dialogue:

18 Al-Ma'arrī, *Dīwān luzūm mā yalzīm*, op. cit.:292.

19 ADONIS, *Rets*, op. cit.:56; *Célébrations*, op. cit.:49.

<i>Ṭūla hādhā 'l-nahār</i>	Tout le long du jour j'ai été occupé
<i>shughiltu bi'l-hadīth ma'a hādhihi 'l-warda:</i>	Par la discussion avec cette rose
<i>kayfa uqni'uhā</i>	Comment la convaincre de parler
<i>likay ta'khudha dawrahā fī 'l-kalām 'annī</i>	A son tour. ²⁰

Encounter with the other calls for introspective endeavour; a reinterpretation of one's own past in comparative terms seeking points of contact, and thus communication based on shared values.²¹ In the poem "In honour of light and shade" Adunis points up the deep bond holding nature and things together. Implicit in the law of the harmony of nature is a rhythm that measures out the moments of our existence. The idea is also to be found in al-Ma'arrī's verses:

<i>La'alla nujuma 'l-layli tu'milu fikrahā</i>	Il se peut que les étoiles de la nuit méditent
<i>li-ta'lima sirran, fa'l-'uyūnu shawāhidu</i>	Pour découvrir un secret.
	Car les yeux restent en éveil [...] ²²

Adunis extends the metaphor of the relationship of night to day in these verses:

<i>lā ya'rīfu 'l-nahāru an yanāma</i>	Le jour ne sait dormir
<i>illā fī ḥuḍni 'l-layli</i>	Que dans le giron de la nuit
<i>Yas-haru 'l-qamaru</i>	La lune ville
<i>'alā sharfati 'l-layli</i>	Sur la terrasse de la nuit ²³

The medieval master's pessimistic tone is tempered by the creative force of Adunis, who never abandons his belief in the possible transformation of anything into something better, as nature demonstrates. Surveying nature, he remarks the phenomenon of interdependence by virtue of which every single element is closely bound up with one another. The poet ceaselessly creates and recreates these bonds with language.

20 ADONIS, *Célébrations*, op. cit.:208–209.

21 Cf. F. M. CORRAO, *Adonis nella pietra nel vento*, Messina: Mesogea, 1999:41–42; Ṭ. LABĪB, *Ṣūrat al-ākhar. Al-'Arabī nāziran wa-manzūran ilayh*, Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Wahdah al-'Arabiyyah, 1999:19–41.

22 AL-MA'ARRĪ, *Dīwān luzūm mā lā yalzīm*, op. cit., ḥarf ad-dāl:311.

23 ADONIS, *Rets*, op. cit.:60; *Célébrations*, op. cit.:50–51.

This became particularly true since Adunis moved to France, because for the poet who lives in the diaspora the only reference to reality is to be found in the language.²⁴

In his creative endeavour the poet is concentrated in imagining a new world through the renewal of the language; his quest for innovating the structure and the metaphors of poetry in this new phase is more attentive to the search of harmony. For Adunis beauty in words simply reflects the harmonious encounter between diverse elements:

Tadfaru yadu 'l-fajri
jadā'ila 'l-shamsi
Likay tahallahā yadu 'l-masā'i

La main de l'aube tresse les nattes du soleil
 Pour que la main du soir les dénoue²⁵

Born of the encounter is that transformation which is the generating element of life, permeating everything. From ancient Greek philosophy to the latest scientific discoveries, the message of metaphors transcending the present is borne out. Adunis opens up a universe of images that are the fruit of this encounter, this cross-breeding. Grief itself can be transformed: change brings forth beauty. For the future, the poet stresses the need to look beyond the dark side of things, to learn to recognise the value hidden there.

24 ADONIS, "Concerto per il Cristo velato", trad. F.M. CORRAO, *Poetica*, vol. 2, 2004; YANG Lian, *Dove si ferma il mare*, intr. e trad. Claudia POZZANA, Milano: Scheiwiller, 2004; *Il Mediterraneo dei poeti. XX di poesia*, ed. F.M. CORRAO, Gibellina Fondazione Orestidi, in the press:87, 93, 97.

25 ADONIS, *Célébrations*, op. cit.:209.