

The Prophetic Expression

Ali Ahmad Sa'id, writing under the pen name of Adonis, is one of the Arab world's great contemporary poets and a major cultural critic. To coincide with the London International Poetry Festival **Karim Alrawi** discusses the poetic vision of Adonis.

"PERHAPS the best way to define the New Poetry is to say that it is a vision...a change in the order of things and in the way of perceiving them." Thus states Ali Ahmad Sa'id in an article first published in 1959 in the Lebanese magazine *Shi'r*. By equating poetic expression with changing perceptual relationships, rather than with stylistic constraints of rhyme and rhythm, Adonis sounded a clarion call for a poetry that was committed politically and free to respond to the fluidity of the modern world. But, for him, this freedom needs to be accompanied by a creative energy that plumbs the depths of the poet's psyche while at the same time re-invigorating the meaning of words and re-creating the sources of language. He calls this New Poetry "the metaphysics of human existence."

This act of re-creation is to proceed not by a logical, syntax bound unfolding of the language, but by tapping into that personal wellspring of images and dreams that is located in the deepest recesses of the poet's mind. Adonis calls this kind of poetry "a vision and a revelation". He states in his book *A Preface To The Ends Of The Century* that "this creation is a permanent presence...a permanent dialogue." What is significant is his choice of words to describe the role of poetry in the modern world. It is, what may be called, a revelatory view of poetry. A view that is deeply mystical.

There does appear, to some, a strange contradiction between a poet who preaches innovation while extolling revelation; a poet who is emphatic in his demand for freedom for the new from all outmoded constraints while at the same time consigning poetry to shamanistic, almost prophetic, forms of expression. For Adonis, real poetry is also a real experience for the poet that changes him. Unlike many of the politically committed poets who aspire to

nothing more than to turn their poetry into slogans that serve the Revolution, whether it is a nationalistic or Marxist one in political colouration, Adonis wants to revitalise the very sources of Arab/Islamic culture. It is the language, its images and syntax, that needs to have its spirit rekindled. The Arabic language, and consequently its literary form, that bore the sacred revelation of the Qur'an to Mankind has become bogged down in clichés and well worn linguistic and stylistic formalities. When a language becomes stale it becomes a brake on creative thinking and a constraint on perception. It is this deep concern for the language that underlies Adonis' critical cultural explorations.

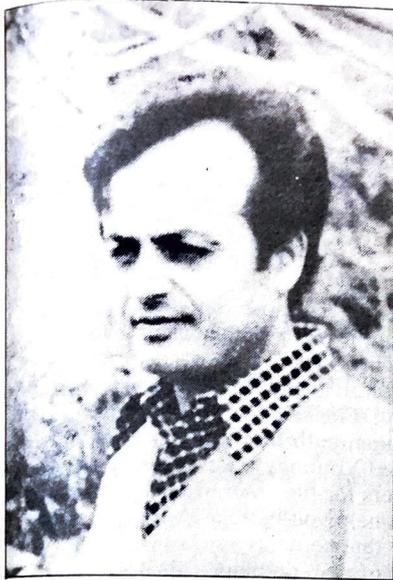
His critical essays and articles collected in both *An Age Of Poetry* and *Preface To The Ends Of The Century* are themselves only the prelude to the most detailed and thought provoking study on Arab/Islamic culture so far produced. Through almost a thousand pages, set out in three volumes, of *The Permanent And The Transient* Adonis probes the literary and poetic development of the Arabic language from the *Jahiliya* to the contemporary age. It is a monumental work. Poets are analysed and critics challenged to yield a study that is full of insights, is often provoking and sometimes infuriating. Yet, at the end of the study the question of what is permanent and what transient still remains unanswered. Adonis appears to be saying that only through renovation and re-creation can a culture have a permanence, which appears to be in some ways a side stepping of the issue raised by the title.

It has been common in the criticism of Adonis' poetry to employ terms taken from European literature. His poetry is often called surreal or symbolist. He is sometimes compared to Louis Aragon or T.S.Eliot. Such

comparisons are unfair and not a little patronising, implying as they do a quality of imitation and lack of originality. It is a poor reflection on our own critics that they find it hard to tackle what is new in Adonis' vision and prefer to limit and circumscribe it by reference to poets whose works have now been digested and whose perceptive edge has been blunted by time. But, also, by describing his achievement in terms that are outside of Arab/Islamic culture it makes it possible to avoid facing, head on, the challenge that his vision offers.

Adonis' impact on contemporary Arabic poetry has been enormous. Even major poets of the stature of al-Bayyati have not escaped his influence. His poetic method is one that unfolds through what can be called an imagistic logic, not arbitrary enough to be called free-association, that is a logic that does not subordinate the image to the argument but, rather, develops the argument through the image. The cerebral poetry beloved by many Arab poets is denigrated by Adonis as simply slogans in rhyme. The formal structures of classical poetry are dismissed as linguistic exercises of little creative value. Yet the dangers of travelling across such uncharted paths are occasionally all too apparent in Adonis' verse. There are times when the poems appear to be so personal and the linkages between the images so tenuous that the result is a high degree of obscurity. His influence on many younger, less skilled and creative poets has not always been fruitful. In an attempt to emulate his style, poems have been written that are so obscure as to be incomprehensible. As a consequence of this, some of his critics have accused Adonis of not being the regenerator of Arab culture but its grave-digger, and his advocacy of an end to all formal literary restraints not a liberation but the death knell of Arabic literature.

Adonis' poetry reflects both the circumstances of contemporary Lebanon, fractured by a multiplicity of communities and torn by war, and the condition of the Arab World today, impotent before its enemies. It is a poetry born on the frontline, in so far as Lebanon is a frontline state and in so far as the poetic sensibility has always been the pulse beat that reflects the health of Arab culture. It is a poetry that requires an understanding of the battle front as a pre-requisite to proper appreciation of its content.



The Minaret

*The minaret wept
When the stranger came - bought it
And built upon it a chimney.*

The Frontiers Of Despair

*My house stands on the frontiers of
despair
Like yellow butter are its wall
Hollowed out and fractured like
clouds.*

*My house, pitted and pasty windowed
Scoured by the wind until it tires
Only then to storm
Abandoned by the sun, close by,
Shunned even by the sparrows.*

*My House, devastated by its own
convulsions
Transcendent beyond transcendence
drawn out
In it I sleep surrounded
By those whose voices are muted and
choked.*

The Martyr

*I saw the night in his blazing eyelids
Yet, found no palm groves in his face
Found no nebulas or stars,
I stormed about his head
like the wind- and broke like a reed.*

Homeland

*To faces that harden beneath masks of
gloom
I bow, and to paths along which my
tears were forgotten
To a dead father, green as a cloud
His face a blazoned flag
I bow, to a child sold
For prayer and the wiping of boots
(In my country we all pray, we all
wipe boots)
To a rock gnawed by hunger
Rain rolling under my eyelids and
lightening
A house whose dustdrop I carry in my
wandering
I bow - All these are my homeland,
bar Damascus.*

The Bird

*I listened:
A bird on mount Sinai
Screeching until peace prevails
Until song becomes as
The edge of a blade
Wounding, harsh and weeping,
The city's chill*

Spurt Of Blood

*I dream:
This is not the voice
My voice,
You, the corpse discarded
I, the bloodspurt of a slaughtered
civilization
Kindling the fires of death
Quenching the fires of death.*

Have You No Choice

*What, so you'd destroy the face of the
earth
And draw for it another?*

*What then have you no choice
But the path of fire?
But the hell of refusal-*

*So that the earth will become
A dumb guillotine or god.*

The City

*Our fires advance on the city
To demolish the city's bed.*

*We will demolish the city's bed
We'll live and cross between the lances
To a land of perplexed transparencies
Behind that mask suspended from the
spinning rock
Encircling the whirling pools of terror
Spinning echoes and words
We shall purge the womb of day, its
guts and foetus
And burn that patchwork presence
called the city.*

*Our fires advance and grass grows
from the riotous embers
Our fires advance on the city.*

