



THE CAIRO REVIEW INTERVIEW

AGE OF DARKNESS

Syrian poet Adonis reflects on Arab decline and the destruction of his homeland

A half century ago, the poet Ali Ahmad Said Esber, better known by his pen name **Adonis**, left Syria for exile, first to Lebanon and then France. He lives on an upper floor of a new apartment tower in the Paris suburb of Courbevoie, steps from La Grande Arche in the modern business district of La Défense. Embroidered cushions from his homeland are on the sofa, abstract paintings on the walls; Arabic and French newspapers are piled around, next to music CDs of Bach and Mahler; Lebanese sweets are served on a platter along with cups of Nescafé. He never stays in one place for long; at the end of April, he was off to New York to open the PEN World Voices Festival with Salman Rushdie and Noam Chomsky.

Adonis, 84, is widely recognized as the greatest living Arab poet. He began writing verse as a teenager in Qassabin, a village in Syria's Latakia province. In Beirut in the 1950s, he started a modernist revolution that the *Guardian* has called "a seismic influence on Arabic poetry comparable to T.S. Eliot's in the Anglophone world." He has published twenty volumes of poetry and thirteen books of literary criticism, reflecting on everything from love and Arab nationalism to American power; in 2011, he became the first Arab writer to win the prestigious Goethe Prize for literature. Adonis, meanwhile, has long been a leading public intellectual in the Arab world. His most recent writings are collected in *Printemps Arabes: Religion et Révolution*, published in France earlier this year by Éditions de La Différence. According to his English translator, Khaled Mattawa, Adonis believes that Arabic poetry has the responsibility of igniting a "mental overhaul of Arab culture." *Cairo Review* Managing Editor **Scott MacLeod** and journalist **Jonathan Randal** interviewed Adonis in Courbevoie on April 11, 2014.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Critics say your poems carry a lot of anger, but you have written some sweet poems. "The rose leaves its flowerbed/To meet her/The sun is naked/In autumn, nothing except a thread of cloud around her waist/This is how love arrives/In the village where I was born."*

◁ Adonis, Pescara, July 15, 2013. *Basso Cannarsa/LUZ/Redux Pictures*

ADONIS: Yes, romantic.

CAIRO REVIEW: *How old were you when you wrote that?*

ADONIS: I forget.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Has Syria plunged into a dark age?*

ADONIS: Well, the Arab world is living, and for a long time has been living, in a kind of age of darkness. Syria is part of that. But we can't judge the future. I think that there are always some strengths in the people, to find solutions, escapes/exits, new horizons. I believe in that. The human being is a decent creature, who is manipulated by everything.

CAIRO REVIEW: *When you were sixteen, was it a better moment?*

ADONIS: Beginning when I was fifteen, we had plans. We could feel it, personally, lots of people of my generation. We had a kind of hope and vitality, a hope to change things, do something better. But from that moment of my adolescence, we also felt that there was nothing we could do in our society if the revolution was going to remain politically institutionalized. Without the separation of religion from the state, there was nothing we could do. I felt that for a long time.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Was religious fundamentalism a danger at that time?*

ADONIS: No. There wasn't the ideological aspect of religion in my youth. It was almost invisible. Religion was never a problem. With my friends at school, I never asked, "What's your religion?" Never. It didn't exist. We knew people by their name, and certain names meant they were Christian. But it wasn't a problem. The problem came with Israel. It has to be said. Because Israel requires that the state be religious. If Israelis are an intellectual people, who know everything, with many scientists, if Israel, with this great people, that is to say Jews, requires that the state be religious, why not the Muslims? Initially when I talked to my young friends, I said: "Maybe Israel will surprise us and give us some hope, more openness and secularism, more civilization and more change." It's really too bad and unfortunate that it has been the opposite. It's a big problem, intellectually.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Where is Syria heading today?*

ADONIS: We can never know. For a long time I've written that what we call the Arab world is totally deteriorating. The big ideas about Arab nationalism, the Arab fatherland and so on, it is all finished.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Certainly after the 1967 war.*

ADONIS: Yes, it was the beginning. I left Syria in 1956, more than half a century ago.

And I stayed away twenty years without returning. I wasn't able to return home for political reasons. But in 1979, I think, with the civil war in Lebanon, with the changing borders between Lebanon and Syria, I thought to myself, "Why not go see my native village now?" So I went at that time but didn't stay. I remained in Beirut because I had become a naturalized Lebanese. I had plans with the revue *Shi'r* [Poetry] and the revue *Mawaqif* [Attitudes]. Lebanon was my second birth, culturally speaking. I stayed in Beirut until 1982, the Israeli invasion, and everything was deserted. I was a professor at Lebanese University. There was no university anymore. Even at my house, my office is filled with shrapnel. I said to myself, "It is better to leave, to try to do something." We couldn't stay there like that. Which is why I came to Paris in 1982.

CAIRO REVIEW: *For you, what is the importance of Syria?*

ADONIS: Syria has a great history. When I speak of Syria, I'm talking about the alphabet, the first interaction with the "other." The Phoenicians were extraordinary as business people and inventors. And there is even a legend that says everything I believe about Syria. It's the legend of Europa. You know that Europa was a Phoenician goddess, from Tyre. And you know that Zeus transformed himself into a bull and kidnapped her. The brother of Europa, Cadmus, went to find her and brought with him the alphabet. Nothing military. Just him and the alphabet. He taught Europa the alphabet, and from that comes the name of the continent "Europe." It's a Syrian name, a Phoenician name. You see? So an imaginary world, not only Syria in itself, but Syria and also the Western "other." That's what Syria represents to me.

With Islam, there was still Andalusia, because Andalusia was also a part of the spirit of this great legend. Andalusia is where all of the culture of the time was experienced together in an extraordinary way; thus Judaism, Christianity and Islam had a single home in Andalusia. But this dream was also shattered with time. The religious spirit in the legal and monotheistic sense prevailed. In Islam, you are Muslim or an apostate; Judaism, likewise in another manner; and Christianity, the church. Christ was a major revolutionary. He was the first person in our history to say "no" to institution. But the church did the opposite and it *institutionalized* Christ.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Tyranny of monotheism. Is that at the core?*

ADONIS: Well, what is monotheism? It's saying, "My prophet, as a monotheistic one, is the final prophet of all." Each of the monotheistic religions repeats that. Secondly, [they say] "the truth conveyed by this particular prophet is the final truth. There is no other." Thirdly, that "there will be no more prophets after mine." Which means that God has no more to say; because he has said his final word to his final prophet. That's what monotheism is. But it also means that violence against the "other" is an integral

part of monotheism. It's always been that way. Which is why the Mediterranean, the poor Mediterranean, has only known religious wars. The Greeks and the Phoenicians never went to war to defend a god. But monotheists go to war to defend God, in the name of God.

Monotheism arrived in order to do better, to correct, as a way for man to feel better about himself, and so on. But what happened was the opposite; even if you make the comparison with apostates, pagans, the Greeks, and Phoenicians, Egyptians and Sumerians, what they accomplished goes far beyond what the monotheists created. What did monotheism create? Nothing. Almost nothing, vis-à-vis the great Sumerian, Egyptian, Greek and Phoenician civilizations. If you go to see the Mayan civilization in Mexico, you would be even more convinced. It's an extraordinary world that Christianity destroyed. So now it's worse; monotheism is, you see, a tragedy. Man, as an individual, doesn't exist anymore. There is the monotheist idea. You, or me. There is war, which is part of existence. It's our existence. The war between people, between tribes and individuals.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Is being Syrian, a poet, living twice over in exile, something that gives you greater resonance?*

ADONIS: I'm not looking for that. I feel that if I don't do this, I don't exist. Or that my existence isn't worth anything. Being like others...I can't do that. So my existence, essentially speaking, is to say what I say and live how I live. For example, we speak now about democracy in Arab countries. Never will there be democracy in the Arab world. It's against its essence. If we don't change the structure of society, by separating radically and totally what is religion and what is cultural, political and social, we will never have democracy.

CAIRO REVIEW: *We need to hit rock bottom first to get there?*

ADONIS: We always say that in theory. Listen, after fifteen centuries of Islam, we are coming back to the same logic as the first century. Back to brutality. Back to the faith. To Sunni, Shiite, Druze and so forth. It's the same logic and the same things that we've done for fifteen centuries. Now on TV I watch people slit the throats of men, saying *bismillah al Rahman al Rahim*, in the name of God. When I wrote my analysis of Arabic literature, *The Fixed and the Changing*, in 1973, I said that the deep structure of Arab society was a religious structure. Without destroying this structure, we cannot advance. It's not genetic; there are conditions. We can't discuss the situation in the Arab Middle East anymore in Western global strategic abstractions.

CAIRO REVIEW: *In Syria, the Baath Party was supposedly a project for modernism in the Arab world. Why did it fail?*

ADONIS: I was against the Baathist policies. They were, to my knowledge, a kind of Muslim Brotherhood without the name. It was a kind of political monotheism. A sort of structural dictatorship: “avoid others; it’s me, or nothing.” It was a variation on religious monotheism. This was the tendency. I think that one aspect of the Arab crisis is that what we call the Left, including Baathists, because the Left wasn’t radical at heart. And the Left got interested in power, not in changing society. All leftist movements, even Communist ones, were not radical. They never separated the two Baaths, in Iraq and Syria, and never secularized society. No separation between the state and religion. So it’s an intellectual defeat, the Baaths in the two countries. Intellectually and politically, because if we change, or if there is a plan to change society, the policies have to be a part of the culture. Essentially, it’s the culture that makes for change in society. Not those in power. Arabs have changed leaders a thousand times and nothing has changed. Gamal Abdel Nasser was a great man, it has to be said. But he led for a quarter century, the same period as Mao. What did Mao do in China and Nasser in Egypt? Nasser left no modern institution. None, in any area; not in education, not in the judiciary. Because he was taken by the fact of being in power. Not by the will to change society. Atatürk did that; he dreamt of creating a new Turkish society, in his own way. He was the only one. And [Tunisian President Habib] Bourguiba did something practical in terms of the law and women’s rights. But the rest did nothing.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Did you imagine, in your worst nightmare, that the beautiful city of Aleppo would be destroyed?*

ADONIS: In a true revolution, we can’t mix up the people and the regime. The people are the people and the regime is other things. This so-called revolution made an amalgam, that you have to destroy Syria to destroy the regime. It’s a savage act, destroying the country. And now the regime is stronger than it ever was. Because everyone is rallying around [President Bashar Al-Assad]. It’s the fault of fundamentalism, the fault of religion. The revolution in a great country like Syria never made the declaration that “we are going to create a new society, separate religion and the state.” Religion is afraid of *laïcité*. They don’t dare to say the word. What is this revolution in a society founded on religion? It’s a movement to change power. And it doesn’t deserve having the country destroyed over it.

CAIRO REVIEW: *In 2011 at the start of the revolt, you wrote an open letter to President Al-Assad in the Lebanese newspaper As-Safir. Why?*

ADONIS: I wanted him to change, to listen to the people. To carry out a true revolution and secularize the country. And not use violence. I am against three things: first, violence. It resolves nothing. I’m against foreign meddling and against politicized

religion. Not against individual religious faith; I have great respect for the faithful. I am irreligious myself and against institutionalized religion imposed on a society. That is the embodiment of violence.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Has the West exacerbated the problems in the Middle East?*

ADONIS: Napoleon used to work with intellectuals. Now the Western powers fight with mercenaries. With people who represent nothing. The old relationship with the West was clearer and purer. Napoleon gave something. He opened something. Let's look at a Western country today, say France. It strikes at fundamentalists in Mali and does nothing in Syria. Explain that to me. If we speak of human rights, dictatorship and democracy, either it's a principle or it's a maneuver. If you really are going to defend these things, there's not just Syria among the Arab countries. There is also Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Why no word on Bahrain? Ninety percent of the people don't want the king to leave power, but would just like that the kingdom be democratized. And nobody talks about it. In Saudi Arabia, 40 percent are under the poverty line. And they say nothing. In that sense, the West has become hypocritical. And the ethical dimension is finished, especially for the United States. The U.S. is a great country with a great people, but its policies have never been on the side of human rights. It's a policy of colonization.

CAIRO REVIEW: *How do you define the Arab Spring?*

ADONIS: In the beginning, it was great. There were students and women. I wrote a lot about that beginning. I was with them, especially Cairo. And then suddenly it changed. There was no longer a "spring" but a Western strategy, maybe against Russia, Iran or China. I don't know.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Why did the Arab people revolt, in Tunisia for example?*

ADONIS: The people were against dictatorship. They love freedom. But there was betrayal in less than a year. Why? You have to ask the West. Maybe because Saudi Arabia doesn't want its people to have, I don't know, democracy. I think the West and Saudi Arabia and its allies were afraid it really was a revolution. A secular and democratic revolution. They were afraid of it and changed everything. In the beginning it was beautiful. The people were hoping for freedom. Against the dictatorship. And the protests did something.

CAIRO REVIEW: *What was missing in Arab society?*

ADONIS: Change isn't easy. Protest isn't easy. The Arab people needed to free themselves. They expressed this innate need for freedom. In Tunisia, Yemen, in Syria and nearly all Arab countries.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Was the Arab Spring the beginning of something good, a rejuvenation of Arab culture?*

ADONIS: No, not anymore. What we call the Arab Spring betrayed the spirit of the revolution. It was catastrophic. And it was another example of proof that we can't carry out a revolution with religion. We must carry out a revolution *against* religion.

CAIRO REVIEW: *There was a euphoria in the West and maybe in Syria that Al-Assad was going to be removed. Was that naïve? Did you think the regime would fall?*

ADONIS: No. I never said that. I said that time was needed to make it fall, and without violence. The Syrian people didn't really participate in what happened. There weren't big protests. Only the army. And armed men took over [the revolution]. Which gave justification to the regime. A revolution in [Syria] can't be carried out with Turks. Or people from Pakistan. The people must carry out their own revolution. The people only partially protested. But they weren't filled with revolutionary spirit.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Did you expect all these foreign mercenaries?*

ADONIS: It was known. Anyone who knows the relationship between Syria and Lebanon would know that. It wasn't a surprise.

CAIRO REVIEW: *The question of Islam: you don't think it's compatible with democracy?*

ADONIS: No, because religion is essentially anti-democratic.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Religion or Islam?*

ADONIS: Religion in itself is anti-democratic because being a democrat means acknowledging that the "other" is different from you. And not only with tolerance; I'm against tolerance because tolerance hides a racist sentiment. "I tolerate you because I have the absolute truth, but I'll let you talk," and so on. Democracy demands equality, not tolerance. A democrat demands equality. A Christian must have the same rights as a Muslim. But it's not like that, unless we separate religion from the state and it becomes an individual belief. But even in a society of believers, if we don't see non-religious people expressing their ideas freely, then that means it's not democratic. So first, religion must be separated from the state. Secondly, individual freedom must be given to everyone to believe what they want, personally. Faith and religion are only for the believers, like in the West.

CAIRO REVIEW: *What about countries where people want religion in their politics and vote religious parties into office?*

ADONIS: That's why democracy is only a slogan. Even in Europe, you can buy people.

Democracy is a culture, an ethic, an acknowledgment of the “other.” If it’s not a society like that, it’s not worth anything.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Tunisia seems to be the one country that did succeed in its revolution.*

ADONIS: Because they accepted some democratic efforts such as dialogue and so on. And the intellectuals there told me, “Maybe [the Islamists] are intelligent, but they were obligated to do that, or else they would have been chased out.” So the social fabric is not religious in all the Arab countries. Even in Saudi Arabia. The people I know there are against religion. But they let people believe what they want. And we must insist on that. The political aspect about changing regimes does nothing, changes nothing. If we want to have an Arab society that is open, progressive and democratic, then we must separate religion from the state.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Are you optimistic about Tunisia?*

ADONIS: Yes, but we have to wait some more.

CAIRO REVIEW: *So much talk in the Arab world is about Israel and colonialism. Do Arabs have to move beyond these issues?*

ADONIS: Let’s look at reality. Arabs aren’t against Jews. They have been open, throughout history, to Jews as a people. Secondly, they gave proof that Israel could exist within the Arab world. They accepted it, in one way or another. There are even embassies between Israel and other Arab countries. Arabs say that they aren’t against Jews. The problem here is an Israeli political problem. And we should never conflate Israel and the Jewish people. If you make this conflation, it ruins everything. So we are against Israeli policy, not the Jewish people. Israeli leaders should do something for peace. They do nothing. Jewish intellectuals that I know are keeping silent. Which is a dereliction of duty. Jews are symbols of freedom, of human rights. And they can’t keep silent about Palestine. They shouldn’t ignore that there is a people being killed and hunted for more than fifty years. You know the situation better than I do. It’s an exceptional case; there hasn’t been in the history of humanity a people killed for fifty years. It’s incomprehensible. So all the intellectuals in the world, especially Jews, should apply political pressure on the Israeli leadership to do something for peace.

CAIRO REVIEW: *The United States has monopolized negotiations between Israel and Palestinians. Is it time to let others handle it?*

ADONIS: The profound problem according to me is that Israeli policy will not recognize the rights of an independent Palestinian country. They don’t want to recognize that right. So Israeli leaders must become convinced of this right, that the people have

this right. It's an Israeli problem because the Arabs are open and have given as much as they can. The problem is on Israel's side. Why does Israel not recognize the rights of this people? It's serious. Catastrophic. Maybe there will be war; the future is apocalyptic.

CAIRO REVIEW: *What does the United States represent for Arabs?*

ADONIS: I can only speak for myself. First, the American people is a great people. One time I said to a friend, "If we could imagine that the entire world took to the streets to protest over its future, the city that would guide that protest would be New York." The American world is the future. Because it has no references, historically speaking; its reference is creation of the future. That's one thing. But American policy and the American region is something else. I love New York, but politically I'm against the policies of the government.

CAIRO REVIEW: *What is the power of the Arabic language?*

ADONIS: The Arabs are not equal to their language. They don't know it. You can listen to an imam, a so-called imam who is supposed to know Arabic, but he doesn't. I've said that Islam has become a religion without a culture, without a language. Nobody reads the Quran anymore. They listen to it like a song. Through the muezzin with a pretty voice. Arabic is a total language; there is music, voice and body. It's a language of the body too. A language of dreams, imagination and nature. There is *natura naturans*, "natured nature," in this language. There are many talented young poets, but poetry has a bit of a problem because Arabs don't read anymore and don't know their language. Loving poetry means knowing one's language profoundly. So there is a problem now in the Arab countries. We don't have a philosophy. In Arab society there are no philosophers. We don't know psychoanalysis. In my opinion, Arabs needed a Freudian revolution more than a Marxist revolution. Because Arab culture is becoming more and more a psychological case. We understand nothing in this society. But no regime, king or prime minister can read a page in Arabic. Christians in Lebanon know Arabic better than the Muslims. Much better. We, Arabs, took this drink of modernity but refused the rational principle of modernity. If you went to Dubai, you would find some aspects of modernity that are more advanced than in New York. But we don't have the rational principle behind European modernity. We are against it, even. We buy. We transformed modernity into consumerism.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Would you have been happier living in the nineteenth or early twentieth century?*

ADONIS: I have no nostalgia. But I love this period, living heartbroken, and I know this heartbrokenness in all respects can create something new.

CAIRO REVIEW: *You have created.*

ADONIS: I did what I did.

CAIRO REVIEW: *You are considered a revolutionary poet.*

ADONIS: What is the purpose of poetry? What is poetry? This is a real problem. And in my opinion, the countries that are the most ignorant about poetry, it's the Arab countries. And yet Arabs used to have just two things: poetry and religion. And now they have neither religion nor poetry. Almost all Arabs are poets. There are a lot. I see a peasant man or woman in a little isolated village. He is more of a poet than a teacher at the university.

CAIRO REVIEW: *The self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia was an act of despair?*

ADONIS: Yes.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Is this the future for the young generation?*

ADONIS: There is lots of despair in the Arab world. And I think what's happening in Syria, among those being destructive, it's an act of despair. This ferocity, this delight in being destructive, comes from despair, not hope.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Should we be afraid of this despair?*

ADONIS: I can understand. The free individual, master of his fate, hasn't yet been born in Arab or Muslim culture. It's very complicated. If we don't understand the cultural problem in the Arab countries, we can't understand Arab people or politics. And that's missing in the United States. The people who write about it only see the surface, not what's behind it.

CAIRO REVIEW: *And in Syria? What is the outlook for Syria?*

ADONIS: The regime will not fall, unfortunately. It will remain. If there isn't an invasion from foreign countries, it will stay. And if there is an invasion, like in Iraq, it will be catastrophic. One should never support violence and war. Or religion. But Westerners don't listen. They only listen to their interests. Can we imagine France, the country of human rights, of the French Revolution, with the Left in power, could we ever imagine it bowing to Saudi Arabia or Qatar?

CAIRO REVIEW: *Your solution for Syria?*

ADONIS: Either there will be an invasion from outside or the regime will stay. An invasion will be horrible and we shouldn't think about it. We are against dictatorship, but we don't destroy a whole country to change one man. It's unethical. Un-human.

My father was a friend to me. He never said, “Do this, don’t do that.” Never. He would always say, “Making decisions is easy. And you will always have time to decide. What’s most important is to think and to see things up close. And after you will choose and decide. You have time.”

CAIRO REVIEW: *What is the story behind Adonis?*

ADONIS: I was thirteen or fourteen years old and I sent my writings to newspapers and magazines. I signed my real name, Ali Ahmad Said Esber. But nobody would publish them. I became furious and by chance, I saw a magazine that had the legend of Adonis, and how he was a legend of beauty, loved by Ashtar, who became Aphrodite, or Venus, afterwards. And how he liked to hunt wild boar. And one day he went out to hunt boar. And instead of hunting the boar, the boar hunted him. And killed him, his blood transforming into the red flower that we call the anemone. And every year in Lebanon, there is the Adonis River, which is now called the Abraham River. Every year the water from the river becomes red. It’s from the soil, but in olden days it was said that not only that the anemone was red from the blood of Adonis, but that the river too was red with his blood. And that story touched me deeply, and I decided to write and sign my name as Adonis. I felt that these newspapers and magazines were the boar trying to kill me. I wrote a piece and sent it to a journal that hadn’t published me before and they did, with the name Adonis.

I wrote something else and it was published on the front page, and they asked me to come to the newspaper headquarters. I was a poor peasant and dressed poorly, in a *galabeya*. And so I went there and as I introduced myself, the guy there didn’t want to believe I was Adonis. This was in ’43, ’44. I had already met the president by then, Shukri Al-Quwatli. In Jableh, the small village near my own, the president listened to me, to the poem that I had read at a big reception. I had dreamed that he would come and would like the poem, and ask what he could do for me. I had imagined that. And it came true to the word. When he listened to the poem, he said, “My child, what can we do for you?” And I said, “Let me go to school. We don’t have a school.” And he said, “Yes, you will go to school.” I was a peasant and went to the most important French lycée in Syria of the era. It was my father who had introduced me to poetry and taught me writing, the alphabet.

CAIRO REVIEW: *You were born in 1930, the same year as Hafez Al-Assad, father of the current president.*

ADONIS: I never met Al-Assad. Nor his son.

Text translated from the French by Grant Rosenberg.