

5 Adonis: Authenticity and exploration of meaning

In the previous chapter on Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, we encountered a reading of *turāth* that combines logical-positivism with the standard narrative of contemporary Arab thought. Maḥmūd's discussion of the problematic of *turāth*, grounded in the familiar opposition between authenticity and modernity and articulated largely within a progressive-linear temporal framework, offers an instructive illustration of the *turāth* discourse paradigm. In this chapter (and the next), our aim is to explore possibilities beyond this paradigm. We will closely examine the ideas of two individuals who, as a staunch modernist (Adonis) and a committed traditionalist (Ṭāhā), appear to be polar opposites.¹ As we look more closely, however, we will see that such straightforward classifications break down once we let go of the parameters of the standard narrative. Once we do that, we may begin to understand these figures as subverting the common understanding of Arab thought by redefining concepts of authenticity and modernity by applying different temporal lenses.

This chapter will concentrate on someone who is better known as a poet than as a theorist of *turāth*: 'Alī Aḥmad Sa'īd Isbir, also known as Adonis. At first glance, his contribution to the *turāth* debate can be (and has been) read as simply another modernist, secularist rejection of traditionalism. Adonis's critique of *turāth*, which he formulated most comprehensively in his dissertation *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab* (*The Static and the Dynamic: An Inquiry into Creativity and Conformity Among the Arabs*); henceforth *The Static*), appears to have much in common with Maḥmūd's and those of others critics of contemporary Arab culture. He lambasts Arabs for being uncritical, passive, conformist, uncreative, and fearful of what is new. He blames the control of traditional religious practices and beliefs for the current state of apathy. He holds up modernity as a model for Arabs and the only way towards self-determination. Hence, within the scope of the *turāth* debate it is understandable why this work would be read as yet another "study of the dialectical relationship between 'tradition' and 'modernity' in the history of 'Arab civilization.'"² Relatedly, Adonis is easy to read as

1 Given his relative fame outside the Arab world, and the fact that translations of his work tend to use the transcription "Adonis" and not "Adūnīs" for his pen-name, he will be referred to in the text using the former, more common spelling. In the references, a distinction is made between sources in Arabic (Adūnīs) and those in other languages (Adonis).

2 Hanssen and Weiss, "Introduction: Arab Intellectual History between the Postwar and the Post-colonial," 28.

someone who essentializes Arab culture in terms of a religious and conformist society, opposed to an Enlightened, free, and Western other.³ He has also been described as “an articulate spokesman of the new radical sensibility,”⁴ or as someone who wants to “destroy the cultural and political heritage for the sake of the progress of Arab society.”⁵ He has been called a “late modernist liberal”⁶ or even a Marxist.⁷

There is some truth to these claims. At base, Adonis’s interest in *turāth* was kindled by his aversion to traditionalism, in the sense of a mindless collective following of precedent in any area of life, be it art, philosophy, politics, religion, law etc. Seen from this angle, it is easy to see in Adonis a standard bearer for the modernist cause, a champion of rationalism similar to Maḥmūd, as well as a host of other Arab intellectuals, like Muḥammad ‘Ābid al-Jābirī, Murād Wahba, and Ṣādiq Jalāl al-‘Azm. Although in his *The Static* he does not engage polemically with the work of contemporary authors, he does attack historical figures up to the twentieth-century conservative intellectual Muṣṭafā Ṣādiq al-Rāfi‘ī in a way that would seem to align him with the rationalist-modernist faction in post-1960s Arab thought. In addition, with his thesis about “the static and the dynamic” in Arab thought, Adonis appears to go along with the rationalist trend of offering a grand critical analysis of “Arab reason” – the most complete and well-known exponent of which is al-Jābirī’s *Critique of Arab Reason*. This kind of analysis of “Arab culture” or even of the “Arab mind” in terms of a single conceptual opposition appears to presuppose an essentialist outlook. But, we should not rush to judgment. We need to distinguish between whether essentialist description is used here as an end or as a means, whether he affirms an essentialist outlook or questions it.

Adonis can be seen as a radical of sorts. Following 1967, he briefly flirted with Maoist ideas in vogue at the time, and endorsed the Iranian revolution in its early stages. Then again, his reasons for supporting these revolutionary movements have always been rather idiosyncratic. The kind of revolution that he envisions has never been of the violent kind. His is an aesthetic revolution, a contestation of norms through art. This not-so-radical sensibility is evidenced by his fundamental

3 Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective*, 132.

4 Ajami, *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice Since 1967*, 32.

5 Eiji Nagasawa, “An Introductory Note on Contemporary Arabic Thought,” *The Mediterranean World* 13 (1992): 66.

6 Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 182.

7 Both Boullata and Abu-Rabi’ attribute an essentially Marxist position to Adonis. See Boullata, *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought*, 31, and Abu-Rabi’, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History*, 107.

humanist commitment to the ultimate value of the person. However, this should not lead us to think of him as a run-of-the-mill proponent of liberal individualism, with its dull, bourgeois talk of rights and duties. Also, though he may have flirted with Marxism, his interest in *turāth* was never premised on activating the elements in Arab-Islamic cultural history that express revolutionary and anti-hierarchical tendencies. Rather, as Robyn Creswell notes, he distinguishes himself from Marxist readings of *turāth*, because instead of affirming its unity, his aim is to unmask its *divisions*. He wants to bring to the fore all the marginalized figures and movements in this history as a way of demonstrating the different possibilities for self-expression inherent to the Arab-Islamic heritage.⁸

In what follows, I propose a reading of Adonis beyond common attributions of being a modernist, a liberal, or a Marxist. As in the discussion of Maḥmūd, this reading will turn on an analysis of time and authenticity in Adonis's writings on *turāth*. Building mainly on *The Static*, I suggest that the opposition between the two concepts in the title of this work – that is, the “static” and the “dynamic” – does not so much adopt the familiar opposition between authenticity and modernity as replaces it. With this intervention, Adonis changes the opposition from a temporal into a purely conceptual one, centered on creativity. The “static,” as we will see, is associated with a lack of creativity, whereas the “dynamic” represents its abundance. The ongoing struggle between these forces is what pushes human civilization to cover new ground and explore hitherto unknown realms of the imagination. Its end goal is not a loosely defined ideal of societal progress, but an aesthetic one. The struggle between the static and the dynamic leads to an exploration of beauty and meaning. In the course of describing this dialectic, Adonis redefines the problematic of *turāth*. His structuralist analysis takes the antithetical pair of modernity (*ḥadātha*) and authenticity (*aṣāla*) out of its familiar surroundings, allowing these concepts to stand for more or less the same thing: *The dynamic*.

As in Chapter 4, this chapter is divided into three parts. We will first look at Adonis's biographical, artistic, and philosophical background. This is followed by a survey of the view of *turāth* presented in his dissertation; and in the third part, we will look more closely at how the dialectical pair of static and dynamic articulate a particular conception of time that helps to redefine a different perception of authenticity and modernity.

8 Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 152–53.

5.1 Adonis: Some background

5.1.1 Early years in Syria

The Syrian intellectual 'Alī Aḥmad Sa'īd Isbir, who later gained renown using his pen-name Adonis, was born into an Alawite family in the Latakian village of al-Qaṣṣābīn in 1930. He developed an interest in poetry from a young age.⁹ He adopted his pseudonym early on, when he found that his poems, when sent in under his own name, kept being rejected. Adonis, the beautiful, mythical figure, resurrected after being killed by a boar, appealed to him, as he imagined his own resurrection following many rejections from the “swine” working at the newspapers where he had vainly sent samples of his work for publication.¹⁰ In retrospect, Adonis also ascribes a deeper meaning to his early name-change. Adopting his sobriquet implied adopting a new, self-styled identity. Although he was not entirely conscious of what this name stood for, it made him think about the notion of personal identity as such. He became more aware of the importance for humans to choose their own destiny, to form their own identity. Identity, he recognized, is always a work in progress, something that must be created and recreated.¹¹ However this may be, the name stuck. This is how he became known to the general public, and this is how he will be referred to throughout.

Coming from a poor rural background, Adonis at first did not have the opportunity to enroll in a formal, modern school. He attended the traditional *kuttāb*, however, where he learned to read and write. Early on, he became aware that he possessed a sound mind, and realized that he would need to move out of his rural surroundings, which, though idyllic, did not offer him opportunities to exploit his talents.¹² An important event in the life of Adonis took place in 1943, when the then-president of Syria, Shukrī al-Quwwatli, visited a town close to al-

9 Nadia Wardeh, “From 'Alī Aḥmad Sa'īd to Adonis: A Study of Adonis's Controversial Position on Arab Cultural Heritage,” *Asian Culture and Heritage* 2, no. 2 (2010): 190.

10 Stefan Weidner,und sehnen uns nach einem neuen Gott...: *Poesie und Religion im Werk von Adonis* (Berlin: Verlag Hans Schiler, 2005), 148–49.

11 Nina Esber, *Conversations avec mon père* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2006), 47; Wardeh, “From 'Alī Aḥmad Sa'īd to Adonis: A Study of Adonis's Controversial Position on Arab Cultural Heritage,” 191.

12 Ṣaqr Abū Fakhr and Adūnīs, *Hīwār ma'a Adūnīs: al-Ṭufūla, al-Shi'r, al-Manfā* (Beirut: al-Mu'as-sasa al-'Arabiyya li-l-Dirāsāt wa-l-Nashr, 2000), 22–23. Most of the references to Adonis concern works written originally in Arabic. Translations from these works are my own. Three translations of his works have been used, namely, *Sufism and Surrealism, An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, and a collection of *Selected Poems*. Translations from other Arabic sources and from the previously mentioned French book *Conversations avec mon père* are also my own.

Qaṣṣābīn called Jableh. Adonis, then thirteen years old, decided to compose a poem for the occasion and pleaded successfully to be allowed to recite his poem to the president. Impressed by this budding artist, Quwwatī helped Adonis get an education at the French lycée.¹³ This proved to be the opportunity that eventually propelled him to worldwide renown as an artist. He went on from the lycée in Tartus to study for the baccalaureate in Latakia, and later graduated from the university of Damascus with a degree in literature.

5.1.2 Sa'āda, *Shi'r*, personalism

As a young student, Adonis supported the pan-Arab cause and associated with the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party (SSNP), led by Antūn Sa'āda. As others have noted, the influence of Sa'āda on Adonis cannot be underestimated.¹⁴ The former presented a powerful voice of nationalist revolutionary fervor, one that combined sociological study with philosophical depth. All of Sa'āda's analyses on topics like national identity, literature, and religion were an instrument of revolution. As Adonis would do later on, Sa'āda sought to "identify society and understand its structures, its potentialities (and so on) through social science only for the purpose of transforming it."¹⁵ He was no determinist, and vehemently opposed the historical-materialist view espoused by Marxists. The intellectual, he thought, must embody a force of societal change. As Adonis understood him, Sa'āda claimed a pivotal role for the literary artist as a renewer of society. The poet is a "lighthouse" (*man-āra*) who illuminates life with a new light and "points to the hiding places of beauty and power," envisioning new horizons for society.¹⁶ Sa'āda, moreover, was fiercely secular. Religion should adapt to the historical moment and should never remain in thrall to a "generation of ideal forefathers."¹⁷ Although Adonis later came to re-

13 Samuel Hazo and Mirene Ghossein, "Adonis: A Poet in Lebanon," *Books Abroad* 46, no. 2 (1972): 238; Weidner,und sehnen uns nach einem neuen Gott...: *Poesie und Religion im Werk von Adonis*, 10. Both 1943 and 1944 are mentioned as the year when this meeting took place.

14 Franck Salameh, "Adonis, the Syrian Crisis, and the Question of Pluralism in the Levant," *Bustan: The Middle East Book Review* 3 (2012): 44; Wardeh, "From 'Alī Aḥmad Sa'īd to Adonis: A Study of Adonis's Controversial Position on Arab Cultural Heritage," 196–98; Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 58–66.

15 Adel Daher, "Some Distinguishing Aspects of Sa'adeh's Thought," in *Antun Sa'adeh, The Man, His Thought: An Anthology*, ed. Adel Beshara (Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 2007), 268.

16 Adūnīs, *Hā-Anta, Ayyuhā al-Waqt*, 107.

17 Nasri Al-Sayegh, "Sa'adeh's Conception of Religion," in *Antun Sa'adeh, The Man, His Thought: An Anthology*, ed. Adel Beshara (Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 2007), 399.

ject much of what Sa'āda had preached – for example, his nationalism and his positivistic outlook – this first ideological orientation would echo throughout his life, both in his ideas on religion and heritage and in the activist role he assigns to the artist-cum-intellectual.

One immediate and far-reaching effect of Adonis's association with the SSNP was that his membership landed him in jail in 1955.¹⁸ After his release in 1956 he moved to Lebanon, where he would live for over two decades. His exile heralded a pivotal phase in Adonis's life. Beirut appeared to the young artist as a land of opportunity, "not the land of endings like Damascus but the land of beginnings."¹⁹ Beirut symbolized modernity, innovation, and freedom, compared to which Damascus was mired in tradition. He found like-minded people in the cultural scene of Lebanon's capital, people who also thought that Arab culture required radical overhaul, away from traditionalism. Together with a number of intellectuals and artists who gathered around the journalist Yūsūf al-Khāl, they would channel their efforts in the highly influential avant-garde review *Shi'r* (Poetry).²⁰

Beirut was at the time a center for the free Arab press, particularly after the Free Officers' coup of 1952 and Nasser's swift rise to dictatorial power had introduced new restrictions on the expression of opinion in Egypt, thereby dealing a severe blow to Cairo's formerly dominant intellectual scene.²¹ The *Shi'r* group made full use of these freedoms to advocate a radical reconceptualization of Arabic poetry. Influenced by the ideas of Sa'āda, they argued the necessity of creating a "‘aqliyya jadida," or "new mentality."²² Their poetry is characterized by a firm rejection of the Romanticist themes popular one generation earlier. Moreover, they experimented with radically new forms of poetic expression in ways "more extreme than any other revolt modern Arabic poetry had seen so far."²³ They were keen on revising the formal structure of poetry based on the line or *bayt*, which consisted of two hemistiches of equal length or metrical value. This revision allowed for much more flexibility in composition and thus for greater freedom of expression and organic unity in their poetry. *Shi'r* actively sought to renew the Ara-

18 Jizāl Khūrī, "Liqa' ma'a al-Shā'ir wa-l-Mufakkir al-Sūrī Adonis," interview, *al-Mashhad* (BBC Arabic, 2015), min. 5:18. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FPNSUiFq3G8>

19 Adūnis, *Hā-Anta, Ayyuhā al-Waqt*, 32.

20 It was in fact the Chicago review of the same name, *Poetry*, that partly inspired al-Khāl's conception of his new magazine; see Ed De Moor, "The Rise and Fall of the Review *Shi'r*," *Quaderni Di Studi Arabi* 18 (2000): 91.

21 De Moor, "The Rise and Fall of the Review *Shi'r*," 90.

22 De Moor, "The Rise and Fall of the Review *Shi'r*," 92.

23 M.M. Badawi, *A Critical Introduction to Modern Arabic Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 225.

bic language, to use poetry to create new words, envision new concepts, and imagine new worlds. In terms of content, it stressed the centrality of the human experience in poetry. Poetry, to the mind of al-Khāl and his circle, had to be based on human experience and express humanity's deepest emotional states. Man, as al-Khāl states, is an infinite source of inspiration, whereas "nature is a temporary and finite phenomenon."²⁴

This humanist orientation was due, at least in part, to the influence that the Lebanese philosopher Charles Malik had on al-Khāl and the *Shi'r* group. Malik had studied philosophy at Harvard under Alfred North Whitehead and at Freiburg with Martin Heidegger. Back in Lebanon as a lecturer at the American University of Beirut, he became something of a mentor to al-Khāl. His philosophical orientation was decidedly humanist, rooted in what Malik himself described as "the Greco-Roman-Christian humane synthesis"²⁵ and bore the marks of the then-popular school of personalism. There exist, as is generally the case with philosophical schools, different definitions of personalism. The main theme that binds them is that the fundamental value and the fundamental object of study, particularly for the humanities, ought to be the human person. Early strands of personalist thought can be seen as arising from a reaction to the impersonal philosophies of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, and as such tie into the genealogy of authenticity; Hegel's dialectical dissolution of all man in the dialectic of reason is a particularly prominent target of personalist philosophy, as are Comtean positivism and Darwinism. As such, personalism bears a close relationship to existentialist modes of thought, in which the human being is also at the center of attention. A major difference is that existentialist writings are generally characterized by anxiety or a moment of existential crisis in which the author runs up against the inherent meaninglessness of the world, only to then attribute the ultimate source of meaning to man himself. For personalists there is no such crisis; there is no point at which the world becomes meaningless, nor can there be an active choice on the part of the subject to imbue it with meaning. Rather, personalists assume the human person to be the ultimate thing of value, *the* bedrock of moral and scientific concerns. In the Arab world, Malik was not the only philosopher touting this idea, but he was its main proponent in the Mashriq – in the Maghrib this role was reserved for Muḥammad al-Ḥabbābī (Lahbabi). Malik's brand of Jacques Maritain's personalist philosophy, tinged by his studies into Heideggerian existentialism, fitted the Cold War atmosphere, as it posited the human individual as the

²⁴ De Moor, "The Rise and Fall of the Review *Shi'r*," 96.

²⁵ Glenn Mitoma, "Charles H. Malik and Human Rights: Notes on a Biography," *Biography* 33, no. 1 (2010): 232.

ultimate source of value, “a bulwark against both the ‘radical immanentism’ of Marxist thought, which reduced humanity to its economic and social conditions, as well as the atomistic tendencies inherent in liberal capitalism.”²⁶ The individual and his freedom were also a chief concern for *Shi’r*, and would remain so for Adonis throughout his later career.

Their zest for innovation and exploration did not imply that the members of *Shi’r* neglected their shared Arab heritage. Each issue included a section on classical poetry. Their interest was not in *turāth*’s safekeeping, however, but in revising it while also learning from and reacting to other traditions, particularly those of Europe. In doing this, they in effect emulated the modernist poets, who were also in the business of borrowing “literary authority from the tradition [they declare] obsolete.”²⁷ It is important to stress that the objectives of *Shi’r*, though phrased in terms of aesthetic criticism, went beyond the realm of the arts. Following Sa’āda, it was their firm belief that, through his art, the poet “shapes reality and creates a new world.” The creative artist can change society by offering a vista of new possibilities, through the innovative use of language. Therefore, the introduction of new poetic forms not only changes the culture, but it opens up new ways of thinking. This in turn will have social and political repercussions, for once new options become available to the Arab reader, he will be able to fight to realize them.

5.1.3 Revisiting the poetic heritage

Besides writing his own poetry and collaborating in *Shi’r*, during the late 1950s, Adonis immersed himself in the Arabic poetical tradition. This would result in the publication of *Dīwān al-Shi’r al-‘Arabī* (*Anthology of Arabic poetry*). The importance of this experience cannot be underestimated, as it is his meticulous study of Arab poetry which provided the impetus for his later treatises on the “static” condition of Arab society. We can witness the early stages of this critical appraisal of Arab culture in a lecture he gave in Rome in 1961 titled “Arabic Poetry and the Problems of Innovation.” Muhammad Mustafa Badawi neatly summarizes the three principles of the New Movement in poetry mentioned by Adonis in this lecture:

²⁶ Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 75.

²⁷ Robyn Creswell, “The Man Who Remade Arabic Poetry,” *New Yorker*, November 12, 2017, accessed May 5 2018. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/18/the-man-who-remade-arabic-poetry>. In context, this quotation refers to Adonis himself as an exponent of this modernist tendency.

- 1) “radical rebellion against the traditional mentality”;
- 2) “a rejection of the old Arab conception of poetry which regards poetry as something static and as no more than emotion and craftsmanship”;
- 3) “a rejection of the view that ancient Arabic poetry is a model to be imitated by all subsequent poetry, or that it is an autonomous and self-sufficient world independent of all poetic heritage in other languages.”²⁸

In a characteristically secular statement, referencing Nietzsche’s pronouncement of the death of God, Adonis links these traditionalist elements of the Arab mindset to the persistent influence of a religious authority on Arab culture. Mentioning one of the poles of the dissertation that he would write over a decade later, he holds the unrelenting reverence for the “static” values enshrined in the Arab heritage responsible for the inability of the individual to stand up to religious authority, as opposed to the “dynamic” force of change pioneered by the creative artist. The only way to get rid of this authority is by revolting against it and establishing a new order of values not based on religious creed, or at least not beholden to a strict orthodox understanding of religion.²⁹

Another notable event during this time was that, in 1960, Adonis received a scholarship to study at the Sorbonne for one year. Here, he had the opportunity to immerse himself more fully in Western culture, the figurative arts, French literature, and the European philosophical tradition, particularly the philosophical writings of Nietzsche and the poetry of Mallarmé and Baudelaire.³⁰ This had a great effect on him and on his poetry, as is evident in his groundbreaking 1961 collection of poems *Aghānī Miḥyār al-Dimashqī* (*The songs of Miḥyār of Damascus*), the protagonist of which is likened by Adonis to Nietzsche’s Zarathustra.³¹ Looking back on this period, he notes that it was not through Arabic sources that he came to recognize the *dynamic* within Arab culture. Instead, he recalls that:

it was reading Baudelaire which changed my understanding of Abū Nuwās and revealed his particular poetical quality and modernity, and Mallarmé’s work which explained to me the mysteries of Abū Tammām’s poetic language and the modern dimension in it. My reading of Rimbaud, Nerval and Breton led me to discover the poetry of the mystic writers in all

²⁸ Badawī, *A Critical Introduction to Modern Arabic Poetry*, 234.

²⁹ It is not easy to pin down Adonis on whether he considers himself an atheist, or whether he can appreciate religion insofar as it remains a dynamic force. While he often inveighs against religion, Islam in particular, he also marks out the Qur’an as a true work of dynamism.

³⁰ Weidner,und sehnen uns nach einem neuen Gott...: *Poesie und Religion im Werk von Adonis*, 142.

³¹ Weidner,und sehnen uns nach einem neuen Gott...: *Poesie und Religion im Werk von Adonis*, 150.

its uniqueness and splendor, and the new French criticism gave me an indication of the newness of al-Jurjānī's critical vision.³²

This background is important. It may be true that, as Adonis claims, he moved beyond this stage of being “captivated by Western culture.” Yet the basic conceptual apparatus that he uses to analyze Arab culture, as well as to articulate his own alternative, originates in a very particular group of modern, Western intellectuals and artists. Specifically, these figures whom he looks up to are all, in some way or other, critical of modern Western society. They are wary of the optimistic positivist spirit of the nineteenth century, and their poetry serves both as a medium for modernity critique and as a source of meaning in what is more and more perceived as an alienating modern world. Moreover, what poets like Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Hölderlin share with a philosopher like Nietzsche is a highly individualistic outlook. In their writings the creative individual – the artist in particular – takes center stage. What Adonis's reading of Western poetry and his association with the *Shi'r* group also seem to accomplish is to change his conception of a poet. Adonis views the artist as an individual harbinger of change. It is not life which changes literature, but the other way around. The poet changes society by changing its language.

At the end of these formative early years in Beirut, Adonis too is confronted by the disaster that befell the Arab world in 1967. What did 1967 mean for Adonis? As is the case for much of the discourse on *turāth*, Adonis's critical appraisal of the Arab poetic heritage in his 1973 dissertation is often linked to the Arab defeat.³³ Given what we have learned about his early years in Syria and Lebanon, I suggest that we take such dramatic claims with a grain of salt. His criticism of Arab culture had already started to take shape at the end of the 1950s as a result of assembling the anthology of Arab poetry, while his perspective on the dialectic between static and dynamic was further sharpened as he studied the works of “dynamic” Western trailblazers like Nietzsche, Hölderlin, and Baudelaire. Also, his endorsement of

³² Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, trans. Catherine Cobham (London: Saqi, 1990), 81.

³³ It is described by Fouad Ajami, for example, as having radicalized Adonis – Ajami, *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice Since 1967*, 32. The lauded Egyptian poet Iman Mersal views the “turning point” of 1967 as “the kernel of Adonis's subsequent cultural project” – see Iman Mersal, “Reading the Qur'ān in the Poetry of Adonis,” trans. Simon Leese, *Middle Eastern Literatures* 19, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 3. See also Ṣaqr Abū Fakhr's statement in the recent Al-Jazeera documentary on *The Static: Abd al-Raḥmān al-Kilānī*, “Adūnis...al-thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil,” *Khārij al-Naṣṣ* (Al-Jazeera, January 13, 2019), min. 1:50. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6QnKHkscon0>

the pan-Arab project must have been doubtful at best, given the fact that he was living in exile after having been incarcerated by the pan-Arab Syrian Baath Party.

Instead of taking 1967 as a turning point in Adonis's thinking, it makes more sense to see it as the beginning of a shift in how Adonis positioned himself within the Arab debates. The main event in this regard is his founding of the magazine *Mawāqif* in 1968. Adonis had spent several years without his customary literary outlet, since he had left *Shi'r* in 1964 after cooperation with al-Khāl turned sour.³⁴ The post-1967 era offered an opportunity to create a magazine of his own, one that would not focus exclusively on poetry, but would function as a forum for the expression of diverse opinions in any form.³⁵ While Adonis's express aim was to remain "beyond any political camp," the tone he adopted was in tune with the politically charged times.³⁶ Using "Marxist and even Maoist tropes" and stressing the need for revolution, *Mawāqif* can justifiably be regarded "as an organ of the Arab New Left."³⁷ The message that Adonis wanted to put out, however, consisted of the same tropes that made up his Rome speech of 1961. The difference was that following the 1967 defeat, the Arab audience had become more receptive to his critical stance. *Mawāqif* was his way of reaching out to them. Through it, Adonis channeled his longtime mission to change Arab culture. "*Mawāqif*," he writes in the preface to the first edition:

aims to be a forestallment [*istibāq*]. Each forestallment is [an act of] creativity [*ibdā'*]. Creativity is an attack: destruction of what we refute and establishing what we want. Civilization is [an act of] creativity: It is not the use of tools, as much as it is the invention of tools. The same goes for culture: it is not the use of language, as much as it is the continuous renewal and creation of language.

Knowledge, therefore, is an attack. It is what we did not yet know. Hence, freedom is not only the right to move within what is known and regulated. It is, first and foremost, the right to search, create, reject and to go beyond. It is the practice of what we have not yet practiced.³⁸

³⁴ Albers, "Relaunching the Arab Intellectual," 138. Ed de Moor mentions 1963 as the year of Adonis's resignation; see De Moor, "The Rise and Fall of the Review *Shi'r*," 86–88.

³⁵ Yvonne Albers goes one step further, offering the interesting suggestion that *Mawāqif*'s appropriation of the June War as a founding moment of crisis was itself instrumental in constituting 1967 as a major turning point for Arab intellectuals: Albers, "Relaunching the Arab Intellectual," 148.

³⁶ Yvonne Albers, "Turning the Page: Reading 1979 in and through the Cultural Journal *Mawāqif*," *TRAFO – Blog for Transregional Research* (blog), May 16, 2018, <https://trafo.hypotheses.org/9858>.

³⁷ Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 181.

³⁸ Adūnīs, "Preface," *Mawāqif* 1, no. 1 (1968): 3–4.

Given this revolutionary tone, and the general revolutionary sentiment post-1967, it is understandable that *Mawāqif* would be seen by some as a quasi-Maoist call for rebellion. As is clear from these opening phrases, however, the aim of *Mawāqif* is not primarily the overthrow of the social, but the constant renewal of the cultural order.³⁹ This is the theme that Adonis had already explored in his 1961 lecture in Rome, and which he would in the next few years work out in systematic fashion as he turned to writing his dissertation. This work, *The Static*, offers a rereading of Arab-Islamic history and its poetic heritage as a means of developing a comprehensive philosophy of culture, art, and society, which would echo through later writings, talks, and interviews. Until this day, Adonis continues to defend this critical reading of *turāth* as a general framework for understanding Arab-Islamic culture, human civilization at large, and the role of the creative artist in particular. While writing his dissertation at the Université Saint-Joseph, Adonis took up a position as a lecturer in Arabic literature at the Lebanese University in 1970. He and his family managed to weather the first ten years of the Lebanese Civil War. However, they too eventually decided to emigrate in 1985 to Paris, where he remains to this day.

5.1.4 Reception

Adonis has been lauded with several prestigious prizes, among them the *Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* (1997), the *Goethepreis* (2011)⁴⁰ and, most recently in 2017, the PEN/Nabokov award.⁴¹ Moreover, he is among the handful of authors whose names pop up annually as a candidate for the Nobel Prize in Literature. Like certain other enduring contenders and recent Nobel laureates, Adonis has a knack for stirring up controversy. The most widely publicized and divisive issue in recent years has been the publication of a number of letters at the beginning of the Syrian Civil War. In one particular letter, which was published in the Lebanese newspaper *al-Safir* on 14 June 2011, he urges the heinous regime to both respect the rights of the protesters who were calling for its downfall and to do everything in its power to protect the nation. In response, “derision and malice were heaped on Adonis,” as the article has been widely interpreted as a symbol of recognition for the regime

³⁹ Incidentally, *Mawāqif*'s lack of revolutionary firebrand credentials is attested to by the fact that the first article in the first issue of *Mawāqif* was written by Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd.

⁴⁰ Maya Jaggi, “Adonis: A Life in Writing,” *The Guardian*, January 27, 2012.

⁴¹ “2017 PEN/Nabokov Award for Achievement in International Literature,” March 27, 2017, <https://pen.org/2017-pennabokov-award-achievement-international-literature/>.

and evidence that Adonis has become completely out of tune with the struggles and the desperate situation of the Syrian people.⁴²

While his standing in the Arab world, in particular among Syrians, has taken a beating over the years, Adonis remains a prominent figure in contemporary Arab culture. This is due mostly to his undeniable poetic talent and his groundbreaking work in Arabic poetics. Something of a cottage industry has arisen in recent years, of academics studying the oeuvre of Adonis and its impact. Scholarly interest tends to be restricted to his literary output, however, discounting the more historical-philosophical background story of *The Static*. Although this dissertation is often mentioned, there is little in-depth study of it that tries to understand his work in the context of the philosophical discourse of the *turāth* debate. Robyn Creswell tentatively relates the work to Arab Left readings of *turāth* pioneered by Ḥusayn Muruwwa.⁴³ Issa Boullata gives a decent description of the book, which he calls “one of the most daring indictments of Arab culture in modern times.” It remains a brief summary, however, and one that presents Adonis rather straightforwardly according to standard narrative parameters – rationalist, modernist, secularist, progressive.⁴⁴ Kassab takes a similar course, and adds to this a more incisive critique of what, following al-ʿAzm, she sees as his orientalist essentialism. Adonis, she argues, rehashes the hoary old binary division between a rational, material, secular West and an irrational, spiritual, religious East.⁴⁵ The most detailed discussion of Adonis’s reading of *turāth* is found in an article by Nadia Wardeh, which

42 Šādiq Jalāl Al-ʿAzm, “Orientalismus der übelsten Sorte,” *FAZ*, September 19, 2015, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/buecher/autoren/sadik-al-azm-kritisiert-friedenspreis-fuer-adonis-13811010.html>. While the controversy surrounding Adonis’s take on the war has had a great impact on how Adonis is viewed currently, the issue is obviously less relevant for contextualizing the theoretical writings on *turāth*, which date back to the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. I will therefore refrain from commenting in more detail on this issue. For an assessment of this scandal, see Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, “Critics and Rebels: Older Arab Intellectuals Reflect on the Uprisings,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 41, no. 1 (2014): 13–16. Although the most common reaction to Adonis’s hesitancy to commit to the struggle against an obviously ruthless regime was one of dismay, he has also received support, in particular from writers anxious about Islamist dominance in the ranks of the opposition – for example, Salameh, “Adonis, the Syrian Crisis, and the Question of Pluralism in the Levant,” 61.

43 Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 150–52.

44 Boullata has also written a useful review essay of Adonis’s philosophy of culture and *turāth* in Issa Boullata, “Review Essay: Adonis: Towards a New Arab Culture,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 20, no. 1 (1988): 109–12.

45 Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective*, 133. This critique is mostly directed at his 1979 “Modernity Manifesto” (*Fātiḥa li-Nihāyat al-Qarn*).

was based on a chapter of her dissertation.⁴⁶ The author gives some useful background to Adonis's thought, bringing in his association with Antūn Sa'āda and the effect of surrealism and Nietzsche on his artistic and philosophical orientation.⁴⁷ In her dissertation, Wardeh provides the most detailed discussion of *The Static* in the English language. More than Boullata and Kassab, Wardeh stresses the secular streak in Adonis's thinking. His deconstruction of *turāth* is presented as a critique of religion, and Wardeh criticizes him for not being fully aware of how, by replacing the religious with the secular, Adonis may be replacing one static order with another. She also criticizes Adonis for his vague definition of the term *turāth*. Concluding that Adonis, to all intents and purposes, equates *turāth* with religion, she explains this equation as due to "his evident bias towards secularism and atheism." *Turāth*, she argues, provides a cover for critique of religion.⁴⁸

While the poetic work of Adonis is well known among Arab literati, few studies are devoted to the theory of *turāth* that he works out in *The Static* and in later publications. However, a number of short appraisals of his dissertation have appeared in various Arabic magazines in the 1970s and 1980s. An early sample of these is an article by 'Abd Allāh 'Abd al-Dā'im that appeared in *al-Ādāb* in 1973. In his opinion, Adonis presents an overly simplistic and essentialist picture of an Arab civilization mired in traditionalism, a civilization that is "static" almost to a fault. 'Abd al-Dā'im, rather, sees a much larger and more intrinsic role for the dynamic in Arab history, as part of a true dialectic with its more static elements.⁴⁹ He argues that "reason" has, from the start, been an essential aspect of Islam and not some sort of aberration,⁵⁰ that politics has historically been informed by secular and not only by religious principles,⁵¹ and that poetry was never dominated by a conservative mindset.⁵² In short, 'Abd al-Dā'im, though he

46 Nadia Wardeh, "The Problematic of Turāth in Contemporary Arab Thought: A Study of Adonis and Ḥasan Ḥanafī" (PhD diss., McGill University, 2008), chap. 3. The dissertation was published in 2015, but no editing of any kind was done, and seeing that the original dissertation is still available free of charge, I will reference the original dissertation.

47 Wardeh, "From 'Alī Aḥmad Sa'īd to Adonis: A Study of Adonis's Controversial Position on Arab Cultural Heritage." This article grew out of Wardeh's dissertation (2008) mentioned in the previous footnote.

48 Wardeh, "From 'Alī Aḥmad Sa'īd to Adonis: A Study of Adonis's Controversial Position on Arab Cultural Heritage," 177.

49 'Abd Allāh 'Abd al-Dā'im, "Ḥawl Risālat Adūnīs: al-Turāth al-'Arabī bayn al-Ittibā' wa-l-Ibdā'," *al-Ādāb* 21, no. 8 (1973): 11.

50 'Abd Allāh 'Abd al-Dā'im, "Ḥawl Risālat Adūnīs: al-Turāth al-'Arabī bayn al-Ittibā' wa-l-Ibdā'," 12.

51 'Abd Allāh 'Abd al-Dā'im, "Ḥawl Risālat Adūnīs: al-Turāth al-'Arabī bayn al-Ittibā' wa-l-Ibdā'," 75.

52 'Abd Allāh 'Abd al-Dā'im, "Ḥawl Risālat Adūnīs: al-Turāth al-'Arabī bayn al-Ittibā' wa-l-Ibdā'," 76–79.

praises *The Static* as an innovative analysis of *turāth*, finds fault with Adonis on historical grounds. He understands Adonis as rejecting *turāth*, and counters this by arguing that *turāth* is not just historical baggage that Arabs should, for the most part, get rid of, but a source of innovation in the modern age.

A less apologetically critical reading of *The Static* was offered a few years later by Muḥammad Kāmil al-Khaṭīb. Iterating a recognizably Marxist critique, he takes Adonis to task for analyzing the cultural superstructure of Arab civilization, without giving due weight to the material base.⁵³ He also criticizes the particular use of metaphor that Adonis makes to ground a radical break between the forces of the static and of the dynamic. Instead of a dialectic between these two that develops through history, al-Khaṭīb sees the metaphorical severance of the realm of metaphor from the realm of the everyday as creating a parallel time, detached from the goings on in the material world that this commentator identifies with the realm of the static.⁵⁴ Lastly, he refutes Adonis's essentialist conception of an anti-progressive Arab mind (*dhihn 'arabī*) and his internal critique of *turāth* as unscientific and detrimental to the project of reform. It is, according to al-Khaṭīb, only by adopting an anti-essentialist perspective from outside the sources offered by a tradition that real change can be made. These and other critiques of the methodology used in *The Static* are critically evaluated by Bashīr Tāwṛīrīt.⁵⁵

Another short critique of *The Static* was written by the Egyptian intellectual Naṣr Ḥamīd Abū Zayd. While the author is sympathetic to Adonis's project as a whole, he laments his hostility to *turāth*. In Abū Zayd's opinion, Adonis aims for destruction (*hadm*), rather than renewal (*tajdīd*) of and building a connection (*ir-tibāṭ*) with the ancient heritage, which he sees as hopelessly stuck in static thinking.⁵⁶ Also, Adonis's call for creativity as a form of complete and unfettered aesthetic freedom does not fit with another aspect of his project, namely his call

53 Muḥammad Kāmil al-Khaṭīb, "al-Manhaj fī al-Thabāt wa-l-Taḥawwul li-Adūnīs," *al-Ma'rifa* 175 (1976): 162–64.

54 al-Khaṭīb, "al-Manhaj fī al-Thabāt wa-l-Taḥawwul li-Adūnīs," 164–67. The rejection of what is, not unjustifiably, seen as Adonis's idealism is a common theme among Marxist critics of Adonis; see for example Ḥusayn Muruwwa's critique as quoted in Bashīr Tāwṛīrīt, "Ta'thīr al-Manhaj al-Adūnīsī fī al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil fī al-Shi'r wa-l-Dīn," *al-Ādāb wa-l-Ulūm al-Insāniyya* 4, no. 7 (2006): 183.

55 Tāwṛīrīt, "Ta'thīr al-Manhaj al-Adūnīsī fī al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil fī al-Shi'r wa-l-Dīn. I have not included all the articles discussed by Tāwṛīrīt, since some of them are very difficult to access. His discussion of methodology in *The Static* was also included in a monograph that analyzes the broader critique of Adonis's poetics among Arab intellectuals; see Bashīr Tāwṛīrīt, *Adūnīs fī Mizān al-Naqd: Arba' Mas'āl Khilāfiyya bayn Adūnīs wa-Mu'arīḍih* (Ālam al-Kutub, 2009).

56 Naṣr Ḥamīd Abū Zayd, "al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil fī Ru'yā Adūnīs li-l-Turāth," *al-Fuṣūl* 1, no. 1 (1980): 243.

for revolution. After all, for a revolution to be successful, the intellectual has to descend from his ivory tower and connect with the general population, something that Adonis's anti-traditional elitism hardly seems capable of, since it considers the population to be in thrall to the static outlook.⁵⁷ Moreover, Adonis's conception of creativity as complete freedom, when applied to historical figures, detaches them from their surroundings and the context to which their works reacted, while his generalizing conception of the "static" is applied indiscriminately to various aspects of historical Islamic societies, like religion, culture, and politics.⁵⁸ Lastly, Abū Zayd critiques Adonis's mechanical and strictly dualistic treatment of *turāth*, which does not countenance the subtle dialectic in which elements of static and dynamic thinking often went together.⁵⁹

One of the most extensive critiques of Adonis's theory of *turāth* in Arabic was put forward by the Lebanese Marxist author Mahdī 'Āmil. Given his orientation, it is no surprise that 'Āmil would repeat the critique, already voiced by al-Khaṭīb, of Adonis as an "idealist" intellectual who does not acknowledge the role of the socio-economic base in his analysis of culture.⁶⁰ Adonis's analysis of the role of religion is, according to 'Āmil, boxed in by his assumption of the Arab's essentially religious cast of mind, which suffuses Arab history and prevents a more dynamic perspective on Arab history in which religion is analyzed as a phenomenon of an underlying class struggle.⁶¹ Even worse, 'Āmil charges Adonis with inconsistency on this point, quoting excerpts in *The Static* that indicate consideration of socioeconomic factors, and others that indicate a single-minded attention to cultural phenomena.⁶² Additionally, he argues that Adonis does not give his readers any useful analysis of Arab culture. He equates Arab culture with religious (that is, Islamic) culture and, instead of assessing the religious perspective critically, adopts its absolutist credo that a true Islamic society ought to be ruled by religious guidelines. He thus does not offer analysis (*tafsīr*), but only a description (*wasf*) of the religious point of view.⁶³ This 'Āmil sees as part of a more general problem in Adonis's theorizing, namely its methodological instability or going back and

57 Abū Zayd, "al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil fī Ru'yā Adūnīs li-l-Turāth," 244.

58 Abū Zayd, "al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil fī Ru'yā Adūnīs li-l-Turāth," 247.

59 Abū Zayd, "al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil fī Ru'yā Adūnīs li-l-Turāth," 248–49.

60 For a take on this interesting figure of the Arab Left, see Samer Frangie, "Theorizing From The Periphery: The Intellectual Project of Mahdī 'Āmil," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 44, no. 3 (2012): 465–82.

61 Mahdī 'Āmil, *Naqd al-Fikr al-Yawmī* (Beirut: Dār al-Farābī, 1988), 117–21.

62 'Āmil, *Naqd al-Fikr al-Yawmī*, 121–27.

63 'Āmil, *Naqd al-Fikr al-Yawmī*, 129.

forth (*ta'arjuḥ*) between various methodologies.⁶⁴ The root of this instability 'Āmil locates in Adonis's dual allegiance to a religious, idealist mode of thinking that comes naturally to a bourgeois intellectual like Adonis, and a materialist perspective that attracts him, but that he does not quite master.⁶⁵ This prevents Adonis from giving an insightful and rational analysis of the dialectic in Arab history. All it does is to oppose two equally static and essentialist orders, one that he calls "static" and is reified in institutions like the state, religion, or the family, and another order that he calls "dynamic," but which is no more than the humanist, bourgeois faith in the individual as a potential creative genius. This attribute of "creativity" (*ibdā'*) thus takes on a magical quality in Adonis's writings. It is the source of authentic humanity and does not admit further analysis, thereby forestalling a more insightful, rational analysis of the material base structure that 'Āmil would advocate.⁶⁶

Finally, a common charge against Adonis's theory of *turāth* is that it relies too much on the Western Orientalist tradition, which paints a hostile picture of Islam. This point is made by a number of Arab authors mentioned by Nadia Wardeh – among them are Jihād Fāḍil, Mutā' Šafaḍī, 'Abd Allāh Ibrāhīm, and Maḥmūd Amīn al-Ālim.⁶⁷ She herself rejects this charge on the grounds that Adonis is not just antagonistic towards Islam, but to any religion. While this is an important observation, it does not completely undercut the charge of anti-Islamic Orientalism. As critics have noted, he does not merely reject Islam, but attributes to Arabs a nature that is essentially religious. This gives his criticism of Islam a particular sting, as it sets Arabs apart from a Western civilization that Adonis would presumably describe as more secular.

This is not the occasion to discuss whether these criticisms of Adonis's theoretical writings on *turāth* hold water. The aim of this study is to move beyond the existing analyses of Adonis's understanding of *turāth* by shedding new light on the binary division between static and dynamic. Instead of trying to understand *The Static* as a structuralist, phenomenological, materialist, or idealist *analysis* of Arab history, we will read it as a discursive *intervention*. We will look at how concepts commonly used in debates about *turāth* and religion like rationalism, authenticity, secularism, or modernity are reinterpreted using a dual schema of static and dynamic. In doing so, I will argue that these two orders are conceptualized using different notions of time, and that this difference plays an essential part

⁶⁴ 'Āmil, *Naqd al-Fikr al-Yawmī*, 130–35.

⁶⁵ 'Āmil, *Naqd al-Fikr al-Yawmī*, 136.

⁶⁶ 'Āmil, *Naqd al-Fikr al-Yawmī*, 152.

⁶⁷ Wardeh, "The Problematic of Turāth in Contemporary Arab Thought: A Study of Adonis and Ḥasan Ḥanafī," 175.

in the reinterpretation of the *turāth* vocabulary, which in turn creates space for a reconceptualization of the discourse on *turāth* that problematizes the familiar opposition between authenticity and modernity.

5.2 Rereading *turāth*: *The Static and the Dynamic (al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil)*

Adonis's doctoral dissertation (*The Static*) was written in three volumes in the 1970s, to which he later added a fourth.⁶⁸ It forms the backbone of his perspective on Arab culture. Later books, some of which were originally published in French or translated into English, summarize and fill in the general view of Arab culture developed in *The Static*, but the structure of the argument remains unchanged. He got the idea for writing this work while compiling *Dīwān al-Shi'r al-'Arabī*. Indeed, in his 1961 address to the Rome conference we already see the ideas brewing that would animate his dissertation. As Adonis tells it, while studying the Arabic poetic heritage he was struck by the extent to which traditionalism had oriented the Arab taste (*al-ittibā'yya tuwajjih al-dhā'iqa al-'arabiyya*) until the First World War, and how even in modern poetry any attempt at renewal in Arabic poetry was frowned upon, being considered a corruption of the Arabic roots (*al-uṣūl al-'arabiyya*).⁶⁹ The same critique that is voiced against modern poets who want to explore new forms of expression was also uttered many centuries before against poetic innovators like Abū Tammām. In *The Static*, Adonis wants to uncover the source of this enduring animosity in Arab culture towards individuals (like himself) who champion aesthetic innovation.⁷⁰ As he will argue, there is a structural flaw in Arab culture

⁶⁸ It should be noted that the last volume to come out was in fact sandwiched between Volumes 2 and 3 – that is, what is now called Volume 3 is actually of a later date than Volume 4.

⁶⁹ Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1 (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-'Āma li-Quṣūr al-Thaqāfa, 2016), 48.

⁷⁰ This pivotal question is connected to a range of other questions central to modern intellectual debates:

- “What is authenticity and how does one define the authentic source (*al-aṣl*)?”
- How can one explain the nature of the relationship between what came before, what is now, and what will be?
- Why did Arabic poetry and Arabic culture generally deteriorate (*inḥaṭṭ*) and is it enough to point to political decline or foreign influence in order to explain this deterioration?
- How do we account for the essential link that exists between language, religion, and politics?
- What does modernity mean for the Arab?
- If the structure of the Arab mind (*bunyat al-dhihn al-'arabī*) is historical, what does the future mean for it?

or in what he terms the Arab mentality (*al-dihniyya al-‘arabiyya*) that runs through all areas of Arab culture and society, from art, to religion, to law, to the very notion of history and time.⁷¹ To understand it, we must acknowledge that society is marked by an ongoing struggle between two forces: the static (*al-thābit*) and the dynamic (*al-mutaḥawwil*). What is peculiar about Arab society is not the presence of the static, for this is a feature of every human society, but its historical dominance. Arab society has always been marked by the dominance of static tendencies.⁷² Since poetry is the Arab’s means of aesthetic expression *par excellence*, this struggle and the dominance of the static is most evident in the history of Arabic poetry. Adonis therefore uses this as a prism through which to analyze Arab culture as a whole, past and present. By showing the structure of the static and the dynamic in poetry, he will analyze the dialectical structure of Arab society. This, he argues, is the only way to gain a clear understanding of the Arab view of man and the world.⁷³

5.2.1 The aims of *The Static*

Notwithstanding Adonis’s claim to provide an objective description of how Arab culture presents itself at the surface,⁷⁴ *The Static* is very much a normative work. Its aim is to change Arab society. For this he employs two methods. First, he is one among several Arab intellectuals who, around this time, turn to the critical analysis of Arab-Islamic heritage as a means for critiquing the cultural and social status quo. Adonis believes that future progress is only possible if we understand the past.⁷⁵ By “understanding” Adonis does not mean mere knowledge of historical facts. If anything, there is too much of that. Instead he proposes a structuralist understanding that uncovers the underlying forces that move Arab culture. Showing these forces at work not only explains how the static has kept Arab society back, but also why a turn towards the dynamic does not imply a move away from traditional, authentic, Arab-Islamic culture. The dynamic, his investigation

– Is man in the Arabic poetic imagination a following heir (*wāriṭh tābi*), or a creative inventor (*khallāq bādī*)?” (Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā’ wa-l-Ittibā’ ‘ind al-‘Arab*, vol. 1, 48)

71 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā’ wa-l-Ittibā’ ‘ind al-‘Arab*, vol. 1, 48

72 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā’ wa-l-Ittibā’ ‘ind al-‘Arab*, vol. 1, 116.

73 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā’ wa-l-Ittibā’ ‘ind al-‘Arab*, vol. 1, 50.

74 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā’ wa-l-Ittibā’ ‘ind al-‘Arab*, vol. 1, 55.

75 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā’ wa-l-Ittibā’ ‘ind al-‘Arab*, vol. 1, 56.

shows, is part and parcel of Arab thinking, and it is up to modern-day Arabs to revive it.

The second approach is more intimately related to Adonis's own position as a poet. According to him, the poet ought to continuously engage in a process of linguistic creation and reformation. Through his literary creations, in which he uses figurative speech and metaphorical allusions to subtly change the meaning of words, he paints vistas of new worlds. Such semantic changes can change society. By changing language, the poet opens up new possibilities and alternative futures to his fellow man that can only be pursued by undermining the current order. In short, the poet is a member of the revolutionary cultural vanguard.

The latter approach is put into practice particularly in the fourth volume of *The Static*. Here Adonis not only criticizes more recent poetry for remaining in thrall to the static, but he also takes it upon himself to redefine such notions as modernity and authenticity. Following his redefinitions, these terms come to stand for the kind of creative, avant-garde poetry that he has long advocated. In other words, the author has morphed from an observer of the structural dialectic of Arab thought into someone who actively molds the discursive landscape through poetic intervention. Adonis puts his own theory of the artist into practice, as it were, changing the parameters of the debate by changing its vocabulary. Through associating terms like authenticity, modernity, and even *turāth* with his ideal of the *dynamic*, he attempts to open up new horizons for thinking about these terms, new possibilities for exploring them. The result is that if you buy into Adonis's redefinition, it will become difficult to coherently articulate the kind of problematic of *turāth* envisioned by someone like Maḥmūd, relying as it does on a temporal opposition between authenticity and modernity. What's more, if you buy into Adonis's vision, it will be hard to even conceive of something like the "static" as opposed to the "dynamic." For, as he wants to convince you, authenticity, modernity, and *turāth*, if understood correctly, are in the end all expressions of the dynamic.

5.2.2 Structure and the political origins of the static–dynamic dialectic

In Adonis's conception of the dialectic between static and dynamic there is a clear structuralist undertone. Not only Arab-Islamic society, but *every* society consists of an "order that represents specific values and interests of specific groups."⁷⁶ At the same time, there is in every society the kernel of an alternative to the ruling order,

⁷⁶ Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 51.

with different values and different interests. Development, on this view, is the outcome of the interaction between these two currents.

While Adonis praises the revolutionary sentiment, and stresses the political-ideological nature of each current and embeds them in a structuralist narrative he should not, as some have suggested, be thought of as a Marxist – not even one of the “humanist” variety.⁷⁷ His poetics were, as al-Musawi recalls, “mainly a *challenge* [my emphasis] to leftist poetics, which argued throughout the [1950s and 1960s] for an urgent engagement with present evils, including authoritarianism and exploitation.”⁷⁸ Adonis does not follow this trend of existentialist literature of engagement (*iltizām*), nor does his reading of *turāth* adopt a historical-materialist tone, according to which cultural expressions are but an expression of the material base and society, albeit in fits and starts, progresses towards a socialist utopia.⁷⁹ Quite the opposite. Instead of positing any particular end goal for art, Adonis offers creation and continuous change as the ultimate goal *per se*. Man, according to him, is essentially a free and creative animal, an explorer of new worlds, and we ought to allow him to live according to this nature. While Adonis does not want to deny that social and economic circumstances are important in explaining human action, and he likewise admits that all human activity, including art, is conditioned by cultural and social circumstances, he sees the creative act of the true artist as going beyond these constraints. The creative artist is not a mere product of society, but is himself an active participant in its renewal. That is also why the true artist is, according to Adonis, always a revolutionary. He is never on the side of the powers that be, for being on that side always obliges one to toe the line by remaining “static.” He is not, however, a “utopian” revolutionary. The aim is not to move society towards a determinate end. It suffices merely to change it into something different from anything it has ever been; the aesthetic revolution is a goal in its own right and therefore it is never complete.

Admittedly, materialist explanations do occur in *The Static*, but they apply only to the forces of the static, to the ruling classes. These, he argues, have a stake in protecting the status quo. They profit from their hold on power. They want to hold on to it and therefore are averse to change.⁸⁰ One of the most formidable weapons at their disposal is tradition. By appealing to the past as the sole measure for the future, they try to convince their subjects that the status quo ought to be

77 The Marxist rejection of *The Static* described above illustrates how his dabbling in Marxist rhetoric was never taken very seriously by the intellectual in-crowd of the Arab left.

78 Muhsin J. al-Musawi, *Arabic Poetry: Trajectories of Modernity and Tradition* (Oxford: Routledge, 2006), 62.

79 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 54–55.

80 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 316.

protected. At least in Arab culture, it is always the ruling power that has advocated the normative value of the original sources (*uṣūl*) and the protection of inherited values (*al-qiyam al-mawrūtha*). It is these values, ingrained in the conservative practice of Islam, that have kept Arab society back. The forces of opposition, without rejecting these cultural roots, have used them in new ways that go against the interpretation given to them by those in power.⁸¹ They have been forced to be creative, to go beyond what is generally accepted, to think what cannot be thought. Forces of opposition are, almost by definition, harbingers of the *dynamic*.

In sum, the ruling structure of Arab culture is static through and through. This structure is supported mainly by the Islamic religion, which is based on a conformist mentality and a refutation of creativity. This has inhibited true progress in Arab society. The goal of Adonis's analysis is therefore to describe this structure and its development in tandem with its dynamic counter-culture in order to change it (*min ajl taghyīrihā*).⁸² It should be borne in mind that the intended destruction of the old structure does not imply a dismissal of the Arab-Islamic heritage *tout court*. The aim is not to replace the entire Arab-Islamic heritage, but to change the way Arabs use it. This kind of analysis must break the blind respect that Arabs have for their past, and make them realize that the value of the past does not lie in the past, but in the use they can make of it to shape their future.⁸³ For this reason, a critique of the static in Arab culture must proceed using Arabic sources. Holding up external examples of the dynamic is not enough. The blind respect for *turāth* can only be broken if Arabs become aware of the static structure of their own thinking.

5.2.3 The history of the static–dynamic dialectic in the Arab world

The origins of the dialectic

The dialectic of static and dynamic is, according to Adonis, a universal one. It did not start with the advent of Islam, as witnessed for example in the daring, rebellious, anti-conventional compositions of the pre-Islamic (*jāhili*) poet Imru' al-Qays, which went against the strict tribal code of the day.⁸⁴ Notwithstanding, the struggle between static and dynamic did enter a new stage with the advent of Islam.

In the period following the advent of Islam, Adonis distinguishes three fields in which he sees a clear mentality of conformity (*ittibā*): In politics and the ques-

⁸¹ Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 20.

⁸² Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 64.

⁸³ Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 65.

⁸⁴ Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 260–62.

tion of who ought to be the leader of the Muslim community – the caliph; in jurisprudence and the outsized role of the deeds and sayings of the Prophet (sunna) as an ethical model; and in poetry. In the realm of politics, Islam ushered in a time of unity to replace the heterogeneity of pre-Islamic times. This unity was first monopolized by the leading tribe of Mecca at the time, the Quraysh. They justified their rule on the basis of their blood ties to Muḥammad and the special mention made of them in the Qur'an, but also on account of their strength in numbers.⁸⁵ The Qurayshī hold on power was temporarily broken when 'Uthman, the third caliph after Muḥammad, was killed in his house in Medina, an act that gave rise to the first *fitna*, or civil war, in Islam. Its eventual victor, Mu'āwīyya, who was also of Qurayshī stock, saw that he needed more ideological ammunition to keep his people in check, so he and his growing company of exegetes began to stress the importance of obedience (*ṭā'a*) to the sunna of the Prophet. Moreover, he and his offspring, who ruled the Umayyad Caliphate (661–750) from Damascus, presented their rule as intimately tied to religion. Their rule was bestowed upon them through a direct line of succession from Abū Bakr, the first caliph after Muḥammad. Adonis thus presents the rise of the Umayyads as the breeding ground for a number of political ideas that were meant to favor the ruling class, homogenize the Muslim community (*umma*), and suppress individual dissent.⁸⁶

This political form of acquiescence is abetted by developments in Qur'anic exegesis and Islamic jurisprudence. In the formulation of a comprehensive system of laws rooted in the message of Islam, scholars came to rely heavily on whatever details they could verify about the life of the Prophet and those who surrounded him. The first generations of Muslims were thus elevated to a position of moral excellence, a model to aspire to for all future generations of believers. As this frame of mind became entrenched, Islam became “a struggle against forgetting.”⁸⁷ This emulative trend gave rise to various disciplines of Islamic science that concerned themselves with comparing, explaining, and judging the veracity of hadiths, as well as a drive to turn the example of the Prophet and his companions into law.⁸⁸ These developments conspired to undergird the acquiescent mentality of Islam and muffle the independent, rational interpretation of Scripture.⁸⁹

85 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 166–69.

86 As Creswell notes, “the idea that politics, in Arabic *al-siyasa*, is essentially an activity of oppression (rather than liberation, solidarity, or negotiation) is consistent throughout Adonis's oeuvre” (Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 23).

87 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 174.

88 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 180.

89 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 185–87.

Finally, this drive towards conformity and traditionalism is also prominent in the fabric of post-prophetic poetry. Muḥammad himself saw that poetry, which the Qur'an labels as a kind of wizardry, is a most effective tool for spreading ideology. He and his successors managed to turn the tribal poet who sang the praises of his next of kin into a propagandist for the nascent Islamic state and its moral regime. Moreover, since the message of Islam that they wanted to promote was seen as manifest and complete, poets were expected to display the same qualities in their works. Poetry also came to be seen as a kind of scientific endeavor, not in order to understand the natural world, but as an exploration of the self in order to control it. This would be done by rehearsing the message of Islam in poetic language, but without any creative effort to change its meaning, or explore new meanings. The only function left for pre-Islamic poetry was to help understand the language of the Qur'an, not to serve as a model of beauty and artistic ingenuity. As for the critic, his only role was to judge new poetry on whether it followed these principles and did not veer off course or try anything new.⁹⁰ The accepted mode of literary criticism only came to judge poetry according to its moral import, its clear, correct use of Arabic – the language of the Qur'an – and the superficial meanings exhibited in poems. This ruled out any appreciation for the kinds of allusions and metaphor that allow poetry to explore deeper aesthetic dimensions of meaning.⁹¹

As the static, acquiescent streak in Arab culture made headway, it also set the stage for its opposition. An early example are the revolutionary movements, which opposed the vast disparity in wealth between the Arab elite and the rest of the growing Islamic community. These opponents of the regime, whom al-Ṭabarī referred to as “the proponents of creation” (*ahl al-iḥdāth*),⁹² pointed to the incongruence between the lavish court life and the egalitarian nature of the Qur'an. In doing so, they effectively undermined the ideological structure of the Umayyads, based as it was on the claim of Arab superiority, but also on the centralized, exclusive interpretation of the Qur'an and the sunna, and obedience to the tribe of the Quraysh to which the Umayyads laid claim. With the political-social struggle thus began a struggle over interpretation, over the meaning of the Qur'an, the Islamic creed, and of the Arabic language more broadly.⁹³ These revolutionary movements would result in the overthrow of the Umayyads in favor of the Abbasid dynasty,

90 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 198–204.

91 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 213–14.

92 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 229. For Adonis, this term (*iḥdāth*) is particularly relevant, since it relates to the concepts of modernity (*ḥadātha*) and creation (*iḥdāth*).

93 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 232.

based in Baghdad, in AD 750.⁹⁴ These social and political movements were accompanied by calls for intellectual and humanistic freedom, represented by early Muʿtazlilites like al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, and the proto-Shiite movement.⁹⁵

Of course, this dynamic trend also manifested itself in Arabic poetry, and it did so in two ways. On the one hand, there were poets who, following the lead of the *jāhili* poet Imruʿ al-Qays, stressed the importance of the inner, personal realm in rejection of the moral code that is imposed on the individual from without.⁹⁶ (An example Adonis discusses at length is Jamīl Buthayna, the Romantically inclined love poet.⁹⁷) On the other hand, Adonis also discerns dynamism in what has come to be known as the *suʿluk*, or brigand poetry. Rather than explore the vexed state of their souls, these brigand poets directed their energies against the inequality and poverty that result from a class-based tribal system.⁹⁸ Adonis associates this kind of poetry first and foremost with the movement of the Khawārij, whom he portrays as early promoters of individual human freedom and equality.⁹⁹ With these various strands of resistance to the norms of the burgeoning Islamic state coalescing, Adonis wants to show how “the Umayyad era was the beginning of the struggle in Islamic society over meanings on different levels,”¹⁰⁰ a struggle that would last into our times.

The “rooting” of the dialectic

During the caliphate of the Abbasids, who succeeded the Umayyads in AD 750, Adonis sees the establishment (*taʿsīl*) of the core principles of the static and the dynamic. The main agent of this development on the side of the static is the celebrated jurist al-Shāfiʿī. In order to strengthen the rule of the new Abbasid dynasty, he set out to legitimate total obedience (*ṭāʿa*) to the Caliph on the basis of an elaborate system for basing juridical judgments on the Qurʾan and the hadith. These sources

94 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʾ wa-l-Ittibāʾ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1, 243.

95 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʾ wa-l-Ittibāʾ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1, 248.

96 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʾ wa-l-Ittibāʾ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1, 258–59.

97 Adonis distinguishes Jamīl Buthayna – whose full name is Jamīl ibn ʿAbd Allāh ibn Maʿmar al-ʿUdhri – as a Romantic on the basis of two aspects of his poetry: The persistence of contradiction (*tanāquḍ*) and his restlessness (*jaza*) – see Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʾ wa-l-Ittibāʾ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1, 301–3.

98 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʾ wa-l-Ittibāʾ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1, 304.

99 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʾ wa-l-Ittibāʾ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1, 308–14. The Khawārij were a movement in early Islamic history that grew out of a number of former followers of Caliph ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib’s. They had become disillusioned after ʿAlī’s agreement to arbitrate with the pretender Muʿāwiyya at the battle of Siffin, taking his reticence to do battle as a sign that their leader did not have sufficient faith that God would grant victory to the true leader of Islam.

100 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʾ wa-l-Ittibāʾ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1, 319.

were taken by him to present the final truth, the root (*aṣl*) of whatever comes after, and therefore immune to change.¹⁰¹ The rules derived from these truths created a similarly static system of moral injunctions, of dos and don'ts, designed to keep the population in check. Since the will of the Caliph was equated with the will of God, to go against his wishes was judged an act of heresy.¹⁰² Al-Shāfi'i continued the Umayyad practice of linking the legitimacy of the central authority to the fate of Islam, and managed to perfect it.¹⁰³ Moreover, his conservative adherence to the text of the Qur'an as the source of all knowledge resulted in a high regard for the Arabic language in which it was revealed. Arabic thus came to be considered "the best of languages,"¹⁰⁴ while the Arabs were assigned special status as having privileged access to the word of God through their native language.

On the cultural side, the development of the static was backed up by the efforts of philologists and authors like al-Aṣma'i and al-Jāhiz. The former established the *jāhili* poetry as the model for all subsequent generations of Arab poets on the grounds that it is the purest expression of human nature (*fiṭra*).¹⁰⁵ People like Aṣma'i and al-Jāhiz in particular presented poetry as the quintessential Arab art. Writing poetry not only comes naturally to the Arabs, it is their window onto the world, their "most correct science" (*ilmuhum al-aṣaḥḥ*).¹⁰⁶ In its purest form it demonstrates the Arab virtues of intuition, spontaneity, and improvisation. Poetry in its purest form, however, could only be written by the purest of Arabs. Once non-Arabs started to compose poems in the Arabic language, based on Arab models, Arabic poetry began to deteriorate.¹⁰⁷ For al-Jāhiz there is only one solid form of poetry, and that is the kind of metered poetry of the pre-Islamic age. Any change to this style, either by experimenting with its forms, or tampering with the meaning of words, will destroy it. Analogous to how al-Shāfi'i instated the earliest sources of law as its only sources, al-Jāhiz thus turned the earliest known forms of Arabic poetry into a template to be followed by all later poets.

The Abbasid Caliphate was not only a foundational age for the static side of Arab culture. It also saw several movements that reacted to the centralization of power in the hands of the Baghdad regime, forming the dynamic opposition. There were, for instance, the revolutionary movements of the Qarmatians and

101 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 2 (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-'Āma li-Quṣūr al-Thaqāfa, 2016), 23.

102 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 2, 30–31.

103 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 2, 32.

104 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 2, 21.

105 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 2, 41.

106 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 2, 44.

107 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 2, 56.

the black slave revolt, which challenged the economic disparities within the Islamic Empire.¹⁰⁸ There was also a small group of freethinkers who criticized Islamic doctrine on the basis of scientific research and rational thought. These were religious skeptics like Ibn al-Rāwandī and scientists like Jābir Ibn Ḥayyān, who worked out an early conception of the scientific method.¹⁰⁹ It included the “rationalist” current of the Muʿtazilites who defended the freedom of the individual to think for himself, and a thinker like Muḥammad ibn Zakariyyā al-Rāzī who used this freedom to undermine the most basic principles of organized religion.¹¹⁰ Most importantly, for Adonis, this dynamic current gave rise to Sufism, as well as to some of the most powerful, creative poetry in the Arabic language, especially in the works of Abū Tammām and Abū Nuwās. These thinkers and artists rebelled against the ruling classes by challenging established notions of truth, beauty, and morality, at least according to Adonis.¹¹¹ Among other things, they upheld the principles that the form of the poem ought to reflect its underlying meaning, that meanings of words are liable to interpretation, that these interpretations can change, and that it is the duty of the poet not to conform to old formats, but to discover new means of expression.

The *nahḍa* and the unrelenting rule of the static in modern Arab culture

In the final volume of *The Static*, Adonis turns his attention to the analysis of modern Arab culture in general and its manifestations in poetry in particular. It is here that we find the most clear view of his overall intentions in writing his book. His analysis of Arab cultural history, after all, is not merely a critical view of its static tendencies; it serves a political goal. The paralysis of the Arab world at the social and political levels is rooted in its cultural weakness. Therefore, it needs more than

108 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʾ wa-l-Ittibāʾ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 2, 65–73. The Qarmatians were a Shiʿi sect originating in the eastern part of the Arab peninsula. They are infamous in Islamic lore for desecrating the holy sites of Mecca during a raid in 930 CE. The slave rebellion mentioned is also referred to as the *Zanj* Rebellion, after the name of African slaves imported to southern Iraq to cultivate its expansive marshlands. These slaves, together with a number of other discontented groups in the area, rose in revolt in 869 and continued to struggle against the Abbasid powers until 883.

109 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʾ wa-l-Ittibāʾ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 2, 84.

110 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʾ wa-l-Ittibāʾ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 2, 90.

111 It bears reminding, perhaps, that this reading of the role that someone like Abū Nuwās played in court is highly idiosyncratic. It is informed throughout by Adonis’s aim to bring out the dynamic in Arab-Islamic culture, not by a historian’s interest in the role that subversive poetry might have played in the social *habitus* of the Abbasid court.

mere political change. What is required is “a complete cultural overhaul.”¹¹² To achieve this, Arabs need first to reassess their heritage and criticize it – as Adonis has done in uncovering the dialectic between the static and the dynamic. Only afterwards can they begin to conceive of a new kind of society, one that can only be achieved through a complete revolution.¹¹³

Yet, before Adonis can tie these ends together – the critical assessment of *turāth* and the articulation of an alternative approach – he needs to fit in one more piece of the puzzle. After all, even if he has convinced his readership of the dominance of the static outlook in an earlier age, this does not mean that it continues to do so to this day. With the introduction of Western modernity to the Arab world, and the efforts at renewal to which this confrontation with the West gave rise, some might argue that the static outlook was interrupted, or at least relegated to a less prominent position. That, after all, is the *nahḍa*-thesis, that the nineteenth century marks a break with centuries of (*inḥiṭāṭ*).¹¹⁴ Adonis’s final task before launching into a more explicit exposition of his own alternative ideal for the Arab world, then, is to show that even the most celebrated reformers of the *nahḍa* did not manage to break entirely with the older spirit of traditionalism.

The analysis we find in the fourth volume of *The Static*¹¹⁵ focuses more narrowly on the development of Arabic poetry than the previous volumes, which surveyed the development of Islamic society as a whole. In the same manner as before, however, Adonis takes the development of poetry as an illustration of larger, structural developments. As a preface to his criticism of the poets whom the Arab world has brought forth in the last century and a half or so, he recalls his classification of poetic traditionalism presented in the first two volumes of *The Static*, which sees:

- 1) the meaning of expressions as present before and therefore independent of the use that the poet makes of them;
- 2) production of poetry as a matter of varying on established themes and forms;
- 3) criticism as the study of these variations; and

112 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʾ wa-l-Ittibāʾ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 4 (Cairo: al-Hayʾa al-ʿĀma li-Quṣūr al-Thaqāfa, 2016), 199.

113 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʾ wa-l-Ittibāʾ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 4, 206.

114 Here, Adonis follows the mainstream *inḥiṭāṭ* paradigm described in Chapter 1.

115 As noted earlier, the fourth volume was in fact the third book of *The Static* to be published. What is now considered the third volume was inserted into the earlier trilogy.

- 4) a strict division between the word and its meaning (between form and content), which turns poetry into an art of imitation of earlier forms of expression.¹¹⁶

He also mentions his earlier definition of renewal (*tajdīd*), which:

- 1) views language as both a storehouse of the past and a fountain of the future, as it delivers the means for a poet to come up with new forms of expression;
- 2) is oriented towards the current situation and not to the past;
- 3) takes new expressions to come about when what is said is in-sync with the way in which it is said;
- 4) emphasizes individuality, competition, and revealing (*kashf*); and
- 5) holds that criticism should shed light on these three elements – individuality, competition, and revealing – and take the new texts themselves as measure, instead of using pre-established standards.¹¹⁷

The next task is to show that the *nahḍa* has stuck closely to a traditional conception of poetry. In a way, the *nahḍa* forms a convenient litmus test for the dominance of the static outlook. After all, according to Adonis's conception, cultures should always respond to changing situations by changing their own makeup. Since the *nahḍa* resulted from the confrontation between the Arabs and the modern power of the West, its culture ought to have responded in kind by developing new ways of thinking. Thus, in poetry the first acquaintance with a radically different, modern poetic tradition raised new questions and problems for Arab poets to tackle, new topics about which to write. This in turn required new forms of expression, new standards of criticism, and a different view of what a poet is or ought to be.¹¹⁸

According to Adonis, none of these things are truly accomplished by writers of the *nahḍa* period, except in the work of his one great modern example of creativity: Jubrān Khalīl Jubrān. As for the others, they have not managed to make the leap from what Adonis identifies as the age of oratory (*khaṭāba*) to the age of writing (*kitāba*). The latter he views as holistic, scientific, productive, and unsatisfying (because it is never complete). Arab culture, needless to say, represents the opposite of these characteristics. Thus, the first true *nahḍa* poet, Maḥmūd Sāmī al-Barūdī (1839–1904), is considered by Adonis to represent the quintessence of traditional, static thinking. His uncritical nationalistic praise of Arab culture, his em-

116 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 4, 14.

117 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 4, 14–15.

118 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 4, 25–27.

phasis on a pure use of the Arabic language which relies on the imitation of classical and in particular Qur'anic forms of expression and turns of phrase, render al-Barūdī a true follower of the static outlook.¹¹⁹ Like the tribal poets who touted the glories of their kinsmen or the poets who spread the fame of their master, al-Barūdī's primary interest is not in creating a beautiful work of art, but in pushing a political agenda. In his case, poetry was meant to create an Arab national consciousness.¹²⁰ This, al-Barūdī and other neoclassicists thought, could only be done by using earlier poetic means that expressed what they regarded as the ultimate truths (*ḥaqā'iq muṭlaqa*) of the Arabic language. They therefore did not deepen, but only expanded the depository of Arabic poetry with more of the same. To Adonis's mind, this is the opposite of what a good poet ought to do. Good poetry is never *horizontal*, but always *vertical*, exploring deeper dimensions.¹²¹ A good poet does not expand on what is already there, but tries to discover new worlds that lie below the surface. He may return to his cultural heritage for inspiration, but not in order to copy exactly what others did before him.

The discussion of al-Barūdī serves as a template for the discussion of other *nahḍa* poets. Though not all of them are described in the kind of derogatory style reserved for al-Barūdī, the gist is the same. Ma'rūf al-Ruṣāfī (1875–1945) is praised for his social engagement and his criticism of Western colonialism, but he fails to back this up with a truly personal and innovative style. His work is reminiscent of the earlier static poetry with its emphasis on clarity of expression. He leaves no room for subjective expression and is ultimately not interested in poetry for its own sake, but only as a medium for critiquing the contemporary state of the Arab world. Even the more innovative poetic movements in Arabic poetry, like the Dīwān School and the Apollo Group, do not meet the standards set by Adonis. This is not to say that they did not innovate and change Arab poetry for the better. The Dīwān poets, 'Abd al-Raḥmān Shukrī (1886–1958) in particular, engaged productively with Romantic English literature and were pioneers in Arabic poetry, championing individual expression, freedom of form, and unity of subject as centrally important aspects of the modern poem. The symbolism of Khalīl Muṭrān (1872–1949), which he uses to capture the relationship between the self and nature, is described admiringly.¹²² Lastly, the Apollo Group, which Muṭrān helped found together with Aḥmad Zakī Abū Shādī (1892–1955) by starting a poetry magazine of

119 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 4, 43–44.

120 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 4, 49.

121 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 4, 53. This opposition between horizontal and vertical will is also expressed in temporal terms – horizontal versus vertical time – as we will discuss in due course.

122 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 4, 97.

this name, did much to break open conventions in Arabic poetry, with its focus on the inner conscience (*al-wijdāniyya*), its interest in nature as a source of mystery, and its exploration of new poetic forms like narration.¹²³ Notwithstanding these attempts at innovation, Adonis does not see any of them as truly breaking free from the ingrained static worldview. They never turned their gaze to the inherited structure of Arabic rhetoric or the inherited forms of poetic expression.¹²⁴ They merely benefited from copying Western forms, renewing poetry's forms, not its content.

The fundamental problem is that none of these authors ever managed to break free from the problematic that has suffused the *nahḍa* project. This is the problematic of authenticity (*aṣāla*), which has been so central to modern Arab thought.¹²⁵ *Aṣāla*, Adonis reminds us, is related to the Arabic term for trunk (*aṣl*), and is used figuratively to denote whatever originates in the Arab personality. This personal core is made up of Islam, of the Arabic language, and of the various scientific and political institutions that characterize Arab culture. *Aṣāla*, in Arab culture, means nothing more than being rooted (*ta'sīl*) and proceeding from the root (*fa-l-aṣāla idhan, hiyya al-ta'sīl fī al-aṣl wa-l-ṣudūr 'anh*).¹²⁶ Taking this credo to heart, Arabs continue to view the relationship between modern and old (*al-ḥadīth wa-l-qadīm*), between authenticity and renewal (*tajdīd*), in terms of a branch's relation to the tree. The clearest modern example of this mindset is found in the reactionary criticism of someone like Muṣṭafā Ṣādiq al-Rāfi'ī (1880–1937), whose incendiary castigation of the aforementioned movements like *Dīwān* and *Apollo* provides the *locus classicus* for the persistence of traditionalism in Arab culture. What Adonis stresses again and again, however, is that even the opponents of al-Rāfi'ī, these supposed innovators, did not manage to break free from a traditional mindset. They all remained caught in the typical *nahḍa* problematic which revolves around reconciling one's own heritage with modernity, not the effort to come up with something entirely new.¹²⁷

123 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 4, 103–4.

124 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 4, 140.

125 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 4, 125.

126 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 4, 125.

127 Adonis discerns this problematic in the earliest stages of the *nahḍa*, for instance in the works of someone like al-Ṭaḥṭāwī – see Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 4, 34.

5.3 Structure of the dialectic of the static and the dynamic

Having reviewed the history of the dialectic between the static and the dynamic in Arab culture, we now turn to its structure. According to Adonis, this dialectic runs throughout Arab-Islamic culture, and its manifestations hang together in myriad ways. There is no clear hierarchy between the different aspects of the static or the dynamic, and therefore there is no obvious starting point for a discussion of what these terms mean. Since the static is considered the dominant force, Adonis spends considerably more time detailing its characteristics. As its dialectical antithesis, the dynamic is quite simply all that which the *static* is not.

That, of course, does not imply that it represents an entirely negative world-view. Far from it! To Adonis, the dynamic means freedom and the creation of the new. To each static concept he opposes a dynamic counterpart. The static is identified with the old, the dynamic with the new. The static provides the foundation for social order, whereas the dynamic calls for revolution. The static is a by-word for oppression, while freedom is the slogan of the dynamic. *The Static* is full of such oppositions, and it is never hard to divine with which side of conceptual pairs Adonis feels the most affinity – even though for the dialectic to function one always requires both sides.¹²⁸ Some of the most important oppositions will now be described, so as to get a grip on the structure of the dialectic envisioned by Adonis.

5.3.1 Wave model–tree structure

An abstract but nevertheless insightful way to encapsulate the characteristics of the static is to view them as variants of a single structural model, one that Adonis likens to a tree structure.¹²⁹ The static takes every field of human endeavor to be ruled by a set of absolute rules. These are essential and immune to change. They form the trunk of the tree, its backbone. This trunk may allow for variations to grow out of it, but the “branches” must never lead to outcomes that run counter to the normative core.

The clearest example of a field dominated by this system Adonis finds in Islamic law. The system Islamic jurists developed was made up of the sources of ju-

¹²⁸ This point regarding Adonis’s poetics is also expressed by Iman Mersal – see Mersal, “Reading the Qur’ān in the Poetry of Adonis,” 6.

¹²⁹ Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā’ wa-l-Ittibā’ ind al-‘Arab*, vol. 4, 125. His likening the structure of the static to that of a tree drives home the point that this mode of thinking relates to authenticity (*aṣāla*) as pertaining to “rootedness.”

risprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) and of the logical rules for deriving a specific judgment or branch (*farʿ*) from its root (*aṣl*). Although the law exemplifies it most clearly, the tree model made its way into all areas of Arab-Islamic culture. Juridical doctrine was, according to Adonis, shaped in conjunction with theological doctrine in an effort to control the populace. This is why we see a similar all-encompassing view of Islam emerging among mainstream theologians. According to them, God is the only source of knowledge of the hereafter, while Muḥammad is the sole source of knowledge about earthly matters.¹³⁰ Any personal opinion, experimentation, or creativity is ruled out. Man's task is to find out what he ought to do by applying a perfect knowledge of Arabic to the study of the Qur'an and the hadith. Science (*ʿilm*¹³¹) is, as al-Shāfiʿī explains, a matter of conformity (*ittibāʿ*) to the text of the Qur'an and the sayings of the Prophet and his Companions, using analogical reasoning (*qiyās*) to apply these precepts to a particular case.¹³²

This tree structure carries over into Arabic poetry as well. In the poetics of this era, the old (*al-qadīm*) is presented as the perfect root (*aṣl kāmil*) of all later poetic expression.¹³³ The word of God was made into the ultimate measure for the quality of a poet's work. After Islam, then, the practice of poetry became similar to that of the law, namely to use individual judgment (*ijtihād*) to deduce individual branches (*furūʿ*) from the roots (*uṣūl*).¹³⁴ Since the meaning of terms and the kinds of subjects a poet ought to write about were set, his task became that of creating variations on these well-known themes.

Adonis wants to do away with the tree model that governs Arab thinking. In its stead he proposes a relationship between old and new in which the latter does not grow out of and depend entirely on the former. He uses the classic Saussurean distinction between language (*lisān*) and speech or discourse (*kalām*) to make his point. Poetry, he argues, is a form of discourse. It is not part of the structure of language, like the foliage that grows out of a tree, but an epiphenomenon, more akin to the waves that ripple on the surface of the ocean.¹³⁵ Poetry ought not be an imitation of what came before, but a deeply personal explosion within language itself. Whether old or new, these waves are equal as they continue to ripple across the ocean of the Arabic language and the cultural heritage to which it gave rise.

130 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1, 187.

131 With this term, al-Shāfiʿī means primarily what would today be termed the Islamic sciences.

132 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 2, 19.

133 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1, 62.

134 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1, 100.

135 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 4, 133.

5.3.2 Creativity-following

The change of the epistemic structure that rules Arab thought is crucial to the distinction that Adonis refers to in the subtitle of his dissertation “An investigation into creativity (*ibdāʿ*) and conformity (*ittibāʿ*) among the Arabs.” Only once the Arabs shed the model of root and branch can they make room for creativity. The theory of creativity (*naẓariyyat al-ibdāʿ*) therefore ought always to question the concept of roots (*al-tasāʿul ḥawl al-aṣl*).¹³⁶ The dynamic distinguishes itself from the static by questioning whether the root is indeed complete and perfect. It instead proposes to take from it only what is best, what can be used to create something new. Those belonging to the dynamic movement do not see any external root as necessary for creation. They regard creativity itself as the ultimate root (*fa-l-ibdāʿ, idhan huwwa bi-dhātih al-aṣl*).¹³⁷ For them, there is no necessary precedent. Precedence resides only in the creative act itself.

Unfortunately, this creative trend continues to be suppressed in Arab culture. The main culprit for this is religion, or at least the ideological-political use that successive regimes have made of religion. The notion that Islam is the “seal of knowledge and the end of perfection,”¹³⁸ has become set in the Arab mind. This has limited his options for further development and progress. After all, if all that is true is contained within religion, nothing a person says that goes beyond or against it can be true. We may expand on what came before and repeat this, but can never diverge from its roots (*usūl*).¹³⁹ Thus creativity in all dimensions of life, but particularly poetic creativity (*ibdāʿ*), is stifled by the excessive regard for tradition and imitation (*taqlīd*).¹⁴⁰

The ingrained Arab contempt for creativity shows up even in the connotation of the word itself. The term *bidʿa*, which is closely related to the word *ibdāʿ* through its trilateral root B-D-ʿ (ب - د - ع), via theological redefinitions came to stand for anything that runs counter to the teachings of Islam.¹⁴¹ The logic behind this was that *ibdāʿ* was defined as creating something without the use of a model. Since the rules for action were already contained in the shariʿa and because, moreover, God himself is referred to as a creator (*mubdiʿ*), it would be presumptuous for

136 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1, 144.

137 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1, 144.

138 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1, 68.

139 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1, 75.

140 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1, 80.

141 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1, 109.

man to think that he may himself create anything entirely new.¹⁴² Thus innovation as such was made into a form of heresy.¹⁴³

In later ages, Arabs have not been able to overcome their erstwhile stagnation by looking to the West. Instead of adopting its ways of thinking, they limited themselves to copying its outer forms, importing new styles and products, but not the creative spirit that gave rise to them. This, then, Adonis finds no less a form of conformity than sticking closely to models that one finds in one's own cultural heritage.¹⁴⁴

The upshot is that Arab culture, under the aegis of Islam, has become a culture of conformity (*ittibā'*) and tradition (*taqlīd*).¹⁴⁵ Traditionalism is, according to Adonis, inherently religious.¹⁴⁶ Even where it manifests in politics or in poetry, its foundation is religious (*asāsuh dīnī*).¹⁴⁷ The Arab reality is a religious imagination, not the consequence of human effort.¹⁴⁸ It rather suppresses any attempt by humans to find out new things about the world around them, or to interpret old texts in new ways. The Salafi imagination that Adonis sees as the default Muslim worldview values transmission of knowledge (*naql*) over the individual use of reason (*ʿaql*).¹⁴⁹ It acknowledges only a single *turāth*, where the creative person carves out his own personal *turāth*.¹⁵⁰

142 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 2, 167.

143 Perhaps as consequential in constraining the creative energy of Muslims was the adoption of a particular view of causality. The doctrine of "acquisition" (*kasb*) – a topic that also plays an important role for our other two interlocutors, Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd and 'Abd al-Raḥmān Ṭaha – entrenched the view that man by himself is incapable (*'ajz*) of creating or doing anything independently. Man may will an act and serve as its physical cause (*mubāsharat al-'aml*), but he can only accomplish it with the help of God. He therefore merely acquires what God has created. There is no such thing as authentic creation (*ibdā'*), because everything is ultimately God's doing – see Adonis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 79–83.

144 Adonis, *Fātiḥa li-Nihāyat al-Qarn*, 3rd ed. (Beirut: Dar al-Sāqī, 2014), 265.

145 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 95.

146 As argued further on, we should be careful not to read this as a blanket rejection of religion. After all, what Adonis rejects is not religion itself, but religion insofar as it suppresses the individual's dynamism. Put differently, what he is against is collective religion, in particular insofar as it is used for political ends to protect the status quo.

147 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 96.

148 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 2, 25.

149 Adonis ties into a classical debate here on what are considered in the Islamic tradition to be the two sources of truth: revelation (*naql*) and reason (*'aql*).

150 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 147.

5.3.3 Future–past

A central feature of Arab-Islamic culture and of the Arab mind, according to Adonis, is its historical orientation. The advent of Islam meant a break with the past, both as the end of the heretical period of *jāhiliyya* and the beginning of a new age, a root (*aṣl*) from which the Islamic civilization would grow.¹⁵¹ From a static perspective, this beginning is by definition better than our current age, since it is closer to the essence of revelation. The passage of time becomes something to battle against, as it leads man away from the truth of revelation. The future becomes a space, not for discovery, but for the endless repetition and rehearsal of knowledge provided by revelation. Revelational time supersedes and annuls historical time; it is of all ages, past, present, and future.¹⁵² Instead of an infinite horizon of possibilities, it imagines a finite endpoint in man returning to the place whence he came, that is God.¹⁵³ The only form of progress (*taqaddum*) imaginable within this temporal framework is “the continuous return to the past, to the root.”¹⁵⁴

This “static” valuation of time in terms of a sanctified past versus a future that can only diverge from the straight path is evident, Adonis suggests, in the way the dialectic between the terms *al-qadīm* (old) and *al-muḥdath* (new) played out in Arabic thought and poetry. Essentially, the term “*al-qadīm*” carries in its semantic root four meanings:

- what came before;
- the passage of a long time;
- that which contradicts *al-ḥudūth*; and
- the intention and what is to come.

In the Arab-Islamic heritage Adonis then distinguishes three different idiomatic uses of the term *qīdam* (the old/ancient) or its adjective *al-qadīm*:

- a linguistic meaning according to which anything that precedes is *qadīm*;
- a philosophical-theological meaning, according to which something is *qadīm* when it has no precedent, when it is its own cause (*‘illat dhātiḥ*); and
- a Qur’anic meaning, according to which *al-qadīm* is what came before *temporally* – usually this implies a negative connotation, since from a Qur’anic

151 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdā’ wa-l-Ittibā’ ‘ind al-‘Arab*, vol. 1, 67.

152 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdā’ wa-l-Ittibā’ ‘ind al-‘Arab*, vol. 1, 68–69.

153 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdā’ wa-l-Ittibā’ ‘ind al-‘Arab*, vol. 1, 70. This is captured, for instance, in the Qur’anic phrase: “We belong to God and to Him we shall return” (2:156).

154 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdā’ wa-l-Ittibā’ ‘ind al-‘Arab*, vol. 1, 73.

standpoint, whatever preceded it is by definition pre-Islamic and thus is tarnished by ignorance of God's final revelation.

What happened in the first centuries of the Islamic calendar, according to Adonis, is that the dominant interpretation of this term took on three dimensions that derive from the above-mentioned idioms, but that also alter these original meanings in important ways. The linguistic dimension now refers to *al-qidam* as what comes before and is foundational, the philosophical-religious dimension refers to *al-qidam* as whatever lacks precedent or foundation, and the evaluative, Qur'anic dimension, rather than value *al-qidam* as something negative, portrays it as perfection (*kamāl*).¹⁵⁵ According to the champions of this definition of *al-qidam* – the *ahl al-ḥadīth*, that is, the scholars who dedicated their efforts to recording, understanding, and passing on the tradition of the Prophet (the sunna), and who opposed or at least severely restricted the use of logic in interpreting the Qur'an and the sunna – these characteristics came together in one document of divine origin, which has no precedent nor equal, and the ultimate interpretation of which is only known by God: The Holy Qur'an. As such, *al-qidam* had to be revered and protected because it stood for the word of God Himself and for the sayings and acts of its ultimate human interpreter: The Prophet Muḥammad. By implication, its linguistic opposite, the notion of *al-ḥadīth* or *al-muḥdath*, became suspect. Particularly its most extreme form, namely creation from nothing (*ibdā'*) came to stand for a rejection of Scripture and the Prophet. To refer to anything other than God as creative was to commit heresy, because any ascription of creativity to something other than the Divine is to "cancel out or deny the creativity of God."¹⁵⁶

This temporal perspective naturally relates to the tree model mentioned earlier. The past is the immovable trunk on which the branches depend for their sustenance. What Adonis suggests is that a move away from this model, away from the servile attitude of conformity (*ittibā'*) and towards an attitude of creativity (*ibdā'*) as the ultimate form of creation, not only requires an appreciation of true creativity, but also of the importance of time as a background for human experience. To be creative, one needs to reject identifying with one's past and move "outside of history."¹⁵⁷ Only then can one conceive of a future that is open, a realm of new and endless possibilities different from anything that has come before. To become creative, Arabs will therefore need to reconceptualize time itself. Rather than stick to the familiar opposition of old versus new, he suggests that Arabs need to look

155 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 2, 137–38.

156 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 2, 167.

157 'Ādil Ḍāḥir, *Adūnīs aw al-Iṭhm al-Ḥirāqlīṭī* (Damascus: Dār al-Takwīn, 2011), 58.

again at what these terms mean, how these meanings are contingent and mediated through political wrangling, and how attributing different meanings to these terms can open up space for social, intellectual, and artistic freedom.

5.3.4 Revolution–order

Because the dynamic is always a reaction to the ruling norms and the actions of those who use these norms to protect the status quo, the dynamic is necessarily a revolutionary movement. It is the weapon of the underprivileged, those who have an incentive to blow up, to unleash society.¹⁵⁸ Their interest lies in subverting the ruling culture. Adonis compares living in a repressive, unfree society to being prematurely dead. Chaos, far from being a threat, is a blessing, an opportunity. Under a repressive regime only chaos can open the doors to freedom.¹⁵⁹

The revolutionary poetry that Adonis deems “dynamic” tries to undermine order, to break entirely with convention. He sees this, for instance, in Abū Nuwās’s celebration of all manner of vices. By crossing ethical boundaries, he sets himself free. Instead of following the law, he himself becomes the source of the law (*yusbiḥ huwwa nafsah maṣḍar al-sharīʿa*). In particular, Adonis directs the wrath of the revolution towards the institution that continues to suffocate Arab society with its grip on public morality: religion. He presents Abū Nuwās as a proto-nihilist. In order to become free, man has to kill the harbinger of the religious order. In order to rise to the same level, to become the lawgiver, he has to kill God and His deputy, the caliph. Only the complete destruction of the old religious order will enable the creation of a new world. It is no wonder that Adonis sees a foreshadowing of Nietzsche in Abū Nuwās.¹⁶⁰

It is worth noting that this opposition also has a temporal character. Revolution, in its current meaning,¹⁶¹ refers to the start of something entirely new and a radical break with the past. It is not just an event, but a new beginning, an ushering in of a new time. This, of course, dovetails with Adonis’s creative ideals and his emphasis on creating new beginnings, and it highlights the centrality of subver-

158 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1, 62.

159 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 2, 124.

160 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 2, 122–23.

161 Interestingly, as Koselleck points out in his seminal historical study of the concept of revolution, the metamorphosis of revolution from a concept referring to the constant return of the same – for example, the revolutions of the planets – to its polar opposite as an all-shattering event of complete renewal, is tied to the changing temporal conceptions that accompanied modernization – see Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989), 64–86.

sive conceptions of time for his philosophical and poetic outlook. It is, moreover, connected to his conception of modernity. For him, modernity (*ḥadātha*) is a “revolutionary ethos” that aims at “unlocking of the creative, and therefore the critical, energies of the Arab individual, affirming that the human person is a creation (*ṣāni*), who innovates and transmutes.”¹⁶²

5.3.5 Religion–atheism

The revolutionary character of the dynamic ties in with Adonis’s avowed atheism. Organized religion as such, and Islam in particular, according to him, are anti-revolutionary institutions.¹⁶³ They take a single moment of revelation or doctrine to be the final word on everything, and use its authority to silence anyone who has the courage and creativity to think differently. This, according to Adonis, estranges man from himself. The original state of man is to trust in his own capacities, to use his reason to understand the world and his creativity to make new ones. This is what the “logic of atheism” preaches. It wants to return man to his original state and to a belief in himself as a human being.¹⁶⁴

This is also why all truly creative art is atheist. Art ought to explore new territory, attempt new things. It is inherently revolutionary and therefore anti-religious. All great poets, as he exclaims in one recent interview, were non-religious or even anti-religious.¹⁶⁵ By contrast, Arabic poetry for the most part resembles religion, or at least abides by its precepts in trying to be as clear as possible, using no other material than what is given in the Qur’an, the sunna, or the *jahilī* tradition, preferring the old to the new, allowing true creativity only to God, and ruling out the possibility of exploring new meanings and vocabulary.¹⁶⁶

Adonis’s atheist streak brings us to another aspect that runs through his work, namely his stance on ethics. Ethics, as it is understood in the ruling static interpretation, is a set of eternal rules based on revelation, used to defend the status quo. This he most emphatically rejects. A moral code should not be imposed on the peo-

¹⁶² Adonis as quoted in Linda Istanbuli, “Miḥyar’s Precarious Journey: Imagining the Intellectual in Modern Syrian Literature,” *Contemporary Levant* 7, no. 1 (2022): 8.

¹⁶³ Needless to say, Adonis here presupposes a very specific conception of religion, as well as of the function of orthodoxy within religion.

¹⁶⁴ Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā’ wa-l-Ittibā’ ‘ind al-‘Arab*, vol. 1, 129–30.

¹⁶⁵ Adonis, “Adonis Interview: I Was Born for Poetry,” YouTube video, min. 29:40, posted by Louisiana Channel (website based at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk, Denmark), 2015, <https://youtu.be/ldLr4M1cP28>

¹⁶⁶ Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā’ wa-l-Ittibā’ ‘ind al-‘Arab*, vol. 1, 107–9.

ple, but arise from man's capacity to reason. As such it can never spring from any religious creed. In recognizably Nietzschean terms, Adonis describes atheism as opening a space for a humanist ethics:

If atheism (*ilhād*¹⁶⁷) is the end of revelation, it is the beginning of the "death" of God, that is, the beginning of nihilism, which is itself the beginning of the overcoming of nihilism. Instead of "Do!" and "Don't!" we get "Reason!" and "Respond!" Hence there is no antecedent command (*amr*) or prohibition (*nahī*): Reason alone commands and prohibits.¹⁶⁸

While commentators on Adonis are not mistaken in attributing an uncompromising secular sensibility to him, we should understand his secular streak in the Adonisian idiolect. What Adonis is against is not religion *per se*, but religion insofar as it quells dynamism. The collectivist impulse of organized religion keeps undermining the value of the individual and his ability to explore. The goal of *The Static*, as he points out in a 2006 lecture that reflects on this work, is to free religion and open up its dynamic potential, not to attack or critique it.¹⁶⁹ Hence, Adonis's stance on religion is not adequately captured by labeling him secular in the liberal sense, namely as someone who believes that state and religion should be separate in order to safeguard personal liberty, the rights of minorities, and the stability of the state. Nor is he a rationalist who believes that religious belief is ultimately false insofar as it contradicts reason. And, even though he acknowledges the role that religion has played in defending class privilege, he does not dread religion solely as an opium of the people. Adonis is anti-religious in a very particular sense: religion should be overcome insofar as it limits the aesthetic horizon. However, to the extent that it helps human creative power unfold, it should be cherished. In another echo of a Nietzschean streak, we hear Adonis exclaim in his groundbreaking volume of poems *Songs of Miḥyār of Damascus* (*Aghānī Miḥyār al-Dimashqī*) the longing for a new God to replace the God of worn-out tradition:

167 Adonis makes this comment in the context of referring to the *ilhād* movement of the Umayyad and early Abbasid ages. This term is currently used to refer to atheism. It bears reminding, however, that a hard "atheist" denial of God was likely not what those associated with this movement had in mind. Rather, they appear to have aspired to a "rationalist rejection of prophecy and revelation" – see Samuli Schielke, "Ch 40: The Islamic World," in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 639. Naturally, such elision between modern concepts of "hard" atheism and older articulations of doubt about the divine that, though certainly radical, were less abrasive than any flat-out denial of God's existence, is not shunned by Adonis.

168 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 130.

169 Adūnis, *Muḥāḍarāt al-Iskandariyya*, 2nd ed. (Damascus: Dār al-Takwīn, 2018), 9.

We pass on without paying heed to this god
And we long for another, for a new Lord.¹⁷⁰

5.3.6 Ethics–aesthetics

Laws, moral codes, and customs, particularly those of a religious sort, are, in Adonis's view, mere instruments to control the behavior of people. This is particularly clear in Islamic law, which he regards as essentially a collection of duties, of dos and don'ts, with a measure of divine endorsement, rather than an effort to investigate the truth.¹⁷¹

The emphasis in Islam on obedience and on following its moral code also affected poetic practice. Since pre-Islamic times, poetry has been used not merely as a means for expression, but as an instrument of power.¹⁷² Poets were considered essential warriors in a war of words between the various Arab tribes. They would defame other tribes or praise the exploits of their own. With the coming of Islam, this role was retained, only now it came to serve the interest of the ruling elite. Hence, under Islam, literature (*adab*) was assigned the role of instructing people on good behavior (*sulūk*).¹⁷³ The value of poetry now lay in the extent to which it expressed the moral tenets of Islam. Poetry became a form of ethics.

This instrumental use of poetry for the inculcation of morals greatly affected poetic standards and practice. Since the goal was to instruct, no ambiguity would be allowed, nor any sense that moral demands may differ in time or according to one's particular situation.¹⁷⁴ Poetry ought to be truthful; it ought to relate directly to what it refers to. Term and referent ought to be united.¹⁷⁵ Here, too, the influence of jurisprudence carried over into literary criticism. Once the poet's role be-

¹⁷⁰ The centrality of this perspective on religion is underscored by Stefan Weidner's adoption of this sentence as the title of his book on religions and poetry in the work of Adonis. For his analysis of this line, see Weidner,und sehnen uns nach einem neuen Gott...: *Poesie und Religion im Werk von Adonis*, 34. I should note here that, whereas Weidner in his German translation translates both "ilāh" in the first line and "rabb" in the second as "God" (*Gott*), I prefer to use the term "Lord," as it is not only closer to the Arabic meaning, but it also conveys the notable difference between the two lines in the original.

¹⁷¹ Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 77–79.

¹⁷² Adonis points out that the meaning of the verbal root K-L-M (ك – ل – م) from which the word for "speech"/"discourse" (*kalam*) is derived is related to injury – see Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 2 45.

¹⁷³ Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 91. In modern Arabic, the term *adab* retains this double meaning of both "good manners" and "literature."

¹⁷⁴ Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 101–2.

¹⁷⁵ Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 103.

comes that of an instructor; his language ought to be clear and unambiguous. Like the jurists who try to determine the meaning of an expression in order to extract a specific ruling, the poet's role was to give a precise description of the world, to write poetry that is unambiguous in its meaning.¹⁷⁶

This instrumental use is, for Adonis, an egregious subversion of poetry. Poetic creation should never be about anything other than the creative act itself. Poetry should concern itself with the aesthetic, not with the ethical. More importantly, the emphasis on ethics obscures a higher value: truth. No law, according to Adonis, is above the truth. Where the two collide, the latter should always prevail. This is a central credo of the dynamic that Adonis finds among its earliest proponents, the Qarmatians,¹⁷⁷ as well as many centuries later in the modernist poetry of Jubrān Khalīl Jubrān's.¹⁷⁸ The law is by definition linked to the ruling interests, and therefore it cannot represent the truth. But if so, then what, according to Adonis, is truth? Where do we find it? Clearly, Adonis thinks that truth can be found in art. The beautiful is the true. This, however, only defers the question. For what is it that links aestheticism to truth?

5.3.7 Inner truth–outer appearance

Adonis does not think of truth as a single, stable entity. He does not want to replace the current truth of the static in Arab society with another, equally static one. Like all good things in life, truth is dynamic. Truth is the daughter of change (*inna al-ḥaqīqa hiyya bint al-mutaḡhayyir*).¹⁷⁹ But if that is the case, how does one find it?

It hardly needs mentioning that what the static regime presents as the truth does not have Adonis's blessing. The truth of the static is "given *a priori* in a text-source which is perfect and definitive," and as such it merely serves to protect the regime by quashing any form of criticism.¹⁸⁰ This would seem to imply that Adonis thinks that truth can only be gained through free and independent thought. To an extent this is true. For example, he admires the rationalist Mu'tazilites for having founded the first rationalist current in Arab thought, one firmly committed to the credo that knowledge based on reason (*ʿaql*) trumps knowledge known

176 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḡhawwil: Baḥṡ fi al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1, 87–88.

177 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḡhawwil: Baḥṡ fi al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1, 125.

178 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḡhawwil: Baḥṡ fi al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 4., 141.

179 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḡhawwil: Baḥṡ fi al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 2., 72.

180 Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 84.

merely through transmission (*naql*). There is, according to them, no truth without reason (*lā ḥaqīqa ilā bi-l-'aql*).¹⁸¹

Clearly, however, Adonis is no ordinary rationalist. After all, the thoroughbred rationalist holds that there is one objective truth about the way the world is, and that this truth can be cognized through the undistorted use of reason. This flies in the face of Adonis's aesthetic conception of knowledge, which is heteronomous, infinite in scope, and irrational. What he respects in the rationalist standpoint is its independence, its foundation on rational criticism, its focus on contextual interpretation rather than blind following. All of these aspects fit with a view of man as an independent being, distinguished by his ability to ask questions.¹⁸² Adonis does not, however, view this critical stance instrumentally, as the necessary requirement for uncovering the true state of the universe.

There is another movement that Adonis identifies with the search for truth. This group, however, did not look for truth in compliance with the Revealed Law, but in dimensions beyond the law that set the rules for our material world of outward appearances. As Adonis's modern-day idol Jubrān Khalīl Jubrān already recognized, the thinkers and artists who most embody this tendency are the Sufis.¹⁸³ Why Sufism in particular? According to the Sufis, or at least Adonis's interpretation of Sufism, truth can only be found in what remains hidden below the surface (*al-bāṭin*). The surface level (*al-zāhir*) is the realm of law (*sharī'a*), whereas *al-bāṭin* is equated with the truth (*al-ḥaqīqa*).¹⁸⁴ What Sufis saw correctly was that "truth does not come from books, or revelation, or laws, or ideas, or science, but from an interior world."¹⁸⁵ It is not that Adonis denies scientific truths. These, however, are not the only truths, nor the most important ones. In his book *Sufism and Surrealism*, a work that largely follows the conclusions reached in *The Static* and uses these two traditions to illustrate his conception of the dynamic, he captures this distinction nicely:

What we call truth does not exist in the world of phenomena apart from in its scientific-conventional form. The truth, on the contrary, is mystery, hidden inside things, in their concealed world. Man is able to reach it only with specific knowledge, which is neither conventional nor 'scientific'. Opposite the visible in the world arises the invisible and opposite the objective in the world arises the subjective.¹⁸⁶

181 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṡ fi al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 125.

182 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṡ fi al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 311–12.

183 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṡ fi al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 4, 163.

184 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṡ fi al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 320.

185 Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, trans. Judith Cumberbatch (Beirut: Saqi, 2013), 12.

186 Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 130.

The kind of truths that Adonis is interested in are not the conventional ones that concern the world of appearances, but the internal ones, the truths of the soul and the imagination. God, according to Sufi teaching, manifests himself in two distinct ways: the outer world of appearances and the inner, which is concealed. "The apparent is clear, rational. The concealed is hidden, heartfelt." Because the latter kind of truth is found in the heart, it requires a different, subjective approach. Thus, Adonis quotes Aḥmad Ibn 'Ajība's "seek after the truth closer to yourself, inside yourself." Instead of asking "How shall I act so that my conduct and my thinking comply with the law?" Adonis lets the poet al-Niffārī ask "Who am I? How shall I know myself and know the truth?"¹⁸⁷

As is the case with the critical stance Adonis finds attractive in the Mu'tazilite doctrine, the goal here is to create space for individual freedom. What renders Sufism even more appealing, is that it goes beyond the bounds of the rational and thereby creates space for free expression and discovery. The Sufi idea of knowledge is the opposite of rational knowledge.¹⁸⁸ Contrary to rationalism, it countenances the infinity of Creation. Because reason cannot do this, it is bound to distort the true nature of reality. Reason puts a veil over experience.¹⁸⁹ It renders everything in a similar light. Sufis, on the contrary, recognize that what we cognize is but a reflection of the truth that reason covers up. In order to get past this veil "one must go beyond reason, suspend its activity and free the activity of the heart" (*la budd min tajāwuz al-'aql wa-ta'īl fā'iliyyatih, wa-ītlāq fā'iliyyat al-qalb*).¹⁹⁰ It is through the heart that one can access truth. Truth arises in a particular relationship between the self and the object.¹⁹¹ Once man learns to listen to his heart, "he sees the truth (God, meaning) in all that is revealed and worships it in every image." Moreover, what this requires is not logical thinking, but imagination, "because Truth is the first and the last, the manifest and the concealed, and imagination is its supreme image." Through his imagination, the Sufi becomes not the passive recipient, but the source of knowledge.¹⁹²

Typical of this mystical worldview is a preference for poetic expression over philosophical treatise. The truths that mystical poets want to express do not suit ordinary language. They require complete freedom, innovation, a break with tradition. It is no coincidence that Sufi poets did a lot of experimenting with new poetic forms, including early forms of the kind of prose poetry championed by Ado-

187 Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 63.

188 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 2, 100.

189 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 2, 103.

190 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 2, 103.

191 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 2, 140.

192 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 2, 108.

nis and his fellow members of the Shi'r group. Their poetry achieves a unity between form and content that is absent from "static" poetry, which concentrates on molding the formal appearance of a poem in accordance with traditional standards. Sufi poets reject the "static" idea that words have a set meaning, fixed for eternity. They instead try to uncover new meanings in an infinite search for truth in an everchanging world. Where the role of the static poet is that of an instructor, someone who inculcates morals, the Sufi poet is a discoverer, a creator of a new morality.¹⁹³

5.3.8 Individual-group

At this point, having discussed a number of antitheses, we can start to see how they feed into each other. The search for truth leads dynamic poets to look for new meanings, because they conceive of truth as infinite and changing. This requires a stance of absolute freedom. Dynamic poets therefore go against laws, against morality. As part of this quest for freedom they adopt a different temporal perspective, one that does not sanctify the past, but rather looks to the present moment or to the future. In short, the dynamic presented by Adonis gives us an entire worldview in which epistemological, ontological, and ethical notions are woven together and mutually support each other. The central element in this complex structure is the individual.

In Adonis's view, the aim of the *static* and its focus on collective identity is to rein in and control the individual. In order to preserve the unity of the community, the individual is kept from going against its customs. He is expected to protect his own culture, not to criticize it.¹⁹⁴ Adonis reiterates the centrality of this characteristic communal sentiment in Arab culture throughout his life. For example, in his presentation of early Islamic history, pre-Islamic society was turned from a heterogeneous society into one that is religiously, racially, and politically homogenous, and one in which the individual dissenting opinion was silenced by force. The result, as Adonis phrases it in a conversation with his daughter Nina, is that "the essential in Islam, on the level of the social and of thought, is the *Umma* and not the individ-

¹⁹³ In light of this, it is not surprising that Sufi elements are rife in Adonis's poetry. His turn away from the more secular idea of myth and "towards Islamic and Sufi symbolism" in his poetic project is placed by one critic around 1968, with the publication of *al-Masrah wa-l-Marāyā* ("Stage and Mirrors") – see Jabrā Ibrāhīm Jabrā, as quoted in Mersal, "Reading the Qur'ān in the Poetry of Adonis," 2.

¹⁹⁴ Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 4, 126.

ual.”¹⁹⁵ The individual in Islamic society only comes into his own within the community. His problems are solved through the community. Freedom is achieved for the community, not for the individual.¹⁹⁶

This early communal bias soon became entrenched in authoritative interpretations of Islam. For instance, the emphasis in Islam on performing one's religious duties – obligatory for every Muslim (*farḍ 'aynī*) – over one's political and social duties – one ought to do them insofar as one is able to (*farḍ kafa'ī*) – forms the basis for a society in which individuals do not engage in politics. They rather leave this to the community as a whole, in particular to its leaders. This ultimately divides Muslim society into a class of religious leaders and the rabble they command. The leader becomes the safeguard of religious laws and hence of the well-being of the community.¹⁹⁷

The obedience to the leader is strengthened by intellectual developments in all fields of Arab-Islamic culture that stifle individual expression. In theology, the idea of complete subservience to the ruler (*ṭā'a*) was pushed by noted early scholars like Ibn Ḥanbal and al-Muḥāsibī,¹⁹⁸ and by influential scholars like al-Ṭabarī.¹⁹⁹ They would argue that the sunna – that is, the deeds and sayings of Muḥammad – is so much entwined with the need to keep together the *umma* – that is, the Muslim community – that in order to follow the sunna, as every good Muslim should, he ought also to follow the customs of the community. “This,” Adonis notes, “is how the concept of obedience (*ṭā'a*) is produced.”²⁰⁰ This notion was in turn supported by the ontological concept of acquisition (*kasb*), which attributed all actions to God. In such a world, as noted by al-Ghazālī, the effect of one's actions are not relevant, since that is ultimately decided by God anyway. What is important is one's own comportment and whether you uphold His laws. Human action can, in this view, only be a measure for rewarding the individual's obedience to God and punishing

195 Esber, *Conversations avec mon père*, 179 (the translation from French is my own).

196 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 137.

197 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 78. This situation is nicely illustrated by a line from his volume *A Time Between Ashes and Roses (Waqt bayn al-Rumād wa-l-Ward)*, in which the power and agency on the part of the religious leader is contrasted with the weakness of the people:

His Majesty, the Caliph issues a law made of water his people are broth, mud,
and wan, wilted swords. His majesty's word is a crown studded with human eyes.
Adūnis, *Adonis: Selected Poems*, trans. Khaled Mattawa [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010], 116.)

198 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 2, 28–29.

199 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 2, 146.

200 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 2, 146.

his recalcitrance.²⁰¹ In Islamic law, the independence of the individual was further marginalized by scholars like al-Shāfiʿī, when he pronounced the consensus (*ijmāʿ*) of the community one of the four sources of Islamic law.²⁰² Al-Shāfiʿī concludes, moreover, that since the first and most important knowledge is contained in revelation, and revelation is addressed to the community, the opinion of the group cannot ever be overruled by that of the individual.²⁰³

Likewise, in poetry, the importance of the individual was reduced, as poetry became a tool of political power.²⁰⁴ Following the example of pre-Islamic poetry, later poets would use their art to praise their own tribe and criticize the other.²⁰⁵ In this war of words, the individual feelings of the artist or his particular view of the world are of no importance. In addition, poetry is used to instruct the populace in their mores. Ethics and aesthetics were merged into a single discipline,²⁰⁶ while poetry, under the sway of religious and political interests, became a vehicle for expressing religious truths and keeping people in line. This political exploitation required a form of poetry that was clear, unambiguous, and committed to repeating the same truths *ad nauseam*. Poets were expected to stay true to customary rules of aesthetic expression and describe things as they are objectively, not as they are perceived by the poet individually. Again, the inner life of the poet is relegated to a peripheral status.²⁰⁷ The upshot is that in Islam the poet gives expression only to the tastes and views of the majority.²⁰⁸ “In Islam,” Adonis writes,

201 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṡ fi al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1., 79.

202 This principle was acknowledged as one of the four sources of jurisprudence. It states that, if there is consensus among the members of the Islamic community on a particular legal judgment, it has the force of law. It is partly rooted in a hadith that states that the community would never agree on what is false (*dalāla*). In practice, this principle has been used to establish the force of rules within a particular school of law. Although the principle has little practical relevance for creating new legal rules, the consensus of the scholars who belong to each of the schools of Islamic law does serve as a means for giving particular rulings that are authoritative within these schools a stamp of approval – see Knut Vikør, *Between God and the Sultan: A History of Islamic Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 88. Adonis’s criticism of this principle appears to be somewhat harsh, considering the wide range of ambiguity and doubt that is central to the Islamic law tradition – see Intisar A. Rabb, *Doubt in Islamic Law: A History of Legal Maxims, Interpretation, and Islamic Criminal Law*, Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), and Thomas Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity: An Alternative History of Islam*, trans. Heinrich Biesterfeldt and Tricia Tunstall (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 94–121.

203 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṡ fi al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 2, 24.

204 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṡ fi al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1, 258.

205 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṡ fi al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 2, 45.

206 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṡ fi al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1, 102.

207 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṡ fi al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1, 88–89.

208 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṡ fi al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1, 102.

“the poet is not an individual, but part of the Islamic group. It is not he who thinks, but the group, not he who writes, but the form-language.”²⁰⁹

The *dynamic* offers an antidote to oppression of the majority. In Sufism, in the revolutionary movements, in Mu'tazilism, Adonis finds a kernel of resistance based on the conviction that the individual should be protected. The celebration of reason (*'aql*) that he finds in this theological school, the injunction to think for yourself instead of copying what has been passed down (*naql*), represents a refutation of the equalizing power of society. Equally, the Sufi disposition to look for meaning inside oneself, to consider the individual the source of truth, is founded on a rejection of the generalizing norms of society. Sufism offers an antidote to Salafi communalism.²¹⁰ What's more, the Sufi adds to a mystical dimension that appeals to Adonis's aestheticism. The Sufi presents the self, not merely as a free individual, but as the conduit for human contact with the ineffable, the infinite, and therefore with the only true source of artistic creativity.

This preference reveals something crucial about Adonis's worldview. Due to his advocacy for secularism and freedom of expression, Adonis is often presented as a run-of-the-mill liberal, “an outspoken champion of secular democracy”²¹¹ whose work is “suffused by the worlds of freedom, the division of powers, the rights of women, and the dialogue between East and West.”²¹² Although it would be a mistake to deny his liberal proclivities altogether, they take on a different significance in the context of his overall philosophy of the static and the dynamic. What truly matters to Adonis, the kind of intrinsically valuable end that moves his philosophical project, is not an ideal of liberal democracy, of moving “within what is known and regulated.”²¹³ Freedom, for him, remains subservient to the interests of the *dynamic*. More than a social democrat, Adonis is something of a Romantic revolutionary. He puts much stock in the Bohemian credo that great art is born out of struggle and hardship, while it languishes in the arid plains of bourgeois comfort. The fight for freedom is meaningful because it leads to the creation of great works of art. Freedom is “‘the essence of man,’ because it enables him to pursue the deepest [parts] of the human self.”²¹⁴

209 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 4, 212.

210 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 137.

211 Adam Shatz, “An Arab Poet Who Dares to Differ,” *New York Times*, July 13, 2002, <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/07/13/books/an-arab-poet-who-dares-to-differ.html>.

212 “Adonis mit Goethe-Preis ausgezeichnet,” *Frankfurter Rundschau*, August 28, 2011, <https://www.fr.de/frankfurt/cdu-org26591/adonis-goethe-preis-ausgezeichnet11424346.html>.

213 Adūnis, “Preface,” *Mawāqif* 1, no. 1 (1968): 4.

214 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 311.

5.4 Progress, time, and authenticity in Adonis's *The Static and the Dynamic*

In light of the many conceptual pairs, like past–present, authenticity–modernity, or East–West, that make up the structure of Adonis's argument in *The Static*, it is appealing to understand him as an exponent of the standard narrative. This impression is strengthened upon reading the introduction to the first edition of *The Static*, in which Adonis rehearses a number of familiar tropes from the *turāth* debate with regard to time: Islam has no historical awareness, or “historical time”; in Islam the passage of time is conceptualized as the falling away from the original root (*aṣl*); the orientation is towards the past, rather than to the future, leading to a conception of science as regurgitation of revealed knowledge without ingenuity (*ibtikār*); time is not continuous, but carved up into moments without any necessary causal connections between them, thus leaving the creation of each moment in God's hands; in short, the static portrays man in a constant state of falling away from God, and “the only thing that bestows on him plenty of value or meaning is his waiting to return to the root (*aṣl*) and the bridge that takes him there.”²¹⁵ The concept of modernity (*ḥadātha*) entails a move away from the root,²¹⁶ and the only acceptable poetic modernity would be of the kind that conforms to the standards of yore.²¹⁷ There can be no progress (*taqaddum*), because the message of Islam, being the final revelation, is the most perfect religion, making the Islamic *umma* the most perfect society imaginable.²¹⁸ “Religion is the domain of progress, there is no progress after it.”²¹⁹ As a result, Islamic society is marked by acquiescence and traditionalism, by an idea of time as something to be overcome or cancel out, because it threatens man with moral-religious decline.²²⁰

By contrast, the dynamic embraces time as a necessary condition for progress. Whereas religion is ahistorical in the sense that it opposes any notion of progress or regression, the dynamic celebrates it. Its critical frame of mind presents an atheist challenge to religion, and opens up a worldview that does not abide by what went before, but imagines man as a free, rational, creative being whose original nature (*ṭabīʿatīh al-aṣliyya*) is to believe in his own capabilities. Atheism is therefore the first condition, not just for critical thought, but for all progress (*al-*

215 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1, 72.

216 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1, 73.

217 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1, 100.

218 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1, 95.

219 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1, 134.

220 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1, 157.

sharṭ al-awwal li-kull taqaddum),²²¹ because it lays the groundwork for a society ruled by freedom and reason under the aegis of mankind itself.²²² From the perspective of the dynamic, mankind becomes the goal of history and the end that is always in the future.²²³ The dynamic future is always qualitatively different from the past.²²⁴

Up to this point, it is still possible to read Adonis as an adherent to the strictures of the standard narrative. He perhaps strikes a somewhat rebellious figure compared to the professional academics who dominate much of the debate, but as someone who nonetheless respects the division of the *turāth* discourse into factions of traditionalists, modernists and, sometimes, of compatibilists. His advocacy for progress, secularism, rationalism, etc. would land him squarely on the side of those who reject *turāth* as mere deadweight holding Arab society down. Indeed, when he comes to speak directly about *turāth* he appears to say as much. Creativity, according to him, is its own root (*aṣl*), and therefore does not need anything other than itself.²²⁵ *Turāth*, it seems, is redundant. The artist may use it to create something new, but he does not need it. A nation (*umma*) may have the most magnificent heritage without being able to change (*yuḥawwil*) and avert its decline (*in-ḥiṭāt*), whereas another society may have no heritage at all and quickly develop it to the level of superior nations (*umam*).²²⁶

With terms like heritage (*turāth*), progress (*taqaddum*), ingenuity (*ibtikār*), modernity (*ḥadātha*), decadence (*inḥiṭāt*), root (*aṣl*), nation (*umma*), and many more tropes familiar from contemporary Arab thought, Adonis takes his position in the *turāth* debate. According to the parameters commonly applied to this debate, Adonis may be portrayed as someone who agitates “against *turāth*.” In this concluding analysis, however, I want to suggest a different reading. This reading is based on two related aspects of his thinking: His ideal of time as being “creative” and “vertical,” and his ideal of the authentic artist as an individual creative genius. In a nutshell, Adonis conceives of the poet as someone who explores new ground through language, by redefining meanings through subtle references, metaphor, and experimental poetic constructions. This enables the poet to change the way his audience looks at the world.

Interestingly, we may read Adonis’s theoretical treatment as just such a poetic act. In his portrayal of *turāth*, he redefines time and moves away from a temporal

221 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʾ wa-l-Ittibāʾ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1, 129–30.

222 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʾ wa-l-Ittibāʾ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1, 133.

223 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʾ wa-l-Ittibāʾ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1, 157.

224 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʾ wa-l-Ittibāʾ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1, 158.

225 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʾ wa-l-Ittibāʾ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1, 144.

226 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʾ wa-l-Ittibāʾ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1, 146.

perspective that looks to the past, or one that annuls time in order to preserve the actuality of revelation, or even one that depicts time chronologically – as is the case in progressivist conceptions of time. Instead, Adonis adopts the role of the poet who changes the manner in which the pivotal diachronic opposition between modernity (*ḥadātha*) and authenticity (*aṣāla*) is understood. If we approach Adonis in this way, it upsets standard readings of *The Static* according to which Adonis should be understood as an anti-traditional radical socialist or a liberal firebrand. These labels assume that Adonis abides by the rules laid down by the dominant understanding of the *turāth* debate. They do not fit with someone who wants to do away with these parameters.

This is not to say that Adonis is not radical in some of his critique, or that he does not display some liberal tendencies. The point is that the ontology that underlies it, his view of the individual, of society, of time, of what is true and beautiful and how man can attain it, is not that of a Marxist revolutionary or of a run-of-the-mill liberal like Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd. He may champion freedom and individualism, but he does not do so for the same reasons. His goal is creation. His ethics are Nietzschean rather than liberal. They foreground the positive freedom of the individual genius to express himself, instead of the negative freedom from intrusion. Adonis's ethics are, ultimately, a radical ethics of personal authenticity.

5.4.1 Redefining time

The introduction to the first publication of *The Static* starts out with a discussion of time. Islam, Adonis states, represents both a beginning and an end. It is the end of the *jāhili* era and the beginning of a new Islamic order. As such, “revelation is, at one moment, the founding of time and of history.”²²⁷ What this means, from a static, Islamic perspective, is not that with Muhammad's prophecy we have the beginning of temporal progression as such. Rather, because this revelation presents itself as the final word of God, harboring all truth, it is valid for all time “yesterday, today, and tomorrow.” From this temporal perspective, the value of the present and the future lies in remembering and harking back to the past in which the Truth was revealed. Revelation annuls historical time, it does not have any use for it, because it claims to be eternally present (*abadiyyat al-ḥudūr*). It thus contradicts the ancient Greek conception of time as “Chronos,” the mythical figure who represents time as a change, as the constant making

227 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1, 68.

and unmaking of things in the world.²²⁸ From the perspective of the individual, the static time of revelation represents degeneration, as man falls away from the pure origin of God's Word. The time of revelation robs man of his self and his life (*yas-lub al-insān dhātah wa-ḥayātah*).²²⁹ The dynamic view of time, as recalled earlier, is oriented towards the future and acknowledges the possibility of change and progress.

This orientation to the future should not, however, be thought of in positivistic terms as a teleological progression. What is meant is not the kind of materialistic scientific development of society advocated by someone like Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd or by Adonis's erstwhile inspiration Antūn Sa'āda. When these reformers talk about time they refer to everyday "chronological time," the field of historical change that forms the backdrop for articulating their ideals of national progress. Even though Adonis may have been more receptive to this positivistic progressivist idea when he was young, he assures us that at a later age came to reject it. Looking back on his younger self he writes that:

I gradually became aware that the essence of progress is human, that it is qualitative not quantitative and that the Westerner who lives surrounded by computers and exposed to the latest in space travel is not necessarily more advanced in any profound sense than the Arab peasant living among trees and cattle.²³⁰

Instead of a "quantitative" notion, Adonis espouses "qualitative" progress, focused on man himself, as "both the pivot and the goal."²³¹ This understanding of progress requires a different conception of time, one that is not chronological, but rather "dynamic," or as Adonis at one point refers to it, "the time of creativity."²³² Chronological time may be conceptualized along a horizontal axis on which successive events are plotted, a container in which man moves from past to future, through the present. Dynamic time, in contrast, is like a vertical axis that intersects with chronological time. It represents not the progression of time, but its deepening; a kind of metaphysical nexus beyond time that harbors the free play of human creativity and artistic development.²³³ In an interview given in 1987, he connects this

228 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 69.

229 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 72.

230 Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 96.

231 Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 96. The connection between dynamism and qualitative temporal difference is already mentioned in *The Static*: see Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 158.

232 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 147.

233 In the first volume of *The Static*, Adonis illustrates the difference between chronological, quantitative time and qualitative time, in an interpretation of the diwan of Jamīl Buthayna. Adonis

point about vertical time with yet another conception, namely circular time. Here, creative time is portrayed as “vertical time and therefore it is circular.”²³⁴ It is circular in the sense that it constantly renews without working towards a fixed end, “it is an explosive time that comes and goes and changes and renews.”²³⁵

Although Adonis often mentions the importance of looking to the future, his orientation is not meant in any utopian sense. The future is an infinite horizon for the exploration of new possibilities through art and creative thinking. Poetry, according to Adonis, is always changing. It knows no definite end, only a constant becoming.²³⁶ Visions of utopia may prove their worth as tools to move the masses. They are never fully realizable, however, as each era will see a different class rise to power and adopt a tendency to promote the static. What's more, were a utopian state to be realized it would, following Adonis's conception, effectively end the need for artistic creation. After all, true art is the product of the dialectic between the static and the dynamic. It flows from an attempt to change an imperfect world. When everything is hunky-dory there is no impetus for creativity.

In the introduction to *The Static*, Adonis describes the static temporal perspective not just in terms of a longing for the past, but also as an absence of temporal progression. In terms of revelational or prophetic time, past, present, and future are the same, as they are guarded over by the unchanging principles set down at the time of revelation. The sense of timelessness also returns in the dynamic antithesis, but with a different intention. Creativity, Adonis says, is without time.²³⁷ Just as the waves move across the sea independently, the works that constitute the highlights of Arabic poetic culture are singular acts of creation, the beauty of which resides in this creative act itself, not in how they relate to what came before them. This is not to say, of course, that poetry ought not refer to anything outside itself. That would render it entirely meaningless. Rather, a poet uses the resources found in his own culture and in the culture of others to create things that are entirely new. This act is always an independent feat, a development without precedent, linked to other historical outbursts of creativity only in the degree

differentiates between the regular, everyday, chronological time of Jamīl. Buthayna, on the other hand, represents a timeless future promise, an infinitely radiating presence. As Adonis puts it: “The value of time is not in its horizontal-quantitative extension, but in its depth and verticality. Therefore the moment may be more valuable and precious than the total extent of time, if it is spent in the presence of the loved one, while it lasts longer than months if it is spent in her absence” (Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 290–91).

234 As quoted in Maryam Jabr Farīḥāt, “al-Zaman fī Shī'r Adūnīs Qaṣīdat 'al-Waqt' Namūdḥaj,” *al-Majalla al-'Arabiyya li-l-Ādāb* 3, no. 1 (2006): 55.

235 Jabr i, “al-Zaman fī Shī'r Adūnīs Qaṣīdat 'al-Waqt' Namūdḥaj,” 55.

236 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 96.

237 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 145.

of its uniqueness. Creativity punctures time. It is a constant presence.²³⁸ Poets like Imrū' al-Qays, Abū Nuwās, and Abū Tammām may be judged ancient in comparison to Jubrān Khalīl Jubrān “when judged in terms of chronological time,” but judged in terms of the temporal perspective put forward by Adonis, they are contemporaneous.²³⁹

This conception of time shares some features with Sufi mystical writings on the concept of a now-time, or “*al-waqt*.” Non-linear and in particular a point-like experience of time is a common theme in mystical writings, and Sufis are sometimes referred to as “the son of the ‘now-time’” (*ibn al-waqt*). The idea is that the experience of the Divine that overwhelms the mystic brings him into a state beyond the spatio-temporal confines of everyday experience, putting him alone before God.²⁴⁰ Interestingly, this understanding of time has also been brought up in interpretations of Adonis’s poetry. Stefan Weidner, for instance, proposes it as one way of understanding the title of one of Adonis’s most celebrated poems titled “*al-Waqt*.” With the recurring opening lines “Embracing the ear of (now-)time as my head is a tower of fire” (*Ḥādinan sunbulat al-waqtī wa ra’sī burju nārīn*), the secularized Sufi poet commits himself to the moment without any care for past, present, and future, allowing the Divine to talk through him.²⁴¹

Another temporal aspect that Weidner finds in this poem is that of the Apocalypse, in the sense of a radical event, a revolution of sorts in which something radically new begins and there is a complete break with the old order. This apocalyptic vision is conjured up through the images of death and destruction, which recall the time and place in which Adonis wrote this poem – in Beirut at the height of the Lebanese Civil War in 1982.²⁴² It is a vision that is strengthened, moreover, with the presentation of the poet as the harbinger of a new time – for example, in having the narrator exclaim that he is the alpha and omega of creation (line 203).²⁴³ Such a revolutionary or apocalyptic tendency is of course also found in

238 Adūnis, *Fātiḥa li-Nihāyat al-Qarn*, 264.

239 Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 98.

240 Giorgio Agamben refers to this as the Gnostic idea of time; see Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: Essays on The Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London/New York, 1993), 100–1.

241 Weidner,und sehnen uns nach einem neuen Gott...: *Poesie und Religion im Werk von Adonis*, 105. The English translation of this line is my own. Mona Takieddine Amyuni’s English translation offers the following alternative: “Carrying the seeds of time my head a tower of fire” – see Mona Takieddine Amyuni, “Adonis’s ‘Time’ Poem: Translation and Analysis,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 21, no. 2 (1990): 173. My translation of “*waqt*” as “(now-)time” is meant to stress Weidner’s interpretation of this particular term as referring to the current moment.

242 For Weidner’s analysis of “*al-Waqt*” as an apocalyptic text, see Weidner,und sehnen uns nach einem neuen Gott...: *Poesie und Religion im Werk von Adonis*, 107–10.

243 See section 5.4.4. for an elaboration on this theme.

Adonis's theoretical texts, that is, the opposition between (static) order and (dynamic) revolution. Moreover, it is intimately related to Adonis's focus on creating new beginnings as a counterweight to the "static" stress on sticking to tradition.²⁴⁴

Connecting to both the now-time and the revolutionary conception of time, Adonis also discusses time in terms of the individual. Writing about Abū Nuwās, he says that this revolutionary poet "rid himself of the burden of inherited time by creating his own personal time, the new."²⁴⁵ In a more general (and practical) sense, Adonis appears to view the possibility of creating one's private time (*zamānuh al-khāṣṣ*) as a precondition for living one's own life. The kind of chronological, objective time outside of us he associates with rigid determinism (*al-zaman al-qadar/al-khārijī*). By disconnecting from this impersonal time and creating his own time frame, man can create a space of freedom and a choice to overcome hardship, and fight for a better existence. Personal time is a prerequisite for the human will (*irādat al-insān*).²⁴⁶

This deeply personal conception of time is also reflected in Adonis's poetry. As Sūzān 'Abd al-Majīd al-Muḥammad concludes in her analysis of time in the poetry of Adonis, one of the central features of his time conception is its connection to the human.²⁴⁷ It is part of man's creative power that he is able to shape time according to his own judgment. A good example of this is a collection of four poems (not discussed by 'Abd al-Majīd al-Muḥammad) titled *Mufrad bi-Ṣiḡhat al-Jam'* (*Singular in the Plural Tense*). These poems were written around the time that Adonis was working on *The Static*, and contain an abundance of temporal references. Adonis starts the first poem titled "Creation" ("Takwīn") by painting a picture of an almost divine act of creation, not by God, but by a figure called 'Alī (Adonis's given name). Accompanied by the voices that will recur throughout these poems, namely of Shams the court jester (*Shams al-bahlūl*), a notebook of messages (*daftar akhbār*), and a secret history of death (*tārīkh sirrī li-l-mawt*), the 'Alī figure is presented as giving "time to what comes before time (*al-waqt*)/to what is without time."²⁴⁸ What follows is a description of a beginning in which the "accident becomes substance"

244 The centrality of the idea of a beginning to Adonis's outlook is also underscored by Robyn Creswell's use of a line from Adonis as the title of his book on modernism in the Beirut literary scene (in which Adonis plays the pivotal role); see Creswell, *City of Beginnings*. For an interesting discussion by Adonis of the relationship between the concepts of "beginning" (*bidāya*) and "tradition" (*taqlīd*), as well as the need for Arabs to critically reconceptualize them, see Adūnīs, *Mūsīqā al-Ḥūt al-Azraq: al-Huwiyya, al-Kitāba, al-'Unf* (Damascus: Dār al-Takwīn, 2018), 13–19.

245 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 2, 122.

246 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 4, 240.

247 Sūzān 'Abd al-Majīd al-Muḥammad, *Mafhūm al-Zaman fī Shi'r Adūnīs* (Beirut: Dār al-Farābī, 2019), 229.

248 Adūnīs, *Mufrad bi-Ṣiḡhat al-Jam'*, Final edition (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1988), 9.

(*yujawhiru al-‘āriḍ*) and of the fine dust that was there at the beginning (of time?) in which forms and images open up. In a true poetic whirlwind, this act of creation is then woven into a story that links two central themes in Adonis’s poetry: The abstract concept of writing and language, and the concrete presence and interactions of human bodies.²⁴⁹

These various perspectives on time obviously relate to Adonis’s personal preoccupations – creativity, discovery, individualism. They are also linked, however, in their rejection of the accepted, chronological notion of time. Adonis wants to move away from a positivistic perspective on time as an empty vessel in which events are neatly ordered according to what happened earlier or later. This view of time may be helpful in some cases, but it would be a mistake to apply it to all spheres of human experience. Chronological time stays within the realm of the finite and rational; it is the time of the collective, not of the individual; it kills man’s ability to think in new ways, to explore new dimensions. In other words, the chronological view of time prepares the way for the kind of historical, traditional mindset that he associates with the static.

This rejection of chronological time is significant within the context of the *turāth* debate, precisely because its discursive structure has been determined by the two poles of chronological time. I argued at the outset that since the structure of the standard narrative depends on a particular conception of time, any attempt to challenge this status quo would likely involve a reappraisal of its temporal underpinnings. This is effectively what Adonis does. Rather than take for granted that one can either look to the past for authenticity or to the future in order to be(become) modern, Adonis explores the possibility of changing the meaning of these opposite poles by looking at time in a different light. This structural change is indeed evident in his redefinition of these two extremes, authenticity and modernity, so that they eventually come to refer to the same thing: the *dynamic*.

²⁴⁹ The centrality of these themes is noted by Iman Mersal – see Mersal, “Reading the Qur’ān in the Poetry of Adonis,” 6. Examples of different Arabic terms used in *Mufrad bi-Ṣiḡhat al-Jam’* to designate conceptions of time besides *al-waqt* (perhaps best translated as “now-time”) are: beginning (*bad’*, p. 10), the time of fate (*dahr*, p. 15), historical time (*zaman*, p. 25), history (*tārīkh* – the title of the second poem, p. 39), ages (*‘uṣūr*, p. 47), times (*azmina*, p. 47), and hours (*sā‘at*, p. 56). Most of these are also mentioned in the poem “al-Waqt.” For a description of their precise meaning, see Weidner,und sehnen uns nach einem neuen Gott...: *Poesie und Religion im Werk von Adonis*, 101–3. While a detailed analysis of *Singular in the Plural Tense*, with its many references to time using a variety of Arabic terms, would certainly be a worthwhile project, this is not the occasion for it. It suffices here to point to how Adonis’s theoretical writings are reflected in his poetry, in particular his use of time as a dimension for personal human creation.

5.4.2 Redefining modernity

In the *turāth* debate, modernity is ordinarily linked to concepts like renewal (*taj-dīd*) and contemporaneity (*mu'āsara*). Modernity tends to be geographically and culturally located in the West, which is seen as the fount of modern thought, institutions, and technologies. Opposed to this conception of modernity we find authenticity (*aṣāla*) and tradition (*taqlīd*), both of which are usually associated with the East, without further ado. Adonis wants to convince his readers that this opposition is mistaken, that modernity is an integral part of Arab culture from even before the advent of Islam, that it is part of this tradition, rather than being opposed to it. First of all, he notes that the word for modernity, *ḥadātha*, is derived from the trilateral root Ḥ-D-TH (ح - د - ث). In classical Arabic this word came to be associated with things that are new or innovative. Analogous to the notion of *bid'a* – a term used to refer to heretical innovation – the predominantly static Arab culture came to associate words derived from this root negatively with whatever is inconsistent with Muslim doctrine as contained in the sunna and the Qur'an.²⁵⁰ In contrast to its low opinion of whatever was newly created (*al-muḥdath*), that which had precedent – the old (*al-qadīm*) – became a term of praise, equal to the religious term *maḥmūd*.²⁵¹ The old, moreover, was associated with the root (*wa-l-qadīm idhan huwwa al-aṣl*), along the lines of the tree model developed earlier by the Islamic jurists.²⁵² Adonis illustrates this contrast by describing at length debates between proponents and critics of *muḥdath* poetry. In short, for Adonis the antithesis of *qadīm–muḥdath* represents one instantiation of the general and ongoing dialectical opposition between conformity (*ittibā'*) and creativity (*ibdā'*) mentioned in the subtitle of *The Static*.²⁵³

By positioning the debate over *al-muḥdath* in the past, Adonis is able to draw the discussions over the new and the old out of the dominant chronological perspective. *Iḥdāth* (the act of creating *al-muḥdath*) now comes to stand for the timeless act of creation. Consequently, the more general notion of modernity takes on atemporal, universal meanings, such as saying what has never been said before, accepting the unlimited nature of knowledge,²⁵⁴ or any radical break with conven-

250 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 2, 145.

251 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 109.

252 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 2, 141.

253 This is obviously from the title of the section in which these debates are discussed: "The Dialectic between *Ittibā'* and *Ibdā'* or *Qadīm* and *Muḥdath*" – see Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 137.

254 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 17.

tion.²⁵⁵ Modern is whatever expresses something that has not been said before, what is unknown (*majhūl*).²⁵⁶ Adonis even goes so far as to present the Qur'an, with its innovative style and revolutionary content, as the embodiment of modernity.²⁵⁷

Not only does this redefinition of modernity infuse the Arab past with modernity, it also undermines the superficial claims that modernists have laid on modernity. Modernist poets like to claim that "modern" is what is different from what came before, that it is contemporary, Western, written in a modern style, or referring to modern content.²⁵⁸ All of these criteria are, in the end, rooted in a chronological conception of time. They judge modernity in terms of something that happened before or after. Yet, to grasp the essence of modernity, we need to get rid of precisely this temporal framework and think of modernity as being of a different temporal kind. As Adonis phrases it:

It became clear to me that modernity was both of time and outside of time: of time because it is rooted in the movement of history, in the creativity of humanity, coexisting with man's striving to go beyond the limitations which surround him; and outside time because it is a vision which includes in it all times and cannot only be recorded as a chronological event: it cuts vertically through time and its horizontal progress is no more than the surface representation of a deep internal movement.²⁵⁹

The claims about modernity that Adonis views as mistaken point to another salient feature of contemporary *turāth* discourse. There, the temporal opposition between authentic and modern has become entwined with the geographical division between East and West. The East is portrayed as traditional and authentic, whereas the West represents the modern. As a result, ever since the early days of the *nahḍa*, the Arabs have been under the impression that the modern (*al-ḥadīth*) was by definition something particular to non-Arabs that they needed to import. They thus came to regard themselves as conflicted between the images of the West and the foundations of their own culture.

If, as Adonis argues, modernity is assimilated to the dynamic, if it is "a climate of universal forms and ideas and not a state specific to one people,"²⁶⁰ then this entire problematic rests on a mistake, for in that case, there is nothing inherently Western about it. This is not to say that the West plays no role in Adonis's concep-

255 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 4, 141.

256 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 1, 17.

257 Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 49.

258 Adūnis, *Fātiḥa li-Nihāyat al-Qarn*, 263–66.

259 Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 99–100.

260 Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 92.

tion of what is modern. As he himself admits, "I find no paradox in declaring that it was recent Western modernity which led me to discover our own older modernity."²⁶¹ Yet, he is convinced that Western modernity was only a midwife. These authors helped him see the modernity contained in his own culture, they did not put it there.

In sum, Adonis's redefinition of modernity shows us how he tries to destabilize the entire *turāth* problematic by focusing on the temporal perspective underlying it. The debates between proponents of authenticity and of modernity essentially turn on the question of whether we ought to move forward or claw our way backwards within a successive chronologically ordered time frame. By taking modernity out of the sphere of chronological time, he prevents it from being conceptually opposed to authenticity or tradition. Moreover, this intervention in the temporal perspective on *turāth* allows him to challenge the geographical divide that separates an authentic East from a modern West.

5.4.3 Redefining authenticity

The redefinition of *ḥadātha* naturally influences Adonis's understanding of its supposed opposite: authenticity (*aṣāla*). In taking up the latter's redefinition, he proceeds much in the same manner as with modernity. As noted earlier, the word for authenticity, *aṣāla*, is derived from the word for root, *aṣl*. This semantic link to a tree's root, of course, jibes with Adonis's depiction of the static structure of Arab thought in the form of a tree. The quest for authenticity is central to modern Arab discourse, because it mirrors the quest to relate every part of culture back to the trunk of the Arab-Islamic tree. When Adonis finds that the *nahḍa* defined its central problematic as the quest for *aṣāla*, he presents this as nothing more than the logical extension of an age-old trope. The root, for the early *nahḍa* thinkers, was to be found in what stems originally (*aṣliyyan*) from the Arab personality (*al-shakhṣiyya al-ʿarabiyya*). To be authentic therefore meant a return to one's roots. The *nahḍa* project's fundamental aim was that of "being rooted in and issuing from the root."²⁶² Therefore, their efforts were focused on rehearsing and reaffirming old ideas and forms of expression.

Significantly, this meaning is merely the one assigned to authenticity by those in power. Adonis's reply to this ideological use of authenticity is to articulate an alternative meaning of this term (*fa-min al-mumkin an nustakhdim hadhih al-lafẓa*,

²⁶¹ Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 81.

²⁶² Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 2, 125.

wa-nu'tiha dalāla jadīda). Instead of referring to cultural roots, authenticity ought to refer to the uniqueness and individuality of the creative experience (*fudhūd-hiyyat al-tajriba al-ibdā'iyya wa-farādatih*).²⁶³ When Adonis calls a poem *authentic*, he does not mean that it conforms to historical standards, but that it breaks with the past, that it is oriented towards the future, that it is its own root (*annahā aṣl dhātihā*). With this, he does not mean to imply that the poem in question is entirely free from any cultural influence, but only that it does not follow this model dutifully, that it “has its own particular aesthetic structure, its own particular perspective, and its own particular world.”²⁶⁴

When Adonis talks about authenticity in later interviews, books, and articles, this redefinition of authenticity is a recurring feature. “Authenticity,” he tells us in *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*:

is not a fixed point in the past to which we must return in order to establish our identity. It is rather a constant capacity for movement and for going beyond existing limits towards a world which, while assimilating the past and its knowledge looks ahead to a better future. What we should take hold of and imitate is the flame of questioning which animated our ancestors.²⁶⁵

Such ideals as “constant capacity for movement” or “going beyond existing limits” are not unfamiliar to the reader of *The Static*. What Adonis describes here under the rubric of “authenticity” is essentially the ideal that he has been defending throughout, namely *the dynamic*. As he has done with modernity, Adonis wants to redefine authenticity in terms of his own ideals, and then use this dynamic definition to spur others on to be more dynamic themselves.

This comes out clearly in a conversation that took place during a workshop in Beirut in 1980. In discussing the notion of a golden age, Adonis retorts that he does not believe in any such thing, nor in cultural particularity or authenticity, insofar as they are defined in terms of a return to a purported golden age. Any golden age, and with it any form of authenticity, must lie in the future.²⁶⁶ He repeats this position later on in talking about the role of Islam in modern society. According to Adonis, “authenticity lies in the future and particularity (*khuṣūṣiyya*) lies in change,” and he goes on to say that therefore “Islam needs to be dynamic, not static.” In other words, he takes it for granted that Muslims nowadays long for authenticity and a feeling of having a particular identity, but he implies that in order to

²⁶³ Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 2, 129.

²⁶⁴ Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 2, 130.

²⁶⁵ Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 90.

²⁶⁶ Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 3, 149.

pursue these aims Muslims need to adopt a dynamic point of view which lies beyond time.

What is the effect of these redefinitions of modernity and authenticity on contemporary Arab thought? To understand this, we need to return to its central problematic, the *turāth* debate, and the way in which the problem of *turāth* is commonly posed. In it, modernity and authenticity are conceived of as two poles that make for an impossible choice. You are either true to your heritage at the expense of modernization, or you embrace modernity at the expense of an authentic identity. One way to approach this problem is to stay within the bounds of the problematic. This is the route chosen by someone like Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, who proposes a golden mean between authenticity and modernity. Adonis suggests an alternative. Instead of following the rules of the game, he subverts them. In his reading of the *turāth* debate, both sides really want the same thing: the constant search for renewal. Both authenticity and modernity, on Adonis's terms, are synonymous with the *dynamic*. If one accepts this, if one accepts his worldview, his ideals, and ignores the question of whether his peregrinations in the Arab-Islamic heritage withstand historical scrutiny, then the project of *The Static* amounts not so much to an adjustment of the *turāth* debate, but to its destruction. Once modernity and authenticity and the entire semantical networks attached to them are understood to refer to the same thing, it becomes impossible to think of, let alone articulate, the binary opposition on which so much of Arab thought has rested.²⁶⁷

²⁶⁷ One might respond that, instead of trying to get rid of a binary way of thinking, Adonis is merely replacing one binary with another, that is, that he advocates a division between static and dynamic as a stand-in for the familiar temporal opposition between old and new. It must be remembered, however, that in our reading of *The Static*, Adonis does not aim to do away with binary thinking as such. Rather, he changes the way these binaries function, and thereby changes their meaning. By accentuating the creative force created by these oppositions, an opposition like "the old" versus "the new" no longer refers to two static, monolithic ideals of a traditional past versus a modern present (as it does in the standard narrative). Instead, the binaries themselves become an expression of an inescapable dialectic of human meaning making. It is also true that this perspective relativizes the negative assessment of the static side of this binary. Iman Mersal articulates this point cogently in reference to Adonis's alter-ego Mihyār the Damascene: "What is the point of Mihyār creating a new language if there is not an old language to oppose? What meaning does the poetic persona's embodiment of the image of the Sufi, historical revolutionary or mad poet have if it is not battling other images such as the Caliph or jurist?" – see Mersal, "Reading the Qur'an in the Poetry of Adonis," 6.

5.4.4 The dynamic, the modern, and the authentic individual

Although the goal of Adonis's redefinitions of authenticity and modernity may be the same, there is a notable difference between the two. A definition of modernity in terms of the timeless, universal creative act will likely strike us as somewhat far-fetched. Modernity is referred to in various ways, using different yardsticks like rationality, capitalism, colonialism, secularism, liberalism, individualism, industrialization, bureaucratization, nationalism, and many others in various combinations, but to equate this with "the act of creativity" stretches the hermeneutic limits considerably.²⁶⁸

However, when we consider the redefinition of authenticity (*aṣāla*) in terms of the individual creative experience, this peculiar definition appears much more natural. Indeed, one of the things emphasized in our discussion of authenticity was that the ideal of an original, creative self can be seen as constitutive of a modern sensibility. We found this particularly on the side of the more artistically minded, constructivist thinkers; writers like Nietzsche who conceived of an authentic identity, not as something that is found within, but something that is created in a way similar to creating a work of art. This connection is not altogether surprising, given the fact that Adonis himself tells us that he became aware of the dynamic through reading Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Nietzsche, and others. The vocabulary he uses to describe the *dynamic*, including ideas like man's killing of God, the idea of the creative poetic genius, and a whole host of Surrealist positions, are taken over from modern Western culture.

Although it would be unjustified to read *The Static* and later books in which Adonis expresses his philosophy of culture as a mere copy of this Romantic, anti-modern, Counter-Enlightenment discourse, it is also hard to understand Adonis without taking into account the profound impact that this vocabulary has had

²⁶⁸ It could be argued that this incongruence is merely due to a mistranslation of Adonis's use of *ḥadātha*. Since he writes mostly about poetry, *ḥadātha* may be read here as referring to "modernism" in its literary sense rather than to the broader category of "modernity" – this is done, for example, by Nadia Wardeh – see Wardeh, "From 'Alī Aḥmad Sa'īd to Adonis: A Study of Adonis's Controversial Position on Arab Cultural Heritage," 198–99. What speaks against this is that, while Adonis focuses on the poetic tradition, his intention is to critique Arab society as a whole, not just its poets. If Adonis wants to address the larger questions associated with the *turāth* debate – and it is clear that he does – then his target *ought* to be modernity, not literary modernism. This ambiguity perhaps issues from the poetic methods applied by Adonis to make his point. The link between the terms "creation" (*muḥdath*) and "modernity" (*ḥadātha*) is one of allusion. The author uses the shared root to establish an associative link between the two terms that can then be used to universalize the "modern." Such poetic allusions necessarily cause a degree of ambiguity, precisely because they break with conventional definitions.

on his conception of the problem. Contemporaries like Charles Malik and Antūn Sa'āda, but also Western voices like Nietzsche and Baudelaire, had a real effect on Adonis's early intellectual formation. Through them, ideas about freedom, individualism, artistic creativity, religion, and atheism became part of Adonis's early formation, as he himself recounts in his biography. Now there is of course always an element of personal ingenuity involved in what an intellectual like Adonis does with these and the many other influences in his life, the people he meets, the environment that he lives in. We should not discount the effect that his exile has had on his formation, or the impression that the civil war in Lebanon had on him. Moreover, we should not forget that these ideas associated with modern Western genealogy were refracted in various ways as they were taken up in discussions amongst Arab intellectuals. But we also need not doubt that in Adonis's worldview we find a meaningful continuation of this genealogy. Notions of freedom, individualism, and aestheticism that characterize his intellectual position are embedded in a modern discursive landscape that makes certain things stand out at the expense of others, that allows an intellectual like Adonis to pose particular questions, to feel that certain problems are salient. With ideals of individual freedom, creativity, and authenticity comes a very specific conception of what is at stake in human culture, a specific idea of what kinds of problems modern societies are faced with, and what is needed to overcome them in order to make this world a better place.

One thing that the aforementioned influences on Adonis share is a reaction to a certain conception of modernity. Modern society is seen as having changed man, as having taken something away from him, denaturalized him in some way. Society, in their eyes, exerted an overbearing force on people to conform, thereby alienating man from his true self. These intellectuals of a Romantic, Bohemian, or existentialist bent reacted against a utilitarian bourgeois ethic focused on comfort and negligent of higher pleasures, an ethic of greed that results in pettiness of mind and "cowardice of imagination."²⁶⁹ The modern world they encountered had, in their eyes, become predictable, manageable, and was gradually shedding its mystical, enchanted garb. The authentic individual put on a pedestal by these philosophers and, in particular, by artists was meant to serve as a bulwark against modern culture. The authentic power of the individual is bolstered to withstand these charges, either by exploring the depths of human creativity in poetry, or by taking down the vestiges of a corrupt, repressive, hypocritical moral system, in the philosophical writings of Nietzsche.

269 César Graña, *Bohemian versus Bourgeois: French Society and the French Man of Letters in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1964), 65.

Such faith in the power of the individual to create meaning in response to an age in which immanent sources of meaning are lacking comes to the fore most powerfully in Adonis's poetry; one that also contains a temporal orientation. His poetry is a response to the present, or what he refers to in "al-Waqt" as "my age" (*'aṣrī*). The entire paragraph, which forms the climax of the poem, reads as follows:

196. My skin is not a cavern of thoughts, nor
 197. my passion memory's woodcutter—
 198. my lineage is refusal, my weddings the grafting
 199. of two poles; this epoch is mine
 200. the dead god, the blind machine—my epoch
 201. is that I dwell in the pool of yearnings
 202. my remains are my flowers, I am
 203. the *Alif* of water and the *Yā'* of fire—the mad lover of life
 204. Revealing to time the secrets of his love
 205. thus he confesses
 206. he is the dissenter, the rebel, the prodigal.²⁷⁰

Coming just after a paragraph in which the poet forcefully embraces the age that is to come (*al-'aṣr al-ladhī ya'tī*, line 188), here we find a reference to the current, modern age, one in which God has been declared dead and machines, the fruits of technological innovation and progress, operate without an aesthetic vision or a moral compass. The individual is thrown into this life with nothing to go by in finding direction other than his yearnings, yet rather than being occasion for existential crisis, this fact is celebrated. The poet declares himself the alpha and omega of creation, master of the elements. His love for life, which he professes by confessing its secrets, marks him out as a revolutionary who creates meanings that are his legacy, a dream-space that he conquers for his successors.²⁷¹

This context sheds more light on Adonis's redefinition of modernity and how he relates it to an ideal of authenticity. When he speaks of modernity, he is not thinking of modernity as utopian project of societal change, nor does he have in mind an ordinary conception of a technologically advanced age of "the dead god, the blind machine." What he refers to, rather, are modernity's critics. He finds in their works a particular outlook on life that appeals to him as an individual and, in particular, as an artist. When he speaks of being authentic, he has in mind a quasi-existentialist view of a strong individual who creates his own

²⁷⁰ Amyuni, "Adonis's 'Time' Poem: Translation and Analysis," 179.

²⁷¹ Compare the section just preceding this one (lines 188–195), which starts by invoking an age to come and ends with the statement that "I pass on to my successors the conquest of this space."

rules and values and does not live by those laid down for him by others. In a way, the position that Adonis adopts in *The Static* with regard to the cowardly, unimaginative nature of *static* Islamic society is easily adapted to a critique of bourgeois society, which equally constrains the power of the individual in the name of law, order, and conformity. It is true that many of the examples of the static are more directly targeted against Arab societies: the autocratic ruler who suppresses different opinions, the state apparatus which limits man's freedom and turns him into a mere cog within a bureaucratic regime, an absolutist religion that forbids any criticism of its creed. These criticisms fit easily within broader Arab liberal discourse. But they are not the only examples Adonis gives of the static. For instance, he describes modern market capitalism as a system that turns man into an object that has only use-value, not a value intrinsic to him as a human being. Market forces compel a person to make herself appear different from who she is. She is turned into a liar, and thereby loses her humanity.²⁷² Adonis derides modern consumerism for its superficiality and for undermining the human search for higher values and deeper layers of meaning.²⁷³ Rather than cheerfully embracing modern Western liberal culture, his critique, though superficially directed at contemporary Arab society, marks him as a scion of the Counter-Enlightenment, denouncing the conventional value system of the bourgeois. Adonis is not a liberal like Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd. His ideal person is not the hard-working scientist, but the creative artist, the poet, who "finds his profound creative core inside, not outside of himself – whether this 'outside' be 'heritage,' or 'the group,' or 'the regime.'"²⁷⁴ Adonis is a champion of the ideal of individual authenticity. Man continually creates himself, or in his own words: "he becomes himself with the life that he has created for himself."²⁷⁵

Harking back to the discussion earlier, we can see how time and authenticity hang together, not just when authenticity is understood in a cultural sense, but also when it is read as a personal expressivist ideal. The redefinition of time as something other than ordinary chronological time is, for Adonis, part and parcel of a vision for the creative individual. Creativity needs a temporal dimension that goes beyond the relentless march of history and reaches into new depths of the

272 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 4, 199.

273 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 4, 194.

274 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab*, vol. 4, 261.

275 "Il devient lui-même avec la vie qu'il s'est créée" (Esber, *Conversations avec mon père*, 47). This outlook has been taken by Sūzān 'Abd al-Majīd al-Muḥammad as a clear indication of Adonis's existentialist leanings. Thus, she emphasizes that, for him, time is a personal human creation – see 'Abd al-Majīd al-Muḥammad, *Maḥmūd al-Zaman fī Shī'r Adūnīs*, 228.

human imagination. This is what gives meaning to life in a modern, disenchanted society.

Iris Murdoch, in writing about the modern condition, has remarked that twentieth-century literature gave rise to two kinds of novel that try to deal with the question of disenchantment and the falling away of traditional structures of meaning and morals. On the one hand, there is the existentialist's recognition that he lives in an age that is religiously and metaphysically impoverished to the extent that "he is in some danger of being left with nothing of inherent value except will-power itself."²⁷⁶ The existentialist novel "shows us freedom and virtue as the assertion of will." It presents the reader with the figure of the "lonely brave man," someone who is deeply critical of society, a godless adventurer.²⁷⁷ On the other hand, there is what Murdoch calls the mystical novel. Here, modern anxiety is not tackled by asserting the individual's ability to act. Instead, the existentialist tries to invent a new religious imagery, more often than not through art.

Adonis exhibits both tendencies. He combines praise for the ultimate freedom of the individual with a Sufi-inspired mystical attitude that seeks new realms of meaning. The dynamic presents an answer to meaninglessness. Meaning is something that must not be taken for granted. It needs to be constantly constructed and discovered through an unceasing creative process. The static refers to whatever kills this meaning-making process, whatever constrains the powers of the authentic individual to imagine himself beyond the grasp of chronological time.

5.5 Conclusion

Despite the immense interest in Adonis's poetry or even his position as a public intellectual in the Arab world, there has not been a comprehensive study of his reading of *turāth*. Our study addresses this lack in the scholarship, but it does so with an ulterior motive. The argument underlying this chapter is that, once we are aware of the temporal dialectic of the standard narrative, we can start to appreciate how particular Arab authors have sought alternative avenues for Arab thought by challenging the temporal structure that underlies this narrative. Adonis, I have argued, is one such intellectual who can be read as trying to go beyond the strictures of the standard narrative in Arab thought. His notion of vertical time makes possible a reconceptualization of authenticity and modernity, pre-

²⁷⁶ Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. P. Conradi (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997).

²⁷⁷ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, 225.

cisely because the ordinary way in which these central concepts in Arab thought are understood is based on a common chronological, horizontal idea of historical time. This puts Adonis outside the purview of the standard narrative of Arab thought, and makes it hard to characterize him as either a modernist or a traditionalist, because he no longer buys into this paradigm.

Whether you accept this reconceptualization is another matter. The foregoing analysis should not be understood as an endorsement of Adonis's outlook, which is based on an idiosyncratic reading of Arab and Islamic history, a highly contentious view of religion and religious orthodoxy, a very particular aesthetic outlook, and an almost religious regard for the meaning-making capabilities of the individual. One does not need to endorse these things to find something of interest in Adonis's overall project. Regardless of whether it withstands critical scrutiny, his vision sheds new light on Arab thought, and shows a different direction in which Arab thought could have gone and might even still go. It breaks with the dominance of a singular model for reading *turāth* by disputing, rather than abiding by, the accepted meanings of what is at stake in the problematic of authenticity and modernity.