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ADONIS AS THE MODERNIST POET

Abstract

Adonis (1930-) is a Syrian poet who played an important role in the development of modern Arabic verse. The form of his poetry, as well as its content, are nourished by national culture.

If in the West, there is not one definite opinion about the attitude of modernism to the tradition – should it reject everything traditional or use it? For Adonis, it's a clear thing – he thinks that the knowledge of classical poetry is necessary to write a new Arabic verse. A really modern poem is part of culture and history and not only just ideas or feelings expressed by a single person. A poet must value the beauty of Arabic because it's impossible to create something new and valuable by the language, with the heritage and memory of which you are not acquainted. The main thing for Adonis, in the condition of the Western political and economic expansion, is to preserve identity. Preservation of tradition and language as the basic factors of identity is necessary for the internationalization of Arabic Culture.

If the main character of European modernist literature has a crisis of subjectivity, the lyrical hero of a Syrian poet is an individual with certain values. If the language of Western modernists is irrational, Adonis's language is in serve of creating of the new Arabic identity. If European modernist culture criticizes the falseness of religion, Adonis thinks that the state and religion must be separated from each other, and Islam must assess individualism.

According to the Western point of view, the process of modernization in the Arabic Culture was connected basically to Europeanisation. This opinion is not groundless, as after Napoleon's expansion, a lot of novelties came from Europe to the Arab world. But Adonis managed to prove with his creations that Arab modernism has its own intellectual and philosophical grounds.

Key Words: *Arab Modernism, New Arabic Verse*

Adonis is one of the modern Arab authors whose name spread far beyond native cultural circles gaining international recognition. In this article the Syrian-Lebanese poet is represented as a modernist creator.

In Arabic culture, the term modernism is used in several contexts. It's often connected with the process of modernization that followed Napoleon's expansion in Egypt. Therefore, in Arabic reality, modernization means Westernization or Europeanisation. But on the

other hand, we have to separate from each other the terms modernization as renovation and modernism as a cultural trend. In European cultural history modernization is also a social phenomenon, which took place from the end of the 17th century till the mid of 20th, but esthetic modernism is a cultural phenomenon that opposed the last path of so-called historical modernism (1860-1960), its ideologization, rationalization, urbanization, technocracy, and industrialization, causing the total desacralization. So, in the West modernist literature opposed the late modern trying to show that the world is much greater than the material reality perceived by us. According to modernists, it's not possible to depict the world realistically. Therefore, modernism opposed realism as well. In the Western modernist culture positive character of realistic literature was replaced by the unstable one whose actions were dictated by irrational impulses and imaginations. He had no ethical principles or values. He was depressed and alienated. He was lost – he didn't know what to do. Modernists' language was also irrational.

So, from the Western perspective, modernism means social development and deconstruction of classical norms on one hand and esthetic criticism of the modern epoch on the other. If some people determine it as a rejection of tradition, for others it's reaction to industrialization, brutal urban society, lack of human values etc. Some theorists think that modernism is a global trend in art and literature, not limited by time (20th cent.) and space (Europe). Adonis also thinks that modernism was not invented only by the West and it doesn't belong only to Europe.

Anyway, in Arabic reality, we cannot observe any social or political changes, technological progress, etc., that had developed Western modernists' ideology or philosophy. As we mentioned above, the process of modernization began after Napoleon's invasion here, and it meant, first of all, westernization. The main things in the process of modernization were not to lose traditions and to assess them critically. If European modernists mostly don't clarify their positions about tradition – should they preserve and use it, or should they oppose it? In the case of Arab modernists, the main thing is to make a difference between static (which must be preserved in culture) and dynamic (which must be changed).

Adonis thinks that if in Europe they heard about the meaning of modern first in the 18th century and if it's associated with the art and literature of the 20th century, in Arabic reality modern appeared in the 8th century, in the epoch of Harun al-Rashid. If European modernism is connected more with politics and social development, old modern was purely a cultural phenomenon that didn't have any connections with industrialization, technical or economic progress, or the development of media. Cultural modernity, according to the poet, is not limited by time or space. Adonis thinks that in modern times, the crisis of Arab identity in relation to the West must be overcome only by returning to cultural, religious, and literary heritage. Tradition is important for him just in this context. He needs tradition to revive and modernize Arabic culture and Islam. Adonis wants to reform and modernize Arabic identity, on the one hand, and to preserve tradition as the main factor of identity, on the other. But in doing so, he assesses critically not only his own inheritance but also Western modernism as well.

For European modernists, it's very important to preserve spirituality, but Adonis tries to preserve not only spiritual values but also identity. In the conditions of foreign political and economic influence identity is very important for the cultural internationalization of the Arabs. The poet thinks that for the Arabic-Muslim Renaissance, a great Syrian personality must be born. He also tries to find such great personalities/individuals among the old poets, who dared to oppose tradition.

Adonis himself is an individualist creator. One can notice it very clearly in one of his first poetry collections, *Songs of Mihyar the Damascene*, which was issued in 1961 in Damascus. The poet worked on this book during his stay in Paris. He was granted by the government of France a one-year scholarship. In this work, which is regarded as the main manifest of Arabic modernity, the author tries to stay between two radical tendencies – if one part of Arab poets cannot free himself from the traditional verse, another part cannot understand the old poetry adequately. For Adonis, the Western is as important as traditional Arabic. But the main thing in this collection is the individual, who is free from the past – sometimes it's necessary for the future, for a critical assessment of the traditions and finding alternative ones.

Adonis tries to find common points between East and West not only in his poetry, but also in other works. In his collection of essays “Sufism and Surrealism” (1995), which gained special popularity in France, he makes a parallel between Eastern mysticism and Western surrealism, between Sufis metaphorical writing and surrealists' automatic writing. Both of these trends try to reach true knowledge by recovering what is hidden in unconsciousness.

While translating French poetry into Arabic, Adonis discovered the form of prose poem. Modern French poetry put a question mark on the Arabic poetic canon detaching it from the Mediterranean and Near Eastern heritages. These changes can be seen in the first translations of Adonis. If he had used before modernized form of the traditional Arabic versification system *arud*, during the process of translation he got acquainted with the prose poem – he listened carefully to the Arabic language revealing its possibilities in this direction. Thinking about new forms of the Arabic verse, he didn't use only his experience as a translator. Like his lyrical heroes, he found in tradition the new ways of expressing too.

Adonis was the first to find out the importance of studying the esthetic possibilities of classical Arabic prose. He underlined that Arabic prosaic tradition had parameters of not only prose but also poetry. He felt the “chemistry of prose,” especially in Sufi texts. Because of the dominant poetic tradition, prose was partly ignored in Arabic culture. But poetry, as it was tied up by strict versification system, frustrated by the time converting into the empty form. The prose, meanwhile, hasn't experienced such frustration. So, it's freer and less determined, containing more poetry than the verse written in definite forms. Adonis finds more poetical potential in classical Arabic prosaic texts than in poetry. So, prose poems became the main poetical form in contemporary Arabic poetry not only because of Western / French influence but also because of the influence of Arabic tradition.

Syrian poet managed to combine modern western lyrics with rich Arabic tradition. His poetry is influenced not only by Sufism and Antique culture but also by surrealism and symbolism. As a modernist theorist, he relies not only on classical Arabic poetry but also

on Rambo, Mallarme, and Western surrealists' conceptions. His vanguard poetry is complicated and revolutionary and contains radical manifests and criticism of organized Islam. One can see anti-Israeli motives there too.

For Adonis the main thing in modernist poetry is a creative view, which makes the reader see invisible. He finds important poetry's social function. If the character of the European modernist literature is frustrated, the lyrical hero of Adonis is a personality with his own visions and values. If the Western modernist's language is irrational and not understandable, Adonis's language is the 14-century-old language of poetry and theology, philosophy, and mystics, which actually has not changed. He always uses literary Arabic because the language is also an important part of Arab identity. That's why contemporary Arabic poem gains in his creatures a great role in formulating of new Arabic identity. If European modernist literature resists the falseness of religion, Arab poet thinks about the reformation of Islam. Modernism, for him, is revolution and enlightenment.

From the Arabic perspective, modernism is the continuation of cultural modernism which occurred in tradition. So, it is not connected with the concrete epoch. Adonis does not agree with the opinion that Arabic modernism, unlike European one, does not have its own intellectual and philosophical grounds. Arabic modernism is influenced by both Arabic and Western cultures. European modernism enriched esthetics of the Arabic literature but it was not just imitated by Arabs. One can notice in the Arabic modernist literature characteristics of the Western one as showing loneliness, fear of death, fragmented perception of the world, etc. Like Elliot, Adonis cannot imagine modernism without tradition.

We can conclude that the term modern is used in the context of technological development, but modernism is used in social and ideological contexts. Arabic modernism tries to create new poetics and a new worldview relying on its traditions. Arab cultural modernism can be found in the Abbasids' epoch, too, among the poets who opposed religion and poetical norms revealing individualism. Unlike European one, Arab modernism didn't appear as an anti-classicist movement. In the 20th century, Arab neo-classical, romanticist, and modernist poets lived approximately in the same period. Arabic modernism had its own, native reasons. It was caused by native revolutions against oligarchical regimes and the spreading of progressive thoughts against conservative parties. Adonis' influence on Arab intellectual life is apparent, but the concrete results of his modernist project have not been researched fully yet.