

A LIFE IN LANGUAGE: A CONVERSATION BETWEEN ADONIS AND LAURA ALLSOP

Laura Allsop

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Adonis, born Ali Ahmad Said Esber in Syria in 1930, is widely regarded as one of the Arab world's greatest modern poets alongside the late Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish. Celebrated for books including *Leaves in the Wind* (1960), *The Songs of Mihyar of Damascus* (1961) and more recently, *Beginnings of the Body, Ends of the Sea* (2003), Adonis was central to pioneering a free-form, experimental Arabic poetry in the 1950s that drew from its rich past as much as it broke from it. Adonis was also one of the founders of the experimental literary magazines *Shi'r* and later *Mawaqif*, both of which he worked on while living in exile in Lebanon.

A prolific writer, for the last decade Adonis, now living in Paris, has also been creating collages, which are on display at The Mosaic Rooms in London until the 30th March. In this conversation with Ibraaz's Managing Editor Laura Allsop, Adonis discusses his origins as a poet, his interest in Sufism, his experiences of exile and how he is finding new expression in visual art-making.

Laura Allsop: How and when did you decide to call yourself Adonis?

Adonis: I was about 15 and I was writing texts that I would send to newspapers, using my full, normal name and nobody was publishing them. I was upset because I was confident they were good texts. And one day I was particularly sad and I read the myth of Adonis. I was very struck by the myth, in which Adonis is beloved by Venus and who went out one day hunting and who was devoured by wild boar and his blood flowed and became a river. In fact, there is a river in Lebanon called the Adonis River, which has now been renamed the Ibrahim River. So altogether, I was really struck by this story. I identified with Adonis and compared the



Adonis, *Untitled*, 1993, mixed media collage. Courtesy of the artist and The Mosaic Rooms, London.

wild boar with the newspapers that wouldn't publish my writing. And so I wrote a text, which I signed Adonis and I sent it to one of the newspapers that never published me – and they published it. And I sent another one and they published it on the first page, signed: Please may Adonis, whoever Adonis is, come to the newspaper's offices and identify himself. So I went, and I was dressed as the peasant boy that I was and I didn't give the impression that I could have written what I had written. I said to the first person I saw in the office: I am Adonis. He stood up, he didn't believe me. Finally I was led to the editor-in-chief, who also stood up in shock and said, 'Are you really Adonis?' And I replied, 'Yes, I am.' And that's how the name stuck.

LA: Who were your poetic inspirations when you were young and who continues to inspire you now?

A: I was very influenced by classical Arabic poetry, pre-Islamic poetry particularly; also poetry that was written in the Abassid period in Baghdad in the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries. There are poets that I still read today; Abu-Nuwas; Abu Tammam; Abu Alaa Al Maari, and some of the poets of mysticism, Sufism, such as Annaffari and others. I place myself in a lineage with Heralitus, who once said, 'You will not cross the river twice'. And all the poets that have followed this line, I consider them as part of my poetic family. There are many of them.

LA: I found a quotation from the early days of *Shi'r*, the poetry magazine you helped found in Lebanon in the 1950s, which states: 'Our movement has no ideological or political affiliation. It is entirely dedicated to poetry ... To transpose an ideological and political conflict into the realm of poetry is truly regrettable and damages the poetic cause to which *Shi'r* has devoted itself'. Is this a condition of poetry – to be a-political, just as you often remark that you are non-religious?

A: It depends on your definition of politics. The politics that I mean is that related to an ideology, an ideological conflict. This is one definition and I am against this definition. I feel that all poets that have tried to impose this vision of politics on their poetry have not produced any interesting work, from the Socialist Realists to others. Poetry then becomes as a mere tool to praise or attack or criticise rather than to express. When art becomes a tool, it's really the end, it condemns itself. I have a different definition of politics, which is that of building the city, building society and building a human being, beyond ideology. And in this sense, everything is political, even love. And in that respect, all poetry is political – including myself.



Adonis, *Untitled*, 2005, mixed media collage. Courtesy of the artist and The Mosaic Rooms, London.

LA: You are part of a grand tradition of poetic exiles. Do you think that the experience of exile contributes to a richer poetry? Indeed, is the condition of yearning for and imagining home necessary for the creation of poetry?

A: I have a different notion of exile from that which is prevalent today, which is really about geographic exile. My own understanding is different. I believe exile is an internal experience, more than it is an external, physical one. Of course, what is exterior can enrich it more or less, depending on the experience of the poet. I don't believe that a real poet does not have that sense of internal exile and it's really to do with language – because language for a poet is both his homeland and his exile. Homeland because in the end a poet really only finds himself in his language; exile because inevitable and invariably, language fails to say what he wants.

LA: You have a long-standing interest in Sufism, which you express in your poetry but also in your book *Sufism and Surrealism* (1995), which explores the relationship between the two. Can you tell me how and when you first became interested in Sufism?

A: During a period of exile, in the sense that I became aware through mysticism that reality, visible reality, is something that is constantly changing and that will disappear. Mysticism helped me to realise the existence of another invisible reality, which is also very vivid, dynamic and also constantly changing. It's like a human being; outside, there is his or her face, body and movements, but behind all of that is an astonishing reality that is deeper, richer and often full of unknowns. So that movement between the visible and the invisible, it's a form of exile because in looking for the invisible, you force yourself into exile to understand that different reality. Sufism alerted me to this unknown world, which remains unknown.

LA: You left Syria at a young age. How do you process the events unfolding there?

A: I left Syria long before you were born, in 1956. I was always opposed to repression, all forms of it that I have experienced, all across the region. Unfortunately, without exception, all the regimes in the region have participated in this oppression in one way or another. And all these regimes, including the Syrian one, need to be changed. I was not really surprised by what has happened in Syria and actually what has happened in the rest of the region. I was however surprised by the forms the protest took; I was particularly surprised by the violence and the request for foreign intervention and I am personally deeply opposed to both these things. To answer the violence of arms with the



Adonis, *Untitled*, 2009, mixed media collage. Courtesy of the artist and The Mosaic Rooms, London.



violence of arms will only create a hellish situation and one that will be very hard to control. Therefore I urge people in Syria and across the region in fact to follow Gandhi and Mandela by going out into the streets and protesting peacefully, quietly and without violence. If you can't persuade me with words, how can you persuade me with arms?

LA: What is the role of the poet in such times of upheaval; indeed, is there a role for poets in such situations?

A: My point of view is that a poet must support freedom and must oppose violence and must say the things that I've been saying. But I don't believe that this applies to the artistic work, because again, if we use a direct means of expression, our art once again becomes a tool. Poetry cannot be direct, it cannot be involved in praise or invective or criticism; the poet needs the distance in order to understand a reality and to express its deepest truths, but for that to happen, he needs distance, it cannot be a direct relationship.

LA: Does that relate to a fear of literalism?

A: This is exactly it; a direct description of reality becomes political and ideological, which I am against, as I said. I would like to refer to an interesting example – during the Soviet era, most poets wrote in this direct fashion. One of the exceptions was the great Greek poet Yiannis Ritsos, who while he was a very committed Communist, created an artistic, poetic world in which he expressed his aspirations and his dreams as a Communist, but in a way that did not relate to a specific event or a specific ideological agenda – and therefore is extremely beautiful and powerful. He did not, for example, praise the achievements of the Communist party. He expressed an ideal, his Communist ideal, through poetry in such a way that was not related to party politics. We have in the Arab world a similar experience; throughout the colonial and post-colonial years there were poems about the revolution in Algeria, about the nationalisation of the Suez Canal, the uprisings in Iraq and so on. And this approach to poetry generally impoverished it and did not produce visionary texts. Ritsos spoke about freedom and his dreams, about his aspirations, not about specific events that were important to the party.

LA: The Lebanese artist and playwright Rabih Mroué, who Ibraaz recently interviewed, made an installation work for an exhibition last year entitled *The People Are Demanding*. In an interview at the time, he expressed the worry that people across the region were in danger of being subsumed into a single mass, one voice. Is this a concern you also share?

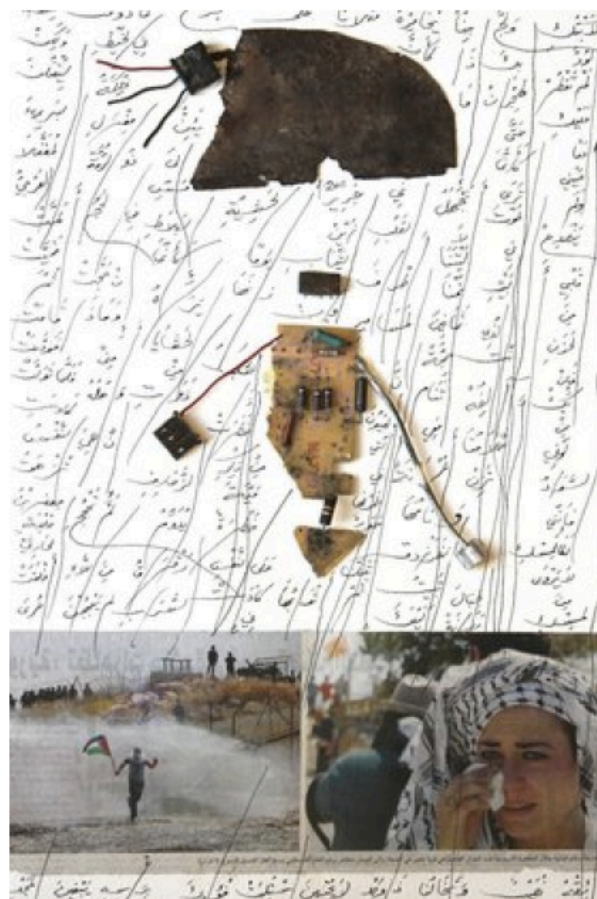
A: The fear may be well-placed, based on previous experience, because the artistic experience, whether it's creative or appreciative, is really only an individual experience. The person who creates the artistic work is an individual, not a collective. My additional anxiety is that these movements bring religious elements to power and so the artist, I fear, will be surrounded on the one hand by a collective taste based on slogans and so on, and on the other by religious ideology and censorship.

LA: Something Ibraaz is thinking about currently is the notion of public space and how it figures in the development of civil society. And I wonder if you have a definition of public space you could share with me?

A: I would of course be delighted if the whole of the Arab world were turned into a creative space for free expression but how can this happen when the predominant movements now in the Arab world hide the faces of women? How can we have free spaces in these conditions?

LA: I'd like to now turn to the collages, which are currently on display at The Mosaic Rooms in London; how and when did you start making them? They seem to be composed of fragments and I wonder if there is a connection between these material fragments and your poetry itself?

A: I started to make them ten or twelve years ago. For me, it's a different sort of poem, but using different materials, different elements. I find that these collages are like graphemes, or rather that they're based on the Arabic word 'raqima', which has three meanings: calligraphy, colouring and figurative drawing. I find it easier to relate to the visual world using this technique than with poetry. It has also allowed me to reconsider objects for which there is usually no consideration – fragments, bits and pieces, pieces of iron, bits of cloth, stone, thread – anything that's thrown away but which, when you gather it together, you give meaning to. It's almost like a dialogue between existing and not existing, all on the same page.



Adonis, *Untitled*, 2011, mixed media collage. Courtesy of the artist and The Mosaic Rooms, London.

LA: Is it necessary to read Arabic to understand these works?

A: No. I use the calligraphy as a background; what you see are actually fragments from poems, not complete poems.

LA: You mentioned in a talk with Hans Ulrich Obrist here at The Mosaic Rooms that the collages allowed you to appreciate the 'genius of working with one's hands' and I wonder if you could elaborate further on this?

A: It was a discovery for me, to use my hands and move for example a piece of stone from one place to another in a composition, how that acquired a new meaning depending on where I put it. The meaning I had always created in my mind through words was now being done with my hands. We have to give scope and reconsider the importance of the spontaneity of the hand because the hand is rarely censored, mentally. It is



generally free of mental intervention and that opens up possibilities for the hand that deserve to be studied more carefully.

LA: My final question regards your new culture magazine *The Other*; does it have a manifesto?

A: No. This is a continuation of the two previous magazines that I helped found – *Shi'r* and later *Mawaqif*. With this magazine we wanted though to give it a wider dimension and that's why we called it *The Other*. We insist on the different as well as at the same time the common, and the familiar – which is in Sufism too. The issue or the problematic of the 'Other' is now extremely prevalent in discourse, both philosophical and artistic.

LA: There's been a tendency to criticise the fetishisation of otherness. Do you instead see the other as undifferentiated from the self?

A: The 'Other' in this instance is not simply another interlocutor, the 'Other' is a creative element, one of the creative elements of one's own creation; a constitutive element of oneself. The other is not separate, it's an element of oneself.

About the artist

Adonis, born Ali Ahmad Said Esber in Syria in 1930, is a poet, writer and artist based in Paris. He has written on Sufism, Surrealism and politics in addition to his poetry. Adonis was exiled to Lebanon in 1956 and move to France in 1985. In 2011, Adonis was awarded the highly prestigious Goethe Prize. An exhibition of his recent collages is on display at London's The Mosaic Rooms until the 30th March 2012.

About the author

Laura Allsop is the Managing Editor of Ibraaz, and has extensive experience in arts publishing. She worked at *Art Review* from 2006-09, before moving on to write freelance for various publications including *Frieze*, *Modern Painters*, *Art Monthly* and *Wallpaper*. She is also currently a freelance arts reporter for CNN's international website.