



# The Poetics of Adonis and Yves Bonneyoy

Poetry as  
Spiritual Practice

Kareem James Abu-Zeid

Resources in Arabic and Islamic Studies

THE POETICS OF ADONIS  
AND YVES BONNEFOY

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The Poetics of Adonis and Yves Bonnefoy:  
Poetry as Spiritual Practice

THE POETICS OF ADONIS  
AND YVES BONNEFOY  
POETRY AS SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

KAREEM JAMES ABU-ZEID

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# THE POETICS OF ADONIS AND YVES BONNEFOY

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## Series Editors' Preface

When we learned that the poet and translator Kareem James Abu-Zeid had no publication plans for his doctoral dissertation on Adonis and Bonnefoy (University of California, Berkeley, 2016), we asked him if he was interested in letting us publish it; he enthusiastically agreed. *The Poetics of Adonis and Yves Bonnefoy: Poetry as Spiritual Practice*—a lightly revised version of the thesis—examines and compares the work of two pre-eminent poets of the second half of the twentieth century and the early part of the twenty-first. Yves Bonnefoy was a French poet, essayist, art and literary critic, editor, and translator; he died in 2016 at the age of 93. Ali Ahmad Said Esber, known by his pen-name Adonis (Adūnīs), is an Arab poet, essayist, artist and literary critic, editor, and translator (including of Bonnefoy's poetry); he turned 90 last year. Through close readings of key moments in their poetry, Abu-Zeid illustrates how both writers, in their own unique ways, construct poetry as a form of spiritual practice, that is, as a way of transforming both the poet's and the implied reader's ontological, perceptual, and creative relationships with their internal and external worlds. Sustained studies of Adonis are, surprisingly, few and far between; those comparing Adonis to other poets rarer still. We are delighted, therefore, to be able to include this important and groundbreaking study in our series.

We are most grateful to the Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah, its founder Sultan Sooud Al-Qassem, and curator Suheyda Takesh, for permission to reproduce a 2003 art work by Adonis on the cover. Our thanks go also to publisher Billie Jean Collins, cover designer Susanne Wilhelm, and distributor Ian Stevens—with all of whom it is always a privilege and pleasure to work.

Joseph E. Lowry  
Devin J. Stewart  
Shawkat M. Toorawa





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I thank both Adonis and the late Yves Bonnefoy, for their inspiring poetry and reflections on spirituality in general. Although it was many years ago now, I have been fortunate enough to meet with both in person, and I am grateful for their generosity.

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I thank my young stepson, Edward Paul McGovern IV, for constantly reminding me to live and act from a place of innocence, joy, curiosity, and wonder.

Finally, I thank my wife, Paige Cochran, who shows me—every single day—how beautiful, loving, and playful a partnership rooted in the spirit of meditation can be.

## Abbreviations

<i>Aghānī</i>	Adonis, <i>Aghānī Mihyār al-Dimashqī</i>
<i>L'Arrière-pays</i>	Bonnefoy, <i>L'Arrière-pays</i>
<i>Basic Writings</i>	Heidegger, <i>Basic Writings</i>
<i>Being and Time</i>	Heidegger, <i>Being and Time</i>
<i>Entretiens</i>	Bonnefoy, <i>Entretiens sur la poésie (1972–1990)</i>
<i>L'Improbable</i>	Bonnefoy, <i>L'Improbable et autres essais</i>
<i>Le Nuage rouge</i>	Bonnefoy, <i>Le Nuage rouge</i>
<i>Poèmes</i>	Bonnefoy, <i>Poèmes</i>
Q	<i>Qurʿan</i>
<i>Thābit</i>	Adonis, <i>Al-Thābit wa-l-mutaḥawwil: baḥth fī l-ittibāʿ wa-l-ibdāʿ ʿinda l-ʿarab. Vol. 1: al-Uṣūl.</i>
“Transcendancy”	Bonnefoy, “The Feeling of Transcendancy”
<i>Zaman</i>	Adonis, <i>Zaman al-shiʿr</i>

# INTRODUCTION

## On Mystical Experience, Awakening, and the Spiritual Path of Poetry

*Our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. [...] No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded. How to regard them is the question—for they are so discontinuous with ordinary consciousness.*

(William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 422)

Few poets have dominated their respective (trans-)national landscapes in the second half of the twentieth century in the way that Syrian-born Adonis (born Ali Ahmed Saïd Esber) has done in the Arab world, or that Yves Bonnefoy has done in France. These two writers cut imposing figures in world literature as a whole, but they are also notable for the conspicuous spiritual and mystic aspects of their poetic work. In conducting close readings of key moments from their respective poetry—and in particular from Bonnefoy’s 1965 collection *Pierre écrite* (“Written Stone”), which in my view inaugurates his more “mature” poetics, and Adonis’s seminal 1961 collection *Aghānī Mihyār al-Dimashqī* (“Songs of Mihyar the Damascene”)—this study will illustrate how both these writers, in their own unique ways, construct poetry as a form of spiritual practice, i.e., as a way of transforming both the poet’s and the implied reader’s ontological, perceptual, and creative relationships with their internal and external worlds. In the case of Bonnefoy, the emphasis is clearly on the poet’s (or poetic subject’s) own subjective spiritual path; while with Adonis, the poetry is more didactic and focused on the reader, attempting to draw him or her into spiritual experience. In this, I will be following, on the broadest scale, a methodology set forth by Pierre Hadot, who demonstrated that the philosophy of antiquity and late antiquity was also a mode of self-exploration, was always a spiritual exercise, rather than a body of knowledge.

Although both poets are from roughly the same generation (Bonnefoy was born in 1923, Adonis in 1930), although both emerged from Surrealist poetic milieus to craft their own unique brands of poetry, although both lived in Paris for several decades (Bonnefoy passed away in 2016), and although Adonis has translated a significant portion of Bonnefoy’s work into Arabic, there is a dearth of studies that compare and contrast the works of the two writers in a sustained manner. This critical gap is all the more glaring when one considers that there is a profound structural similarity between their poetry,

namely: Both Bonnefoy and Adonis write primarily in a form that I call the long poem, wherein an entire collection can justifiably be considered as a single poem, or as a single integrated poetic process, that stretches across dozens or even hundreds of pages. We will see that the length of these poems, which implies specific poetological and rhetorical techniques as well as a specific temporality, is a core aspect of the spiritual practices that the poems constitute, and also that the two poets' deep mistrust of conceptual language informs their poetry as spiritual paths, albeit in very different ways and in very different cultural contexts. By juxtaposing the works of these two poets, and also by foregrounding the notion of spiritual practice, this study fills a significant gap in the existing scholarship on both Yves Bonnefoy and Adonis. To facilitate the analysis, I rely on certain aspects of the language of Buddhism, which also entails a mistrust or critique of conceptual language.

As an integral aspect of the spiritual process, an underlying—and sometimes very conspicuous—experience of “mysticism” underpins the writings of both these poets, and it is not an overstatement to call their work mystical poetry, though there are obvious and pronounced differences between their poetry and that of classic “Eastern” mystics such as Rumi, Kabir, and Hafez, or canonical Christian mystics such as Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa of Ávila. In his 2014 book *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion*, the popular author Sam Harris, a secular atheist, notes one of the difficulties inherent in writing about mysticism or spirituality in the mainstream press, to say nothing of writing about it within academia:

I share the concern, expressed by many atheists, that the terms *spiritual* and *mystical* are often used to make claims not merely about the quality of certain experiences but about reality at large. Far too often, these words are invoked in support of religious beliefs that are morally and intellectually grotesque. Consequently, many of my fellow atheists consider all talk of spirituality to be a sign of mental illness, conscious imposture, or self-deception. This is a problem, because millions of people have had experiences for which *spiritual* and *mystical* seem the only terms available.<sup>1</sup>

Harris is here expressing the same concern that William James expresses in his groundbreaking work *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, namely, that “[n]o account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded.”<sup>2</sup> For James, mystical experience is one of the most conspicuous of these “other forms of consciousness,” and he dedicates an entire chapter to it. I take his point in a more specific direction, and make the claim that no account of the poetry of Adonis or Yves Bonnefoy can be complete without taking mystical experience into consider-

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1. Harris, *Waking Up*, 11.

2. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 422.

ation. The fact that the qualities and concept of mystical experience are subjective and notoriously difficult to pin down does not exonerate scholarship from ignoring or glossing over them. Any truly comprehensive scholarship on these poets needs to take mysticism into account. Harris himself, an outspoken proponent of both secularism and atheism, believes that it is very possible to view, and indeed analyze, such so-called altered states of consciousness “in universal and secular terms.”<sup>3</sup>

Before delving into the idea of poetry as a spiritual practice (as well as into terms like “mystical language” or “mystical poetry”), a discussion of the nature of mystical experience is needed—despite the fact that writers of every ilk have claimed that such experience is “inexpressible” or “ineffable.” If mystical experience does indeed form one of many backdrops to the poetry of Bonnefoy and Adonis, then we must at least briefly consider the following questions: What is mystical experience? How is it recognized or posited? Is it really so inexpressible that not even a tentative description can be given? And is all mystical experience the same?

In the anthology *Trajectories of Mysticism in Theory and Literature*, Philip Leonard posits that mysticism is the yearning for “union” or “a direct and personal awareness of a transcendent authority such as God, Providence, the Creator or the Infinite,” and goes on to note that it is common to pursue that union through “less rational means” such as drugs, dreams, visions, madness, etc.—we will later see that this “less rational” (or perhaps simply less discursive) aspect manifests in both the work of Bonnefoy and Adonis as a conspicuous mistrust of conceptual language per se.<sup>4</sup> The *unio mystica* that Leonard invokes implies the paradox of an utterly transcendent godhead (or presence, source, etc.) that is simultaneously immanent, and that the individual has access to in one way or another. The Dutch writer Bruno Borchert, in his wide-ranging book *Mysticism: Its History and Challenge*, employs similar terminology, defining mysticism as “the experimental [presumably in the sense of ‘experiential’] knowledge that, in one way or another, everything is interconnected, that all things have a single source.”<sup>5</sup> Any number of philosophers and poets throughout the ages, from Plotinus to Meister Eckhart, from Ibn ‘Arabī to Kabir, could be cited to further emphasize this key point of a basic experience of unity being at the core of mysticism, and as being one of the goals of spiritual practice. William James says as much in his groundbreaking account of mysticism:

In mystic states we become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness. This is the everlasting and triumphant mystical tradition, hardly altered by differences of clime or creed. In Hinduism, in Neoplatonism, in Sufism, in Christian mysticism, in Whitmanism, we find the same recurring note,

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3. Harris, *Waking Up*, 203. In his book, Harris, who has a PhD in neuroscience, skillfully interweaves his own personal experiences and anecdotes with the results of recent scientific research.

4. Leonard, *Trajectories of Mysticism*, x (preface).

5. Borchert, *Mysticism*, 3.

so that there is about mystical utterance an eternal unanimity which ought to make a critic stop and think, and which brings it about that the mystical classics have, as has been said, neither birthday nor native land. Perpetually telling of the unity of man with God, their speech antedates languages, and they do not grow old.<sup>6</sup>

Although there does indeed seem to be an underlying “eternal unanimity” to mystical utterance in the sense that a certain experience of unity is evoked, one must be careful not to take this argument too far. In *Mysticism*, Borchert succinctly defines mystical *language* (as opposed to mystical experience) as follows: “Mystical language is an attempt to utter the inexpressible. The crux of the matter is not so much how something is experienced as what that something is.”<sup>7</sup> While it is true, to a certain (and in my view quite limited) extent, that mystical language—including the poetry of Adonis and Bonnefoy—is often an attempt to express the inexpressible, disregarding the *how* in favor of the *what* presupposes that the two are separate, or can be separated. Yet if mystical poetry (or language) is an attempt to inaugurate a “mystical” experience in either the poet or the implied reader, then the *how* becomes very important. This study considers, among other things, the poetological and rhetorical mechanisms of the mystical poetry of Adonis and Yves Bonnefoy, and in doing so implicitly transforms existing models of mystical literature, expanding them to include a more modern sensibility. In the spirit of the mystical experience itself, I go beyond the more traditional definition of mystical language as an attempt to express the inexpressible or ineffable (without doing away with that definition, or entirely denying it). While I suggest the possibility that the temporal act of reading poetry can be considered as potentially inauguratory of mystical experience in the subjective experience of the reader,<sup>8</sup> my emphasis, in this study, is on poetry as a specific mode of spiritual practice characterized by certain poetological and rhetorical techniques. This poetry functions, among other things, as impassioned spiritual training grounds, and I accordingly explore the mechanisms of that functioning.

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6. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 457.

7. Borchert, *Mysticism*, 18.

8. As such, this poetry is at times not unlike the Zen tradition of koans, or the “pointing” texts and techniques of such modern schools of non-duality as “the Headless Way.” See, for example, the classic book of Zen koans, *The Gateless Gate*, or the non-dual pointing experiments of the Headless Way at [www.headless.org](http://www.headless.org). This potential “pointing” aspect of Bonnefoy and Adonis’s poetry cannot, of course, be verified in any kind of philosophical or theoretical fashion, as it hinges solely on the subjective experience of the reader at hand. In this study, I will therefore be focusing more on the aspect of contemplative experience, as well as on the lengthy critiques of conceptual language that are found within this poetry—critiques that can be viewed as preparatory for deeper spiritual and mystical experiences, which are almost universally described as operating in a realm of experience that transcends concepts (and that cannot be described or circumscribed by concepts).



Some further clarification is needed to make my own means of critical approach to this poetry clear, and to reveal my own prejudices on this subject, which are informed by years of study of spiritual texts and, perhaps more importantly, by years of intensive meditative practice employing techniques from various spiritual schools, including those of Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as prolonged periods of silence and sensory deprivation. First, I am making a subtle but important distinction between mystical experience on the one hand (as a subjective and internal experience) and spiritual practice on the other: While one of the goals of spiritual practice may indeed be (depending on the practitioner, or in this case the poet) to inaugurate mystical experience (in either the poet or the implied reader), it is by no means the only or even the primary goal. This poetry, when considered as a spiritual practice in its own right, goes beyond merely being “mystical poetry.” Peak mystical experiences are wonderful—perhaps the greatest and most joyful one can have—but they are not equivalent to what various traditions have called “enlightenment” (also known as “awakening” or “self-realization”), which I will preliminarily define as a non-dual state that is posited as the supreme goal of spiritual practice in various traditions, and in particular Buddhism. Although there is a certain loss of self in the union with “God” (or whatever one chooses to call it), this loss of self is temporary within the context of mystical experiences. The modern Christian contemplative Bernadette Roberts, who had, until her own deeper awakening, assumed that union with God was the endpoint of contemplative practice, acknowledges the transience of that union:

Thus there is no longer any sense of “my” life, but rather “our” life—God and self. In this abiding state God, the “still-point” at the center of being, is ever accessible to the contemplative gaze—a point from which the life of self arises and into which it sometimes disappears. But this latter experience of loss-of-self is only transient, it does not constitute a permanent state, nor did it occur to me that it could ever do so in this life.<sup>9</sup>

A mystical experience (which Roberts would call the dissolving of the self into God) is just that—an experience, something that arises and then passes away. William James lists “transiency” as one of the “four marks” or core aspects of the mystical experience of unity, noting that “[t]he adjective ‘mystical’ is technically applied, most often to states that are of brief duration.” James does not devote time to a discussion of enlightenment or awakening, freely admitting his own ignorance of Buddhism—and yet the distinction between enlightenment and mystical experience is a crucial one.<sup>10</sup>

In my view, and in the terminology I will be using, there is a fundamental difference between a temporary experience of union with God (or reality, source, Being, the Absolute, etc.) and an ongoing perception of the world through a non-dual lens, wherein the

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9. Roberts, *The Experience of No-Self*, 10.

10. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 414–15, 79, 567.

sense of a separate individual self falls away and reveals itself to have been illusory from the very beginning. The latter is what I would call enlightenment, or rather, one of the possible modes or stages of enlightenment.<sup>11</sup> Mystical experiences are peak experiences, and peak experiences, by definition, cannot last very long: If they did, they would cease to be peak experiences and would instead become plateaus, and would be folded into the fabric of ordinary everyday reality. The path to enlightenment may entail mystical experiences, but enlightenment is not itself a single specific experience of the world, but rather a certain way of experiencing it. Enlightenment, insofar as one may speak of such a thing with any logical clarity, is not impermanent in the way that a mystical experience is impermanent. In the Buddha's *Prajnaparamita Sutra in 8,000 Lines*, which is the central text of the Mahayana tradition, it is explicitly spelled out that Perfect Wisdom (which we can equate with the awake or enlightened "state") is "free from any concept of spiritual attainment or mystical union."<sup>12</sup> If the consciousness or awareness of the individual expands to such an extent that it identifies with all of the material world, as well as with the single unified and transcendent source of all realities, so that the other (*any* other, regardless of their identity or spiritual faculties) is seen as being just as much one's self as one's own body and mind, then it is not, strictly speaking, possible to die—for how can all of reality die? It is, in the words of one contemporary spiritual teacher from the United Kingdom, "life without a centre."<sup>13</sup>

Coming from a Christian contemplative tradition (she was formerly a nun in the Catholic Carmelite order), Roberts, for her part, does not use the term "enlightenment" in her account of this new and wholly unexpected second leg of her contemplative journey (following the first leg of mystical union). In her 1993 book *The Experience of No-Self*, she relates in great detail this "second contemplative movement," her journey from a merging of one's self with "God" to no self at all.<sup>14</sup> The following is from the introduction:

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11. Different schools of Buddhist thought delineate different stages of enlightenment. Theravada Buddhism has four stages (generally referred to as "paths"), while the more expansive Tibetan accounts have either ten (called "bhūmis" or "grounds") or five (called "paths"). For an overview and comparison of the maps of various Buddhist traditions as well as those from other spiritual models, see Ingram, *Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha*, 294-362.

12. Hixon, *Mother of the Buddhas*, 104.

13. Foster, *Life Without a Centre: Awakening from the Dream of Separation*. Foster takes the phrase "life without a centre" from the prominent twentieth-century spiritual teacher Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895-1986). It should be noted that the term "awakening" is currently a quite popular alternative to the term "enlightenment," and is no less historically valid. The Pali word *buddha* simply means "the awakened one" (it can also be translated as "the one who knows/perceives").

14. Roberts, *The Experience of No-Self*, 195. She relates the "first leg" of her journey in great detail in her 1991 book *The Path to No-Self: Life at the Center*. That book was written before the deeper awakening she experienced, and exclusively narrates her experiences of union with God.

I took for granted the self was the totality of being, body and soul, mind and feelings; a being centered in God, its power-axis and still-point. Thus, because self at its deepest center is a run on with the divine, I never found any true self apart from God, for to find the One is to find the other.

Because this was the limit of my expectations, I was all the more surprised and bewildered when many years later I came upon a permanent state in which there was no self, no higher self, true self, or anything that could be called a self. Clearly, I had fallen outside my own, as well as the traditional frame of reference, when I came upon a path that seemed to begin where the writers on the contemplative life had left off.<sup>15</sup>

Here, in this new mode of being, the entire reflexive apparatus of consciousness, i.e., the ability of thought to refer back to a separate “self,” has been permanently extinguished, so that one can no longer speak of “self-consciousness” with any accuracy. As Roberts writes, “*when we can no longer reflect (or check) on the subject of awareness, we lose consciousness of there being any subject*” (italics in the original).<sup>16</sup> This does not mean that no thought arises, only that it arises without being attached to any particular subject or thinker: “thought goes right on even when there is no self, no thinker, and no self-consciousness.”<sup>17</sup> In this new mode of being, it is difficult even to speak of God, or at least of any sort of personal God, because there is no longer a personal self for such a God to relate to. Roberts wrote her book largely because of the dearth of information available on such states, particularly in the Christian tradition—she notes that Meister Eckhart was the only writer she found in that tradition who had anything helpful to offer her as she transitioned to this new state and embarked upon “the journey beyond union, beyond self and God, a journey into the silent and still regions of the Unknown.”<sup>18</sup>

Although this may sound like an “altered” state of perception, within traditions such as Buddhism and Hinduism, as well as nature-based indigenous traditions across the world, this is in fact generally considered the “true” or “natural” way of seeing things, a mode of true “insight.”<sup>19</sup> One of the more surprising “discoveries” in my own meditative

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15. Roberts, *The Experience of No-Self*, 10-11.

16. Roberts, *The Experience of No-Self*, 94.

17. For a sustained analysis of the actual nature of thought as it relates to mind from the modern perspective of a clinical psychologist, see Mark Epstein’s 1995 book *Thoughts Without a Thinker: Psychotherapy from a Buddhist Perspective*, and in particular chapter five, “Nowhere Standing: The Buddha’s Fourth Truth,” which is directly relevant to the present discussion.

18. Roberts, *The Experience of No-Self*, 11, 16. Unfortunately, a discussion of Meister Eckhart’s remarkable works is beyond the scope of the present study. For an analysis of the mystic and temporal aspects of Eckhart’s thought, see Niklaus Largier’s book *Zeit, Zeitlichkeit, Ewigkeit*.

19. Note that the historical Buddha’s term *vipassana*, which now denotes several different meditative practices the Buddha taught (depending on who is using the term), simply means “insight” or “true seeing.”

journey backs up such claims: namely, the fact that the sense of a separate self is actually produced or created through thought, and that it ceases to appear when that activity of conceptual production ceases. It is simply, in the Buddha's own words, one of many "products of habitual conceptualization."<sup>20</sup> Upon examination, no stable entity called a "separate self" can be found—the existence of such a self was an erroneous assumption to begin with, although it felt very real. Through meditation, that ceaseless production of a separate "I" can fall away, whereupon the world is no longer perceived through the illusory mental veil of separation. The body-mind continues to function remarkably well without that extra layer or perceptual filter; in fact, it functions much more fluidly than before, since no-self implies no-suffering. In this sense, this mode of seeing can be described as a more direct perception of reality, in that it is not filtered through the assumed separate self—with its desires and aversions, its various conceptual frameworks, its opinions and beliefs, all of which serve to color perception.

In his 2015 book *The Mind Illuminated*, Culadasa (aka John Yates), a neuroscientist who is an ordained teacher in Tibetan and Theravada Buddhist lineages, also emphasizes the non-transient nature of awakening, as well as its cognitive aspect: "Awakening isn't some transient experience of unity and temporary dissolution of ego. It's the attainment of genuine wisdom [...]. This is a *cognitive event* that dispels ignorance through direct experience."<sup>21</sup> This valuation of a "truer" or "more natural" mode of perception is implicitly, and often explicitly, present within the work of both Bonnefoy and Adonis, and both of them, in very different ways, posit the notion of a certain *return* to more natural primordial states that we have forgotten or fallen out of—and that Bonnefoy sometimes characterizes in Christian terms as a fall from Grace, and at other times characterizes in more Heideggerian terms as a forgetting of Being. As we shall see, both poets emphasize the prominent role that conceptual language plays in this fall, in this forgetting, and attempt to reverse it in their own ways. Their poetry, as spiritual practice, can thus also be said to serve a certain didactic function: They implicitly attempt to teach the reader how to live, or at least, how (best) to perceive the world.

A growing body of rigorous psychological and neuroscientific research is revealing the key aspects of the mode of perception that has historically been referred to as "enlightenment" or "awakening," using accepted methodology to map the various facets of this way of being in the world. Among the most notable findings is the fact that ongoing perception of union with a higher source is, in fact, only one stage of enlightenment, and that there are stages beyond where even the perception of unity falls away (in line with Buddhist descriptions of the fully awakened or enlightened state).<sup>22</sup> This transition from

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20. Hixon, *Mother of the Buddhas*, 211.

21. Culadasa, *The Mind Illuminated*, 489–95 (citing from the Kindle edition, where "locations" are given in lieu of page numbers).

22. As the Buddha's *Prajnaparamita Sutra in 8,000 Lines* states in reference to the awakened mode of per-

an experience of oneness with transcendent unity to something “beyond” can also be found, if one knows to look for it, all across the spectrum of spiritual literature—in recent years perhaps most clearly in Roberts’s *The Experience of No-Self*.

For the sake of clarity, I provide a brief and simple analogy to elucidate such a state of being, since conceptually describing non-conceptual modes of perception is ultimately doomed to failure (though some failures can, of course, be more felicitous than others—a testament to the growing popularity of spiritual literature in mainstream markets in the US and Europe over the past few decades).<sup>23</sup> Imagine you are an individual cell located somewhere in the human body—let’s say inside one of your fingers. For most of your life, your entire world and reality seem to consist of “your” internal experience within that cell, and it is the focal point of your concern and your awareness: You worry about regulating your mitochondrial proteomes, you take pride in how efficiently your nucleolus synthesizes ribosomes, and you always pay close attention to how many and what kind of molecules pass through your cell membrane. One day, perhaps as the gradual result of many years of meditative and contemplative practices, or perhaps quite suddenly and out of the blue, you awaken out of the perception of that cell being a separate entity in the body, and come to identify instead with the entire organism as a whole. It’s all “you.” And the cell right beside you, as well as other cells in parts of the body that you cannot even perceive with your senses, are just as much “you” as your own individual cell. It is, quite literally, an experience of selflessness, and you suddenly realize, experience, and embody (as opposed to merely understanding conceptually) the Buddha’s term *anatta*: “no separate self” (one of the three characteristics of existence). Upon investigation, you find that there is no separate self (a phenomenon Harris refers to as the *intrinsic selflessness of consciousness*).<sup>24</sup> And if you are a cell who was educated in the so-called Western world, you will think that Descartes did, in fact, get it wrong. I do not exist because I think. Rather, all thought (including thoughts about the “I”) arise within an impersonal background of awareness. In fact, that impersonal background can even be said to be

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ception, “Suchness cannot be enumerated, even with the numeral one” (Hixon 219). More recently, the psychologist Jeffrey Martin has referred to distinct modes of non-symbolic perception as “locations” on a continuum of “persistent non-symbolic experience” (more on this term further in this Introduction). Although there are some methodological shortcomings in his work, his results are intriguing: He documents the transition from the location characterized by an experience of unity with God (or whatever one calls it) and an all-pervasive sense of love for all existence (“Location 3”) to an experience of even greater well-being wherein all sense of unity and even all personal emotions fall away (“Location 4”).

23. The German-born spiritual author Eckhart Tolle (b. 1948), who is said to have changed his first name (from Ulrich) in homage to Meister Eckhart, is perhaps the most prominent example of this popularity. Although he hails from no specific spiritual tradition or religion, his two books *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment* (1999) and *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life’s Purpose* (2005) have sold over eight million copies between them.

24. Harris, *Waking Up*, 82. Harris notes that this is, in fact, his own non-metaphysical translation of the Buddhist technical term “the dharmakaya of emptiness.”

the ultimate source of all thoughts and perceptions, and indeed of the entire supposedly objective world.

This is where things, from the conventional viewpoint of separation, start becoming very strange indeed. For a while, your experience might be one of unity with a larger whole, and you might call that whole God, or something similar. But even in that, there is still a subtle experience of individuality: “I” am unified with God (or whatever you term this), and I perceive and embody the overflowing love of God in all moments of my life. But as you deepen into your nature, it is possible that even that experience of unity with something greater than oneself will disappear, as the self more fully dissolves. With truly no perception of a separate self, no perception of unity is possible, for even unity is still a dualistic experience (as it implies the possibility of its opposite, separation). Even terms like “divine love” often vanish here, as everything melts into a unified field (who would love whom?). Phenomena (sounds, sights, etc., and also thoughts) arise within the space of awareness, but there is no “I” for them to attach to, and even the physical body (however it is perceived in any given moment) is just another object arising within vast impersonal awareness. It only becomes “my” body when the thought “my” is produced. If this kind of thought-production stops happening, then it is simply “a” body and no longer “mine.”<sup>25</sup> Here, terms like “pure consciousness” or “pure awareness” are common, and even the sense of individual agency disappears.

A different analogy, one used frequently by the Indian Advaita (nondual) teacher Nisargadatta Maharaj (1897–1981), is helpful to explain this lack of a sense of agency, which is perplexing, and which many erroneously equate with a kind of vegetative state.<sup>26</sup> Consider the functioning of your body after you eat a meal. How much conscious “agency” goes into the digestion of that food? Your body simply takes care of it naturally and, if you are healthy, without too many problems. In the state of awakening or enlightenment that transcends even the experience of unity, *all* functionings of the individual (thought, movement, etc.) are perceived as occurring spontaneously and naturally without any personal volition, just as digestion occurs spontaneously and naturally, for there is no separate person to have volition. To return to the initial analogy of the cell: The cell simply functions, performing its tasks in the world, without any undue suffering. There is impersonal awareness of all that happens—some would call it “loving,” because this awareness is separate from thought (it observes even thought itself) and includes

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25. It is important to note that this does not imply the cessation of thought, simply the cessation (or at least diminishing) of self-referential thought and the inability to identify for any significant length of time with a concept called “I.” All the same, at this stage (often referred to as “right view” in the Pali Buddhist canon, which can be considered a precursor to the more thorough “right release”), most practitioners report a remarkable drop in the frequency and intensity of thoughts.

26. This analogy recurs throughout Nisargadatta’s recorded self-inquiry talks with his students, collected together in the volume *I Am That: Talks with Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj*.

all possible objects of perception, and it “accepts” all those without reservation, even if thoughts occasionally arise that express non-acceptance (those thoughts themselves appear in the all-inclusive space of awareness). As such, it is not an experience of dissociation, but rather of radical involvement in the world, as everything that arises is perceived and accepted as an integral and necessary part of the single indivisible whole. In a more esoteric interpretation of the Gospels, this also explains the famous quotation by Jesus, “not my will, but thine, be done” (Luke 22:42)—it is the end of personal will, a deep surrendering that has dissolved the illusion of personal control, of agency. To cite a more modern example, the experience of “bottoming out” is common among all sorts of addicts, and is frequently accompanied by a spiritual opening.<sup>27</sup> But the experience of loss of personal will need not be so dramatic, and is frequently evoked by artists of all ilks to describe their experience of artistic creation—for example the Swiss-German painter Paul Klee, to cite one prominent case: “Everything vanishes around me, and works are born as if out of the void. Ripe, graphic fruits fall off. My hand has become the obedient instrument of a remote will.”<sup>28</sup> The cell, now, has woken up to its true nature, and finds that when its individual consciousness disappears into the totality of the organism (i.e., all of existence), suffering falls away in the face of peaceful awareness. It also finds that it does not die when the individual cell dies, because it is much more than any individual cell: Upon investigation, it discovers that it is not only the entire body, but that it is the source from which the entire body arises, the source of all existence. The latter is the more esoteric aspect of the teaching, and one that is extremely difficult to demonstrate, whether by logical deduction or by analogy and metaphor—it is attested to by texts and testimonials since the beginning of recorded human history, and yet it defies any logical or conceptual proof.

From the perspective of awakening or enlightenment then, strictly speaking, there is no “I” writing this study. There are thoughts arising spontaneously in (impersonal) awareness, followed by a physical unit (the body) performing the actions necessary for

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27. Bill Wilson (better known as “Bill W.”), the co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, who had taken LSD in controlled medical experiments together with Aldous Huxley in the 1950s, was enthusiastic enough about the possibilities of LSD to aid in opening up this spiritual dimension of surrender and ego-loss that he considered adding LSD to the 12-Step Program. He even explained the substance’s mechanism in spiritual terms: “It is a generally acknowledged fact in spiritual development that ego reduction makes the influx of God’s grace possible. If, therefore, under LSD we can have a temporary reduction, so that we can better see what we are and where we are going—well, that might be of some help” (Alcoholics Anonymous, “Pass It On,” 370–71).

28. Klee, *The Diaries*, 387. Klee’s voluminous writings on painting and the nature of consciousness reveal a lifelong spiritual journey, and also indicate just how intricately spirituality and art were bound together for him. His experience, it should be noted, is by no means unique among artists, as I show below with the examples of Bonnefoy and Adonis. My presentation of Adonis’s work in particular weaves together the notion of creativity with that of spiritual practice.

those thoughts to be communicated to others (taking down notes, organizing ideas into logically coherent sequences, typing words on a laptop computer, revising those words, etc.). And behind, beneath, and within it all there is impersonal awareness—or, to cite the famous eighth-century Advaita Vedanta teacher Adi Shankara, “eternal, undifferentiated, unshaken Consciousness.”<sup>29</sup>

This perspective that takes a step beyond the concepts of the analytical mind is well suited to analyze the poetry at hand, which, as we shall see, goes beyond conceptual thinking to uncover more revolutionary modes of perception. Even William James, who freely admitted to having only second-hand knowledge of mystical states and to being “forced to look upon the subject so externally,” found it necessary to give the topic of mysticism lengthy consideration.<sup>30</sup>

A recent catch-all psychological term to describe states of enlightenment reveals one of several reasons why a comparative approach can be fruitful: *persistent non-symbolic experience* (PNSE). The term PNSE was coined by the psychologist Jeffrey Martin in an attempt to find “neutral” non-religious vocabulary to use when conducting interviews with his research subjects, but was derived from a paper published by the psychologist S.R. Cook-Greuter in the *Journal of Adult Development*:

Eastern psychologies have often pointed to the nonsymbolically mediated, or immediate ways of knowing as the only kind of knowing that can lead to enlightenment or true insight into human nature. In fact, they consider our addiction to language-mediated, discursive thought as a major hurdle in realizing our true or divine Self, or union with the Ground.<sup>31</sup>

This brings up an extremely important facet of the discussion of enlightenment, one that is of prime importance (though in very different ways) to both Bonnefoy and Adonis: the question of conceptual language. In both Cook-Greuter’s description and in Bonnefoy’s own implicit and explicit poetic ontology, it is *symbolic* representation, the most evident and widespread example of which is conceptual language, that keeps us from a different mode of perception—Cook-Greuter uses the term “enlightenment,” whereas Bonnefoy frequently refers to “presence” or “plenitude.” Language *gets in the way*, as it were, and yet it is the medium Bonnefoy works with. Hence, a new mode of *contraconceptual* poetry is born, a poetry that functions as a spiritual practice, both pointing toward and attempting to inaugurate a new mode of perception.

Discussing mystical states in particular, William James notes the following in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*:

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29. Maharshi, *The Collected Works*, 196. Translated from Sanskrit into Tamil by Ramana Maharshi, before being translated from Tamil into English by Arthur Osborne, and revised by K. Swaminathan.

30. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 413.

31. Martin, “Clusters of Individual Experiences,” 4.



[Mystical states] break down the authority of the non-mystical or rational consciousness, based upon the understanding and the senses alone. They show it to be only one kind of consciousness. They open out the possibility of other orders of truth, in which, so far as anything in us vitally responds to them, we may freely continue to have faith.<sup>32</sup>

Bonnefoy's poetry, a slow working against the concept and the image in favor of a more direct and unmediated perception of reality, also seeks "to open out the possibility of other orders of truth" on the ontological level. Using very similar rhetorical and poetic methods to those of Bonnefoy, Adonis will take up a comparable contraconceptual mode of poetic and spiritual practice, but will expand it from the realm of "mere" ontology into the domain of political and religious critique. In his writing, the more overtly anti-authoritarian aspect that James mentions comes to the fore, in an unconcealed attempt to "break down the authority of the non-mystical or rational consciousness." Through his unique poetry, much more so than through his critical writings on Arab culture, Adonis reveals the full insurrectionary potential of language. And although both Bonnefoy and Adonis were, particularly early in their careers, greatly informed by the Surrealist movement, with its emphasis on the irrational and the unconscious, the two of them went on to express Surrealism's great mistrust of conceptualization in new and unexpected ways, in modes of writing that were more refined and nuanced than much Surrealist poetry. By considering their poetry as modes of spiritual practice (though not reducing it to this definition), my study sheds new light on some of the subtler facets of their writing.

Several aspects of what I mean by "spiritual practice" have, by now, come to light, and I employ the term in part to take this poetry beyond a superficial definition that views the poetry as merely pointing toward mystical experience. While the texts can occasionally be read as pointers, they constitute—within the temporal act of reading—a form of spiritual practice, the goals of which are by no means dissimilar from those of "formal" meditation. In *Being Dharma: The Essence of the Buddha's Teachings*, the renowned Buddhist monk Ajahn Chah (1918–92), who was largely responsible for bringing the Theravada Thai Forest Tradition to the Western world, notes that in spiritual practice, "[w]hat is important is to uproot conventional reality, the seeming appearance of things, to make an end of them and be liberated."<sup>33</sup> This view, which is by no means an aberrant or unique one among Buddhist teachers, reveals just how closely the "goal" of meditation lines up with the "goals" of the poetry of Adonis and Bonnefoy—"goal" being a paradoxical and not entirely appropriate term here, since in many ways the path is the goal. Both meditation and this poetry can, with equal justification, be considered spiri-

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32. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 461.

33. Chah, *Being Dharma*, 103.

tual practices, although the poetry necessarily engages more actively with language than meditation tends to do.

My view of poetry as a spiritual practice is largely derived from the writings of the French philosopher Pierre Hadot, who considered the philosophy of antiquity and beyond as a form of spiritual practice (or as spiritual “exercises”). He also notably characterized his own mode of philosophy in terms of spiritual practice, most recently and most succinctly in 2008 (two years prior to his death), in the online essay “My Spiritual Exercises”:

Philosophy is not primarily a theoretical and abstract activity, but rather a new mode of perception, which Bergson qualifies as ‘naïve,’ in the sense that the artist views nature without any *a priori*, liberating himself from the selfish habits and interests that prevent us from seeing reality as it is.<sup>34</sup>

Like Hadot’s philosophy, the poetry of Bonnefoy and Adonis represents a new “mode of perception,” and in this sense those poems can be called spiritual practices, exercises intended to, in the words of Hadot, “trigger self-transformation”<sup>35</sup> as well as a new way of perceiving the world. This is akin to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s remarks, in his 1945 *The Phenomenology of Perception*, where he defines phenomenology as “a transcendental philosophy which places in abeyance the assertions arising out of the natural attitude, the better to understand them,” and notes that phenomenological reflection “slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world and thus brings them to our notice” to reveal that world “as strange and paradoxical.”<sup>36</sup> Indeed, phenomenology itself, and especially that of Martin Heidegger, frequently discovers, through this suspension of the natural attitude, a hidden spiritual dimension that analytic philosophy generally glosses over (although the phenomenologists often refer to this dimension as “ontological” rather than “spiritual”). The deep parallels between the work of Heidegger and that of Bonnefoy in particular will be highlighted in this study.

My methodological approach throughout (including in this present discussion) weds a more linear and analytical orientation with an ever-deepening spiraling around certain key themes and characteristics, which allows for unexpected aspects of the poetry to be brought to light.<sup>37</sup> The more analytic or conceptual aspect of my analysis allows for clar-

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34. Hadot, “My Spiritual Exercises.” One of Hadot’s best-known accounts of “spiritual exercises” can be found at the outset of a 1977 essay of the same name, published in French in his book *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* (for a brief introduction to the topic, 19–22), and in English in his *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (81–82). (Unless otherwise noted, all translations from French, German, and Arabic throughout are my own.)

35. Hadot’s full definition of spiritual exercise, from “My Spiritual Exercises,” is: “Personally, I would define spiritual exercise as a voluntary, personal practice intended to trigger self-transformation.”

36. Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 63, 70.

37. This dual approach mirrors my own training in both “analytic” and “Continental” philosophy.

ity and communicability, while the meditative “spiraling” and the willingness to engage with the spiritual dimensions of this poetry allow for a richer and deeper understanding. In terms of literary, philosophical, or linguistic theory, I take a text-immanent approach, theorizing from within the poetry and calling upon external philosophies and theories only when they are beneficial to the examination of that poetry.

Once again, my contention is two-fold: first, that the poetry of Yves Bonnefoy and of Adonis—replete as they both are with visions, dreams, and even madness—represent a means of approach to this more “fundamental” mystical or unitary experience (this assertion is virtually self-evident, and needs little exposition, though it is an important underlying assumption); and second, that they also, through their own specific rhetorical and poetological techniques, constitute their own unique forms of spiritual practice, the characteristics of which are explored here. As means of spiritual practice, this poetry transforms both the poet’s and the implied reader’s most fundamental relationships with the world by transforming their relationships with the *languages* through which that world is conceptualized and hence perceived. This is one of the core paradoxes of mystical poetry as a whole, and of the poetry of Bonnefoy and Adonis in particular: namely, that language itself—which most would argue is, by its very nature, a conceptual beast—is used to approach or attain a non-conceptual perception of the world. Here, the core paradox of this study also comes to light: I am using a language that is, it could be argued, even more conceptual than that of the poetry at hand to elucidate largely non-conceptual spiritual practices. This paradox is unavoidable, and perhaps even productive. While this study is, in one aspect, a scholarly intervention in the existing critical literature on Bonnefoy and Adonis, it can simultaneously be considered a kind of spiritual practice itself, or at least a supporting element of such a practice, for it attempts to translate the contraconceptual practices of these two poets into more “ordinary” conceptual language—the act of understanding on a more conceptual level has its clear place within spiritual practice. As an act of love, this study’s goal is not to reduce the works of these two poets to any one of their dimensions (not even the “spiritual” dimension), but rather to broaden and deepen our understanding and appreciation of these texts, which constitute, in my view, some of the most remarkable poetry of the twentieth century.

The first chapter, “Spiritual Turbulence: The Early Phase of Bonnefoy’s Poetry,” traces, in very broad strokes, a spiritual arc across Bonnefoy’s first three collections of poetry, from his Surrealist beginnings in *Anti-Platon*, to his figurations (and idealization) of death in *Du mouvement et de l’immobilité de Douve*, and on to his own “Dark Night of the Soul” as it is poetically expressed in *Hier régnant désert*. In this chapter, I also examine his views on language and his notion of “poetic presence,” considering it in relation to Heidegger’s own views on “presence” and “Being.” In my second chapter, “Coming Back

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The practice of spiraling is largely derived from Heidegger’s later writings, but I strive for a clearer exposition than is often found in those works.

to Earth: The Spiritual Practice of *Pierre écrite*,” I provide an in-depth and sustained reading of Bonnefoy’s subsequent collection, *Pierre écrite*, demonstrating how it represents both the end of Bonnefoy’s “dark night” and the turning point of his poetry, and I discuss how that collection represents the inauguration of a certain apophatic spiritual practice. I then turn to the work of Adonis. In the third chapter, “The Struggle for Arab Culture: On Adonis’s Critical Thought and Poetry,” I examine some of Adonis’s most important critical writings as a backdrop to his poetry and as a means of introducing several key themes, including that of creative innovation, which I link explicitly to the spiritual process of this poetry—this examination entails a critique of Adonis’s often reductionist critical writings, as well as an examination of the spiritually expansive role Sufism plays for him. I also begin my analysis of Adonis’s collection *Aghānī* as an intratextual spiritual practice that is intended to enact certain transformations in the implied reader. Here, the more didactic aspect of Adonis’s poetry as spiritual practice is contrasted with the more subjective spiritual practice of Bonnefoy’s poetry. In the final chapter, “Shaddād’s Reply: The Intertextual Spritual Practice of *Aghānī Mihyār al-Dimashqī* (“Songs of Mihyar the Damascene”),” I shift my focus of attention from the intratextual to the intertextual. I focus on a single poem from the collection as an in-depth case study, in order to demonstrate how Adonis uses intertextual mechanisms to operate a Nietzschean revaluation on several key Islamic concepts, thereby opening up a new cultural field for spirituality. I show the ways in which Adonis, through subtle and sustained work on central terms and concepts, attempts to bring about a certain spiritual revolution in his poetry. In a short conclusion, I tie all these strands together, and offer some general remarks on the spiritual potential of poetry.