



# 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:  
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THE POETICS OF ADONIS  
AND YVES BONNEFOY  
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KAREEM JAMES ABU-ZEID

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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-Qassemi, and curator Suheyra 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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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>

## Conclusion

The impact of the work of Yves Bonnefoy and of Adonis on their respective (trans)national poetic landscapes has been immense. I have attempted to demonstrate how the work of both these poets can also be considered forms of spiritual practice, albeit in very different ways. These differences are largely due to the different cultural contexts in which each poet finds himself. In the cultural context of Bonnefoy, who began his poetic career in earnest after the end of the Second World War, “God” had long ago been declared dead, and the burning question for him was: How to maintain any spirituality at all in this modern era? He was initially intrigued by the sense of the sacred that the Surrealists seemed to value so greatly, but quickly became disillusioned by what he considered the linguistic and philosophical naiveté of their work. His poetry became his spiritual practice, his way of eliciting the sacred and drawing the implied reader into that non-conceptual experience of presence. His path, as we have seen, was not without its obstacles, in particular the mournful Dark Night period through which he passed and which he vividly documented in his 1958 collection *Hier régna le désert*. In his 1965 collection *Pierre écrite*, he overcomes that spiritual impasse, and fully comes into his own as a poet of presence. Through what I have been calling the long poem, Bonnefoy is able to present an entire spiritual process on the page, a lengthy labor that seeks to draw both the poetic subject and the reader into a realm of experience beyond the conceptual. This process parallels that of certain Buddhist meditation practices, which also seek to introduce the meditator to a way of experiencing the world wherein concepts lose their hold on the individual.

For Adonis, who follows Bonnefoy in writing lengthy and sustained collections of poetry, a different cultural context leads to a very different mode of poetry, though it too, I argue, can be viewed as spiritual practice. Although the Arab world was beginning to undergo its own modernist movements in literature in the decades following the end of the Second World War, Adonis never loses his conviction that the concepts and cultural constructs of the Arab public as a whole are largely determined by the rigid conceptual boundaries of mainstream Islam. The transcendent God never died in the Arab world, and so his poetic project takes on a very different hue than that of Bonnefoy. Where Bonnefoy attributes a large degree of individual agency to the implied French reader, Adonis sees a clear lack of any such agency in the implied Arab reader. Bonnefoy’s cultural circumstances allow him to move beyond—or to attempt to move beyond—conceptual language itself in his poetry. For Adonis, even though a sense of the sacred clearly animates his poetry, the Arabic language, in his view, has too much conceptual baggage to allow for such a direct approach. Adonis must first break down the dogmatic structures of Islam and instantiate a creative agency on the part of his reader. In my reading of this poetry, it is precisely this destructive process—as well as the subsequent creativity—that consti-

tutes Adonis's spiritual practice. Although Adonis himself does not always emphasize the spiritual aspect of this, I believe it is present throughout his poetry, which I have argued through the example of his seminal 1961 collection *Aghānī Miḥyār al-Dimashqī*. Where Bonnefoy presents himself, at least in his more mature poetry, as a humble writer going through his own internal spiritual process and grappling repeatedly with the limits of language, Adonis presents himself more as a pagan prophet who seeks to negate Islamic concepts and values (rather than moving beyond the concept entirely, as Bonnefoy does), and his poetry accordingly has a much more didactic tone. Indeed, Adonis seems to reject "humility" outright, which he equates with the act of prostration before a transcendent God, and seeks instead to inaugurate a sense of active and iconoclastic creative agency on the part of the implied reader.

Despite their clear differences, both writers share a deep mistrust of the transcendent, and a view of poetry as path. Their long collections allow for a sustained intratextual working on the concept (whether the Islamic concept or simply the concept in and of itself), a lengthy spiritual process that is rooted firmly in the immanence of this world. Due to its nebulous nature, and due to the materialist and scientific attitude of the modern world, the realm of spirituality is often discounted or ignored in modern scholarship, as it is so difficult to pin down and define. I have not attempted a single rigid definition of the spiritual realm, but I have repeatedly pointed to the fact that spirituality begins where the conceptual ends. In my reading of Adonis, that space of radical unknowing is simultaneously a space of creative agency, one that is, in his view, desperately needed in the modern Arab world. By challenging the authority of the dominant Islamic conceptual framework, Adonis's poetry seeks to clear that spiritual ground. For Bonnefoy, when the concept loses its hold, a new realm of spiritual experience enters in, a mode of immanence that he frequently refers to as presence. This does not lead him to abandon language altogether, but rather to engage in poetry as a spiritual exercise, as an ongoing process of moving beyond the inherently transcendent concept. Considering the work of these two poets as a mode of spiritual practice in and of itself, my aim has been to shed new light on this remarkable poetry, to offer fresh readings of their well-known work, and to open up new avenues of interpretation for future scholarship.