

Reading Guide: *An Introduction to Arab Poetics* by Adonis

Please note: This book was originally written in Arabic and meant for an audience that was already familiar with the features of Arabic poetry. As a result, Adonis occasionally goes into technical matters that are beyond the scope of this class (first half of p. 26, for instance). My intention in having you read this text is not to worry overmuch about the formal details of Arabic poetry, but rather to gain an overall sense of its evolution from the pre-modern to the modern era. Use the questions below to get a sense for the basic themes I'd like you to consider, while skipping over the more technical details. You are only responsible for the vocabulary I've listed below.

Chapter 1

Important date - 622 AD: the first year of the Islamic calendar, marking the date of Muhammad's migration to Medina (accompanied by his supporters). In Islamic historiography, everything prior to 622 AD (the pre-Islamic era) is known as al-Jāhiliyya, or "The Age of Ignorance."

1. According to Adonis, what are some of the implications of the fact that pre-Islamic poetry was an oral art form? How did the orality of this art form define the poetic act *vis à vis* the poet and his/her audience?
2. How did the approach to the Arabic language and its poetic traditions begin to change in the Islamic era?
3. According to al-Farabi (d. 950 AD), what distinguishes a literary (poetic) text from a non-literary utterance (p. 24)? Which of the five literary properties described by Culler in *Literary Theory* (p. 28-35) does al-Farabi's opinion most closely evoke?
4. Starting on p. 32, what is the crisis in respect to the relationship between poetry and modern Arabs that Adonis refers to?

Vocabulary

ṣajʿ (*ʿ* = a deep guttural consonant, "ayin"):

hemistich:

qasīd (or *qasīda*):

Chapter 2 (pp. 35-37; 45-49; 52-53)

1. How did the question of "form" *versus* "content" play out in the view of the classical Arabic literary critics? In the view of Adonis, what changed everything (see p. 37)?

2. According to the classical literary critic, al-Jurjani (d. 1078 AD), what is the secret of “poeticalness” (p. 46)? Why is this so? Does al-Jurjani’s emphasis on “strangeness” as the essence of poetic language evoke anything you’ve read in Culler’s *Literary Theory*?

3. Would you describe al-Jurjani’s approach to poetry as being based in *poetics* or *hermeneutics*?

Chapter 3 (pp. 55-62; 64-67)

1. How does the distinction of “poetry” *versus* “thought” play out in Adonis’ history of Arabic poetics (pp. 55-56)?

2. How does the etymology of the word “poetry” (*shi‘r*) in Arabic both confound and support this distinction (pp. 57-58)?

3. What does the great classical (Abbasid-era) poet, Abu Nuwas, represent to Adonis (pp. 59-62)?

4. How does Adonis characterize the works (and mind) of al-Ma‘arri (d. 1058, pp. 64-67)?

Vocabulary

shi‘r:

Chapter 4 (pp. 75-81; 88-89; 98-102)

1. What role has “modernity” played in Arab society in the classical/medieval and contemporary eras? How deep is its historical reach?

2. According to Adonis, how has the traditionalist or fundamentalist culture impacted the valuation and development of Arabic poetry from the 19th century onwards?

3. What role did western literary thinking play in development of Adonis’ own ideas regarding Arabic poetry (pp. 80-81)?

4. When did a new, authentic, “second modernism” begin to take shape, and what did it look like (p. 98)

5. In his conclusion, how does Adonis define the essence of modernity (pp. 100-102)?

Vocabulary

nahda: