

# J. Haydar — contemporary Arab bard seeks eternal truth

By Ica Wahbeh

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*"Should I win my spurs today  
I'll cross the frontiers of time to write my  
name on the walls of tomorrow."*

Jawdat R. Haydar

AMMAN — For an Arab to be known for his poetry in the U.S. is an accomplishment in itself. To write in English and draw praise from literary critics in the "New World" is an act seldom paralleled.

Jawdat Haydar, a Palestinian-Lebanese of the A. Rihani, M. Naimy and Khalil Gibran caliber, is one such Arab who, in his fine collection of poetry, grants us the privilege of sharing with him the intellectual heritage of those Lebanese who feel as much at home in the American cultural tradition as in their own.

Born in Baalbek, Lebanon, in 1906, Mr. Haydar was educated in the United States and France. He holds a B.Sc in education from North Texas State University in Denton. After returning to Lebanon, on completion of his studies, he became principal of the

National College at Aley and later assumed the directorship of the Najah National School in Nablus. Between 1932 and 1960 he worked with the Iraq Petroleum Company as an industrial relations advisor, and, later, as general manager of the Mid-East Auto Trading Company. He now resides in his hometown of Baalbek, but often visits Jordan where he has a daughter.

Mr. Haydar's poems reflect a profound philosophy of life; life in its eternity, its infinite, repeated cycles; life as represented by history and civilisations, by people and places that never completely disappear but get transformed, leave something behind, create immortality.

The first volume of verses, "Voices," was published in 1980 by Vantage Press, New York. "I called it Voices be-

cause there are many people inside. I talk about Gandhi, Napoleon, Frost."

How did the poet start writing?

The literature teacher at university left a strong impression on the 17-year-old mind. She read a poem by Burns. "I wrote a poem myself. She liked it and encouraged me to write."

In 1928, back in Lebanon, the writer, overwhelmed by memories, wrote a poem about Texas, the place where he studied.

"There's no land but dear old Texas for me,

'Tis paradise 'tis the home of the free

That's why I long to cross the ocean bar,

To dwell in my country to hail its star." (Dear Old Texas)

Mr. Haydar professes interest in philosophy and in discovering the way it forms an integer part of existence. He prefers rhymed to free verses.

Why write in English?

"I began thinking in English not in Arabic. It is easier to express myself in English," he says, adding that the death of

his only son a few years ago triggered his writing a poem in Arabic.

The tone of his first volume of verses is that of lyric melancholy.

"I value the years, the wrinkles deep

On my brow, around my eyes But O! for my thoughts that come and heap

On my heart, a world of sighs." (Wash, Wash, Wash)

Nostalgic as it sounds, Mr. Haydar's poetry is not escapist. Rather it is committed and concerned; the commitment of a moral man who respects the traditional values associated with family, who watched life go by and reflected on it.

Mr. Haydar's concern in the first volume was to awaken his readers to the dangers of their hostile environment and to remind them of the precious privilege of their humanity:

"Everything that goes to excess is harmful;

We have had enough of this brutality;

We need more common sense to be more thoughtful

Of the human race and mortality.

Adam ate the forbidden fruit and fell;

We are not prepared to eat the poisoned one

God when disobeyed, He created a hell;

That's why, we should look always beyond the sun." (Pollution)

The poet, who had the grace to grant the Jordan Times an interview, although a "farmer" at heart ("I still farm my land to get the fresh smell of earth") has an immense fascination with the sea. Maybe it is the symbolism it conveys: the beginning and end of life, infinity, fertility, untamed force; maybe it is a desire to explore unknown realms, to become one with a never-ending cycle of life, born again with every breaking wave.

People and places pass in front of our eyes, history and characters are revived in his poems. The images are strong. They transpose the reader in other worlds and times wherefrom it is difficult to come back to reality.

The poems seem to be a permanent search for the

meanings of life and death, of mysticism, of inner soul. And all this search, as old as man himself, is done in circles (or maybe spirals) suggestive of the course of life itself.

"We start going back on the road we take

Walking ahead to the outset behind;

.....

A memory of the walk on the track

And the track trails in smoke behind the Flame." (Going Back).

In the second volume, "Echoes," published in Lebanon in 1986, the tone of the poems is more contemplative. They were written during the time of Lebanon's political troubles. In true patriot, Mr. Haydar reacted to the anarchy and destruction around him with the stoical fortitude of someone who for many years has been a keen observer of the human condition.

"Yesterday I was the prince of my youth;

Today I'm the emperor of my years.

My empire but a domain of the truth,



Jawdat R. Haydar

A smile in the spring in winter but tears." (The Prince of Youth).

A third volume of verses, to

be named "Shadows" is to be published soon in New York. The volume will contain poems.