

Poetry in seventy years of motion

Jawdat Haydar's love of the English language has translated to countless pages of creativity, writes *Nada Al-Awar*

Poetry and Jawdat Haydar are old friends. Inspired to write a poem for a professor at the University of Denton in Texas when he was a student there – “I was young and Miss Cleveland was very pretty,” he laughs – the 90-year-old Haydar has indulged his passion for writing for close to seven decades.

“I loved the United States, and after I came back to Lebanon I wrote a poem about Texas that was published in several American newspapers,” says Haydar. “I’ve kept going ever since.”

That poem, like much of his work, was written in English. “There is something about the English language I can’t quite explain. It has a kind of facility that I love,” muses Haydar. “Maybe it’s because the teachers who taught me English were so professional and explained poetry in such a way that I had to love it.”

Although a native of Baalbeck, Haydar and his family were exiled to Turkey at the start of the first world war. He was only eight years old at the time and lost much of his Arabic during his stay there. When he returned to Beirut, he decided to learn English: “I was taught English by Edib Efendi Farhat, a scholar, and was one of three of his students to pass the English exam at the American University of Beirut,” explains Haydar. “I entered the first form in 1919.”

The ease with which he expresses himself in the language, and the accessibility of his poetry, belie the sometimes arduous nature of the writing experience. “Writing in English is very hard because it is an irregular language,” explains Haydar. He maintains that poetry is about “constructing structures” rather than divine inspiration: “You have to build a poem, and the process is so difficult that one poem can sometimes take years to complete.”

Only “refined learning”, explains Haydar, “gives one a true perspective on humanity”. He feels he acquired this type of knowledge primarily through reading. “I have read translations of Chinese, Japanese, Russian and Persian poetry,” he says. “The question in poetry is not just to write about one’s experiences. Education is very important for writers.”

Citing a poem he once wrote about Napoleon after a visit to the Les Invalides mausoleum in Paris, Haydar contends that poetry is the ability to “write in 24 lines on a subject about which thousands of books may have been written”.

But there is nothing contrived about Haydar’s poetic “constructions”. His work is

That’s Why I Say

Though I’m bound to the cliff of the eighties soon
I never believed in my wrinkles to sorrow
Even now my season minus sun plus moon,
I stand against the menace of tomorrow.

And so I have no worries to bear in mind
As never had I a lock without a key,
Having explored the code of wisdom to find
The cryptic secret betwixt the world and me.

Yet through the gene shell of life I keep a drill
To procure sufficient knowledge and declare
A triumph over the years but alas! Still
I might hold the line of hope without a snare
That’s why I say

There is nothing sure in a moving tide
Of a world changing faces day by day
For life and death are always side by side
And we come here but not for long to stay.

Jawdat Haydar, 1984

unruffled and deliberate and the product of quiet contemplation in those hours before dawn when his heart and mind are at their most serene. “I wake up at four o’clock in the morning and lie in bed thinking, and subjects come to mind,” he explains. “Then when I get up I write it all down.”

It was on such a night in 1984, shortly after the death of his only son Bassam, that Haydar’s thoughts took on a different turn.

“I was asleep and suddenly woke up. I knew that the poem I would write about my son had to be in Arabic,” he says quietly.

Entitled *My Existence is Non-Existence*, the poem uses the ebb and flow of the sea and the changing seasons as metaphors for sorrow and bewilderment. In the last two lines of the poem, *My lifetime has departed and returned as I*



Haydar: ‘I wake up at 4am and lie in bed thinking, and subjects come to mind’

stand amazed in the midst of my grief, non-existent, Haydar meditates upon the shared and secret intimacy between life and death.

Haydar has discovered that, despite his love for English – which he describes as “the language of my intellect” – his native Arabic can best reveal the extent of his emotions. His ability to excel in both languages has helped him acquire a formidable reputation both here and abroad.

When reciting his poems, Haydar’s English is

heavily accented. The rise and fall of his voice, the pauses for breath and the repetition of certain lines are reminiscent of recitations of Arabic poetry. He lifts his head and points a finger to the sky. There is no hesitation in his words:

*How I long to saddle my horse and fly
Back over the tracks of life to regain
The age of my youth ere I age and die
Then o then! I’ll love and be loved again
(from The Wonder Man)*