

## And Shall the Twain Ever Meet? The Poetry of Jawdat Haydar as Mediation

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6 December 2010

In these troubled times, when it seems the whole world is being torn apart, it is a salutary lesson in the art of “dialogue” to read and study the poetry of Jawdat Haydar, who, as this paper will show, was one of the earliest poets to try and bridge the gaps between civilizations, rather than encourage talk about the “clash of civilizations”.

Jawdat Haydar’s interest in the West began with his passionate love for the English language, and as a young boy he decided to continue his schooling in the Syrian Protestant College in 1923, which was still a school and later became the American University in Beirut. In the classic *The Arab Awakening* George Antonius acknowledges that Arab nationalism in Greater Syria owes a great deal to the missionary efforts of the West, in particular the American Protestants, and that the “intellectual effervescence which marked the first stirring of the Arab revival owes most to their labours” (Antonius, p. 43). It is thus worth remembering that studying in foreign institutions is one of the elements that increased Haydar’s nationalism.

Through his foreign education, Jawdat Haydar came in touch with the best in American culture, whether at school in Beirut or the university in Texas to which he proceeded. Did Haydar admire the Americans? We may get an answer in his poem “Dear Old Texas”, where he says

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.

He loves Texas for its hat, pistol, horse, cow, flag, heaven, nature, and sea, but more importantly, because of the values it supports. He ends his poem with a prayer, “God keep you, God safeguard your liberty.” He calls America “my country” because he spent happy years there, but also because in Texas he witnessed the democracy and liberty it was so proud of. Does this mean that he abandoned Lebanon for Texas? Does love for the West negate love for your homeland? Does one exclude the other? Not at all, for Haydar finds similarities between the two. In the poem entitled, simply, “Lebanon”, he declares,

That’s the Lebanon the heart of the world

Where the cedars living for ages unknown

And the flag of liberty always unfurled

In a democracy without a throne.

Having spent his formative years under American influence, Haydar came in contact with all that is admirable about the nation that was soon to replace Britain as the leading world power. He was also able to relate that to the same admirable qualities in his own country.

One of his earliest poems in English was written in 1931. The poem praises May Ziadeh and the concept of liberty, both in her life and in the Egypt that had adopted her, saying,

To cry live Egypt live independent and free

She is Venus and the marrow of liberty

Thus we find that Haydar's concern for liberty precedes his poem on Texas, and we also discover that it is one of the main concerns of his poetry. This is understandable, given the period and circumstances in which he was living. In the thirties all the Arab world was suffering under the yoke of British and French occupation, and Haydar, who had himself as a child felt the sting of Ottoman occupation as well, knew too well the value of liberty. It is no wonder, then, that his earliest poetry is a celebration of personal and national freedom. It is no coincidence either that such sentiments were voiced in Palestine, where the crimes of the British were to be their worst, with their endorsement of Jewish immigration and settlement, leading to the creating of the state of Israel. In 1950, Haydar spoke out against the massacre of Deir Yassin, again upholding the principle of liberty in the face of injustice, saying:

My old father was killed at Deir Yassin,

My mother, my sister were also slain,

The world was blind but the blood I have seen

Gushing out from those dearest hearts again.

The UN should have been the sword to shield

The rights of man and his integrity,

The heavily armed brigade on the field

To smash the oppressors of liberty.

But tis a tavern for talk, wine and dice,

The Superpowers take their drinks and go,  
The small and weaker nations pay the price  
Then come Sam and the Bear to close the show.

Written in 1950, the poem sounds very contemporary. All of us today can hear these words being spoken now. The power of the words lies in the fact that they are so visionary, and still ring true 60 years later, and also in the fact Haydar stood up in his poetry to the Superpowers and condemned their injustice and abuse of human rights. Accomplices all, it turns out they are involved in the conspiracy to establish the Zionist state, violating the principles of liberty and democracy they had upheld. In 1998 he denounces the Americans for their double standards, and reminds them of the values they had established their country to practice and had fought for. In "A Hint", he tells the Americans

Yankees, wake up timely ere you regret  
It's wrong to get enthralled sleep and forget  
Be schooled well and read Teddy's Alphabet  
Then be wise and quit a harmful mind-set.

Haydar's American education and his love for Americans does not blind him to their flaws and failings, and does not stop him from criticizing them for failing to live up to their standards and for forgetting their values of liberty and justice.

But Haydar does not stop at criticism. He looks forward and he has a vision for the East/West conflict, seeing a possibility of reconciliation between East and West, where both cultures can appreciate each other. In a poem titled "Untitled", he says:

I would that Milton be the living open lid to eye  
This paradise found on these Lebanese shores  
To forget the long film of the sable nights spent  
And write anew his Paradise Lost  
Messages from the east to the west

To look at the same sky and enjoy this beauty of the world.

Thus Haydar would like a great poet like Milton to see Lebanon, or the East, with his own eyes, and pass on the image to the West, thus creating a Paradise for the two. In fact, Haydar goes

beyond a paradise of an east and west united in love. The particular brand of Haydar's mediation between East and West is a philosophical one, based on his humanism and transcending the petty differences of immediate greed and ineptitude, as well as borders and divisions. In one poem entitled "Superpowers" he addresses the West

Nip in the bud your disguised quarrels and be friends

The world's waiting for your nuclear accord

Make Irish and spit on your palm and shake hands

To endorse you word and attain your reward.

What Haydar is calling for is an end to greed, wars and senseless deaths. His is a universal call for peace, preaching love and brotherhood instead of destructive competition. Again, in a poem called "Countrymen" he expresses a hope for a better future for the whole world:

Teach the people how to climb the highest slopes

To build on top a love nest for all to dwell

In a world of democracy full of hopes

A paradise inside this our present hell.

Addressed primarily to the Lebanese people during the civil war, the message is a universal and visionary one, transcending local and temporal concerns, whether they be the Lebanese civil war or the Arab Israeli conflict, transcending borders and artificial boundaries, to encompass all humanity. The present may be hell, Haydar is telling humanity, but if we put aside our differences, if we dare to dream, we can live in a love nest in a world of democracy and hope. This then is the vision of Jawdat Haydar: a mediation not between East and West only, but between the citizens of the world, based on an ideal of democracy. This is the Paradise that Haydar envisions for the world, for Haydar is not just a poet of a particular place or time, but a philosopher for all time.

Antonius, George. *The Arab Awakening*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1938.