‘FROM “DOVER BEACH” TO “LEBANON”: JAWDAT HAYDAR, FAITH, REASON AND CULTURE

One of the world’s most enduring debates is the tension between religion and science, often recast as the conflict between faith and reason. Jawdat Haydar also addressed this issue and sought to resolve it for his own peace of mind in his typically down to earth way.

The Victorian essayist and poet Matthew Arnold, whose writings Jawdat Haydar well knew, recorded his response to the debate in a poem, called “Dover Beach,” probably written in 1851.

The poet sets the scene, as its title would suggest, on the seashore in the south of England, near where Arnold spent his honeymoon close to the seaport of Dover. It is evening and the poet watches the tide ebbing and flowing, in the company of a woman, presumably the lady who had recently become his wife:

The sea is calm tonight

The tide is full; the moon lies fair

Upon the straits—on the French coast the light

Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand

Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.

Come to the widow, sweet is the night air.

Then the poet draws the lady’s attention to the ebb and flow of the tide and comments:

The sea of faith was too once at the full and round earth’s shore

Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl’d.

But now I only hear its melancholy, long withdrawing roar,

Retreating to the breath of

The night wind down the vast edges drear

And naked shingles of the world.

Therefore, Arnold concludes:

… let us be true

To one another, for the world which seems

To lie before us like a land of dreams,

So various, so beautiful, so new,

Hath really, neither joy nor light

Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain,

And we are here as on a darkling plain

Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,

Where ignorant armies clash by night.

The closing lines echo Sophocles’ description of the night-time invasion of Sicily during the Pelopenesian wars. According to the Greek historian Thucydides, it was a time of great confusion and indiscriminate slaughter, because the dark made it difficult to distinguish between friend and foe. This, Arnold believed, was analogous to the intellectual confusion which the debate over the truthfulness of the Biblical story of the Creation provoked by Sir Thomas Lyell’s geological theorizing and Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution had aroused. To cope with such intellectual chaos, Arnold suggests, the only consolation is to rely on human love. The only certitude in an uncertain word is that which exists between those who are sincere in their affection for one an Haydar’s solution to the faith-reason dialogue was somewhat similar, though he expressed it in more specific terms. This is evident if we compare Arnold’s poem with one by Jawdat Haydar, which owes much to “Dover Beach” in terms of verbal echoes but less to its spirit. Where Arnold’s poem is a cry of desperation, Haydar’s is optimistic; where Arnold was gloomy, Haydar is jubilant. The poem I refer to is called, quite simply, “Lebanon.”

It begins with a reference to the poet’s late wife Maliha, whom Haydar wishes were with him to share his night-time experience, at a place probably not far from where we are now: I would that you were with me here, sharing

This celestial view, seen, unseen before

Where Sannin eternally up staring

At the evening star glaring at the shore.

The deep is rising, the ships heading east

The green mountains capped with snow behind

Perhaps the eye of an artist possessed

May contain such a paradise in mind.

Then the poet asks his companion to share the vision before them: Come darling, see what I see, and more. Stars above, stars below, moon in between A brigade of cavalry charging the shore Falling back on sand in glorious sheen. But, note the change of tone from Arnold’s poem. Instead of despair, Haydar experiences hope. Instead of Arnold’s vision of a bleak future, where “ignorant armies clash by night,” there is an affirmation of life and liberty: O life! There’s nothing more to enchant me Than this vision of growing ecstasy. I feel dissolved and carried fancy-free Where beauty and dreams meet in poesy. And finally, the poet transmutes this abstract feeling of joy and freedom into something more tangible, a place where these positive values have coalesced: 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. Those of a cynical turn of mind might think that Arnold’s “ignorant armies clashing by night” is a more apt description of Lebanese reality than Haydar’s idealistic vision but the poet makes clear by his reference to “cedars living for ages unknown” that what he has in mind is the “idea” of Lebanon rather than its recent dysfunctional reality. For Haydar, Lebanon’s twenty-five year long civil war was an aberration not the norm. This is evident in another poem called “We shall ever be yearning for Beirut.” There he exhorts his countrymen “to quit this vile world of bloodshed and crime, immorality, pollution and shame, a world of tarnished honor and shame.” Instead, we should focus on our paradise lost, “where the sacred rivers run/Where the birds sing and we enjoy to hear/Where there will ne’er be an eclipse of the sun/And where there’ll ne’er be pollution to fear.” Although on occasions Haydar seemed to despair of Lebanon, as he did for humanity, noting the capacity of both for imposing self-inflicted wounds, he had little doubt about the path Lebanon and Man should take. As one may readily deduce from even a cursory look at his poetic achievement, Haydar’s philosophy of life was quite simple. It was love your fellow human beings; love the world in which you live; love God; treasure your freedom and do not think you can cheat death because, as he put it, the world which had a beginning must have an end. Haydar had no time for sectarianism; no time for political parties (when he ran for parliament in the Bekaa, he ran as an independent); no time for those who pursued scientific experimentation that imperiled the lives of others; no time for dogma or philosophical abstractions. Instead, It was the “idea” of Lebanon that shaped Haydar’s vision. Haydar shared with Mikhail Naimy, a writer he much admired, the same vision of Lebanon: a place steeped in history, the cradle of myths, a place that had somehow managed to thrive, in spite of having to accommodate a multiplicity of faiths and creeds. It was a country that simultaneously looked to both east and west, a country in which both faith and reason could peacefully co-exist. Indeed, it was Lebanon’s pluralism which defined its identity. In short, Lebanon, as an idea, was the very epitome of the ideal world that Haydar envisaged. That it was not always able to live up to its potential, Haydar acknowledged but he never lost faith in the idea that Lebanon had the capacity to be a beacon to the rest of the world. In spite of petty religious and political squabbles and intrigues, Haydar always clung to the belief that Lebanon could serve as a universal role model, a place where individual human rights were enshrined within a legal framework which allowed for cultural diversity. This same vision—though not its geographical identity-- informs a statement by Diana Ayton-Schenker in her 1995 United Nations Background Note, entitled “The Challenge of Human Rights and Cultural Diversity.” There she makes the point that cultural diversity need not be a cause of friction, as long as we recognize that human beings everywhere have the “legal” right to safety and security. There is no such thing as a “cultural” right, only a human right. In other words, one should not believe that just because one is a passionate believer in a particular creed or cause, this entitles one to impose its message on others. Rather, we should seek to identify what unites us rather than what may divide us. But let Jawdat Haydar have the final word. I refer to his poem, “Brothers”: Be brave to bear the burden of your fate And wise to quell the imposed storm of hate Then teach those gate-crashers to understand The meaning of our brotherhood and land The meaning of free birth and liberty The rights of Man and his integrity.