

Title: “Jawdat Haydar, an Eco-critical Approach”

Subject: Literature/Cultural Studies/Eco- and Geocritical Studies

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Topical Outline:

*“I decided to climb up the mountain
Passing by the grave of Gibran
And the old cedars on my way
To the Black Corner.”* (Jawdat Haydar, from “The Black Corner”, *Echoes* 1986)

A critical approach to Jawdat Haydar’s poetic/literary discourse should take into consideration two aspects directly related to the poet’s works, National (e.g. national identity construction) and Eco- as well as Geocriticism, which form the core of Haydar’s literary repertoire and which reflect the latest topical trends in the Humanities worldwide. In a presentation at the 1995 ASLE conference, John Elder summed up traditionally defined nature writing as a “form of the personal, reflective essay grounded in attentiveness to the natural world and an appreciation of science but also open to the spiritual meaning and intrinsic value of nature” (cited in Armbruster and Wallace 2001: 2). While a concentration on this form of writing makes perfect sense as a starting point for a critical school that takes the natural environment and human relations to that environment, ecocriticism’s most important task at this time is expanding its boundaries beyond these topics to address a wider spectrum of texts (as spatial narrative). In addition to proving ecocriticism’s usefulness to scholars outside the field, such an expanded sense of environment and of the potential topics for ecocritical analysis, which extend to geopolitical spaces as well as nation and culture, will help Ecocriticism grapple with one of its central conceptual challenges – understanding nature and culture as interwoven rather than as separate sides of a dualistic construct (ibid.). A viable Ecocriticism then “must continue to challenge dualistic thinking by exploring the role of nature in texts more concerned with human cultures, by looking at the role of culture in nature and by attending to the nature-focused text as also a cultural – literary text” (ibid: 4). Authors such as Jawdat Haydar can inspire us to ventilate

and invigorate the merely academic world. Our central purpose should be renewing literary education and enhancing the vitality of our culture.

Connor (1994) defines a nation as a psychological bond that joins a people and differentiates it, in the subconscious conviction of its members, from all other people in a vital way. A major recurrent theme/trope in Jawdat Haydar's poetic discourse is a longing for pre-civil war Lebanon (1975-1991) and a personal exile/alienation from a "modern" Lebanon torn apart by civil strife. Haydar's poetry represents continuity and modernization of the *Mahjar* (the émigré poets of *Al-Rabitah Al-Qalamiyyah* in New York pioneered by Gibran, Rihani and Naimy amongst other Lebanese-American elites at the time) though the fact that he had important ideas regarding contemporary issues, such as the end of civil strife in Lebanon, environmental pollution, and scientific as well as cultural progress in his country of origin. His modernization of the theme of alienation was due to a commitment to geo-political and environmental causes, which are directly related to the themes of nature, the Lebanese nation-state, nostalgia for the past, and a critical eye on the present. Haydar was first inspired to write poetry by "the beauty of [Lebanon's] nature" (McDonnell 2006, page not available). He sought refuge in nature and committed himself to his country, his people, and the environment. As such, Haydar's poetic oeuvre lies in the context of "ecopoetry" (a term coined by Scigaj 1999) of political agency. Haydar's politics cannot be separated from his natural inclinations and his call to his people/readers (universally and locally, in a Lebanese context) to preserve nature and national heritage and to avoid conflict. Haydar's modernity thus lies in its embodied political/poetic voice which foregrounds collective agency, in the service of environmental, cultural, as well as geo-political activism. His discourse exceeds mere nostalgia for an immemorial past and instigates a progressive vision for a civilized future; a call to action, from nostalgia to critique.

Haydar's modernity reflects a shift in the Humanities towards "Spatiality" (Tally 2013), as well as Eco-/Geocritical explorations of Lebanese national heritage and identity (as an "imagined community") particularly. The "spirit of place" evident in Jawdat Haydar's literary repertoire on Lebanon is really more of a power discovered through reading Haydar's texts. Obviously, the reading and the writing are complementary, and there is a great deal of overlapping territory in the production and consumption of literature, although literary geography is largely a product of educating the reader to enhance her/his own engagement with the literary cartography of the text. As Umberto Eco famously states, "to read fiction means to

play a game by which we give sense to the immensity of things that have happened, are happening, or will happen in the actual world” (1994 cited in Tally 2013: 85). This is equally true of the spaces as of the events depicted in literary narrative. The focus is on the social and, ultimately, environmental impacts of narrative and of criticism itself. In reading, the “spirit of the place” emerges from the writer’s literary cartography which the reader uses to give imaginative form to the actual world. In so doing, the reader draws upon frames of reference to help make sense of the text, the spaces it represents, and the world we live in.

Finally, the approach to the study is a joint literary-environmental-cultural studies endeavor which revolves around various literary genres as well as field trips and environmental-geo-critical education of the Lebanese natural/national landscape.

Omar Baz Radwan, Ph.D.

SALIS Scholar in Comparative Literature
Dublin City University
Dublin, Ireland

Part time Lecturer
Humanities Department
Lebanese American University
Beirut, Lebanon