

Beirut ceremony to honor Arab world's 'Prince of Poets'

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BEIRUT: A year has passed since Jawdat Haidar, named the "Prince of Poets" by the Arab League, died in Lebanon at the age of 102. The centenarian writer belonged to a long tradition of Lebanese poets who composed their verse in English, including Gibran Khalil Gibran and Amin Rihani. On Tuesday, Haidar will be posthumously honored with a ceremony devoted to his life and work at Unesco Palace in Verdun, during which the winners of a student essay competition will also be announced.

The contest, sponsored by the Organizing Committee of the

Friends of Jawdat Haidar, seeks to recognize "students' creative skills in thought and expression" as conveyed in English-language submissions of 5,000 words or less that tackle Haidar's poetry as their primary subject.

Haidar was born just after the turn of the century to a family of wealthy Baalbeki landowners. He grew up in an environment populated by Ottoman subjects, Arab nationalists and assorted intellectuals. He attended Beirut's International College and then traveled to France and the United States to pursue his university studies. He graduated from North Texas State University with a degree in education and returned to Lebanon in 1928.

He worked for the Iraq Petroleum Company and took

various posts in agriculture and trade. He wrote his poems in English until the death of his wife in 1982, at which point he began composing in Arabic. Haidar is often credited with reviving Lebanese literature after

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the 1975-1990 Civil War.

His work is collected in four English-language anthologies: "Voices," published in 1980, "Echoes," in 1986, "Shadows," in 1999 and "101 Selected Poems," published in 2006.

An assimilation of experi-

ences, Haidar's books tackle everything from the parallel lives of an individual and a nation to the sociological dilemmas of mankind and the environmental problems of an unpredictable century. He blended East and West with great dexterity in his poetry.

In formal terms, the importance of rhythm, and the ability of rhythm to convey one's desire for immortality, is evident in poems such as "Orpheus."

"Orpheus pull out the strings of my heart / And stretch them head to bottom on your lyre; / Tighten them, tune them and please quickly start / The yearning melodies of my desire," Haidar wrote.

Clearly influenced by the likes of John Keats, Lord Byron,

William Wordsworth and, of course, Gibran, Haidar used poetry to purge personal anguish, such as the death of his only son, as well as to express collective anxiety, such as web of hatred and distrust spun by 15 years of internecine violence.

"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," he wrote in the poem "Countrymen."

"Come back put your foot down and your head up / Like proud Sannin on the breast of our land / With eyes looking the world from the top up / Our flag, down the years of the brine washing sand," he wrote in the poem "Lebanese Immigrants."



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