

Name: Pamela Layoun

E-mail address: pamela_layoun@yahoo.com

University: Holy Spirit University of Kaslik (USEK) – Kaslik, Lebanon

Current Grade Level: Masters

Topic Selected: The Melancholy of Jawdat Haydar's Echoes

The Melancholy of Jawdat Haydar's Echoes

Jawdat Haydar is another name which adds itself to the list of prestigious poets that Lebanon has given to the world, such as Gibran Khalil Gibran and Mikhail Naimy. Haydar's verses are eloquent in style, for they are written with high sensitivity and contain prolific imagery, some of which are directly drawn from Greek, Roman and Phoenician mythologies. To describe Haydar, he is the Lebanese bard who celebrates the history and beauty of his country's landscape, but who, on the other hand, laments the scars of the Lebanese civil war. Haydar is also the Romantic poet, who likens himself to English Romantic poets by seeking refuge in nature when circumstances in his life prove to be unbearable. Armed with powerful lines, Haydar unleashes his feelings of melancholy, which is a combination of sorrow and grief, in Echoes. In fact, the suggestive title Echoes is rich with melancholic rhymes, which evoke echoes of a Lebanese glorious past, the poet's own past and the memory of his deceased wife and son. Haydar's opus also echoes the melancholic Romantic themes of English Romantic poets, the most prominent of whom is Lord Byron. Ultimately, Haydar's melancholy is his only way to show his gradual acceptance of certain harsh facts in life such as enduring the aftermath of war, losing someone dear or growing old.

Echoes reveals a poet with sincere feelings. It is Haydar who says: "Once I started writing, I realized that through my work I can express my deep inner feelings of beauty, love, ambition, passion, pain, despair, loss and worry" (McDonnell, 22-26). Haydar gives expression to his "deep inner feelings" in fifty-four poems, which make up Echoes,

which is not an accidental title. In fact, an echo involves the creation of an original sound followed by endless repetitions of that sound. The repetitions are only there to remind us that the original sound cannot be reproduced. In the same way, Haydar's echoes evoke memories of a country which cannot restore its peaceful pre-war state, memories of people who cannot be brought back to life, and memories of youth, which multiply as the poet grows older.

In Echoes, Haydar weeps over Lebanon by comparing its prosperous past with its barren present. In "Beirut", the Lebanese capital is depicted in two different ways. The first portrays a capital that used to be bustling with life, whereas the second represents a recent desolate graveyard. Haydar begins with a simple question that conveys his distress at the sight of his beloved city turned into dust: "Where's Beirut of yesterday?" (1) Initially perceived as "the precursor of religious pride" (3) and the teacher of "the true meaning of brotherhood and love" (7), Beirut is finally a painful memory, "reduced to heaps of prehistoric mounds, / inhabited by the whimpering owls at night / And far stretching skeins of eagles at sunrise" (15-17). In the end, Haydar directs his wrath at the world that remains silent vis-à-vis the calamity striking the Lebanese territories: "And I stand here on the highest mound / To spit now and every year once on the whole world" (27-28). In another poem entitled "O Time! O Fate!", the diction is predominantly melancholic and lacking any signs of hope for Lebanon regaining its previous grandeur:

O God! our hearts are still throbbing
 In waves of grief gathering tears
 For the land we are still sobbing
 With the flow of the passing years. (5-8)

Losing hope regarding the possibility of seeing Lebanon standing on its feet again forced a lot of Lebanese citizens to flee the country towards safer lands. In “Lebanon 1983”, Haydar describes the pain he felt as he was parting with his beloved native land. Although he praises the United States of America for preserving “the rights of man in such a dignity” (36), his only pride remains Lebanon: “That sweet home that Lebanon by the sea / So big in the heart of every nation” (39-40). Haydar’s attitude is similar to Byron’s, who left Britain as an exile to live in Italy. In Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, although he celebrates Italy as “the garden of the world” (Watson 280), he remains forever true to his British identity:

I loved her [Britain] from my boyhood – she to me
 Was as a fairy city of the heart...
 And Otway, Radcliffe, Schiller, Shakespeare’s art,
 Had stamp’d her image in me... (Franklin 107).

Haydar, like Byron, cherishes his land and rejoices in its history and culture. Just as the bard sings the history of his people, Haydar also gives glimpses of Lebanese history. Thus, he goes back to times when Phoenicians, the ancient people who inhabited the Lebanese coast, fought back the Roman legions (“Lebanon 1983” 77-80) to remind the readers that the present situation can be changed. Indeed, after describing the devastation, Haydar drops resolute optimistic lines just as he mentions the “Godly omen” (46) he found in the United States. In addition, he refers to Lebanon as the “beloved Cederland” (65). The cedars are, in fact, a sign of national pride. They are cited in the Bible where they are recognized for their majesty and prestige. Indicating longevity, the majestic trees signify that Lebanon, which has significant historical roots, is likely to have a brighter

future. As a result, there is no doubt that “the sun again’ll shine to give light, / Hence eagle eyed we shall pick our pain” (71-72). Following the same line of thought, “O World” displays Haydar’s indignation and disappointment with the world’s carelessness and indifference to the sufferings of his people: “O World! our world has become a world of pain, / ...O world! is there no world in this world to care?” (1,4). However, he ends his poem with a determination to hit back at the world by showing the ability of his dear land to rise again in an image reminiscent of the phoenix: “Though our homes have been burned and scarcely remain, / Withal out from the flames we shall rise again” (13-14). In fact, Haydar clearly fights his feelings of grief and despair with hope, which reveals him unwilling to surrender to melancholy.

Although Haydar pours his melancholic feelings in most of his poems, these feelings seem to orientate him towards a belief that there may be a brighter future for his country. In the same way that the phoenix renews its life from its ashes, melancholy can give way to a budding hope. In “Our Hills on Fire”, Haydar clearly states what he wishes for his country and for the world: a time “[w]hen peace and justice will reign / To make this world a better place for living” (33-36). Finally, it can be said that Haydar suffers deeply for his country, which is tormented by a merciless war, but his feelings of melancholy are in some sense dismissed by a hope for a better tomorrow.

The poet’s pen takes the readers along a long road filled with difficult and painful moments from his personal life. Haydar could not overcome the devastating death of his wife Maliha and his son Bassam. In the poem “In Memory of My Wife, Maliha”, he articulates his bereavement and the difficulty of continuing life without his beloved wife. Thus, he wishes to “steep in Lethe to swoon and forget” (10) and have a long sleep “to

hush the divine voice of love in pain” (14). Verging on Byronic Romanticism, he considers the possibility of shunning “[t]his blank Janus, faced world” (9) and dwelling on his years of grief. However, he remembers her encouragement as she asks him to shed no tears and to accept her death as an inescapable fact. In the end, he promises to carry on with his life, yet he announces that melancholy will govern his poems from now on. “A Shelter of Tears in Memory of My Son Bassam” presents a man who is unable to accept the loss of his son. In an almost melodramatic way, Haydar beseeches God to take him out of this world so that he can join his son in eternal bliss. Unlike the poem dedicated to his wife, “A Shelter of Tears” directly reports Bassam’s recommendations to his father before he parts with the world (13-14). Haydar is also unable to understand why he, Winter, should stay and his son, Spring, should die. But his inability to accept the bitter reality is short-lived. “Looking into the Distance” (8/1/1984) seems to be written as an immediate response to “A Shelter of Tears” (6/18/1984). In fact, it deals with life as ephemeral and depicts a fluid image of people coming in and going out of this world: “Nature replies ‘Life’s but touch-and-go”’ (“Looking into the Distance” 12). Again, the poet’s melancholy does not lead him to despair but rather to come to terms with death.

There seems to be a close relationship between Haydar and the English Romantic poets of the nineteenth century, whether it is obvious through his style of writing or the tributes he pays to them, which may indicate a profound link between the poet and his inspiring predecessors. They are connected through their expression of deep feelings and emotions, which go beyond time and place. In the same way that Byron praises Robert Southey in Don Juan as he writes: “You’re a poet – poet Laureate / And representative of all the race” (Stabler 249), Haydar eulogizes William Wordsworth by declaring: “Never a

star was so much glorified / During the remote ages of our race” (“In Memory of Wordsworth” 5-6). He also refers to John Keats and his famous “Ode to a Nightingale” when he writes:

What were those sad strains of the heart I heard last night;

Would that still be the nightingales along the years;

Are mourning the death of their shepherd who did write

That soulful ode with the ink derived from his tears? (“The Nightingales” 1-4)

Yet, it is most probable that his main influence is Byron, who found expression for his sorrow in nature. For example, “Bereaved Birds Sorrow like Men” is only a conclusion that Haydar drew out of a night in which he went walking alone. Looking thoroughly at a perched nightingale, he noticed sadness in its figure and finally realized that man and nature are intricately intertwined with each other to the extent that the latter can express the former. As for “Days Seem Centuries”, it is slightly reminiscent of Byron’s “When We Two Parted”, though the outcome is different. In “Days Seem Centuries”, the poet praises his lover and the virtues of love in optimistic opening lines: “In thee bloomed my betime thought of love / Like a lovely rosebud rainbow hued” (1-2). But although he suffers from the separation, he concludes with hope: “And I’ll ever be broken hearted / Till I reach the west and meet you there” (15-16). On the other hand, in “When We Two Parted”, Byron starts and ends with a melancholic tone showing his disappointment in love and his lover:

If I should meet thee

After long years,

How should I greet thee?

With silence and tears. (29-32)

What distinguishes Haydar's poetry is the optimism which is lacking in Byron's. Despite his sadness, Haydar always strives to remain on his feet and maintain himself, which makes his poetry appealing to readers, who find a melancholic background punctuated with sparks of hope.

It is interesting to note that Haydar devotes some of his best lines to address the issues of time and death. As was previously mentioned, the "Echoes" in question are the poet's scattered memories, which are brought to mind with great nostalgia. In "Yesterday", Haydar sketches an evocative image of trailing generations being thrown into a bottomless pit of oblivion. However, when reviving memories, the poet declares:

Ah then! How beautiful to repeat then

And how dearly I remember

My childhood my school days

The smile of my father the glad eye of my mother

The wonderful times hunting lions and elephants in the forest. (14-18)

In addition, he neither holds grudge against his memories as a young man nor does he feel self-pity. In fact, he embraces his old age and accepts the reality of death, which he does not fear at all. It is he who says, "Though I'm bound to the cliff of the eighties soon / I never believed in my wrinkles to sorrow" ("That's Why I Say" 1-2), and later adds, "For life and death are always side by side / And we come here but not for long to stay" (16-17). To him, life and death are two amazing phenomena in human existence that remain mysterious to human scientific knowledge. Although the opening lines of "Breath

and Clay” suggest despair and nihilistic tendencies, the poet is, in effect, amazed by the cycle of life:

Since birth and we are consumed like a pyre

Out of nothingness into nothingness

We return but ash of the burning fire.

What a bewildering timeless process! (1-4)

The same thought is repeated in “On My Eightieth Birthday”, which shows Haydar’s celebrating his eighty years of existence, which he considers as “the true colorful shades of life” (2); however, he sinks into grief as he remembers his “dearest three brother son and wife / Who had no chance to pass on this bridge of time” (9-10). Haydar’s acceptance of death is reminiscent of Byron’s same attitude in “On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year”. Indeed, Byron, who passed away at the age of thirty-six, declares that his days are “in the yellow leaf” (5) and that his life is committed to grief. But then, he articulates his readiness for death when he writes:

Seek out – less often sought than found

A soldier’s grave, for thee the best,

Then look around and choose thy ground,

And take thy rest! (37-40)

In the same way, Haydar is “[w]aiting for the last wink of fate” (“A Pensioner Made” 14) and “[s]preading the carpet for (his) home coming / To rest and wait” (18-19).

Nevertheless, readers could sense that Haydar did not always have the same attitude towards death. In “They Were Here”, which was written in 1960, he shows his bitterness and sadness because he is well aware that, with death, everything fades away:

That's how successive generations pass,
Voices heard facing gone
Nothing left but the scattered stones
And scarcely a scribbled name on sand. (13-16)

Yet, in 1984, he seems to have come to terms with the meaning behind death. In fact, he shows religious inclinations as he refers to the separation of the soul and the body:

Birth growth toil hope expectation
Then the beyond to free the soul
What remains but the lime of him
Who was buried yesterday. ("Yesterday" 24-28)

Ultimately, it can be deduced that Haydar is an evolutionary poet, whose poems display his maturity and understanding of life, as he grows older. Although he is bitter about the idea of death, his faith in its inescapability and his desire to join his loved-ones in the afterlife soften his view of it. As a result, from death springs the hope of finding eternal bliss.

Haydar's tragic life circumstances are well reflected in his poems, which are predominated by melancholy and through which he echoes a past that he regrets. The Lebanese poet now suffers for his country torn apart and yearns for it as he sails away from it. He also grieves the loss of two members of his family: his son and wife. According to him, their deaths are beyond consolation. And, as he grows older, his memories become enveloped with nostalgia and sorrow for days gone by. However, according to Haydar, melancholy seems to shape a path for budding hope. In fact, he

declares his faith in the Lebanese phoenix, which can revivify itself despite its self-destruction. Taking a Romantic Byronic stance, he exhibits trust and comfort in nature, which, at times, is his only refuge. Nature also reveals that death is not frightening but only inevitable. When one becomes the emperor of one's years, one is blessed with wisdom and acceptance of the end, which, to the poet, is only another beginning. Finally, poetry is Haydar's best medium for self-expression, for it is "the lustrous galaxy of the mind, / Radiating thoughts of wisdom well designed" ("Verse" 1-2).

Works Cited

- George Gordon, Lord Byron. Lord Byron, the Major Works. Ed. Jerome J. McGann.
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Franklin, Caroline. Byron: A Literary Life. Literary Lives: Macmillan Press LTD,
2000.
- Haydar, Jawdat. Echoes. 1st ed. Jawdat R. Haydar, 1986.
- McDonnell, Rafael. "Jawdat Haydar: Life Is a Gift." The North Texan Online. Winter
2006. 23 Sept. 2008 <<http://www.unt.edu/norhtexan/archives/w06/lifeisagift.htm>>
- Stabler, Jane. "George Gordon, Lord Byron, Don Juan." A Companion to Romanticism.
Ed. Duncan Wu. Blackwell Publishing, 1998. 247-258
- Watson, J.R. English Poetry of the Romantic Period 1789-1830. 2nd ed. London and
New York: Longman, 1992.