It must have been the late spring of 1984 when I first met Jawdat Haydar. I was a Professor of English at AUB and I had an office which overlooked the garden of the President's residence, Marquand House. I say it must have been late spring because the jacaranda trees around the Marquand House fountain were in bloom. There were still a few faint traces of snow on Mount Sannin and the waters of St.George's Bay glistened in the late morning sunlight. I had received a telephone call from the secretary of the department that a certain Mr. Haydar would like to see me. He had come down to Beirut from Baalbek and wanted to know if I had a few moments to spare.

I was intrigued. I had begun a parallel career as a journalist after the better established journalists in Lebanon had left the country for places of greater safety and had been reporting on various events and personalities who were making their mark during Amin Gemayel's tumultuous presidency. I had recently visited Baalbek in the company of a friend and former student who came from Baalbek, Farazdak Mustafa—where, I wonder is he now?-and together we had interviewed Hussein el-Mussawi, leader of Islamic Amal, which had recently broken away from Nabih Berri's mainstream Amal party. I was eager to find out what people living in the Bekaa thought about him. How important was he in the confused fabric of Lebanese politics? How close were his links with Iran? There was a knock on the door and a distinguished looking gentleman walked into my office carrying a brief case. We exchanged customary pleasantries and I mentioned that I had recently been in Baalbek and had met several officials of Islamic Amal. How representative of the Shia' community was his movement? How strong was his following? What were the movement's aims?

Did they really expect to set up an Islamic republic in Lebanon? How close were the movement's links with Iran?

I should have held my tongue. Jawdat gave me a dismissive wave of his hand. "These things will pass," he said. He wanted to show me his poetry.

I was somewhat crestfallen. Discussing a stranger's poetry was not something I had had in mind. "Why do you want to speak about politics when you have such a beautiful view from your office?" he admonished me. "And why should a professor of English literature concern himself with these political matters anyway?" We had not got off to a good start.

Then he showed me his poetry. I had a mind to be critical. "Too derivative," I said. Listen to this. It's obviously been heavily influenced by William Wordsworth. And this, here's Shelley and here is Matthew Arnold. Here's Tennyson. And why all these contractions—Twas, T'is, ne'er—and these archaic poetic words--descry, yore, petaline, odiferous? I believe--hope --I expressed myself with greater delicacy than these rather blunt words suggest, because I had met a man whom I quickly grew to respect. I wish that I had bitten my tongue. But you could not help respect Jawdat Haydar. He was a man of character but also a man of great humanity and as I grew to know him better, my admiration was tempered with warmth. I grew to love the man. He was quite simply exceptional.

Above all, Jawdat was the prototypical Levantine gentleman: wise, courteous, urbane, confident and knowledgeable about a great many things. As you will understand, I remember him with a huge amount of affection.

But on that day we had not get off to a very good start. Let us just say that at that time I was not in the mood for poetry. Far

more important things were happening around me—or so I believed at the time. I needed Jawdat to remind me that poetry was far from being an idle pastime, a genteel hobby for distinguished gentlefolk in retirement, as I had rather too rashly assumed. On the contrary, Jawdat's passion for poetry made me realise that I had allowed my environment to encroach upon once cherished beliefs which had led me to study literature in the first place, feelings which should have sustained me , as they did Jawdat, during difficult times. I had forgotten that literature and above all poetry was a very serious matter indeed. It was, in Jawdat's own words, "a forest of thoughts, growing trunks of culture within the perimeter of knowledge, bearing the perdurable fruits of excellence in written language." For Jawdat, poetry was not simply playing with words, a verbal game. It was the distillation of life with all its complexities into language which was evocative, forceful and illuminating.

Jawdat defended his corner robustly. He was not going to have some disaffected English professor have the last word: after all those of us who can, do, and those of us who can't, teach. Jawdat was a doer; I was merely a critic. "Why do you complain about my poetic language?" he asked. That's the way I hear it in my head," he said. "The words in my poems come to me partly through the poetry I've read. That's the way I feel. That's the way the words come to me, through the magical words of the best poets I have read. What's wrong with that?

With this simple, though spirited, straightforward defense of his poetry, Jawdat won me over. Politics were forgotten and our conversation turned to literature. I freely admit that at this time I was too heavily burdened by the canons of modern literary taste, too eager to find the ingenious turn of phrase, the arresting image, the clever juxtaposition of words. I was

thinking like an academic and had forgotten what I should not have done, that if poetry exists only for academics it is hardly worth the paper it is written on. I was thinking of poetry as an artificial construct, not words of “a man speaking to men” as one of Jawdat‘s poetic heroes, William Wordsworth, had put it. Jawdat Haydar had reminded me of something of which Khalil Gibran—another of Jawdat’s poetic heroes-- was well aware; as were the English Romantic poets, whom Jawdat also knew well. Poetry does not exist in a state of pure mind; it does not have to be super-subtle, the product of practised ingenuity, riddled with symbolic ambiguities and clever paradoxes. There is another poetic tradition to which Jawdat proudly belonged—the Romantic tradition, which held that poetry should be the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling recollected in tranquility.” And above all, that the poet himself should not be just a wordsmith, crafting obscure visions in his study for others to pore over in their studies, but a person in touch with both ordinary life and what for want of a better word we might call the soul of the universe. For Jawdat as for the Romantic poets, as for Gibran, the poet’s mission was to express thoughts “which lie too deep for tears,” (Wordsworth again) for the benefit of humankind and the poet himself should be –this time Shelley—above all, an “unacknowledged legislator of mankind.” He should be its moral arbiter, inspiring people to lead a better life.

These are the criteria by which Jawdat Haydar’s poetry should be judged. He experienced life; he brooded over it; his feelings tempered by reflection found their way into words that stir the mind and the imagination. And what a full life he had led! As a child he learned English by chatting with British soldiers stationed in the Bekaa during World War I. After attending International College here in Beirut, he visited France, where a chance encounter with the wife of the Consul at the American

embassy facilitated his gaining a visa to study in the United States. There, he earned a BS degree in education from the University of North Texas, then worked throughout the Middle East variously as a teacher, as an industrial advisor to the Iraq Petroleum Company, personnel manager and latterly General Manager of Mid East Auto Trading before retiring—I use that term “retiring” very loosely—as a farmer in the Bekaa. (You can find details of his long and colorful life on his website: jawdathaydar.org). More importantly, his experiences, the events he witnessed during his long, working life, his ruminations on the nature of things, were filtered through an enquiring mind, sifted and distilled for their universal significance and expressed in forceful language. Like his heroes, the English Romantic poets and more particularly the Lebanese-American prophet-poets of New York—Gibran Kahlil Gibran, Amin Rihani and Mikhail Naimy—Jawdat Haydar’s poetry is both timeless and thoughtful. It is suffused with that spiritual world that lies beyond our intellectual understanding. It speaks to the soul of mankind no less than his intelligence. It is an expression of thoughts that lie too deep for tears.

As is the case with his literary heroes, the themes of Jawdat Haydar’s poetry are the very stuff of a well considered life. For example, take this, about coming to terms with old age in “Cheating Time”:

> If you can not cheat Time by your laughter
> Why cheat your wrinkles, dyeing your gray hair?
> If you be careless to care thereafter,
> Who cares to care about your careless care?.....
>
> The walks of life are of different shades;

Choose the one leading to your dignity;
Missing links of truth whets the doubtful blades,
Cutting sinews of your integrity.

Be true to yourself and keep your grey hair
To match well with wrinkles of your face;
Old age should be revered without despair,
Having had a natural touch of grace.

Of course, some may think it is possible to cheat death—or at least prolong life—with the help of science. But Jawdat Haydar remained skeptical of science's omnipotence in the face of spiritual reality. As he wrote in "Death and Clay":

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!

That's why we ponder again and again
The theme of science to the wide extreme;
Perhaps with a test tube we might attain
A spark of hope in the ash of our dream.

But of course, such hopes are doomed to failure, because the cyclical progression from birth to life to death to our spiritual rebirth is the ordained pattern.

Yet we keep tracing the mystery claimed
Of a godless secret we still ignore
The eighth puzzling miracle still unnamed

Breath and clay, a merger made at the shore.

Moreover, science, if left uncontrolled, can blight our lives, creating a world which is inimical to human life. Here is Jawdat Haydar addressing the harm that science can inflict on civilisation:

We chariot to school to learn to read and write
Not to skin nature and rise to the sky
Not to work for fame by using dynamite,
Pollute the world and by pollution die.....

Never scratch nature to bleed and react
For the falling blood is nothing but bane
'Tis not a vision fancied but a fact
Since we've polluted the air and the main

Why not be a hand in glove with nature
To have a serene and happy future?

There is little doubt that Jawdat Haydar's vision of the universe was shaped and conditioned by his beloved Bekaa valley, where each year the verdant spring bursts through the winter cold to recreate the endless cycle of the returning seasons, where even the centuries old ruins of Baalbek serve as a timely reminder of the transience of earthly things. Like Kahlil Gibran, for Jawdat Haydar, Lebanon was both an inspiration and a symbol. And also like Gibran, he saw through the tawdry and viciousness of a Lebanon pulled apart by scheming politicians and outside interference from foreign powers to recognise its true nature. This he expressed most memorably in one of his best poems, "Lebanon," which effectively combines a sensuous description of Lebanon, a verdant land caressed by the waters of the Mediterranean with its mythic resonance as a land with a

historical past, reaching back into the mists of time:

I would that you were with me hence, 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.

Come to me darling, and look at the strand
The edge-breaking foam lay miles apart
Amidst a galaxy topping the land
Looming a sky within heaven a heart.

Come darling, to 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.

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.

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.

I cannot remember whether it was this poem or another on a similar theme that I read with Jawdat Haydar on the first occasion we met, or during another, subsequent encounter. But I remember snorting with barely disguised irritation at this idealized portrait of a Lebanon which I believed no longer existed, nor could ever exist again. Remember this was 1984 and the country was being torn apart by lawless gangs masquerading as political militias with legitimate agendas. The state's institutions had collapsed and Hamra St. in Beirut was awash with armed men, whom one confronted at one's peril. On January 1, 1985, I wrote a column about peace in Lebanon being an unlikely condition and quoted the Lebanese writer Edward Atiyah, author of An Arab Tells His Story, who begins one of the chapters in his autobiography with the words: "Christians versus Muslims: this was my first notion of collective human relationships... Muslims and Christians in antagonism to one another—two natural, inevitable groups, as natural and as inevitable as the world itself." "Isn't that a better description of Lebanon than your vision of Lebanon?" I asked Jawdat. Aren't you being a bit naïve?

Jawdat was not put off by my irreverent analysis. He responded with some heat. "You don't know this country," he said. "Where there is democracy there is always tension but everyone who lives in Lebanon knows his place in the scheme of things and the balance is always restored. Where there is democracy, however flawed, there is always hope. Since the Ottomans left Lebanon there is no outside force that can play us against one another, at least not for long, because we are sprunbg from the same soil; we enjoy the same spiritual heritage. True, during Ottoman times we were always being manipulated. Today, though we may quarrel among ourselves, above the noise we make there is an awareness that all of us live in a land blessed

with beauty, a land with a proud history, that we are a people joined by mutual suffering. But we have survived and we retain that harmonious vision. (Of course I am paraphrasing. My memory is not that exceptional: but, certainly, this is both the gist and the spirit of the words Jawdat said.) He went on to point out that this vision had been kept alive even among those of his countrymen who had gone abroad in search of a better life. Indeed, exile, Jawdat said, has made us feel more keenly the essence of Lebanon. All of us, he said, who were born in Lebanon share that vision of an ideal land. And it is always that that brings us home again. We share a life of the spirit, fostered by that very special place we call Lebanon. And that transcends everything else.

Obviously, as I have said, I cannot remember the exact words Jawdat spoke so long after the event, but this is an approximation of the words he used in admonishing me, words he delivered with some passion yet quiet dignity. I can still feel his words, though I may not have remembered them accurately. I can still feel the force of his quiet presence.

But let us not rely on my faulty memory. It is probably better that we should let Jawdat speak to us directly through one of his most successful poems, “Gibran Khalil Gibran.”

This poem is clearly inspired by the author of “The Prophet” himself, though the tumbling cascade of words echo the metrical style of the late Victorian Jesuit poet, Gerard Manly Hopkins. The scene Jawdat depicts is obviously Bsharre, Gibran’s birthplace, with which the poet is eternally associated. I make no apologies for quoting it at some length because it seems to me to sum up beautifully Jawdat’s enthusiasms and his philosophy: his love of Lebanon, his awareness of its

history, his recognition that though we may travel far away from Lebanon's shores, we remain tied to its soil and above all, how we share the same oneness of spirit that enfolds us all in an indissoluble embrace:

Torrential waters collapsing swallow speed tunneled
Out of the cave a stream gargling throat
Falling braids bantering over mountain steep
Touseled, spattering bubbles on the lake
Swaying breezily a waltz moving rounds
Rejoicing to be debating to while away
Leaning gracefully reeling swoon and pop
To fall zillions of grains as if blown of sand
Around a stone the shape of man
Having two birds perching on fingertips
Gazing at the Universe as if mapping its perplexity.

It joys my soul to stop here and have a drink
And take a look at the breast of this proud mountain to read
The history of the world written on the ribs of its slopes
Caving shoulders rising-lips drinking sky
And the ancient cedars their vulturine wings
Facing space by their spearing years
And the years dropping ashen leaves
Floating on the ever tumbling down the yawn between the hills
Splitting around beauty spots merging again
Meandering down eye travel to the sea
Welcomed by brigades of thirsty spahis rising to the shore
Ah! What a luscious bewildering creation

Where a world seems created but a piece of heaven in a dream

Then the poet imagines he sees Gibran as a young man. Gibran complains that there is little to be gained by staying in Lebanon. He has no plow to cultivate the land and reap the harvest of his aspirations. The poem ends with the poet wishing Gibran “God speed,” as he realizes that having been nourished by the soil of his native land no less than by its history, he will be able to “sail over the ocean sweep of years” and fulfill his destiny.

I am sad to have missed Jawdat Haydar’s centennial celebrations which were held at the UNESCO palace, because I would have loved to have shaken his hand once again. Our time together was so short and our meetings all too frequently interrupted by road closures, rumors of military action and news of various egregious acts of violence. The time was hardly conducive to civilized discourse and frankly—as I have said--poetry was not uppermost in my mind during these years. But though he deplored violence and the rape of the countryside by greedy property developers with political – or more usually, militia--connections, Jawdat Haydar’s optimism remained undimmed. I know this because although I moved to Cairo in 1988, I still had news of him sporadically through members of his family and friends. Originally, we had planned to produce a complete volume of his poetry and I had pledged to help him. This was something I looked forward to doing. It would be an opportunity to renew old ties, to rekindle my own love for Lebanon and the people there that I remember with respect and affection.

This was not to be. But as Jawdat would have known, those who have been touched by this land where history lies in every mountain and valley, where there is always the spirit of optimistic renewal, one will always view Lebanon with affection. One will always return. And that is why I am here today to honor a man I greatly loved and admired. In so many ways he typifies what I most appreciate about this country, certainly the Lebanon I knew when I first came here from America in 1966: its willingness to welcome strangers, its vibrancy, its warmth, its awareness of history, its willingness to enjoy the finer things in life as well as its pleasures and comforts; its awareness of a spirit world that lies just beyond our senses. All these qualities Jawdat Haydar recognised and shared. He was able to ride above the petty tumult of the world and, secure in his serene optimism, he could see beyond the horizon to a peaceful land where streams flowed through a verdant landscape shaped by history; where people labored with honesty and commitment for their just rewards. That was the vision he conveyed in his poetry; this was the vision he aspired to as a man. Moreover, this is the vision of Lebanon that most thoughtful people still cherish – and clearly these people still exist: witness this celebration in honor of his memory. I greatly miss Jawdat Haydar but we have the consolation of knowing that in his poetry his spirit will endure and hopefully encourage subsequent generations to aspire to the values he so earnestly believed in and so obviously demonstrated in his exemplary life.