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"*Yet we dream the dreams dreamt by dreamers before*"

When Gibran Khalil Gibran pitied "the nation divided into fragments, each fragment deeming itself a nation," he probably didn't suspect that he would be quoted many decades later (as in Jawdat Haydar's "The Black Corner") only to warn against re-consenting to the schemes of divisions and breaches. Rare must be the nations where non-contemporary poets grieve over the same kind of ailments that seem to plague their country incessantly. When the poet, in "The Black Corner," passes by Gibran's grave on his way to "the peak of [his] land," he actually passes by the crushed dreams of a Lebanese resurrection before he heads for a renewal of hope. Everywhere in Haydar's poems on Lebanon can we see this constant fluctuation between despair, disappointment, disgust and rage on the one hand, and hopefulness, confidence, belief and faith on the other. Gibran's work is definitely imbued with identical evocations as well. The two writers are gone today; gone with them is a long century during which Lebanon failed to take off its disturbing outfit and to respond to Gibran's, Haydar's and – between and after them – countless other voices' calls for a new beginning. Some pressing questions have surged though: How far-reaching are the echoes of those poetic voices today? Are they able to touch us the way they used to move readers in the past? Can we still maintain the classical response to them while living in a post-war, post-9/11 Lebanon? Reading Jawdat Haydar in the light of this controversy has engendered contradictory answers.

What would first strike you as chilling when you read Haydar's poems about Lebanon written many years – even decades – ago is definitely the freshness of their themes, the

directness of their effect, the transparency of their lines, the feel of 'contemporaneousness' that you meet in many Lebanese literary works (as in Gibran's as I mentioned earlier) that touch upon the country's political and social issues, however old they might be. I say chilling because it conjures up the possibility of future repetitions and reiterations of the same expressions of consternation and, for that matter, of hopefulness and dreams. One cannot but dread the thought of a vicious cycle that might take hold of the country where the merry-go-round of history would seem to run forever, and would continuously be exhibited – within different frames and styles maybe – in literature and arts. That would entail, in one way or another, the imminent suspension of hope and the waning of what patriotic displays have to offer to the audience and to national discourse in general; the symptoms of which I couldn't deny when reading Haydar's poems.

In "Lebanese Immigrants," Haydar bemoans the intensive wave of emigration that Lebanon has witnessed since the outbreak of war. He includes a strong call for all who have opted out of the country to be courageous and come back, despite the wretchedness, to re-build their homes and nation: "Pitch tents o'er the ash of your homes and stay / In the field of honor to live or die / 'Tis shameful to be car'free running away / Be eagle like keep your cliffs and defy" (Shadows 8). Exactly twenty years after these words, the Lebanese are still forming long queues at embassies' doors, seeking refuge under other skies, fleeing a country that doesn't seem to outgrow itself even after all it has been through. A recent article by Samir Atallah tackles the same issue (An-Nahar on 24-10-2007) and argues that, if there are still people who haven't left yet, it's because they don't have the means to or can't secure a visa easily. Although I can't agree with Atallah's narrow list of reasons, I'm not inclined to fully adopt the poet's terms of "honor," un-shamefulness and "eagle-like" existence.

Four years before "Lebanese Immigrants" saw the light, Haydar wrote about the Lebanese people whose "blade" of "unity and reason," of "clever diplomacy" would redeem

them from successive fallouts (Shadows 44) and saw "a sky blazing with hopes / A lustrous shield of stars over the land / Stars on mountain tops gazing at the slopes." Scarcely can you read expressions as hopeful today or expect literary voices to illustrate such a rosy image for Lebanon's future or, if they did, their vision would be deemed as exaggerated or excessively lyrical. Having lost belief in that future isn't what lies at the stem of such response today. What lies behind it is actually the weakening belief in a unified national discourse, in the impartiality of Lebanon and in the possibility of a perfectly harmonious coexistence – especially within the current political system; hence the suspicion felt and the disillusionment experienced upon reading texts that still take those notions for granted, even when those texts are as personal and spontaneous as poetry. When Haydar painfully wonders about what drove the Lebanese into violence for fifteen years, he assumes that, prior to that atrocious span, people had been loving brothers who'd been able to make Lebanon's "heydays" in solidarity and unison: "Friends but why like a bundle of fire wood / Burning by the match of a mean intrigue / Remember your centuries of broth'rhood / Your heydays without bloodshed and fatigue" (Shadows 55). Haydar is here intimating the idea of 'conspiracy' which the Lebanese are said to have yielded to; "*la guerre des autres*" as Ghassan Tueni called it. Yet, the very concepts of harmony and congruity as essentialist characteristics of the people are quite questionable today. The same idea is re-communicated in two of Haydar's poems named "Beirut" where the city's role as one that teaches the world "the true meaning of brotherhood and love" is lost and missed (Echoes 16) and where the "tradition and brotherhood" are being threatened (Voices 4). Was there really some "true meaning" for and a "tradition" of national coherence before war time? Don't we always need to refer to some remote phase in our history, polish it then posit it as backdrop against which we can play out our current pains and regrets? Won't it be always frustrating, then, to compare today and yesterday? Will we ever

be able to articulate a sound *modus vivendi* when an impeccably shiny (or an extremely sad) image of the past is permanently at the back of everyone's mind?

In Haydar's "Beirut" (Echoes 16), you can also smell Beirut of today and you can watch the wheel of history as it reaches a point that resonates powerfully with the poem written in 1982. The poet is outraged by the world's silence over Beirut's events and ends with his hope of a nearing justice that would punish the perpetrators. The lines below still strike a chord today and they evoke the current Lebanese longing for the reign of justice following the last years' tragic events, and their wish for a definitive end to the long cycle of violence. But will the wheel seriously turn to the "palace of Justice" this time, once and for all?

> Never mind history will record the crime
> And timing timely will avenge blood for blood,
> Just to make the balance sheet right.
> And I stand here on the highest mound
> To spit now and every year once on the whole worlds,
> To lubricate the tools of its mechanisms;
> Perhaps it will wheel right
> To the palace of Justice
> So that the people on earth
> May enjoy their safety tomorrow (Echoes 17).

Not only do Haydar's poems give you this eerie impression of an endless roundabout to Lebanon's troubles and, consequently, elicit a kind of disillusioned outlook on the country's role and meaning; they also give rise to new forms of questions related to Lebanon's beauty and heritage as being classic sources of national pride. The deep-rooted Lebanese tendency to boast the exquisite nature of the country doesn't seem to coax anyone

today into overlooking what lies on the opposite side of the spectrum or into hindering the search for a less poetic, more constructive kind of discourse. Haydar deliberately puts Lebanon's exclusive scenery in stark contrast with the country's brutal experience as to divert the eyes and minds from what divides into what should gather. In "Lebanon," for example, the grandeur of the cedars and mountainous view is a metaphor for the country's core qualities and inner beauty:

> 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 or ages unknown
> And the flag of liberty always unfurled
> In a democracy without a throne (Voices 26).

To circle back to "The Black Corner" (Echoes 14), we can also see the hopeful vision encapsulated in the moment of exaltation by nature and by the proximity to Gibran's grave. The latter, as a cultural heritage, provides the poet with a sustainable reference that enhances his yearning for an escape from hatred, for a common ground and a meaningful unity. Gibran's hometown also leads to the cedars, and to the highest peak – what the poet wishes his countrymen to attain, metaphorically:

> To keep away from the smothering smoke
> And the rising temper of the war to the knife
> Besides to shun looking at the mortal remains
> Which flayed the flies to fly away from a shocking sight.

I decided to climb up the mountain,
Passing by the grave of Gibran
And the old cedars on my way
To the Black Corner.
[…]
Sleeping I dreamt that the Lebanese will rise again
Like a phoenix from the ash by the wings
Of their love and brotherhood to the tower of their glory
With their flags of liberty wavering on the highest mountain
Peak of their land: the Black Corner (14-15).

What I tried to suggest above isn't that Haydar's message is free of a call for innovative thinking; yet it actually still believes in Lebanon's celebrated attributes as a kind of undisputed magnet and an inspiring resort where the significance of nationhood can be lived. What I'm suggesting is the dissatisfaction with this shelter today and the dire need to articulate new forms whereby we can delineate the contours of a viable 'national' discourse; because keeping one that only sees in Lebanon a land of 'beauty,' a 'message' to the world or a 'unique' human experience, would never secure a stop for the merry-go-round of déjà-vu grievances and their counterparts in literature.

Our attitudes vis-à-vis the country, its meaning and its role are definitely changing; not only because we're tired of the ceaseless discourse and ceaseless chain of aborted efforts, but also because, in a post-war, post-2005 Lebanon and a post 9/11 world, we stand before a moment of revelation that shows us the vagueness of our otherwise unquestioned nationalistic 'selves' and the uncertainty of our 'shared' dreams. Do we give up reading Gibran, Haydar, listening to Fairouz, relishing a splendid natural view, taking pride in so many Lebanese 'particulars'? I think not. It's the self-reflexive, self-conscious fashion of doing all of the above what is actually inescapable today. A nation is always a construction, and so is national

fiction. We need them both. The "dreams dreamt by dreamers before" are still dreamt today. The fashion is what is and what we *want* different.

On Lebanon

Can we keep company with the wings of time
Cleaving the bounds of distance in every clime
To gain our cherished freedom out of this cage
Flying yon the bard by the wisdom of age?

Is that only a wish we track fading gleam
On the waste of life, a mirage in a dream?
Yet we dream the dreams dreamt by dreamers before
Who had sailing ships failing against the shore.

So friend, be not sure of the things as they seem.
'Tis like churning the sea to ski but the ream.
That's why our joy remains tied to our sorrow;
That's why what's true today may not be tomorrow.

Cannot? Why try to alter the scheme of fate;
Would it not be better to reason and wait? (Echoes 78)