

# KAHLIL GIBRAN

(1883—1931)

*Christopher Buck*

THE ARAB-AMERICAN author and artist Kahlil Gibran was a best-selling writer whose work has yet to receive critical acclaim equal to his popular appeal. There is no question that Gibran's work in Arabic was central to the development of twentieth-century Arabic literature—in that Arab Romanticism begins with Gibran, the pivotal figure in the Mahjar movement of émigré Arab writers centered in New York. There is also no question that Kahlil Gibran's masterpiece, *The Prophet* (1923)—a small volume of aphorisms (wise sayings) offering pithy wisdom of an almost prophetic quality—belongs to world literature, for it is known and loved the world over. As an American man of letters, however, Gibran has received scant attention from American literary critics. Since *The Prophet* has yet to be widely recognized as an *American* classic, and the author yet to be fully accepted as an *American* writer, Gibran's inclusion in the *American Writers* series requires some justification.

Eminent scholars including Irfan Shahid (professor emeritus at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.) and Suheil Bushrui (professor emeritus and current director of the Kahlil Gibran Chair for Values and Peace at the University of Maryland at College Park) have made the case for Gibran's recognition as an American writer worthy of note. According to Bushrui, America is entitled to claim Gibran as one of its sons (even if not a native son) as fully and as authentically as his native Lebanon can lay such claim: "In his work, he became not only Gibran of Lebanon, but Gibran of America, indeed Gibran the voice of global consciousness" (1996, p. 10). After all, the young Gibran spent only the first twelve years of his life in Bsharri (a village near the famous "Cedars of God"), where he was born in 1883, before emigrating with his family to the United

States. Apart from a two-year study in Paris and two brief return visits to Lebanon, Gibran spent his entire adult life—the last two-thirds of his life, in fact—entirely on American soil, dying in New York at the age of forty-eight. In *The Prophet*, the city of Orphalese is often said to represent America (or New York).

Shahid underscores the fact *The Prophet* was America's best-selling book of the twentieth century, not counting the Bible, and that Gibran outsold all other American poets, from Walt Whitman to Robert Frost. According to Gibran's New York publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, *The Prophet* has sold more than ten million copies. The book's success was due entirely to its own appeal, as Knopf never promoted it. Strangely, Gibran is arguably America's best-loved prose-poet, whose market appeal continues despite critical indifference. It's true that Gibran had what might be called a double psyche, and inhabited two thought-worlds at once. As an Arab American, Gibran wrote in two languages: English and Arabic. Arabic was his mother tongue, and English his second language. As an accomplished man of letters of considerable influence in the Middle East, Gibran inspired a literary renaissance in the Arab world, such that all modern Arabic poetry bears the marks of Gibran's. Yet Gibran's work has had little influence in American letters, despite its enormous popular appeal. Notwithstanding, Shahid thinks that Gibran has not been fairly treated as an American writer. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that, categorically, *The Prophet* exists in splendid isolation, severed from its Arabic cultural roots. And so *The Prophet* will have to be evaluated, or reevaluated, on its own literary merits and for its singular contribution to the American literary heritage.

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## BIOGRAPHY

A biography of Kahlil Gibran's life is complicated by the fact that Gibran himself spun some fanciful tales about it. He embroidered, embellished, lionized, and mythologized himself. He claimed, for instance, that his father was a wealthy Arab aristocrat and that his grandfather owned a grand mansion guarded by lions, and he did not resist speculation that he was the reincarnation of the English mystic William Blake. But the real facts betray Gibran's humble origins, and it is necessary to demystify Gibran.

Kahlil Gibran was born on January 6, 1883, in Bsharri, a picturesque but impoverished Maronite Christian village, perched on a fertile ridge between Qadisha Gorge and the spectacular grove of Lebanon cedars now known as the Cedars of God in northern Lebanon. His original, full name was Gibran Khalil Gibran—the first name his own; the second, his father's; and the last, his grandfather's. Raised in the Maronite tradition, Gibran was a sensitive boy. His father, a bully and a gambler, owned a walnut grove thirty-five miles from Bsharri. His father's lordly pretensions (marked by his trademark amber cigarette holder), extravagant habits, aversion to peasant-type labor, mercurial temper, and addiction to the gambling game of *domma* prompted young Gibran to retreat to the surrounding countryside, which was dominated by the Cedars of God. Contemplative, inventive, and creative, Gibran had no formal schooling in Bsharri, but he received private instruction from Selim Dahir, who taught the boy the rudiments of Arabic, history, and art. The young Gibran was also mystically inclined. Early in life, Gibran interpreted personal experiences as profoundly spiritual in nature and attached religious significance to them.

His father, Khalil, clerked in his uncle's apothecary shop until he became so indebted from gambling that he stooped to working as a tax collector and enforcer (a job that was considered below repute) for Raji Bey, the village headman and local administrator appointed by the Ottomans. To put it bluntly, his father was a thug for the village strongman. In 1891, after Raji Bey was dismissed following numerous complaints, Gibran's father was jailed on graft

charges. At the time, Lebanon was a Turkish province, part of Greater Syria (Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine) and subjugated to the Ottoman Empire, until its fall in 1918. In June 1895, while the elder Gibran languished in his Bsharri jail cell, his wife, Kamila Rahme, left her native Lebanon and immigrated with her children to America, where her brother lived. They arrived in New York on June 25, 1895.

On December 3, 1895, the family moved into Boston's impoverished immigrant South End, in Chinatown, where their cousins were living. To support her four children—Gibran, his younger sisters Marianna and Sultana, and her son by a previous marriage, Peter (Butrus)—Kamila sold cloth and lace in Boston's then-wealthy Back Bay. She opened a dry goods store on Beach Street with Kahlil and his half brother, Peter. On September 30, 1895, Gibran entered Quincy School, where he was placed in a class for immigrant children who needed to learn English. Gibran's name was shortened, with two letters inverted (from Khalil to Kahlil), whether through a clerical error, or because a teacher wanted the boy's first name to suit American pronunciation. In any event, Gibran kept his shortened name, Kahlil Gibran, as his English pen name.

Meanwhile, Gibran's talent for drawing attracted the attention of a growing number of admirers, several of whom became his patrons. Among them was Jessie Fremont Beale, a social worker who, in 1896, when apprised of Kahlil's talent for drawing by a settlement house art teacher, Florence Pierce, wrote to her friend, Fred Holland Day, asking if he would assist the boy. Day, a wealthy Bostonian aesthete and avant-garde patron of the arts, was also a photographer, and he began to use Gibran, his younger sisters, his half brother, and his mother as models for his own symbolist and semierotic "fine art" photographs. Day viewed the young Gibran's artistic and literary gifts as evidence of natural genius, and he became the boy's close mentor and patron.

In 1897, Gibran returned to Lebanon to study at the Madrasat al-Hikmat ("School of Wisdom"), founded by the Maronite bishop Joseph Debs in Beirut. In 1899, Gibran had an ill-fated affair

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with a twenty-two-year-old Lebanese widow, Sultana Tabit (against social taboos), memorialized in his Arabic work *al-Ajnihah al-Mutakassira*, published in 1912 (translated into English as *The Broken Wings* in 1957). In autumn 1899, Gibran came back to Boston, but he returned again to Lebanon in 1902, as a guide and interpreter to an American family. But when his mother became ill, Gibran returned to the United States once more. (She died of tuberculosis on June 28, 1903.)

Day's mentorship continued to be crucial in Gibran's life; he introduced the young artist to the writings of the Belgian symbolist Maurice Maeterlinck, to the work of nineteenth-century poets such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, John Keats, and Percy Bysshe Shelley and also to the writing of various other British, American, and Continental poets from the turn of the century. Day's patronage made possible Gibran's emergence as a new talent, both as artist and poet, as Gibran entered the prestigious circles of Boston's artistic and intellectual elite. In 1903, Day's friend the poet Josephine Preston Peabody arranged for an exhibition of Gibran's drawings at Wellesley College. In January 1904, Day held, in his own studio, an exhibition of Gibran's art. Another exhibition was held in February 1904 at the Cambridge School, where the headmistress was a progressive schoolteacher named Mary Haskell; Haskell was ten years his senior, but she and Gibran developed a close friendship that endured throughout his lifetime. (She declined his offer of marriage in 1910, and Gibran remained a bachelor for the rest of his life, despite the considerable number of women who were drawn to the handsome and gifted artist and poet.) After the exhibitions in early 1904, Day's Harcourt Buildings studio burned, destroying Gibran's entire portfolio.

Not only did Mary Haskell remain Gibran's good friend and benefactress, she served as his editor as well. He continued to rely on her to correct his punctuation and grammar, and occasionally suggest an alternative word for greater euphonic effect. From June 1914 to September 1923, he sought her advice on *The Madman*

(1918), then *The Forerunner* (1920), and finally, *The Prophet* (1923).

In 1905, Gibran's brief piece, *al-Músíqá* (*Music*) was published by the Arabic immigrant press in New York City, marking the author's debut into the world of letters. In 1906, Gibran, who opposed Ottoman Turkish rule and the Maronite Church's strict social control, published his next Arabic work in 1906, *'Ará'is al-Murúj* (English trans., *Nymphs in the Valley*, 1948; the work has also been translated as *Spirit Brides*), an anticlerical collection of three short stories serving as a caustic critique of establishmentarian church and state. The Arabic poem *al-Arwáh al-Mutamarrida* (English trans., *Spirits Rebellious*, 1948), also incorporating a social critique, followed in 1908. During this same period, Gibran was working on a book about the philosophy of religion and religiosity (also in Arabic); but that book was never published.

In 1908, Mary Haskell sponsored Gibran's undertaking of a three-year study at the Académie Julian in Paris, a private art school where he produced the series of paintings titled "The Ages of Women" (1909–1910) and a portrait of Auguste Rodin (1910). There he was exposed to the work of the English mystic poet William Blake (1757–1857), whose thought and art had a profound influence on Gibran. In 1910, Gibran, Ameen Rihani, and Yusuf Huwayyik met in Paris, where they envisioned and drew up plans for the cultural renaissance of the Arab world.

On his return to Boston in October 1910, Gibran earned his living through portrait painting. In 1911, he began work on his first English-language manuscript, eventually published as *The Madman: His Parables and Poems* (1918). He was frustrated with the shortcomings of the cultural scene in Boston, however, and, in 1912 he made New York City his professional home. Gibran produced his finest work in his studio at 51 West Tenth Street (which he nicknamed "The Hermitage").

In total, Gibran published seven spiritual works in English: *The Madman: His Parables and Poems* (1918), *The Forerunner: His Parables and Poems* (1920), *The Prophet* (1923), *Sand and Foam: A Book of Aphorisms* (1926), *Jesus*,

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*the Son of Man* (1928), *The Earth Gods* (1931), and *The Wanderer: His Parables and Sayings* (1932). The publication in 1918 of *The Madman* established Gibran as a writer worthy of note in America, inaugurating a new literary career in English. Among his other Arabic works, Gibran published *Dam'a wa Ibtisama* (1914; English trans., *A Tear and a Smile*), *al-Mawákib* (1919; English trans., *The Procession*), *al-'Awásif* (1920; English trans., *The Storm*; a collection of previously published work), *Iram, Dhát al-'Imád* (1921, one-act play set in a lost Arabian city mentioned in Qur'an 89:7; English trans., *Iram, City of Lofty Pillars*, published in *Secrets of the Heart*), and *al-Badá'i' wa'l-Tará'if* (1923, English trans., *Marvels and Masterpieces*).

Fulfilling the promise he had demonstrated as a youth, Gibran became an accomplished visual artist as well. (Along with drawing and painting, he also executed small wood carvings.) In December 1914, Gibran had an exhibition of his drawings and paintings at the Montross Gallery, New York. In 1917, Gibran had exhibits at the Knoedler and Company Gallery, New York, and the Doll and Richards Gallery, Boston. A collection, *Twenty Drawings*, was published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1919. In January 1922, Gibran's work was showcased at the Women's City Club, Boston.

In April 1920, Gibran and some fellow writers from the Arabic diaspora founded a group they named al-Rábita al-Qalamíya (The Pen League), or "Arrabitah," as they referred to it in English. Gibran was elected president and the Lebanese author, Mikhail Naimy, secretary. This was the first Romantic school in the Arab world. Ardent nationalists, Gibran and other members of the Arrabitah sought reform and Arab liberation from colonialism through the power of the pen. The society published a literary and political journal, *al-Sá'ih* (The Traveler), edited by 'Abd al-Masáh Haddád, which was widely read across the Arab world. They met regularly until Gibran's death eleven years later.

On April 10, 1931, Gibran died of cirrhosis of the liver with incipient tuberculosis at St. Vincent's Hospital in New York. Two weeks before his death, he published *The Earth Gods*,

his last work to appear during his lifetime. His remains were taken back to Lebanon for burial in his home village, arriving in the port of Beirut on August 21, and his body was eventually interred in the old chapel at the monastery of Mar Sarkis in his native Bsharri, near which the Gibran Museum was soon established to commemorate his literary and artistic legacy.

On October 19, 1984, the U.S. Congress passed legislation authorizing the building of a memorial to Kahlil Gibran on federal land with private funds. The result was the Khalil Gibran Memorial Garden, on Massachusetts Avenue directly opposite the British Embassy in Washington, D.C., which President George H. W. Bush dedicated on May 24, 1991, calling the memorial a tribute to Gibran's "belief in brotherhood, his call for compassion, and perhaps above all, his passion for peace."

## INFLUENCES

Gibran's work resonates with that of Blake, Keats, and William Wordsworth and of American transcendentalists such as Emerson, Whitman, and Henry Thoreau, and it arguably shows clear marks of their influence. For instance, in Gibran's 1919 Arabic work, translated as *The Procession*—Gibran's most respected Arabic poem in verse—the critic Ahmad Majdoubeh has found lexical and philosophical echoes of Emerson and Thoreau, revealing the direct influence of these exponents of New England transcendentalism. A personal letter dated November 10, 1925, from Gibran to the archbishop and metropolitan Antonious Bashir (who translated *The Prophet* into Arabic) offers insights into possible further influences on Gibran's work. In this letter (translated from the Arabic by George N. El-Hage in 2005), Gibran tellingly commends to the archbishop, for translation to Arabic, "four valuable books which I believe are among the best that Westerners have written during our present time" (p. 12): *The Treasure of the Humble* (1896) by the Belgian symbolist Maurice Maeterlinck (rendered from the French original); *Tertium Organum* (1912) by the Russian philosopher P. D. Ouspensky; *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament* (1918) by the Scottish

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anthropologist James George Frazer; and *The Dance of Life* (1923) by the British sexologist Havelock Ellis.

Other scholars theorize about the way in which Gibran re-visions Christianity in the light of Sufi (Islamic) mysticism. In the Madrasat al-Hikmat, beyond his required course of studies, Gibran immersed himself in classical and contemporary Arabic literature, including Paris al-Shidyak, Francis al-Marrásh, Adib Isháq, and the great Sufi masters Rumi, ‘Umar ibn al-Farid, al-Ghazálí, Ibn Rushd (Averroes), and Ibn Síná (Avicenna). This immersion was to have a lasting influence on Gibran: the American architect Claude Bragdon recalls how, at the end of his life, Gibran would freely translate Sufi poets to a circle of admirers and would recount folktales of his native Lebanon. Thus Gibran’s early works effectively re-forge Sufi thought, in which, as expressed by Suheil Bushrui and Joe Jenkins in their biography of Kahlil Gibran, Gibran’s “aphorisms, parables, and allegories closely resemble Sufi wisdom—the themes of paradox and illusion turning on the unripeness of a sleeping humanity attached to the ephemeral” (p. 15). Thus in Gibran’s work (although he is by no means a “Sufi poet”), man is portrayed as on the arc of ascent, traversing spiritual degrees in drawing closer to God, in which one becomes increasingly godlike in the process.

Friedrich Nietzsche, Carl Jung, and Rabindranath Tagore (whom Gibran met in December 1916) are cited as other influences, although Bushrui and Jenkins emphasize that Gibran was drawn to Nietzsche’s form rather than his formulations and identified with his passion more than his philosophy. There is evidence of Bahá’í influence as well: the New York artist Juliet Thompson, one of Gibran’s artistic circle of close friends and an adherent of the Bahá’í Faith, had lent him several works of its founder, Bahá’u’lláh, in the original Arabic. These writings impressed Gibran deeply, for he later declared that Bahá’u’lláh’s Arabic works were the most “stupendous literature that ever was written” (Bushrui and Jenkins, p. 125). On Friday, April 19, 1912, Gibran drew, in his studio, a portrait of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (1844–1921), the son and successor to Bahá’u’lláh. On

that same day, in a letter to Mary Haskell, Gibran wrote that he had, in the presence of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “seen the Unseen, and been filled” (Bushrui and Jenkins, p. 126). Juliet Thompson later recalled Gibran telling her that his audiences with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had profoundly influenced his writing of *Jesus, the Son of Man*, which appeared in 1928.

Ultimately, however, Gibran, while shaped by his influences, crafted his own art and writing in his own way. The sum total of these “influences” are perhaps best characterized as “confluences”—that is, the convergence of orientations and ideas that were spun into prosaic gold by Gibran’s synthetic power and gilded by his own sapiential genius.

From the sophomoric to the sublime, Gibran’s prose-poems may be characterized as a form of secular wisdom literature, reaching audiences with a spiritual—but not necessarily religious—interest. That having been said, Gibran’s sage advice, through the mouthpieces of his various literary personae, is more inspirational than prescriptive in nature, and it rarely ventures into the realm of social teachings that might guide a society as a whole.

Ideologically, Gibran urged escape from the trappings of materialism (although sales of *The Prophet* endowed him with a respectable income). He encouraged transcending sectarian religious conflict, he promoted reform in the Arab world, and he championed ideal East-West relations, in which he believed he might play the role of cultural intermediary. While he promoted spirituality and virtue, he was not a paragon of it. Although mystically inclined, Gibran was not a mystic. But his art endowed life and nature with the mystique of divine mystery.

Except for mentioning their publication in the course of his career, Gibran’s Arabic works, a number of which have been translated into English, will not be treated in the following discussion, as Gibran’s works in English are what distinguish him as an American writer of note. That having been said, Gibran’s Arabic works (in translation), will be consulted as an aid by which to interpret some of Gibran’s salient themes in his English work.

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## THE MADMAN

Out of the thirty-four parables that comprise of *The Madman: His Parables and Poems* (1918), eleven original manuscripts are preserved in Princeton Library's Department of Rare Books and Special Collections as part of the William H. Shehadi Collection of Kahlil Gibran. The order in which the parables appear in the manuscripts differs somewhat from their published sequence. Annotations in Arabic can be found throughout. *The Madman* is said to have been based on Lebanese folklore.

The book's eponymous persona, the "madman," has had seven prior lives, and he begins to recount experiences and expound parables. In the latter part of the book, Gibran experiments with personification of a blade of grass, a leaf, the eye, sorrow and joy, and so forth. *The Madman's* desultory nature and lack of coherence is evidence of Gibran's developing yet unripened talent insofar as his English work was concerned. While *The Madman* has been described as a thought-provoking collection of life-affirming parables and poems, the book can scarcely be described as prescriptive in nature. It inspires self-reflection, but not a clear sense of self-direction—except insofar as Gibran's most basic message is concerned, as exemplified by the last sentence of the chapter "The Greater Sea": "Then we left that sea to seek the Greater Sea" (Collected Works, p. 38; all citations are from this 2007 volume). If *The Madman* has a message, that message is that of discovering the true self—the greater sea is the greater self.

In "The Sleep-Walkers," the "freer self" is mentioned. This implies another self, presumably captive of passions and other limitations. In "The Seven Selves," the madman teaches that there is a rebellious self, a joyous self, the love-ridden self, the tempest-like self, the thinking self, the working self, and the do-nothing self. The seven stages of the soul are a well-known Sufi paradigm, although Gibran has taken liberties with it here. In "Night and the Madman," the Night tells the Madman of his "little-self," of his "monster-self," and that his soul is wrapped in the veil of seven folds (p. 33). These are neither separate

nor serial selves. They are simply selves in different stages of spiritual development.

In *The Madman*, Gibran's contrast of the soporific self and the sapiential self is inchoate and undeveloped. Previously, in his Arabic work, *A Tear and a Smile* (1914), Gibran had spoken of the "inner self" as a "spirit growing" within the thew and sinew of the "flesh" or the "covering of matter" (p. 789)—yet the doctrine of the greater self is scarcely developed beyond the spirit/matter dichotomy. Yet the theme of the benighted self and the awakened self may be traced throughout Gibran's mature works, where the doctrine matures as well.

## THE FORERUNNER

Most of Gibran's work *The Forerunner: His Parables and Poems* (1920) is composed of tales, interspersed with a few poems. The tales are very much like Sufi tales. Seven of the twenty-four morality tales *The Forerunner* are archived in the William H. Shehadi Collection at Princeton. The tale "God's Fool" is set in the city of Sharia, which is an obvious reference to the Islamic code of law (although the reference would not have been obvious to Gibran's readers). The tale "Dynasties" takes place in the city of Ishana, which betrays possible Hindu influence, as Ishana is one of the five faces of the god Shiva. To what extent Gibran's place-names are symbolic is hard to say.

The underlying theme of *The Forerunner* is the need to spiritually awaken. Here, in contrast to *The Madman*, Gibran's doctrine of the awakened self is further developed. It commands the attention of the reader in the opening line: "You are your own forerunner, and the towers you have builded are but the foundation of your giant-self" (p. 53). Thus the prologue opens by saying that each person is his or her own forerunner, and that each person has a "giant-self" within, which is the "greater self" (one of the tales is "The Greater Self") and "freer self" as well. The greater self may be thought of as a "deeper heart." In "Out of My Deeper Heart," Gibran speaks of "man's larger self" (p. 73). The Mad-

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man, in his parable titled “Crucified,” had exclaimed: “For we must be crucified by larger and yet larger men, between greater earths and greater heavens” (p. 39). That which is crucified will resurrect with greater power, and so the lesser self, when crucified, will rise as a larger self in a progressing expanding consciousness.

The spiritual self is opposed by the materially attached self—the self that must be crucified—which is described in various ways. In the poem “Love,” Gibran speaks of the “weaker self” (p. 57), but later in “Beyond My Solitude,” the two selves are mentioned together: “Beyond this burdened self lives my freer self” (p. 86). *The Forerunner’s* final piece, “The Last Watch,” is a sermon by the Forerunner himself, who speaks to slumberers in their sleep, right before dawn. He speaks like the prophets of old. He has loved one and all, “overmuch,” including “the giant and the pigmy” (p. 87; symbols for the spiritually awakened and spiritually undeveloped selves). The message is that spiritual awakening is needed. If each one is a Forerunner, as the opening line explicitly says, then that Forerunner “sees with the light of God,” as is said in “The Last Watch,” which continues, “He speaks like the prophets of old. He unveils our souls and unlocks our hearts” (p. 90). The Forerunner within each person is prophetic. Ultimately, the Forerunner becomes a Prophet, whose mission is to awaken and illumine the soul within.

### THE PROPHET

*The Forerunner*, according to Gibran’s contemporary Mikhail Naimy, was a title chosen deliberately by Gibran as a precursor of *The Prophet*. Gibran conceived *The Prophet*, published in 1923, as the first of a trilogy, to be followed by “The Garden of the Prophet” (on humanity’s relationship to Nature) and “The Death of the Prophet” (on humanity’s relationship to God). The first book is set on the eve of the Prophet’s departure from Orphalese to his native island; the second is set on the island itself, in the garden of the Prophet’s mother; and the planned third volume would have the Prophet return to Orphalese, only to be imprisoned and then stoned

to death in the marketplace after being freed. Gibran had partly written the second work, which was completed by Barbara Young (the pseudonym of Henrietta Breckenridge Boughton, who claimed she was Gibran’s secretary and companion for the last seven years of his life) and published posthumously as *The Garden of the Prophet* in 1933. (To what extent that book actually is Gibran’s authentic work is controversial.) Nineteen of the twenty-six discourses, or poetic essays, as well as the prologue and epilogue (or farewell) of *The Prophet* are archived in Princeton Library’s Shehadi Collection.

The plot of *The Prophet* is skeletal. The Prophet’s name is Almustafa—that is, “al-Mustafa” (Arabic for “the Chosen” and one of the names of Muhammad)—in its more familiar transliteration. Almustafa was a stranger who tarried twelve, lonely years the city of Orphalese, waiting to return to the island where he was born. From a mountaintop, he saw a ship with purple sails slip through the mist, and he hastened to the city to meet it. There he was met by a throng of people in a great square before the temple. They came to bid him farewell.

A seeress named Almitra entreats the Prophet to impart to them his wisdom before he embarks on his way back home. Speak, Almitra beseeches Almustafa, of love. Speak, asks another witness, of marriage. And so the Prophet speaks on topics that matter most in human life: “On Love,” “On Marriage,” “On Children,” “On Giving,” “On Eating and Drinking,” “On Work,” “On Joy and Sorrow,” “On Houses,” “On Clothes,” “On Buying and Selling,” “On Crime and Punishment,” “On Laws,” “On Freedom,” “On Reason and Passion,” “On Pain,” “On Self-Knowledge,” “On Teaching,” “On Friendship,” “On Talking,” “On Time,” “On Good and Evil,” “On Prayer,” “On Pleasure,” “On Beauty,” “On Religion,” and “On Death.” Of these discourses, the most popular in American popular culture may well be “On Marriage,” which is used in a great many American wedding ceremonies.

These topics reflect universal human concerns. Almustafa’s discourses may best be characterized as spiritual meditations, yet they do not rise, much less aspire, to the threshold of

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prophetic or revelatory utterances. They are words of wisdom; they are sublime, but not divine. *The Prophet*, moreover, has been described as neither a purely philosophical work nor a purely literary work, and therefore it occupies an ambiguous position in American literature. Although English in form, it is Arabic in thought-form.

Published in September 1923 by the prestigious New York publishing firm of Alfred A. Knopf, *The Prophet* is Gibran's masterpiece. Composed, for the most part, in April and May of 1918, its original title, as a manuscript, was "The Counsels." Of its initial print run of 2,000, *The Prophet* sold only 1,159 copies (although other sources claim that the print run was 1,300 and that these sold out within a month or two). To Knopf's surprise, demand for *The Prophet* doubled the following year and again the year after. The book sold 12,000 copies in 1935, and late in World War II an edition for distribution to soldiers was published by the nonprofit Council on Books in Wartime. Sales numbered 111,000 in 1961, and 240,000 in 1964, according to a 1965 article in *Time* magazine tracing the cultlike phenomenon that *The Prophet* had become. It went on to become the best-selling book of the twentieth century, apart from the Bible, and has been translated into over forty languages.

Of the experience of writing this book—which is of modest length (less than twenty thousand words) yet of immodest ethos—Gibran wrote to Archbishop Antonious Bashir: "You know that this small book is a part and parcel of my being, and I hardly wrote a chapter of it without experiencing a transformation in the depth of my soul" (El-Hage, trans., p. 172). Admirers of the *The Prophet* respond to its luminous wisdom and its approach to the numinous.

Yet there is a hidden dimension to *The Prophet* as well. Mikhail Naimy, Gibran's friend and, later, his critical biographer, saw *The Prophet* as an intensely personal production. One is struck, certainly, by the visual resemblance between the portrait of Almustafa and that of Gibran himself. One can see Almustafa as Gibran; Orphalese as New York; Almitra as Mary

Haskell; Almustafa's native island as Lebanon; and the twelve years in Orphalese as the twelve years Gibran spent in New York prior to the publication of *The Prophet*.

Unenchanted critics have criticized *The Prophet* as platitudinous and petty. Others find Gibran's masterpiece profound and ennobling. Writing in the *London Review of Books*, Robert Irwin caricatured Gibran's poetic craft by declaring that "as latter-day Prophet, Gibran favoured a mock-Biblical delivery, larded with archaisms, and inversions of word-order for rhetorical effect." Bushrui and Jenkins, by contrast, privilege *The Prophet* as "the most highly regarded poem of the twentieth century" and as "the most widely read book of the century" (p. 2). The broad and long-lasting appeal of *The Prophet* in American popular culture has never been satisfactorily explained, but presumably it has something to do with the human hunger for deeper meaning in life, which established religions have traditionally provided. Given the widespread decline in church attendance and the waning influence of religion generally, does the appeal of *The Prophet* render it a surrogate gospel?

"Gospel" is, in fact, too narrow a word, in that *The Prophet* is not an exclusively Christian text; rather it is a fusion of Christian and Islamic (Sufi) mysticism. In religious terms, *The Prophet* could be considered not a social gospel but, rather, a personal gospel—a gospel with a message of salvation from the ignorance of one's own true self, not of salvation from sin in the traditional Christian sense. Gibran himself epitomized the message of *The Prophet*: "The whole Prophet is saying one thing: 'You are far far greater than you know—and All is well'" (Bushrui and Jenkins, p. 238). In the chapter "Crime and Punishment," Almustafa speaks of the "god-self" (that is, the higher nature) and what he calls the "pigmy-self" (that is, the lower nature): "Like the ocean is your god-self. . . Even like the sun is your god-self; . . . But your god-self dwells not alone in your being. . . But a shapeless pigmy that walks asleep in the mist searching for its own awakening" (p. 122) The human person is both benighted and enlightened, in that each individual is "but one man standing in twilight

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between the night of his pigmy-self and the day of his god-self” (p. 124). This is Gibran at his most pellucid moment: The giant within is the god-self, while the dwarf within is the pygmy self, which stand in polar relation to each other—as day and night. The relation of the pygmy self to the giant self is developmental, progressive, evolving, like that of the acorn to the oak. But is the god-self the spiritually awakened lesser self grown to its full potential, or is the greater self a cosmic principle, a world supersoul? There is no consensus among scholars on this issue, but the latter interpretation seems persuasive, because it carries the inherent pantheism of *The Prophet* to the extreme.

In the volume’s concluding discourse, “The Farewell,” Almustafa says: “It is in the vast man that you are vast, And in beholding him that I beheld you and loved you” (p. 154). The concept of the “vast man” is the key to unlocking the message of *The Prophet*. By “man” is meant consciousness. The greater the spiritual awareness, the vaster the man. Man is asleep, benighted in oblivion to a higher reality (including his own higher being), until awakened by the dawn of spiritual awareness. The seed of that awareness is the realization that a person is far more than the body, as the physical frame cannot contain the boundless spirit. Almustafa explains, “You are not enclosed within your bodies, nor confined to houses or fields. That which is you dwells above the mountain and roves with the wind” (p. 159). Elsewhere in *The Prophet*, the message seems to be that love is the power of spiritual growth. It manifests most intensively in the passionate love between man and woman, yet that is merely a beginning for the wider embrace of love. Love results in unity, and that sharing or merging of consciousness is expansive and redemptive.

In “The Farewell,” the Prophet admits that his teachings may be “vague”: “If these be vague words, then seek not to clear them” (p. 159). This vagueness has not escaped the notice of critics who feel that *The Prophet* is overrated. As an example, in the discourse “On Reason and Passion,” Almustafa says that one should rest in reason and move in passion, just as “God rests in reason” and “God moves in passion” (p. 130).

While a reader may understand that passion is emotion and emotion has motive power, and that reason is pensive and therefore still, whether reason is best described as “rest” is controversial. Yet ultimately such definitions are not the point. *The Prophet* is exquisitely inspirational—it is not intended to be ethically explicit or morally prescriptive, nor is it a social panacea.

### SAND AND FOAM

Gibran is the consummate aphorist, and his 1926 volume *Sand and Foam* is primarily a collection of aphorisms, pithy bits of wisdom, strung like pearls across the skin of the slender volume’s pages. Some of the aphorisms in this work were first composed by other writers in Arabic, then translated by Gibran into English. For instance, Gibran writes, “Love is the veil between lover and lover” (p. 185). This alludes to a couplet composed by the Bahá’í founder and prophet, Bahá’u’lláh’s. As it is written in an English translation of his mystical work *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*: “Love is a veil betwixt the lover and the loved one; More than this I am not permitted to tell” (Marzieh Gail, 1991). Despite its negative reception by critics, *Sand and Foam* won popular acclaim.

Gibran sustains his anthropology of the lower and higher selves in this book, with phrasing such as “You are but a fragment of your giant self” (p. 225) and “rising toward your greater self” (p. 173). Rising toward the greater self is a process of expanding one’s awareness and seeing the greater picture in a vaster panorama unbounded by limitations of narrow identities: “If you would rise but a cubit above race and country and self you would indeed become godlike” (p. 225). Elsewhere in *Sand and Foam*, the writer speaks of the “other self” as the greater self: “Your other self is always sorry for you. But your other self grows on sorrow; so all is well” (p. 184). (This evokes Gibran’s précis of the message of *The Prophet* discussed above—“You are far far greater than you know—and All is well”—and the idea as before, that God is latent within each person as the greater self.)

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The book concludes with what may be Gibran's most prescriptive general counsel in English: "Every thought I have imprisoned in expression I must free by my deeds" (p. 228). Here, action follows cognition, if moved by volition. Mere intentionality is inert, and action without knowledge and wisdom is a rudderless ship. In *Sand and Foam*, the reader stands on the shore of the ocean of grandeur, gazes on the sea of wisdom, is awakened and enlightened by the dawn of knowledge, is inspired by the breezes of love, is uplifted like a bird, and soars in the atmosphere of spiritual oversight in an invisible world that endows the visible world with meaning and purpose—yet the reader must inevitably return to the rigors of daily life and find a way to translate insight into action.

## JESUS, THE SON OF MAN

For twenty years, Gibran had wanted to write a life of Jesus. After Alfred Knopf gave him a two-thousand-dollar advance, Gibran abandoned *The Garden of the Prophet* in order to work on *Jesus, the Son of Man*, which he began in November 1926. The book, published in 1928, was handsomely produced with some of Gibran's illustrations in color. Reviews were favorable, and the book remains the most popular of his works after *The Prophet*.

The full title of this work is *Jesus, the Son of Man: His Words and His Deeds as Told and Recorded by Those Who Knew Him*. This polychoral and imaginal life of Jesus is Gibran's lengthiest work in English. It is a creative and reverential life of Jesus as told by seventy-eight of his contemporaries, both real and fictional, enemies as well as friends, and strangers from a distance—such as the Persian philosopher who was a follower of the Persian prophet Zoroaster. As such, *Jesus, the Son of Man* is a series of sketches from which a patchwork portrait of Jesus emerges. At the very end, "A Man from Lebanon Nineteen Centuries Afterward" speaks, saying that seven times he was born and seven times he had died, that Jesus' mother is seen in the sheen of the face of all mothers; that Mary Magdalene, Judas, John, Simon Peter, and Ca-

iaphas and Annas are all archetypally alive in the recurring cosmic drama.

Ernest Renan's *Life of Jesus* (English trans., 1863) was a major influence on Gibran's conception of Jesus. His biographers Bushrui and Jenkins claim Baha'i influence as well: "The template for his unique portrayal of Jesus was inspired by his meetings in 1912 with 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Bahá'í leader, whom he drew in New York, a man whose presence moved Gibran to exclaim: 'For the first time I saw form noble enough to be a receptacle for the Holy Spirit'" (p. 252). This novel hypothesis, however, remains undeveloped. While Gibran was clearly impressed by Bahá'u'lláh's writings in Arabic, and by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in person, he was relatively unfamiliar with the full scope of Baha'i teachings and thus cannot be said to have subscribed to them generally. The result was a gospel narrative that is not seamless but rather is a patchwork of fictional reminiscences by those who knew or had met the Nazarene, creating an impressionistic medley of memories that would entertain, even illumine, but not necessarily enlighten. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, rather than being an actual template for *Jesus, the Son of Man*, could arguably have served as an immediate inspirational presence in the mind of Gibran, while he was composing this secular yet sacred portrait of Jesus.

Is Gibran's Jesus Christian? Clearly, the figure portrayed in this volume is both orthodox and extra-orthodox (not necessarily heterodox). Curiously, in "John the Son of Zebedee: On the Various Appellations of Jesus," Zoroaster, the prophet of the Persians, is identified as a previous incarnation of Jesus, as is Prometheus and Mithra. Not only does Gibran add apocryphal accounts to the life of Jesus, he enhances a number of the sayings of Jesus by taking a familiar teaching and expanding on it. For instance, in "Simon Who Was Called Peter: When He and His Brother Were Called," Jesus says to Andrew, brother of Peter, on the shores of Galilee: "Follow me to the shores of a greater sea. I shall make you fishers of men. And your net shall never be empty" (p. 253); a reader might recall that "the greater sea" is a favorite Gibranian symbol for the Sufi notion of the greater self, or the "perfect man."

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The most extensive of Gibran's edifying edits of the sayings of Jesus is in the chapter, "Matthew: The Sermon on the Mount," in which Gibran embellishes Jesus' beatitudes, proverbs, and other teachings. This, in turn, is followed by Gibran's version of the Lord's Prayer. Sometimes the alteration or embellishment may be accomplished by a single word, such as in Gibran's version of Jesus' "cry of dereliction," as scholars call it. In "Barabbas: The Last Words of Jesus," Jesus, who is still alive on the cross, exclaims, "Father, why hast Thou forsaken us?"—where the word "us" is substituted for "me" (p. 390). Some of Gibran's sayings of Jesus are utterly noncanonical, as in this saying from "James the Brother of the Lord: The Last Supper": "Heaven and earth, and hell too, are of man" (p. 397). Gibran here has disenchanting the metaphysical world of the principality of Satan and shifted attention back to the true principal of evil—man.

The biographical narrative is not sequential and is sometimes glaringly out of sequence. For instance, "The Last Supper" appears shortly after the Crucifixion account, mentioned above. The anecdotal accounts are interwoven with the occasional poem, typically a paean to Jesus. *Jesus, the Son of Man*, as a whole, is an artistically original and eloquent tribute to the "Prophet of Nazareth."

### THE EARTH GODS

As a complete work, *The Earth Gods*, published in 1931, brings Gibran's literary work to a conclusion, as it appeared shortly prior to his death in same year. Illustrated with several exquisitely executed drawings by Gibran himself, twenty-eight manuscript pages of the book (which correspond to pages 1 to 27, or two-thirds of the published book) are archived in Princeton Library's Shehadi Collection.

*The Earth Gods* is a free-verse triologue among three earth-born Titans, in what may be considered a meditation on love. At one point, the Second God discloses the open "secret" that is at the heart of Gibran's consistent message: "Yea, in your own soul your Redeemer lies asleep, / And in sleep sees what your waking eye

does not see. / And that is the secret of our being" (p. 431). In other words, the greater self, the spiritual giant, Christ-spirit is within. The beginning of salvation is to awaken the sleeping giant.

At the height of their debate, the Third God proclaims: "Love is our lord and master" (p. 443).

Love is God on Earth. Beyond that, the debate is convoluted and unsophisticated, with no clear progression in reasoning. (There is no rhyme.) *The Earth Gods* is perhaps the least deserving of Gibran's English works. Its publication was anticlimactic. Fortunately, it was followed by the appearance of *The Wanderer*, which is more true to form and a more befitting legacy.

### THE WANDERER

Gibran finalized the manuscript of *The Wanderer: His Parables and His Sayings* during the last three weeks of his life. The original manuscript, however, is not extant; after she edited the manuscript, and once the book appeared in print in 1932, Barbara Young destroyed it. *The Wanderer* is primarily a book of fables, tales told by the itinerant traveler whom a man chances to meet and invite to his home. The guest regales his host and family with edifying stories with various morals. Some of these stories serve as social commentaries as well. Among the fifty-two parables and poems, for instance, in "The Lightning Flash," a Christian bishop is asked by a non-Christian whether there is salvation for her from hellfire. The bishop replies that only those baptized in water and the spirit will be saved. Then a thunderbolt strikes the cathedral, igniting a fire. The woman is saved by the men of the city, but the bishop is consumed by the fire. This fabulous fable turns on the irony of the priest telling the woman that she is destined for hell-fire, when he himself is the one ultimately engulfed by fire; of she being saved and he, not. The salvation of dogma is the antithesis of real salvation.

In "The Prophet and the Child," the prophet "Sharia" appears, with Gibran again drawing on the term for the Islamic code of law. In "The King," the author speaks of the "kingdom of Sadik" (p. 466)—an Islamic term for "righteous"

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and name of Ja'far al-Sádiq (d.765 C.E.), universally revered as a mystic in both Sunní and Shí'a Islam, and regarded as the "Sixth Imám" by all Shí'a Muslims. In "The Three Gifts," Gibran writes of his birthplace, "Becharre" (p. 469), and in "The Quest," two ancient philosophers meet on a mountain slope of Lebanon much like the one near Gibran's childhood home. There is much personification throughout the stories, such as in "Garments" (where Beauty and Ugliness converse), or "The Eagle and the Skylark," in which a talking turtle enters into the conversation between the two birds. There are talking oysters, frogs, dogs, trees, sparrows, grass, and even a speaking shadow. Like the title of the book's final fable, "The Other Wanderer," the book may be thought of as a desultory disquisition on the mysteries of life and death, in which the reader is left to divine the wisdom of each brief tale.

### INTERPRETING GIBRAN'S ENGLISH WORKS BY HIS ARABIC WORKS

Gibran's early Arabic works may offer a key to better understanding Gibran's salient themes in English. Gibran's eight Arabic books are: *Music (al-Músiqá, 1905)*, *Nymphs of the Valley ('Ará'is al-Murúj, 1906)*, *Spirits Rebellious (al-Arwáh al-Mutamarrida, 1908)*, *The Broken Wings (al-'Ajniha al-Mutakassirah, 1912)*, *A Tear and a Smile (Dam'a wa Ibtisáma, 1914)*, *The Procession (al-Mawákib, 1919)*, and two collections of previously published work, *The Storm (al-'Awásif, 1920)*, *Marvels and Masterpieces (al-Badá'i' wa'l-Tará'if, 1923)*, and *Heads of Grain (al-Sanábil, 1929)*, (*Music* scarcely qualifies as a book, however, since it is only eleven pages long.) To express his ideas in Arabic, Gibran first used the short narrative, but over time, he employed the literary devices of parable, aphorism, allegory, and epigram—all of which became the distinctive stylistic hallmarks of his English works.

In a 1908 letter to his cousin Nakhli, Gibran, wrote: "I know that the principles upon which I base my writings, are echoes of the spirit of the great majority of the people of the world" (quoted in Bushrui and Jenkins, p. 87). Nowhere is this

more perfectly illustrated than in "Khalil the Heretic"—one of the four short stories of *Spirits Rebellious* (although only three of the stories from the Arabic appear in Anthony Ferris' translation (the other two being "Madame Rose Hanie" and "The Cry of the Graves," excluding "The Bridal Bed"). Speaking transparently as the character Khalil in this story, Gibran fictionalizes himself as a young peasant man who challenges the avaricious prince, Sheik Abbas, and the corrupt Maronite church. In part 3, Khalil introduces himself by name. He tells the story of how he had dwelled for a time in a monastery, where the monks addressed him as "Brother Mobarak"—yet they never treated Khalil as a "brother." They dined on sumptuous foods and drank the finest wine, while Khalil subsisted on dry vegetables and water, and they slumbered in soft beds while the young man slept on a stone slab in a dank and dismal room by the shed.

One day, Khalil recounts, he stood bravely before the monks who gathered in the garden and criticized them for corrupting the teachings of Christ by segregating themselves from the people and enjoying the fruits of others' labor in an unholy parasitism. Jesus had sent these corrupt monks as lambs among wolves, Khalil says—that although they feign virtue, their hearts are full of lust; they pretend to abhor earthly things, but their hearts are swollen with greed. For his words, Khalil was branded a heretic, and he was scourged and cast into a dark cell for forty days and nights. In part 5, Khalil the Heretic describes the way that, in Lebanon, the noble and the priest collude to exploit the farmer who has worked the land and reaped the harvest to protect himself from the sword of the ruler and the curse of the priest. We learn that Sheik Abbas conspired with Father Elias to punish Khalil for having sought shelter at the house of Rachel, the widow of Sa-maan Ramy. In part 6, Khalil is arrested and brought to the Sheik's home. In part 7, before a throng of onlookers, Khalil answers his accusers, Sheik Abbas and Father Elias, and tells them that the souls of the peasants are in the grip of the priests, and their bodies are in the jaws of the rulers. Winning over the villagers by force of argument and eloquence, Khalil then beseeches

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Liberty, and, in his prayer, he calls “Liberty” (p. 687) the “Daughter of Athens,” the “Sister of Rome,” the “companion of Moses,” the “beloved of Muhammad,” and the “Bride of Jesus” (p. 688).

The story has a happy ending. We learn that a half a century later, the Lebanese people had awakened. In the future, fifty years later, a traveler, on his way to the Holy Cedars of Lebanon, is struck by contented villagers in homes surrounded by fertile fields and blooming orchards. Sheik Abbas’ mansion has since fallen to rubble. As for Khalil, his life’s history has been indelibly written by God with glittering letters upon the pages of the people’s hearts.

While *Nymphs of the Valley*, *Spirits Rebelious*, and *Broken Wings* are all set in Lebanon, they set the stage for Gibran’s English works. The advent of *The Madman* in 1918 marked Gibran’s transition to, and adoption of, English as a universal language for literary purposes. Lebanon recedes from the foreground and becomes a background, while remaining the bedrock of Gibran’s basic orientation.

In his early Arabic works, Gibran may be described as a social reformer, in a visionary sort of way. In his English works, Gibran is more of a spiritual guide, offering counsels for edification and personal transformation. But despite his strengths in these respects, Gibran had serious limitations that must be acknowledged as well. John Walbridge, an authority on Gibran and translator of Gibran’s *The Storm* (1998) and *The Beloved* (1998) from the original Arabic, has framed some of the most persuasive critical analysis of Gibran’s shortcomings. Walbridge notes that Gibran is not adept at narrative and that “his narrative harp has only a few strings” (2001, online) As a writer, says Walbridge, Gibran lacks the skills of subtle characterization or complex plots. Everything Gibran says is deadly serious. There is never a trace of humor or irony in his work (nor in his art), and thus he has a significant limitation on his range of expression. Walbridge sees Gibran’s English prose as pretentious, his ideas as excessively mystical or just trite; Gibran’s aesthetic is Arabic, not American. Like one of his paintings, each of Gibran’s liter-

ary pieces typically represent a single arresting image. Gibran is also incapable of ironic detachment, or even rational analysis. Gibran’s paintings and stories are dreamlike and ethereal. Whether a painting, a prose poem, or an illustrated story, Gibran’s art touches the heart at a prerational level. As in his painting, Gibran in his writing uses a vivid but essentially static image, but he does not explicate this link of emotion and experience; his work is impressionistic.

While one may appreciate the extraordinary force of Gibran’s moral seriousness as related to various aspects of life, says Walbridge, the reader should not expect from Gibran prescriptions for living, reforms for reordering society, reasoned ethics, rational theology, conceptual depth, nor a coherent philosophy. Gibran tends to express his moral and spiritual views in terms of dichotomies. He romanticizes the country and demonizes cities. Society and religion, for Gibran, are systems of oppression, whereas nature and love are what benefit humanity most. (Other scholars have commented on Gibran’s persistent dualisms as well, such as life and death, good and evil, love and hatred.) Gibran’s views do not represent practical teachings; as Walbridge points out, we cannot desert our cities to live as hermits at the edge of the Qadisha Gorge nor can we all escape to live as couples in idyllic cottages overlooking Beirut in total abandonment of society.

What, then, are Gibran’s contributions in the final analysis? In the Arab world, Gibran’s influence was as profound as it was pervasive. What came to be known as “Gibranian style” was marked, among other elements, by the electric cadence of his rhythms, in the drumbeat of his incantations and repetitions; by the charm of his new poetic style; in his inventive and selective choice of words, in brave abandon of arid Arabic poetic diction; through the evocative power of words with emotional immediacy; by rhetorical reliance on “value words” such as beauty, love, power, and justice; through structural use of biblical images that inform and sustain his narratives; and by dint of soul-deep symbolism—that is, the cage (symbol of oppression), the forest (symbol of sanctuary, freedom, renewal, and immortality), the storm or tempest (symbol of destruction and

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regeneration), the mist (symbol of mystery and eternity, or that which obscures), the child (symbol of perceptiveness and equilibrium), the river (symbol of the course of human life), the sea (symbol of the great spirit or the greater self), the bird (symbol of the soul's search for the divine), the mirror (symbol of contemplation), the night (symbol of soporific ignorance), and the dawn (symbol spiritual awakening).

These carry over into Gibran's work in English, which is stylistically marked by a lyrical impulse, by rebellion against literary norms and established forms, and by impressionistic imagery with evocative power to effect emotional elevation. Gibran's ideological leitmotifs include—to name some of the more obvious themes—the veneration of love, a pantheistic quest for the mysterious in nature, the rejection of religious and political corruption, a passion for freedom, and a belief in human brotherhood.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF KAHLIL GIBRAN AND THE PROPHET

On July 9, 2009, the International Astronomical Union officially approved the naming of a crater, one hundred kilometers in diameter, on the planet Mercury after Kahlil Gibran, thanks to the efforts of Nelly Mouawad, a postdoctoral researcher in the astronomy department at the University of Maryland, in association with the university's director of the Kahlil Gibran Chair for Values and Peace, Suheil Bushrui. Even though a crater on Mercury has now been named after Gibran, his identity as a significant *American* writer is still in question. Where is Gibran's "crater" in the American literary critical landscape? Why is Gibran still largely "off the map" in terms of critical acclaim?

Whether or not *The Prophet* is an American classic, and whether Gibran himself will be accepted by critics as an American writer of note, Gibran's legacy transcends that category itself. *The Prophet*, after all, falls outside conventional frames of reference. It resists categorization. Yet, to be a great American author is, perhaps, to write a work of universal quality, of enduring international appeal, irrespective of how qualitatively

American it may or may not be. If a work such as *The Prophet* has entered the canon of "world literature," then surely its author ought to be viewed as belonging to the American literary hall of fame as well.

Beyond the question of whether *The Prophet* is an American classic, however, or whether Kahlil Gibran ought to be recognized, at long last, as an American writer worthy of note, there is the question of Gibran's significance for the twenty-first century. Those who promote the idea of his importance today do so not for what he was but for what he represents; his importance is in his message of reconciliation, of peace, of brotherhood. Gibran has iconic value in the way he represents the embrace of East and West. It is Gibran's greater self, as it were, that really matters—not the person, but the paradigm.

In a speech in December 1995 to celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of Gibran's arrival in America, Suheil Bushrui spoke of the importance of Gibran's work and ideas for our time, and he pointed out the dual recognition that Gibran has received in the academic and public spheres in the United States—as represented by the University of Maryland's creation of the Kahlil Gibran chair and the dedication of the Kahlil Gibran Memorial Garden in Washington, D.C. Beyond this national recognition, said Bushrui, Gibran also occupies a distinctive position among the world's great writers because of the universal appeal that *The Prophet* has enjoyed internationally. Gibran's "stature and importance increase as time passes," said Bushrui, because "his message remains potent and as meaningful today" ("Kahlil Gibran of America," 1996, online). With "its emphasis on the healing process, the universal, the natural, the eternal, the timeless," he continued, Gibran's work "represents a powerful affirmation of faith in the human spirit." His name, says Bushrui, "perhaps more than that of any other modern writer, is synonymous with peace, spiritual values and international understanding." Gibran's work imbues purely secular concerns with sacred significance, by enlarging individual identity with the "greater self" of the world at large. Indeed,

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perhaps the most important element in Gibran's work for our own time is that it conveys the quintessential spiritual unity of Islam and Christianity and of all religions. In his parable "War and the Small Nations" (which is immediately preceded by "The Greater Self" in *The Forerunner*), Gibran's social message is embodied in the words of a mother sheep to her lamb (representing the "small nations"), as two eagles (powerful, hegemonic nations), each intent on devouring the lamb, were fighting in the sky overhead: "Pray, my little one, pray in your heart that God may make peace between your winged brothers" (p. 67).

In the province of universal imagination, Gibran's "greater self" of the individual is transposed to the greater, collective identity not only of nature, but of society itself. Throughout his works (both English and Arabic), Gibran draws from a palette of natural, spatial, and situational metaphors to convey the notion of an interior, hidden, expansive, liberated, powerful, and spiritual "self"—one that has compassion for others. This "greater self" is not ontologically swallowed up by one vast, undifferentiated Oversoul in the Emersonian sense. Rather, the "greater self" is greater by virtue of its identity *with*—not its identity *as*—the universe of other souls. Thus Gibran's "greater self"—rather than referring to some amorphous, atavistic "Oversoul"—is the socially "wider self," progressively self-actualized in part-to-whole harmony with the human family, or "the world."

Gibran's call for reconciliation, for the realization of a "greater self," addressed not only the need for Christian-Muslim understanding that seems so relevant today; it acknowledged the need for religious tolerance and understanding that would encompass all religions and all peoples. And, as the scholar Irfan Shahid points out, Gibran's poetry and ideas have stood the test of time, the best of all critics. Nonetheless:

Although his Prophet has sold, according to one estimate, ten million copies, thus outselling all American poets from Whitman to Eliot, the American literary establishment has not given him the recognition he deserves, and has not admitted him to the American literary canon. The Ivy League

Universities, such as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, do not teach him in their departments of English or Comparative Literature, and it is only recently that he came to be taught, but in a non-Ivy League University, that of Maryland, by Professor Suhayl Bushrui. *The Prophet* has passed the test of time as an enduring work. Indeed, ten million readers cannot be entirely wrong. Yet, *The Prophet* has not passed the threshold of the canon of American literature.

(p. 4)

Although *The Prophet* has entered the canon of world literature, Gibran does not appear in anthologies of American literature, even in collections known for cultural diversity such as the prestigious *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* (where there is not a single line from Gibran). This critical indifference to the author of America's bestselling book (apart from the Bible) goes far in explaining why *The Prophet* has been so marginalized in American literary history. That indifference is hardly disinterest; rather, it is a studied disinheritance of something distinctively unique in the American literary heritage, and has the paradoxical effect of raising serious questions about the critical recognition of greatness in the face of so overwhelming an audience response. It therefore makes perfect sense that Gibran's masterpiece *The Prophet* ought, at long last, to be included in the American canon.

*The Prophet* is not without honor save in its own country. Perhaps it's time for that to change.

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