



OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

MELUS



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Source: *MELUS*, Vol. 7, No. 2, *Between Margin and Mainstream* (Summer, 1980), pp. 21-36

Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/467082>

Accessed: 22-09-2015 08:33 UTC

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Cultural Discontinuity in the Works of Kahlil Gibran

Eugene Paul Nassar

The Prophet has been among us since 1923; by 1976 the volume of counsels had been bought in America alone by more than six million people, read certainly by three times that many. The book has been too highly praised by the True Believers, but it also has been too roundly and imprecisely attacked. Gibran was a man of considerable talents, and a critical sketch of his work and life is in order now, a half century after their publication; it is necessary both to correct these imprecisions and to probe the actual merits and defects in the works.¹ Many of those merits and defects are intimately bound to Gibran's struggle to live within two cultures, the Lebanese-Arab and the American. In Gibran's case, the struggle led him to adopt a pseudo-wisdom posture which can be called "exultant dualism." Gibran's personal psychic suffering in maintaining the posture before his audience is variously demonstrated in some of his best, certainly most poignant, lyrical moments. These lyric passages, which constitute the most authentic Gibran, dramatize the pangs of cultural discontinuity. Gibran's life and work and the small body of critical comment on that life and work are, however, so little and poorly known, despite the popularity of *The Prophet*, that I find it necessary, for the purposes of this introductory essay, to outline both.

In 1974, through the New York Graphic Society, there appeared a reliable biography of Gibran by Jean and Kahlil Gibran (the writer's cousin-namesake). This biography goes a long way toward the necessary demystification of Gibran. The work had already been accomplished in part—brilliantly, I think—back in 1934 by Mikhail Naimy, a writer of great stature in the Middle East, in an impressionistic critical biography in Arabic. The book did appear in English, translated by the author in 1950 (Philosophical Library) but too late or little known, it seems, to counter the still-fashionable tendencies to either deify or damn Gibran. One will learn from either biography that Kahlil Gibran is best, most realistically, understood as a Lebanese-American emigre writer, not as an oriental wise man.²

Born of Christian parents in the Lebanon in 1883, in 1895 Gibran, his
MELUS, Volume 7, No. 2, Summer 1980.

brother and two sisters were brought over to Boston's immigrant South End by their mother. They left their homeland partly to escape the poverty and restrictions of Ottoman rule, partly to escape from a drunken husband and father. Gibran, then a poor and uneducated boy of thirteen, wandered into the Denison Settlement House on Tyler Street. When a social worker, Jessie Fremont Beale, was apprised of Kahlil's talent for drawing, she wrote to her friend, Fred Holland Day, asking if he would assist the boy. It was Day, an eminent publisher (Copeland and Day), photographer, collector, and man of taste, who developed the boy's talents for draftsmanship and his attitudes towards the arts. It was Day who introduced Gibran to Blake, Keats, Shelley, Emerson, Whitman, and various turn-of-the-century British, American, and Continental poets. Day was fascinated by Gibran's Near-Eastern heritage, which was Christian, not Islamic, and thus partly kin to the Western tradition. Apparently Day encouraged the impressionable young man to be proud of that heritage. As a consequence, Gibran went with some enthusiasm back to Lebanon for three years of advanced secondary schooling in a Maronite Christian school in Beirut. Before he left for Lebanon at the age of fifteen, Gibran had already sold some book-cover designs to Scribners, and, by his own account, had been inveigled into a love affair with a patroness of the arts. He left for Lebanon having just met and been impressed by the young poet, Josephine Preston Peabody, who was about to be published by Copeland and Day. In 1902 he returned at the age of nineteen; he then had to face the deaths, in quick succession, of a sister, a brother, and his mother. Terribly bereaved, weighed down by a melancholy which later became the ground base of all his work, the young Gibran found spiritual and cultural companionship with Miss Peabody.

The immigrant boy of nineteen knew what he wanted: to be a "pure artist" in the sense of the term as understood by Day and Peabody. But he had no money, was being supported by his sister, and his command of English was more comic than effective. An exhibition of his drawings was arranged by Fred Day in Day's own studio in 1904, and to that exhibition came a friend of Miss Peabody's: Mary Haskell, headmistress of Miss Haskell's School for Girls. Haskell was immediately taken by the drawings; she made Gibran's acquaintance, and by 1908 was so convinced of his "genius" that she financed a year's schooling in art for him in Paris.

By 1908, the twenty-five-year-old Gibran had published two books of short fiction in Arabic as well as dozens of short poetic essays in Arab-American newspapers; in literary circles in both the Near East and in the New York-Boston Lebanese-American community he was well-known as one of the vanguard of artists who were infusing Western attitudes and modes into Arabic literature. However, because of his lack of formal training he thought himself stalemated as a painter. With the Haskell offer of the Paris

year began the spiritual and patronage relationship that was to last up to and even past Gibran's death in 1931. Mary Haskell kept voluminous journals (now at the library of the University of North Carolina) during all of these years; these journals are a mine of information about Gibran, and are the primary base for the biography by Jean and Kahlil Gibran. From these journals emerge two very decent people: Mary, deeply committed to things of the spirit—art, ethics, humanitarianism—and afraid of sexuality; Gibran, deeply grateful, eager to please, puzzled and uncertain of his role with Mary. Was he to worship, or teach, or love, or marry this admirable woman? What did she want; what was the decent thing to do? One learns much about Gibran through Mary's eyes; yet one must also be cautious about Mary's Gibran. It seems clear from Gibran's writings, his letters, and in other accounts of the man, that there is much in Gibran, the Lebanese rather than the American Gibran, that did not find expression in the relationship with Mary Haskell. Gibran proposed to Mary, and was rejected. Either because of this rejection or because he needed wider artistic horizons (or perhaps for both reasons), in 1912 Gibran left Boston and acquired a studio apartment on West Tenth Street in New York City, where he remained for the rest of his life.

The early New York years were overcast for Gibran by the terrible fate of Lebanon during the Great War (fully one-third of the population of the Mountain starved). His chronic melancholia pervades the prose-poems in Arabic of this period. But he was finding success in America, where he most wanted it; here, both his symbolic drawings and his life drawings of famous artists and other notables, were popular. He then began to experiment with writing in English, under the tutelage of Mary Haskell. His early parables, which stemmed far more from Old and New Testament sources than from anything in Islamic literature, gained much critical attention, especially through the pages of the prestigious *Seven Arts Magazine*. The 1918 publication in English of *The Madman*, a collection of Gibran's parables, and the publication of *The Procession* in Arabic in 1919 mark a watershed for Gibran. Though his reputation in the Arabic world grew in the Twenties as a result of further collections of his earlier prose-poems in Arabic, Gibran now turned all of his literary energies and aspirations to the slim books of poems, parables, and aphorisms in English, and he turned his draftsman abilities to the illustration of these books.

The continuity of tone that runs throughout the works of Gibran is that of lonely alienation, of a yearning for connections. Beneath all his prophetic masks, Gibran's lyric cry for connection reveals his most authentic voice. Hungering for real unity, Gibran is ever attempting to lift himself up by his own bootstraps to deliver truths or at least prolegomena to the multitudes in

old societies or new on social and cosmic questions. But ever behind these pronouncements is the Gibran of unsureness, of profound melancholy, of tragic vision. Gibran is at home neither in the old culture nor in the new, and an unresolved dualism vitiates much of the work when, as so often occurs, it pretends to resolution.

The reader of the translations from the Arabic and of the English works of Gibran will find in each a confusing series of self-projections and investitures. Gibran was of the mold of William Blake: both angry social reformer of old cultural contexts and the prophet of an expanding cosmic consciousness beyond any need of a given cultural context. Most often and fundamentally, however, he emerges as a lonely poet finding solace only in the poetic consciousness or imagination. He wants desperately to trumpet a Humanism with absolutist foundations, but at the center of his vision (a center he keeps trying to shroud in mist), he is a tragic dualist whose exultation is fixed only in the idea of an ever-upwards-striving human spirit:

We are the sons of Sorrow; we are the poets
And the prophets and the musicians. We weave
Raiment for the goddess from the threads of
our hearts . . .

“We And You,” *Secrets of the Heart* (p. 41)

And Wisdom opened her lips and spoke:
“You, Man, would see the world with the eyes of
God, and would grasp the secrets of the hereafter
by means of human thought. Such is the fruit of
ignorance . . .

“The many books and strange figures and the lovely
thoughts around you are ghosts of the spirits that
have been before you. The words your lips utter
are the links in the chain that binds you and your
fellow men.

“A Visit From Wisdom,” *A Second Treasury* (p. 37)

My departure was like Adam’s exodus from Paradise,
but the Eve of my heart was not with me to make
the whole world an Eden. That night, in which I
had been born again, I felt that I saw death’s
face for the first time.

Thus the sun enlivens and kills the fields with
its heat.

Broken Wings (p. 47)

Though the child was dead, the sounds of the
drinking cups increased in the hall . . .

He was born at dawn and died at sunrise
 A lily that has just blossomed from the bud of
 life and is mashed under the feet of death.
 A dear guest whose appearance illuminated
 Selma's heart and whose departure killed her soul.
 This is the life of men, the life of nations, the
 life of suns, moons and stars.

Broken Wings (pp. 118-19)

These passages are, I think, "touchstones" for the central drama of Gibran's soul, a dualism that longs for unity, a belief only in the "divinity" of man's ability to create and to love, and a struggle to "make do" with this humanism. The humanism is much like both the humanism of Gibran's mentor, William Blake, and the early humanism of Percy Shelley. The young poet aspires to the energy of Blake, the social ardency of the early Shelley, and the cosmic euphoria of the Whitman of the *Song of Myself*; what Gibran really achieves, however, are dramatizations of the inextricable dualisms in Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, the tragic tone of Shelley's *The Triumph of Life*, the solitary laments of Whitman's "Out of the Cradle" or "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd."

Gibran always struggles to extricate himself from a melancholic position; at times he attempts this with a shell of toughness and bitterness which he, according to Naimy, fashioned after Nietzsche; often he attempts it through a brand of transcendentalism that seems a fusion of his own intuitions with his knowledge of Emerson, Naimy, and others. Neither role convinces as much as does the lyric voice of the poet who is often ashamed of both roles.

The bitter Yusif El Fakhri, in the philosophic dialogue, "The Tempest," has withdrawn from civilization, and he tells the questioning poet:

"No, my brother, I did not seek solitude
 for religious purposes, but solely to
 avoid the people and their laws, their
 teachings and their traditions, their
 ideas and their clamour and their wailing
 What I really know to be true is the crying
 of my inner self. I am here living, and in
 the depths of my existence there is a thirst
 and hunger, and I find joy in partaking of
 the bread and wine of Life from the vases
 which I make and fashion by my own hands.

Secrets of the Heart (pp. 15, 20)

But though Fakhri sought solitude only to avoid civilization, he has had "religious" experiences:

“And among all vanities of life, there is only one thing that the spirit loves and craves. One thing dazzling and alone It is an awakening in the spirit; it is an awakening in the inner depths of the heart; it is an overwhelming and magnificent power that descends suddenly upon man’s conscience and opens his eyes, whereupon he sees Life amid a dizzying shower of brilliant music, surrounded by a circle of great light, with man standing as a pillar of beauty between the earth and the firmament”

Secrets of the Heart (p. 22)

Such momentary psychic experience is not to be denied; Gibran’s poetry is often of such moments. The question is whether in Gibran’s mind such moments of “mysticism” or “cosmic consciousness” are in fact intuitive glimpses into a higher reality for an immortal soul, or only esthetic apprehensions of the evolutionary potential in man’s creative imagination. And the truth of the matter, demonstrably so, is that Gibran was tortured by the question, wanting to assert the one to his audience, while believing the other.

The poet’s dilemma is indicated in any number of pieces in both the Arabic and English writings. *The Procession* consists of an internal debate between Age’s desire to make sense of things and Youth’s disdain for all formulation:

The truth of the flute will e’er remain,
While crimes and men are but disdain
Singing is love and hope and desire,
The moaning flute is the light and fire

Give me the flute and let me sing;
Forget what we said about everything.
Talk is but dust, speckling the
Ether and losing itself in the vast
Firmament

Why do you not renounce the
Future and forget the past?

Secrets of the Heart ((pp. 150, 155, 157, 158)

Fakhri’s bitterness and “Youth’s” bitterness and also their estheticism or mysticism are reflected again in another internal debate, *The Earth Gods*, a poem in English finished and published just before Gibran’s death in 1931, but sketched out in the period 1912-18, which seems to have been the time of greatest ferment, turmoil, and creativity for Gibran. Indeed, most of *The*

Prophet was also written in 1918, though not published till 1923. The reason Gibran often gave for delay of *The Prophet* was that he wanted to make the book as perfect as he could. A profound unsureness about whether he was in fact prophet or "false alarm" (as he once confessed he felt to Mikhail Naimy), prophetic "forerunner" or mere bitter "wanderer," honey or poison for his readers, is more likely the reason.

There is a very moving and revealing Arabic poem of nightmare, confession, and self-analysis called "Between Night and Morning" in *The Tempests* volume of 1920. This poem consists of two related nightmares. The first is of the poet's harvesting fruit trees of his own planting. After the harvest is given away to the people (his Arabic readers, specifically the Christian-Lebanese), the poet discovers his fruit is as bitter as gall:

Woe to me, for I have placed a
Curse in the mouths of the people, and an
Ailment in their bodies.

Secrets of the Heart (p. 60)

Another tree is planted "in a field afar from the path of Time," watered with "blood and tears," but not one of the people will now taste of this sweet fruit of sadness, and the poet withdraws to his solitude. The second nightmare is of a boat of the poet's own building, "empty . . . except of rainbow colors":

and I said to
Myself, "I shall return with the empty
Boat of my thoughts to the harbour of the
Isle of my birth." . . . And on the masts and
On the rudder I drew strange figures that
Compelled the attention and dazzled the
Eye. And as I ended my task, the boat of
My thoughts seemed as a prophetic vision
Sailing between the two infinities, the
Sea and the sky.

(pp. 61-62)

And the people *are* dazzled:

Such welcome was mine because my boat
was beautifully decorated, and none
Entered and saw the interior of the
Boat of my thoughts, nor asked what
I had brought from beyond the seas. Nor
Could they observe that I had brought
my boat back empty

(p. 62)

The guilty poet then sails the seas to fill his boat with worthy cargo, but his people will not welcome him back, though the boat is full. And he withdraws, unable to speak or sing, even as dawn approaches. Both nightmares are obvious allegories of Gibran's guilt feeling with regard to his art and his audience. Gibran later, at the full tide of success of *The Prophet*, confided to Mary Haskell his plans for sequels, in which Almustafa, back at the isle of his birth, is first rejected by his disciples, and is then stoned to death by "his people" in a marketplace.

The "Seven Selves" parable is likewise deeply personal and poignant, as are others in *The Madman*, *The Forerunner*, and *The Wanderer*:

"Ah! could I but be like one of you, a self
with a determined lot! But I have none, I
am the do-nothing self, the one who sits
in the dumb, empty nowhere and nowhen, while
you are busy re-creating life"
the seventh self remained watching and
gazing at nothingness, which is behind all
things.

"The Seven Selves," *The Madman* (p. 23)

The "forerunner" preaches a new gospel of a new John the Baptist to his people, but as he closes, he exclaims:

"Like moths that seek destruction in the
flame you gather daily in my garden: and
with faces uplifted and eyes enchanted you
watch me tear the fabric of your days.
And in whispers you say the one to the other,
'He sees with the light of God. He speaks
like the prophets of old'

"Aye, in truth, I know your ways, but only
as an eagle knows the ways of his fledglings.
And I fain would disclose my secret. Yet in
my need for your nearness I feign remoteness,
and in feat of the ebbtide of your love I
guard the floodgates of my love."

After saying these things the Forerunner
covered his face with his hands and wept
bitterly.

The Forerunner (pp. 63-64)

And then later, after the coming of the "prophet," and also the commentary on both the historical Jesus and the Jesus within (*Jesus, Son of Man*, 1928), Gibran projects himself as the "wanderer":

I met him at the crossroads, a man with but
 a cloak and a staff, and a veil of pain upon
 his face
what I now record was born out of the
 bitterness of his days though he himself
 was kindly, and these tales are of the
 dust and patience of his road.

The Wanderer (p. 3)

It is within this melancholy context that the record of Gibran's euphoric moments, and the quasi-theology around which he fashions those moments, must be read.

The Prophet is an extended flight on the wings of a dubious idea that Gibran derived from Blake, Whitman, and Nietzsche, that the evolving godliness in man is god enough for exultant worship:

My God, my aim and my fulfillment; I am
 thy yesterday and thou art my tomorrow.
 I am thy root in the earth and thou art
 my flower in the sky.

The Madman (p. 10)

You are your own forerunner, and the towers
 you have builded are but the foundation of
 your giant-self. And that self too shall be
 a foundation
 O my faith, my untamed knowledge, how shall I
 fly to your height and see with you man's
 larger self pencilled upon the sky?

The Forerunner (pp. 7, 39)

The "Greater Self," "Larger Self," "Vast Man" (cf. Blake's "Eternal Great Humanity Divine,") within us is the God of *The Prophet* (and, to be sure, of *Jesus, Son of Man*):

But your god-self dwells not alone in your being.
 Much in you is still man, and much in you is not
 yet man
 Like a procession you walk together towards your
 god-self.
 You are the way and the wayfarers
 In your longing for your giant self lies your
 goodness: and that longing is in all of you
 For what is prayer but the expansion of yourself
 into the living ether?
 Our God, who art our winged self, it is thy will
 in us that willeth.

The Prophet (pp. 39, 40, 66, 67, 68)

All of which may seem acceptable doctrine in some theological (Emersonian) circles. However, to other (particularly Lebanese-Christian) circles, it is heretical because the speaker, Gibran, wants 1) to do without a Godhead existing independently of man while pretending to the absolute authority of such, and 2) to do without any promise of ego-immortality while pretending sufficient compensation in the immortality of the Life Force, that is, in the succeeding generations of man evolving an ever wider and wider consciousness.

Whitman's "Myself" is much the same as Gibran's "Larger Self." In fact, *The Prophet* is deeply influenced by the *Song of Myself*. Both works are devious enough to obscure the problem of evil in the euphoric, cosmic moment:

What is called good is perfect, and what is
called sin is just as perfect.

Whitman, "To Think of Time"

For what is evil but good tortured by its
own hunger and thirst?

The Prophet (p. 64)

Both poets are honest enough to dramatize the endless pain in the contingent reality:

The malformed limbs are tied to the anatomist's table,
What is removed drops horribly into a pail

Song of Myself (sec. 15)

For even as love crowns you so shall he crucify you
Your blood and my blood is naught but the sap that
feeds the tree of heaven.

The Prophet (pp. 11, 23)

In both the *Song of Myself* and *The Prophet* we have, in fact, dualism pretending to unity. The following is perhaps Gibran's best expression of his true position:

Verily all things move within your being in
constant half embrace, the desired and the
dreaded, the repugnant and the cherished, the
pursued and that which you would escape.
These things move within you as lights and
shadows in pairs that cling.
And when the shadow fades and is no more, the
light that lingers becomes a shadow to another
light.
And thus your freedom when it loses its fetters
becomes itself the fetter of a greater freedom.

The Prophet (p. 49)

This is a vision of a dualistic spiral; the wider the consciousness is expanded, the greater the awareness of *both* joy and pain, good and evil. Gibran's Arabic prose poem, "The Ambitious Violet," is of a violet that would be a rose for a day so as to have a moment in the sun, a rose that is willing to then be dashed by the tempest. Or, as Gibran's "Jesus" says it, "The lilies and the brier live but a day, yet that day is eternity spent in freedom" (p. 54). One need not de-emphasize the importance of ecstatic psychic or mystic moments. A moment in eternity is a different blessing than to be eternally in eternity. Thus, the bluff one often senses in both Gibran and Whitman. What is moving in both poets is their elsewhere tortured consciousness of this bravado. It is not, however, a bravado likely to bluff the Christian-Lebanese peasant in general, or the Christian-Lebanese peasant in Gibran.

Gibran's later work, *The Earth Gods*, is in many ways a more satisfying work than *The Prophet*. In this book, the "second god" strikes the true tonality of the artist-as-only-savior central to Gibran:

In our eyes is the vision that turns man's soul
to flame,
And leads him to exalted loneliness and rebellious
prophecy,
And on to crucifixion.
Man is born to bondage,
And in bondage is his honor and his reward
For deaf is the ear of the infinite,
And heedless is the sky.
We are the beyond and we are the Most High,
And between us and boundless eternity
Is naught save our unshaped passion
And the motive thereof.

The Earth Gods (pp. 16, 25)

The first god speaks only of weariness, bitterness, and a death-wish; the third god speaks of merely human dancers and mere human love, ever-fresh. All three gods represent attitudes of the poet in a complex inner debate with no possible resolution save that all three are capable of being caught momentarily by the beauty of the young lovers and by their dance in the ancient "sacred grove":

Yea, what of this love of man and woman?
See how the east wind dances with her dancing feet,
And the west wind rises singing with his song.
Behold our sacred purpose now enthroned,
In the yielding of a spirit that sings to a body
that dances.

The Earth Gods ("second god," p. 32)

The third god would build some transcendental truths upon this love, but the second god protests:

Your hands have spun man's soul
 From living air and fire,
 Yet now you would break the thread,
 And lend your versed fingers to an idle eternity
 Oh, lofty dreaming brother,
 Return to us from time's dim borderland!
 Unlace your feet from no-where and no-when,
 And dwell with us in this security. (pp. 21, 35)

For the gods are "earth-bound." The poem ends with the third god finally agreeing with his brother:

Better it is for us, and wiser,
 To seek a shadowed nook and sleep in our
 earth divinity,
 And let love, human and frail, command
 the coming day. (p. 41)

The voice of the lyric Gibran here persuades the prophetic Gibran; the poet persuades the transcendental philosopher.

The passage from *The Earth Gods* beginning "Oh, lofty dreaming brother" is a conscious variation on a motif in *The Prophet*:

And others among you called unto me, not in
 words, and they said,
 "Stranger, stranger, lover of unreachable
 heights, why dwell you among the summits
 where eagles build their nests?
 Why seek you the unattainable?
 What storms would you trap in your net,
 And what vaporous birds do you hunt in the sky?
 Come and be one of us.
 Descend and appease your hunger with our bread
 and quench your thirst with our wine." (p. 90)

Gibran's answer to the people, in the grandiose manner of *The Prophet*, is that "I hunted only your larger selves" (p. 91). It is in *The Wanderer* later that the motif receives its most personal variation:

Two men were walking in the valley, and one
 man pointed with his finger toward the moun-
 tain side, and said, "See you that hermitage?
 There lives a man who has long divorced the
 world. He seeks but after God, and naught
 else upon this earth."

And the other man said, "He shall not find God until he leaves his hermitage, and the aloneness of his hermitage, and returns to our world, to share our joy and pain, to dance with our dancers at the wedding feast, and to weep with those who weep around the coffins of our dead."

And the other man was convinced in his heart, though in spite of his conviction he answered, "I agree with all that you say, yet I believe the hermit is a good man. And may it not well be that one good man by his absence does better than the seeming goodness of these many men?"

(p. 87)

More human? Yes. But Gibran is always partly thus. Gibran the Christian-Lebanese peasant son worships the idea of the Mother in *Broken Wings* (Bantam ed. pp. 82-83); Gibran the philosopher of the Larger Self tells parents to stay out of their children's way in *The Prophet* (pp. 17-18).

Gibran was born into an ancient and rich hill-culture in the Lebanese Mountain. He was separated from this culture, but he also separated himself from it. That culture as I know it from my immigrant parents and their peers is one that humanizes nature, the universe, and God in terms of the Lebanese family, its garden, and its mountain village. The Father ideally rules the family, but only in the context of the worship of the Mother. Grandparents have the double respect of parents and of age. The family and the clan stand together in the village; one village tells tales about another, one region tells tales about another. Dogs, vegetables, fruit trees, and all natural phenomena are seen in terms of brothers, sisters, cousins. God is seen now as the village patriarch, now as the neighborhood visitor, even at times as the village jokester; He appreciates laughter, the well-told tale, the well-made *arak*. A person weeds the garden and prunes the vine not out of hated obligation, but out of love of the lettuce leaf and the grape. The apricot thirsts for the water of the spring; the villager brings water to the garden plot, and the villager's thirst is quenched by both the apricot and the spring. So too are the relationships between brothers, cousins, neighbors, and strangers.

This idyllic vision, attained, of course, only fitfully, had sufficient power to cause the ambiguous love-hate, accusatory-guilty relationship of Gibran with the Old Country and its—(his)—people:

And he looked upon his mariners and said:
 "And what have I brought them? A hunter was I, in a distant land. With aim and might I have spent the golden arrows they gave me, but I have brought down no game. . . .

And he ceased from speaking and there fell a deep gloom upon the nine, and their heart was turned away from him, for they understood not his words.

And behold, the three men who were mariners longed for the sea; and they who had served in the Temple yearned for the consolation of her sanctuary; and they who had been his playfellows desired the market-place. They all were deaf to his words

And behold, they turned and went every man to his own place, so that Almustafa, the chosen and the beloved, was left alone.

The Garden of The Prophet (pp. 5, 49-50)

These passages, as usual, allow for the accusing of the people while in large measure dramatizing the self-accusation of the poet. In one of the saddest parables in *The Wanderer*, ironically and consciously given the title "Tears and Laughter" (also the title of Gibran's first volume of Arabic prose poems), a crocodile and a hyena protest that the people do not care when the crocodile really cries or the hyena really laughs.

The fundamental tone of Gibran then is lyric, tragic, alienated, punctuated by a series of struggles for transcendence and/or involvement. (It is worth noting that Gibran's art work too, his drawings, oils, washes, whatever merit they have standing alone before the artist's eye, are deeply illustrative of his fundamental tonality—pain and alienation and longing pervading them almost to the exclusion of any sense of joy.) Gibran is hardly a Blake or Whitman, not having their linguistic and imagistic vitality (though his style—obviously dependent on the King James Bible—is of considerable emotive and evocative power). But their "transcendental" thinking is much alike, often embracing the "exultant dualism" which is a pretense of an achieved unity covering a morass of conflicts. All three poets labor under the burden of their transcendent self-projections of unitary truths and are wholly convincing only when wholly absorbed in dramatizations of their dualistic experiences. To put Gibran in this company, at least in terms of similarity of theme and substance, is both to save him from his cultists and to place him, rightly, far more within the Western than an Eastern poetic tradition.

With regard to Gibran's stature with "his people,"—the Arabic world in general perhaps, but more specifically the Christian-Lebanese and Lebanese-American worlds—there is a great deal of pride in the native son, and an appreciation of his bringing forms and themes of Western Romanticism into Arabic literature. There are also negative reactions. There is much of the

predictable arch-conservatism, against which Gibran wrote and thrived. But there is also a thoughtful conservatism (viz., the letters to Gibran of the writer May Ziadeh) which sensed that beneath the bravado of the prophetic robes, Gibran really had no adequate replacement for the richness of the cultural heritage, both peasant and intellectual, of the Christian East. It appears that the bread and wine in the Lebanon hill village were, perhaps, a better bet for a life than were the winds of solitude at the studio apartment on West Tenth Street in Manhattan. Gibran himself wrote with pain of this "exile":

No punishment more severe has befallen a child
of God; no exile so bitter

We may be wealthier than the villagers in gold,
but they are infinitely richer in fullness of
true existence

Oh, Giver of Graces, hidden from me behind these
edifices of the throngs which are naught but
idols and images hear the anguished cries
of my imprisoned soul! Hear the agonies of my
bursting heart! Have mercy and return Your
straying child to the mountainside, which is
Thy edifice!

"Contemplations in Sadness," *Secrets of the Heart* (pp. 144-45)

The involutions of Gibran, which allowed him to put on so many masks and speak through so many personae, create a human drama which is deeply moving, despite its having been often played: the drama of a talented emigre at home neither in the Old Country or the New.

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Notes

1. Works originally in Arabic are: *Nymphs of the Valley* (1906); *Spirits Rebellious* (1908); *Broken Wings* (1912); *Tears and Laughter* (1914); *The Procession* (1919); *The Tempests* (1920); *Best Things* (1923); *Spiritual Sayings* (1927); *The Spikes of Grain* (1929).
Works originally in English are: *The Madman* (1918); *The Forerunner* (1920); *The Prophet* (1923); *Sand and Foam* (1926); *Jesus, the Son of Man* (1928); *The Earth Gods* (1931); *The Wanderer* (1932); *The Garden of the Prophet* (1933), a posthumous compilation.
Most of the Arabic writings of Gibran have been collected in *A Treasury* and *A Second Treasury of Kahlil Gibran* (Citadel Press 1951, 1962), translated by Anthony R. Ferris. The translations make readable English prose and I think a comparison of these with those of others will bring the reader back to Ferris's work. A good selection from the pieces in the two volumes is the Signet paperback, *Secrets of the Heart*, which together with the Bantam paperback of the novella, *Broken Wings*, is perhaps a sufficient sampling of Gibran's Arabic writings for the English reader. What these volumes lack for the critical reader is a chronological arrangement or even a dating of the various pieces.

2. The biography by Jean and Kahlil Gibran, cited above, is very helpful for Gibran's Boston years, less so for the New York City years. The book in general has a sense of incompleteness with respect to the Arabic side of Gibran's life. It is most comfortable when working with documents like letters and diaries: "Previous allusions to relationships and incidents that have not been corroborated by primary source material have remained unmentioned." (p.4) This procedure might be well in the biography of a man long dead, but the chaste avoidance of the very much alive Lebanese and Syrians and others in Boston and New York City that knew Gibran or knew of him thins the biography.

Mikhail Naimy's critical biography, cited above, for all of its impressionism and imprecisions gives the reader a more three-dimensional Gibran, one that seems more like the author of the works. There is a great deal more energy in the analyses of the works and actually a great deal more empathy for them than in the later biography. There *is* to be sure a great deal of Naimy in Naimy's book; he *is* using Gibran as an example of the backsliding initiate into the mysteries in which he is full professor, but the work at the same time has excitement, ironic self-awareness, and, I think, fundamental truthfulness to Gibran that gives it stature both as literary criticism and as creative achievement.

Khalil Hawi's *Kahlil Gibran: His Background, Character, and Works* (Am. Univ. of Beirut, 1963) is a very sober and intelligent study, and one that is critical both of Naimy's biography and Gibran's thought. But he is also respectful of Naimy's critical ability and of Gibran's contributions to Arabic literature. A well-known poet and scholar in the Arab world, Hawi was without benefit of the Haskell papers which would have gone some way towards clearing his objections to Naimy. Many of Hawi's objections to Naimy's book are rebutted in Nadeem Naimy's *Mikhail Naimy: An Introduction* (Am. Univ. of Beirut, 1967) and in Naimy's own *Sab'un* (transl. *Seventy*, Beirut, 1960).

The argument over Naimy's biography is not trivial (indeed it is still current in the Arab world) because the flaws Naimy—a man who seems to love and understand Gibran—finds in Gibran's character, weaknesses for women, money, fame, alcohol, in fact make Gibran more warmly human and the works more poignant. It seems clear from Gibran's letters (see *The Second Treasury*) that Naimy was indeed Gibran's closest comrade, and so I see no reason to assume that the "imaginary conversations" in Naimy's biography are not reconstructions of confidences given by Gibran over the years to Naimy.

Barbara Young did Gibran no favor with her fulsome *This Man From Lebanon* (Knopf, 1945), as such cult material provokes understandably extreme reactions like that of Stefan Kanfer in the *New York Times Magazine* (June 25, 1972). Kanfer, sensitive to many of the inadequacies of *The Prophet*, takes then the liberties of wide inaccuracies about Gibran's life, gratuitous witticisms, and simple obliviousness to the lyric Gibran behind the prophetic mask. Suhail Hanna's "Gibran and Whitman: Their Literary Dialogue" (*Literature East and West*, 7:174-98) is a fine essay on the Whitman and New England Transcendentalism influence on Gibran.