Introduction

I

When historians look back at the twentieth century they will see human consciousness being stretched upwards toward the heavens and outwards across the earth; an age when East and West finally touched and the peoples of the world awoke to the voices of a larger humanity. They will see the great poets of the West embracing the East – Yeats's translation of the *Upanishads* and Eliot's epiphany as he first read the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* – the world itself appearing transformed, renewed, painted with "bright, delicious" lines.[1] They will find too the great writers of the East embracing this new global consciousness and embarking upon a voyage of discovery.

At the forefront of this new adventure they will find the "burning genius"[2] of Kahlil Gibran. In his work, as in his thought, Gibran achieved lasting eminence and fame as a writer in two completely disparate cultures and represents the meeting of two worlds. A liberating force in Arabic literature, he became one of the most widely read authors in his adopted tongue – his work possessing a rare and distinctive flavor of ancient wisdom and mysticism, often leaving readers amazed to discover that its creator lived in New York from 1912 to 1931.

As an oriental who wrote his most celebrated work in the major language of the Western world, Gibran's style and philosophy is characteristic of the East, and of the Arab in particular. His constant inspiration was his own heritage, which colored his English and exercised an inescapable hold over his mind, its insistence being upon the wholeness of visionary experience and the perpetual availability of another realm of being. In all his work he expressed the deep-felt desire of men and women for a kind of spiritual life that renders the material world meaningful and imbues it with dignity.

He was one of those rare writers who actually transcend the barrier between East and West, and could justifiably call himself – though a Lebanese and a patriot – a citizen of the world.

It was, however, as a man from Lebanon that he spoke, and it was a Lebanese mode of thought and belief he ardently expressed. His words went beyond the mere evocation of the mysterious East but endeavored to communicate the necessity of reconciliation between Christianity and Islam, spirituality and materialism, East and West; Gibran in his work and his life refuted Kipling's often-quoted line, written in 1889, "Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet."[3]

Gibran was born in "a year of transition."[4] While the Ottomans were still in control of his homeland, the British had invaded Egypt and the Sudan, and in 1883 were struggling against the Mahdi. In the same year Sir John Seeley published *The Expansion of England*, arguing that the growth of empire was an inevitable process and the British had an imperial mission. Incited by similar ambitions the French gained control over Tunisia in 1883, adding this to their neighboring colony, Algeria. That same year from India, Kipling proclaimed his concept "the white man's burden"; and in October the Orient Express made its first run: West and East were coming closer together – if not colliding – in the most dangerous of ways.

In the sphere of technology the machine-gun and the first skyscraper were built, while in the realm of ideas Wagner, Marx, and Turgenev passed on and Kafka, Keynes, and Kahlil Gibran were born.

During Gibran's comparatively short life from 1883 to 1931 the Arabic-speaking world came to consider him the genius of his age, while in the West his work has been compared to Blake, Dante, Tagore, Nietzsche, Michelangelo, and Rodin.[5] His popularity too as an oriental writer is unprecedented, and, after the works of T. S. Eliot and W. B. Yeats, *The Prophet* is today the most highly regarded poem of the twentieth century,[6] as well as being the most widely read book of the century.

The more that has been written about Gibran the more elusive the man himself has tended to become as critics, friends, and biographers have built up a variety of unconnected pictures. Gibran himself is partly to blame. He wrote very little about his own life and in recurrent moments of insecurity and "vagueness,"[7] particularly during his first years of recognition, often fabricated or embellished his humble origins and troubled background. This self-perpetuation of his myth – a tendency followed by other literary figures such as Yeats and Swift – was not intellectual dishonesty, but a manifestation of the poetic mind's desire to create its own mythology.

At crucial moments in his early life – when external conditions changed – Gibran was able to rely on his innate qualities of fortitude and resilience. Born as he was into a troubled household often beset by tension between father and mother, the boy sought solitude in the magnificent landscape around his small village in northern Lebanon where he first sketched and scribbled among the mysterious ruins of bygone ages.

When he was ten a severe fracture left him paralyzed for weeks, awakening him to the reservoir of his own inner world. As a twelve-year-old he experienced a fracture of an entirely different kind when he sailed to the New World and encountered a new set of stimuli which he began to interpret through the lens of his unique artistic sensibilities – what he would later call his "madness" – his insatiable urge to create. Throughout these difficult years, and indeed throughout his life, it was always to his pen and brushes that he would turn when tragedy, exile, and rejection hounded him.

The charismatic personality, the burning ambition, and the "rapt spiritual quality"[8] of Gibran needs acknowledging in any account of the poet's life if one is to understand his growth within the West. As early as 1898, when the boy from the Boston ghettoes was just fifteen, Americans were beginning to recognize in him a unique quality: "The boy was made to be one of the prophets;"[9] similar descriptions corroborating this aura occurred throughout Gibran's life: "His face is full of stars. Look at him and you'd know there's not a dead spot in him . . . a peculiar power in him and a peculiar beauty";[10] a colleague wrote of "the delicate boy with chestnut hair, high forehead and large wandering eyes – and here one must stop in describing Gibran – for those large eyes . . . arrested the attention of the beholder so that observation seldom went beyond."[11]

While the young man with the beautiful manners[12] attracted a host of admirers, he was reticent about his humble origins, sometimes alluding to a fortuitous birth in India, a "charmed" childhood, aristocratic relatives "who kept lions as pets,"[13] and ancestor "princes" who were crucified in Antioch in the thirteenth century.[14] He avoided references to the humiliating circumstances when his father became embroiled in a tax-collecting scandal which drove his wife and his children from Lebanon to the United States.

Gibran found himself in America at a propitious time. The benevolent social scientists of Boston – where Kahlil settled with his mother, half-brother, and sisters – were struggling to bring order to the chaos of the seething tenements. Boston was a city where the new showpiece of culture,

the Boston Public Library, had recently opened; a city still throbbing from the transcendentalist chords struck by their own Ralph Waldo Emerson – where avant-garde enclaves rebelled against the sentimentality of the "sick little end of the century,"[15] and dabbled with spiritualism and orientalism against an "exotic" backdrop of Turkish carpets, jade bowls, water pipes, fezzes, pointed slippers, and Maeterlinck's Neoplatonic broodings on death and preordained love.

However, to the tens of thousands of immigrants like Gibran and his family living "over the railroad" in an environment compared unfavorably with the notorious slums of East London, life was hard and uncompromising.[16] By the 1890's the city's charitable organizations, realizing that something had to be done to "lighten the burdens"[17] of the poor immigrants, had begun to establish settlement houses run by social workers. It was at one of these centers in 1896 that Gibran's drawings first caught the eye of an art teacher, Florence Pierce. Word moved quickly and two weeks later the young artist found himself entering the world of the colourful avant-garde photographer, publisher, and philanthropist Fred Holland Day.

Over the next few years as he crossed the railroad into the colorful world of "Brahmin Boston," Gibran sensed among Americans a vague spirituality – an inchoate civilization, increasingly looking to the East for the substance and authority lacking at home.

He also sensed that exoticism is ultimately superficial, frivolous, and merely decorative, caring most about its own desires. When its fickle disciples have grown bored of their objects of devotion – and "objects" they have become – they are dropped back into the ghetto and the inherent spiral therein. However, Gibran's unswerving belief in his own destiny – "I came to this world to write my name upon the face of life with big letters"[18] – his innate abhorrence of superficiality, and his weariness with the tendencies of "self-admiration"[19] ensured that this particular "street fakir"[20] escaped from the high priests of pretension.

By 1912, tired of Boston,[21] and her "children of *yesterday*,"[22] Gibran sought change. This need for a fresher, more invigorating environment had been fueled by the two years he spent studying in Paris[23] between 1908 and 1910. It was here that he first came under the spell of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* which was revolutionizing the literary sensibility of the age, and, more importantly for Gibran, was written by an author who convincingly and audaciously adopted the towering figure of a prophet from the East as his mouthpiece. Gibran found in Friedrich Nietzsche, this

"sober Dionysus,"[24] a lightning erudition capable of demolishing – with one searing flash – the ancient habits of thought, and moral prejudices; a writer whose breathless blasphemy and ecstatic prose – "Write with blood: and you will discover that blood is spirit"[25] – matched his own deepest needs for artistic authenticity. In Paris Gibran also met Rodin who introduced him to the art and poetry of William Blake. Gibran immediately felt a "kinship"[26] with the visionary Englishman, and the benign shadow of Blake was to fall on virtually all of his English writings as well as many of his Arabic works.

Gibran was one of a long line of writers who were indelibly affected by their origins. For William Butler Yeats it was the sands of Sligo Bay, the emerald loughs and rivers of Western Ireland and the legendary mountains of Ben Bulben and Knocknarea that provided an inexhaustible store of symbol and image with which to fire his poetic imagination. For Kahlil Gibran the land that provided the lasting inspiration for his work was Lebanon, unique in so many ways, particularly in its geographical position and its admixture of ethnic groups. Lebanon of the sacred grove, of the dreaming ruins of the temple of Astarte, of the lofty snow-capped mountains soaring into heaven; Lebanon where the Phoenicians built their great ocean-going vessels which carried the hardy cedar to the pharaohs, and the weaves, purple dyes, glass, sculptures, and alphabets to the Greeks; a land of poets, seers, and prophets who brought their moral revelations to a barbaric world.

The breathtakingly beautiful countryside around the village of Bisharri, where Gibran was born, was untouched by the polluting forces that were robbing the America of the early 1900s of her countryside. Reminiscences of the Lebanese countryside fill the emigrant's letters and conversations and color all his work. Among the mountains, hills, streams, waterfalls, and copses the little boy played, rejoicing in the delights of freedom that stimulated his dreams and reveries.

Trees, and particularly the cedars of Lebanon, had a special place in Gibran's heart – ". . . poems that the earth writes upon the sky. We fell them down and turn them into paper that we may record our emptiness."[27] In his long Arabic poem *al-Mawakib* (*The Procession*), published in 1919, he uses the image of the tree to suggest the peaceful continuity of nature contrasted with the clamor and confusion of urban living. In another of his Arabic pieces the poet pictures himself as having "fled from the multitude" and taken refuge in a quiet valley in Lebanon where he is able to enter the "temple invisible,"[28] expressing his lifelong yearning for the sanctuary of the

Cedar Mountain, a yearning that intensified as he became more embroiled in life in America.

Much of what Gibran gave to the world he owed to his homeland, particularly his acute awareness of the interchange of cultural and artistic influences by which Lebanon is so enriched, a land which provided the social and geographical context for so many of his works. Perhaps most of all he was indebted to Lebanon for his awareness of the inestimable blessings that flow from the harmonious coexistence of differing peoples and faiths, as well as his vivid apprehension of the catastrophes that must inevitably result from the breakdown of such religious and social harmony. During his lifetime he witnessed the consequences of such breakdowns – the terrors of reciprocal destruction and the horrors of famine in his native land – a period when he became, in one observer's eyes, "shattered like a Belgian Cathedral."[29]

Although at the forefront of efforts to awaken the West to the plight of his people,[30] Gibran believed that ultimately the root of all conflict was not political but a psychological "sleep" lying heavy on the human heart. Like his contemporaries Rilke, Yeats, and Eliot, and like Blake before him,[31] Gibran challenged what René Guenon called "The Reign of Quantity," and reaffirmed in the face of ascendant materialist ideologies the reality of the living Spirit as the true agent of liberation and peace – what the Irish mystic poet and painter George Russell (AE) called the "politics of eternity."[32]

II

From an early age Gibran, although brought up as a Maronite Christian, was conscious of the exalted place of the Qur'an in Arabic literature and its simultaneous potency as a spiritual, social, and literary source of inspiration.[33] He once declared that he "kept Jesus in one half of his bosom and Muhammad in the other,"[34] and constantly expressed his belief in the fundamental unity of religion and the many ways to truth. His desire to reconcile Christianity and Islam, as well as being instinctive, was practical in that he foresaw the dangers of sectarianism in Lebanon as well as the insidious Western interventionist policies that such division would provoke.[35]

When Italy declared war on Turkey in 1911 and tensions mounted in the Middle East, Gibran began to speak out against the divisive habits of his countrymen in the past, whereby the Druze adhered to England, the Orthodox to Russia, and the Maronites to France. He implored the Muslim community to understand that the war was not a conflict between Islam

and Christianity.[36] During the same period that Mahatma Gandhi expounded his teaching of *satyagraha* in South Africa, Gibran, at a gathering of Arab immigrants in Boston in 1911, propounded his own program of non-violent reform. He implored his people not to rely on religious or political partisanship, or the constitution, or the "putrefied corpse"[37] of state, but work toward a change of heart, whereby, shackled by worldly chains or not, true freedom could still prevail. He published too, in the Arab press, "The Voice of the Poet", condemning violence as a means of conflict resolution;[38] and in his writings he urged the people of the Middle East to exercise caution and discrimination in their dealings with Western powers:

> The Spirit of the West is our friend if we accept him, but our enemy if we are possessed by him; our friend if we open our hearts to him, our enemy if we yield him our hearts; our friend if we take from that which suits us, our enemy if we let ourselves be used to suit him.[39]

There were times, especially during the war years, when Gibran found life in the West uncomfortable, even intolerable: "The *normal*, educated, polite, moral man . . . is so thin . . . hanging in the air between heaven and hell – but he is so comfortable there that he is always smiling at you!";[40] and often he felt "tortured" and estranged in a distant land where "life is as cold as ice and as grey as ashes."[41]

The hermit in Gibran became more "determined" around this time,[42] and a quality of "aloneness" became a characteristic of his life and a feature of his writings. In some of his letters he portrays a "solitary traveller,"[43] wandering in Central Park until nightfall, an artist quietly sketching, or a man thoughtfully jotting down his thoughts in his notebook.[44] Although he could be the most sociable of men,[45] he *ached* for solitude[46] – sometimes wearing his "aloneness" around him like a carapace, calling himself "a stranger among men," entirely on his own even while "possessing seventy thousand friends of both sexes."[47]

Despite his popularity – particularly in his early years in New York – Gibran could be insecure, "crippled and diminished under discord,"[48] yet, if the disagreer was an enemy, "cocksure, lofty, dogmatic, almost contemptuously blunt."[49] The paradoxes of his personality – the asperity and warmth, the vanity and modesty, the self-protectiveness[50] and openness, the man "so readily agitated and depressed . . . so soon rested and refreshed,"[51] the temper and the self-possession – remained an enigma even to those who came closest to him, riddles in part written by Gibran himself

who held that those who understand us enslave us.[52] Although during this period Gibran felt "chaotic inside,"[53] characteristically, he had the will to transform his traumas through the "mystic pain"[54] of his creativity, concurring with Nietzsche who wrote: "One must still have chaos, to give birth to a dancing star."[55]

From the furnace of Gibran's alienation *The Madman* emerged – his first English work. Published just as the war ended in 1918, and for all its oriental garb, the anxious mood of *The Madman* could be understood by a generation who had known the horrors of the epoch just past. Although some critics called it "destructive and diabolic stuff,"[56] it was not an inopportune work with which to introduce himself to the English-speaking world. The impact was immediate and within a year *The Madman* had been translated into French, Italian, and Russian.[57]

The Great War reactivated Gibran's deep concerns for Lebanon, and, although at heart he was a rebel, he had difficulty in finding the right outlet for his energy. He might have enlisted and helped liberate his country from the Turks – his pacifism lapsing as stories of atrocities reached America – but, never benefiting from a strong constitution, he decided instead to act as a mouthpiece for the Arab cause in the West.

In 1914 he published an "Open Letter to Islam" calling on the various native sects in Ottoman-occupied lands to cease their internecine struggles and unite in opposition to the Turks, as well as writing other articles highlighting the plight of his people and appealing for aid. He also helped organize a League of Liberation, and was instrumental in the formation of a relief committee which raised funds to combat the famine that was sweeping the Middle East during those terrible years.

His health deteriorated markedly during this time and, despite the worthiness of his aims, Gibran was "apolitical";[58] many years later he received an invitation to join the government of Lebanon – an offer he refused.[59]

The tone of Gibran's writings changed dramatically during these years – striking a sombre, even nihilistic, note – the confident affirmations replaced by gloomy prophecies of the fall of civilization. This disillusionment is apparent in an anthology of his various journalistic writings in Arabic, collected from 1912 to 1918 and published under the title of *al-'Awasif* (*The Tempest*). In the book he portrayed civilization as "an old corrupt tree" and liberty as a cadaverous specter defeated by the savagery of the "new primitives"[60] – themes captured in "The Grave Digger," where the chief character, a giant ghost, buries the hordes of spiritually dead people with

apparent relish; a piece that earned Gibran the title "the Grave-Digger" in the East.[61]

Coming from a part of the world that only twenty years before his birth had been convulsed by religious strife, Gibran constantly expressed his conviction that beneath the various forms of religion was an underlying unity. As a student he drew up plans for a Beirut opera house with two domes symbolizing the reconciliation of Christianity and Islam. Although his dream never bore fruit, his writings through the years reflect his desire to merge the Sufi Muslim tradition with the Christian mystical heritage of his background – a dream realized in his portrayal of Almustafa, the eponymous prophet, both a Christ figure and the universal man of Muslim civilization – representing the literary and philosophical meeting-point between the spiritual traditions of East and West.

Every nation has as part of its heritage an inspirational heroic myth. The Irish have the figure of Cuchulain, whose name and mighty deeds are a symbol of national consciousness and aspiration. Christians in Lebanon have Jesus Christ who, as a leader of men, refuses to combat ignorance and intolerance with weapons other than peaceful ones. For Gibran Jesus was the supreme figure of all ages: "My art can find no better resting place than the personality of Jesus. His life is the symbol of Humanity. He shall always be the supreme figure of all ages and in Him we shall always find mystery, passion, love, imagination, tragedy, beauty, romance and truth."[62] Gibran saw Christ as a "raging tempest,"[63] a depiction that appears in many of his early Arabic writings. The poet's vision of the Nazarene was crystallized too in his English work *Jesus, the Son of Man* (1928), a book which some critics thought was imbued with an inspirational intensity that even exceeds *The Prophet*.

While many of his opinions were modified over the years, his fascination with Christ continued throughout his life, and any understanding of Gibran the man and poet will fail unless it explores the deep kinship the man from Lebanon felt with the "commander" from Galilee.

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."[64] His meetings with 'Abdu'l-Bahá left an indelible impression on the poet, surpassing in its influence many propitious acquaintances Gibran made during his years in New York, including Carl Gustav Jung and W. B. Yeats.

III

Gibran's first published writings, which were exclusively in Arabic, made him the foremost exponent of Romanticism in Arabic literature. As a founder-president of "al-Rabita al-Qalamiyyah" ("The Pen Bond," or "Arrabitah") much of the credit must go to Gibran for the dissemination of that society's pioneering and innovative ideas. Arrabitah, by liberating Arabic poetry from stupor and decadence, transformed the literary art in every sphere of its activities[65] and instigated a renaissance in Arabic creativity.[66] Just as Gibran's incantational prose-poems influenced writers of the thirties and forties, his fierce rebellion against ecclesiastical and political corruption inspired writers and artists of the fifties and sixties.[67]

Arrabitah was composed of "a small and rather select group of avant-garde men of letters"[68] who, under the guiding spirit of Gibran, became "an accomplished school in action",[69] embarking on an adventurous literary experiment that effected a historic shift of emphasis in hitherto accepted Arabic literary excellence.[70] William Catzeflis, himself a member of Arrabitah, remembered Gibran's influence on the New York Arabs: "Arrabitah, with Gibran in the lead, threw a bombshell by saying, 'if the meaning or beauty of a thought requires the breaking of rule, break it.'"[71] As a result of such a radical and liberating approach there was a "greater purity of attitude and practice," a new truthfulness, and a greater flexibility of language, meter, and rhythm.[72] Contrary to some interpretations, Gibran was no escapist but deeply involved, "even obsessed," with contemporary history and realities.[73] Although the voice of his early rebellion was at times the cry of an *émigré* artist, as he grew in confidence, his expression became the roar of an artist tempered by "the harsh discovery of a freer way of life."[74]

Gibran's Romanticism was a health-restoring revival of the instinctual life in contradistinction to the constraints that sought to sublimate human freedom in the united name of social tradition or religious conformity; in many ways his rebellion was akin to the beginnings of Romanticism in England a century earlier, when Blake, Wordsworth, and Shelley strove to explore the literature of internalized quest and Promethean aspiration.[75] These English writers drew much of their inspiration from ideas that filtered indirectly from the East – Arabic and Persian poetry, the Indian Sanskrit classics – and in turn inspired Gibran, who reinforced his own native mysticism with their visionary vocabulary.

In his "outpost" of New York, Gibran initiated a Romantic movement and school in Arabic literature that echoed a generation's instinctive call for change and renewal. Living five thousand miles away from the stern and sanctimonious gaze of those whose vision could not transcend the inherited and inhibitive methods of their age, this first true rebel in Arabic literature[76] enjoyed an unparalleled freedom that allowed him to revolutionize the literary sensibility of the time.[77]

The Arab Romantic movement never acquired a poetic creed or formulated any defined principles after its development. It was directed from the outset by an ardent desire to acknowledge poetry as an expression "of the heart and not just the tongue,"[78] an unconscious belief in the inner freedom of the individual and a rejection of the fossilized traditions of the East. Its viewpoint was primarily subjective and more self-consciously emotional than neo-classical poetry, so presenting itself as a "religion of the heart."[79] One of its central themes is the high estimation given to the "self," this subjectivism being the mainspring of Gibran's creative position.[80] His whole life has been described as a "Romantic quest" – a progressive evolution from innocent childhood to disillusioned experience, and, finally "Higher Innocence borne out of knowledge" – a life often caught between Nietzschean rebellion, Blakean pantheism, and Sufi mysticism.[81] Yet Gibran's creative imagination fused and fired this apocalyptic mix into "one grand design"[82] perhaps unmatched in its profundity since the utterings of the great medieval mystics.

His conscious concern was an artistic one, capable of answering the forces within the field of poetry itself, which in the early part of the century yearned for a change in form, language, attitude, and content. Its time had come, and although the Arab Romantic movement came into being with the rise of Arab nationalism, it could not be identified with it.[83] Nevertheless, both movements arose as more Arabic-speaking people began to realize the disparity between acquired ideals and the realities of life around them – an intense acknowledgment of the urgent need for liberation.[84]

For Gibran, liberation in artistic terms meant challenging the authority and ideals of classicism. Unable to harness himself to the yoke of traditional meter, he was rarely able to translate his poetic vision into the outworn forms of traditional verse. In this we find a parallel with James Joyce who, like Gibran, found himself unable to write in traditional form – his experimentation with the language of prose allowing him to create a new form and a new poetic style, represented in *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake*.

Likewise Gibran's inability was providential in the extreme. His experimentation in prose rather than poetry allowed him to perfect the prose-poem as a new genre, freeing him from the established poetic diction of the decadent period in Arabic literature. He was therefore able to create a totally new rhythm with a life of its own, emanating from within the syntactical framework, and, as such, his poetic prose, or prose poetry, constitutes a unique contribution to modern Arabic literature.

Aesthetic or literary technique aside, Gibran's presence acted as a renovating influence on the Arab world, which had already begun to aspire to a healthier and more just society. This deep social concern – although remaining pervasive and even becoming more politically significant in the pan-Arab dimension of his colleague Ameen Rihani's work – became diluted in Gibran whose writings over the years took on a more universal aspect.[85] The expression of alienation became not merely geographically oriented but evolved into the expression of an exiled soul descended into the foreign realm of matter; his vitriol directed not just at the corrupting influences in his homeland but the universally defiled image of man – a spiritual emigrant in the "heart of darkness,"[86] the universality of his experiences resonating with a Western audience reeling under the pernicious reign of materialism and militarism and quaking before the merciless idol of "Progress."

Such was the impact of *The Prophet*, the quintessence of Gibran's universalism, that the *New York Times* was reminded of "Gautama, the philosophers of the *Upanishads* . . . and the best of the old Hebrew prophets," the "epigrammatic pithiness of utterance" recalling "the older sages of the Orient."[87]

IV

The response to Gibran's English works was sometimes marked by bewilderment or hostility: "meaningless mysticism";[88] "Is it a source merely of psychological indulgence?"; "Gibran's appeal probably lies in the nearness of his imagery to the symbolism of the subliminal consciousness";[89] "taken directly out of Jung's revealing 'Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido.'"[90] Such contrived responses were inevitable given what Jung himself called "the assiduously cultivated credulity of the West in regard to Eastern thought";[91] but in an age when it was impossible to generate by intensive publicity the kind of sales modern best sellers enjoy, it became strikingly obvious that the English-speaking public was genuinely moved by Gibran's impulse to sing from the heart. Not since *The Arabian Nights* had a writer

of Arab descent enjoyed such universal appeal and *The Prophet*, the "strange little book,"[92] went on to outsell all others in the twentieth century except the Bible.

It took the poet more than eleven years assiduously to perfect the unity of a message he mirrored through text and pictorial medium. It was, he once said, an expression of the "sacredness" of his "inner life,"[93] and it came as no surprise to those around him when Gibran, the "Bard of Washington Street," was mentioned in the same breath as his "God-man," William Blake.[94]

For some critics *The Prophet* represented the height of Gibran's literary career:[95] "This prophet," he once said, who had "already 'written' me before I attempted to 'write' him."[96] Given the importance of *The Prophet* in Gibran's oeuvre, it is not surprising that some critics thought his works leading up to *The Prophet* were exploratory, even rudimentary, the products of "an extremely sensitive soul groping its way towards a goal whose contours are yet wrapped in mist."[97]

Another view however takes his Arabic works such as *Iram, City of Lofty Pillars*, published two years before *The Prophet* in 1921, and his English works such as *The Madman* on their own terms, giving due regard to Gibran's profound exploration of the Sufi principle of the unity of being (*wahdat al-wudjud*) in *Iram Dhat al-'Imad (Iram, City of Lofty Pillars)*, and to his trenchant criticism of social values and the elevation of the outsider-poet-seer in *The Madman*.

Gibran awaited his moment before publishing *The Prophet*. As World War I drew to a close, he wrote: "Human beings have changed remarkably during the past three years. They are hungry for beauty, for truth."[98] The receptiveness Gibran sensed for his healing message was well attuned. Within a month all 1,300 copies of the first edition had been sold. He told an interviewer: "America represents the bud just pressing at its sheath, just ready to blossom, still hard, still green, and not yet fragrant, but vigorous and full of life."[99]

Although the sensational success of *The Prophet* brought its author universal acclaim, Gibran's latter years were marked by sickness and burdened by fame. As more self-appointed devotees of "Gibranism" learnt that the "Lebanese savant"[100] was living on West Tenth Street, he began to be inundated with visitors. While some came to "confess" or seek counsel,[101] others came simply out of curiosity. Gibran himself, always aware of his own shortcomings, however, had no desire to wear the mantle of a "prophet."[102]

Increasingly tiring of life in "New Babylon,"[103] he returned to his sister

Marianna and the Syrian community in Boston. Even here, however, there were conflicts of a different kind – the "orderly life" pulling Gibran away from creative writing and forcing him to concede that "chaotic living is the best sharpener for my imagination,"[104] and the mysterious illness, which eventually killed him when he was forty-eight, feeding his self-doubt: "I am filled with regret because I remained a chatterbox until my jabbering weakened my strength."[105]

As we follow this man from Lebanon, sometimes in his Irish homespun suit,[106] sometimes in Dervish robes splattered with paint, and sometimes attired like a cultured Frenchman,[107] we find the life of a man struggling against his weaknesses and trying to construct something permanent and holy out of his private failures and disappointments. From the small dreaming boy who planted bits of paper in the hope of growth on the thin soils of northern Lebanon, to the mature writer in Manhattan, we are confronted by a consummate artist, who believed "there is nothing more tiresome than laziness."[108]

Less than twenty years after his emigration to the New World, the youth from Bisharri found himself moving among the elite literary and artistic circles of America, where he would seemingly slip on new personas – masks that enchanted, fascinated, and sometimes beguiled his American acquaintances. Astounded by Gibran's chameleon-like ease of adaptiveness one journalist in New York wrote, "Gibran is Broadway or Copley Square or The Strand or the Avenue de L'Opera – a correctly dressed cosmopolitan of the Western world . . . a sensible denizen of Greenwich Village – for such there be";[109] while another onlooker thought the dapper man of five foot three with the white suit, hat, and cane "the spitting image" of another immigrant of the time, Charlie Chaplin.[110]

Beneath the masks, however, was a man whose gestures were those of "the unhurried courtesy of the East,"[111] one friend writing: "The odour of the Sacred Grove seemed somehow still to cling to him."[112] Gibran, however, as a poet from the East, had no illusions about the moribund state of its literature and consciously set out to change it forever. His vehicles of expression – the epigram, the parable, the short essay, poetry, the apophthegm, and the prose-poem – were sometimes interspersed with powerfully symbolic artwork.

The combination of his Rousseau-like belief in the innate goodness of an unshackled humanity and his personalized interpretation of the Christian message of universal love led him to launch a radical assault on church and state in his two early works *'Ara'is al-Muruj* (*Nymphs of the*

Valley, 1906) and *al-'Arwah al-Mutamarridah* (*Spirits Rebellious*, 1908). Such assaults represented the wildest insubordination to the status quo, and he was vilified and condemned as a heretic.[113] Gibran's severe criticisms of the church have still not been entirely forgiven – understandable perhaps given such vitriolic denunciations of the priest as a "betrayer" of Christ and "a hypocrite whom the faithful girded with a fine crucifix, which he held aloft above their heads as a sharp sword."[114] By 1910 apocryphal stories abounded around anathemas, the public burning of Gibran's books in Beirut, and his excommunication from the Maronite church.

In addition to attacking both church and state for their obsession with self-glorification, power, and wealth, throughout his writings – right up to his last work, *The Wanderer*[115] – Gibran attacked fanaticism, extremism, and injustice in all its forms. Although often scathing and bitter, Gibran's early works subtly manifest a masterful interpretation of the mystical ontology, reforging Sufi thought to express the poetic realities of his own creative vision.[116] His 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. His reverence for Sufi thought too finds clear expression in his Arabic book *al-'Awasif* (*The Tempest*), which contains short essays on three of the greatest figures in Sufi literature: Ibn al-Farid, al-Ghazali, and Ibn Sina (Avicenna) who, on Gibran's own admission, was nearer his own "spiritual inclination" than any other.[117]

Although Gibran's first English work, *The Madman*, did not appear until 1918 the intervening period was one in which the poet imbibed, assimilated, and brought to fruition the manifold cultural influences to which he was exposed – guided by his American benefactress, Mary Haskell.

In Gibran's early days in America – which saw the tragic deaths of his sister, only brother, and mother and his ostracism by many in his community for his single-minded obsession with art rather than the more traditional forms of work expected of a young immigrant – it was Mary Haskell, a schoolteacher from South Carolina, his "guardian angel,"[118] who reassured him that he was "not a stranger in a strange land,"[119] and who became his patroness and confidante. He once told her: "Three things in my life have done most for me: my mother, who let me alone; you, who had faith in me and in my work; and my father, who called out the fighter in me."[120]

Mary Haskell's role is so crucial to Gibran's development that at times biographers find two destinies woven as one.[121] Although it was not until

1917 that her protégé's art was finally acknowledged, Mary's faith in, and generosity towards, "the Syrian genius" never wavered. She paid for him to live and study in Paris and on his return the patroness and poet fell in love. Unlike the many women who were merely drawn to the poet's striking looks Mary's relationship with Gibran was an intellectual, yet warm and tender, "kinship." Although not without difficulties, Mary helped transform his dreams into realities and remained a loyal friend right through his life.

A radical headmistress, Mary was drawn to the passionate young writer, "electrifying . . . mobile like a flame . . . *The Pulse* visible,"[122] whose volcanic outpourings against tyranny and corruption sent a shudder through the power-possessing beings of Syria, and whose upbraiding of the complacency he sometimes found in America resonated with her own native perceptions. Mary was also attracted to the gentle romantic being "longing simply to be allowed to love," to his "unspeakable sensitiveness"[123] that expressed itself in such tender love stories as *al-'Ajnihah l-Mutakassirah* (*The Broken Wings*), a semi-autobiographical work in which Gibran tells the story of a love that beats desperately against the taboos of oriental tradition. Magnetized too by the ethereal paintings that she first saw at a small exhibition in Boston in 1904, Mary felt drawn to Gibran's art, which some critics years later thought challenged "the present to a recapitulation of its standards".[124]

Mary's intense relationship with Gibran, meticulously recorded in her journal, shows Gibran's evolution from a provincial Arab writer to an American artist expressing universal concerns – a man who, in 1911, declared to her: "I know I have something to say to the world that is different from anything else."[125] During his years in New York, Gibran worked incessantly, often until dawn, bringing his twin crafts to perfection, and under Mary's guiding hand the apocalyptic blend of Western and Eastern influences merged insensibly into his psyche.

Gibran's punishing working habits, usually fortified with little else but strong coffee and cigarettes, sometimes left Mary, and in later life medics, concerned for the state of his health. Early in February 1912 after an intense bout of work he wrote to Mary: "It seems that I was born with an arrow in my heart, and it is painful to *pull it* and painful to *leave it*."[126] But for Gibran the role of the poet was a holy one – "the wire that transmits the news of the world of spirit"[127] – always striving, searching against all odds for the *essence* and the spirit of all things.

Although writing in two languages Gibran made an easy shift in his "double psyche,"[128] choosing a vocabulary less idiomatic than writers more conscious of modernism in language. The disparities between the linguistic

consciousness of East and West should have created the problem of "root words" but, because Gibran's sensibility had been influenced and tempered by the language of the Bible – a book belonging to both East and West – he was able to bridge what seems, at first glance, to be unbridgeable.[129]

Although his appearance on the Arabic literary scene was timely in that it satisfied a great need, the critic Salma Khadra Jayyusi felt it was "his personal tragedy" that he did not appear thirty years later, in an age unhindered by the peculiarities of Arab poetic history and the ignorance and timidity of its literary arbiters:

> He was restricted by the poetic needs of the time to follow a career of liberating both the form and the spirit of literature, but with all these handicaps he could not be both the liberator and the creator of literary works that would transcend his time and yet remain in the lead among a sophisticated reading elite that was constantly growing in number.[130]

Nevertheless it must also be acknowledged that many of his Arabic works possess a lasting appeal. This is nowhere more obvious than in his many aphorisms and epigrams, which, even when translated into English, retain a vividness and effectiveness – transcending temporal or cultural barriers – as well as reflecting the pithiness of their author's wit.

Although Kahlil Gibran's name is widely known throughout the world, his achievements in the West have, to date, received only scant attention by scholars. It is doubtful whether any other writer who has attained such global popularity has been so neglected.

The failures of the past to acknowledge Gibran may be on account of *The Prophet*'s reputation for appealing to the young, or to only "late romantics" and seekers of "the exotic"[131] . . . "a creed for the vaguely well-meaning."[132] Despite Gibran's contributions to such publications as the influential *Seven Arts* as early as 1916 – alongside the likes of Robert Frost, D. H. Lawrence, and Amy Lowell – none of the leading journals in the West reviewed his books when they were published. They invariably omitted Gibran from surveys of modern American literature – reflecting an inability to come to terms with literature that falls outside conventional terms of reference.

Unlike his contemporaries Eliot, Pound, and Yeats, Gibran had no wish to refine the English language to meet the realities of the age, but yearned to inject into it the priceless values of the mysticism of the East. Gibran was indifferent to the dictates of an age in which creativity becomes mere

reaction to the shifting sands of the fashionable milieu; he was intent instead on expressing a timeless and universal literature: "I'll make a tree and pick the fruit for six hundred years ahead."[133]

If critics persist in regarding Gibran as an English writer to be considered and measured against his contemporaries, they will find that the existing criteria of evaluation do not apply. Driven by a mechanistic *Weltanschauung*, the Western mind has often been arrogantly unresponsive to mysticism, blatantly rejecting any vision of the unity of culture. Furthermore, Gibran's experiences of vision cannot be adequately represented, as most Western critics demand, in the language of philosophy or in the framework of materialistic logic.

Over recent decades, however, this piecemeal consciousness of the Western mind has begun to wither. A vision of the universe as a dynamic web is emerging, in which each is seen as being a part in the whole and the whole being in each part; physicists perceiving that the "quintessential religious experience, the experience of mystical oneness and 'supreme identity' might very well be a genuine and legitimate experience of this implicate and universal ground."[134]

For those academics still cloistered by their own one-dimensional ethnocentric attitudes and their analyses of the particular as against the universal the literature of Gibran will pass them by as it transcends global dualities, cultural barriers, and academic one-dimensionalism. Those who dare to embrace and evaluate a literature such as Gibran's, both deriving from, and unified by, two separate traditions will find in the poet from Lebanon a literary pioneer bound by little save the beauty of his words: "And how shall you rise beyond your days and nights unless you break the chains which you at the dawn of your understanding have fastened around your noon hour?"[135] The Irish mystic poet George Russell (AE) was one of the first critics to glimpse the possibilities therein:

> If Europe is to have a new renaissance comparable with that which came from the wedding of Christianity with the Greek and Latin culture it must, I think, come from a second wedding of Christianity with the culture of the East. Our own words to each other bring us no surprise. It is only when a voice comes from India or China or Arabia that we get the thrill of strangeness from the beauty, and we feel that it might inspire another of the great cultural passions of humanity.[136]

It is not surprising that it was an Irishman who was one of the first critics

to acknowledge the importance of Gibran's work. Himself a key player in the Irish literary renaissance – which occurred during the same period as Arrabitah – AE's perceptions highlight the affinity that undoubtedly exists between Celtic and Arabic poetic genius. There is a certain affinity of spirit and sentiment toward language; a common devotion to the manner of expression; a heady delight in the hypnotic rhythm of the music of speech and a deep awareness of the mystical elements that permeate the landscape of mist and mountain, desert and moonlit night.

Gibran's vision was not that of an academic or a philosopher, but of a poet whose raw materials came from his own psychic life, "the final form of what he had been able to prove from his knowledge, and the last word arising from the influence of his suffering."[137] The grief and acute sense of alienation experienced by the hypersensitive youth laid its stamp on him, attuning his subconscious to the "most delicate light and shade" and prompting him to sing with the eloquence of Isaiah and the sorrow of Jeremiah.[138] One critic described Gibran's work as being "dipped in blood . . . a cry bursting through a wounded heart", asking of those who wish to understand Gibran to "imagine for themselves what a degree of pain it would require to inspire them as did that suffering which so inspired Gibran."[139]

By an evolution that testifies to the nature of his character, Gibran's appearance grew more commanding, more resolutely masculine and illumined as his health declined. The reticent youth matured into a man deemed by others to be "the captain of his soul and the master of his fate,"[140] his early experiences of death somehow deepening his concentration towards a passionate affirmation of life: "I want to be alive to all the life that is in me now, to know each moment to the uttermost."[141]

V

Writing as he was when Darwinism was at its height, Gibran's extraordinary receptiveness to the appeal of nature may in many ways be seen as offering a positive counterpoise to the Darwinian metaphor. The most powerful imagery in his work he borrowed from nature, her rich and beautiful store of symbols providing him with the emotional and intellectual apparatus of his poetry and intensifying his most dreamlike moods with the "unfathomable mystery of Nature's secrets."[142]

In his last Arabic work, *Iram Dhat al-'Imad* (*Iram, City of Lofty Pillars*), which he published in 1921, Gibran's visionary perception of nature becomes apparent:

> In one atom are found all the elements of the earth; in one motion of the mind are found the motions of all the laws of existence; in one drop of water are found the secrets of all the endless oceans; in one aspect of *you* are found all the aspects of *existence.*[143]

It was Einstein who encapsulated the Western malaise as "separation-delusion," a view echoed by Gibran when he wrote: "The heart is drunken with overmindfulness of self[144] . . . The image of the morning sun in a dewdrop is not less than the sun . . . You and the stone are one. There is a difference only in heart-beats. Your heart beats a little faster, does it, my friend? Aye, but it is not so tranquil."[145]

Throughout his work with both pen and brush Gibran expressed his belief in the sanctity of the living earth and our duty to protect her and ennoble her, revere and celebrate her, learn from her and commune with her. His views represented a significant new departure in Arabic literature which previously had usually treated the natural world as either a force to be reckoned with or as an ornament evoking little save aesthetic appreciation. Gibran, however, in "mystical fusion,"[146] identified in nature a universal source of creative energy. To observe the cumulative affect of this oeuvre is to recognize him as a powerful advocate of the unity of being in the West on the one hand, and a pioneer in the transformation of the Arab mind's perceptions of the planet on the other, becoming one of the first major ecological poets of the twentieth century both in the East and in the West.

For Gibran everything separate and closed within itself must perish for lack of a principle of renewal. This renewal requires mutuality and within this matrix human destiny is irrevocably linked with that of the cosmos; only by the giving and receiving of energies can cosmic harmony be maintained. In Gibran's words, "We live upon one another according to the law."[147] He perceived the natural world to be a living being: "If you sing of beauty though alone in the heart of the desert you will have an audience";[148] "the body and its environment are linked together"[149] – the foresight of his environmental message striking in its anticipation of modern theories in physics which are internally consistent and in perfect harmony with the views of Eastern mysticism.[150]

In Gibran's imagery, the metaphors and similes are closely interwoven "like brilliantly coloured dyes" evoking a highly emotional and "new but familiar way of describing" nature.[151] In the processional of the year – the spring breezes nursing the awakening buds, the iridescent leaves of autumn

with their memory-laden smells – the poet acknowledges the thoughts and emotions of some great consciousness. The reader senses the impassioned conviction of a poet who felt "the most god-like thing in man is his wonder at life"[152] and feels they are listening to one whose senses are heightened by an irrepressible fascination with, and reverence for, a planet conceived as a living being, speaking "in the tongues of brooks and streams."[153]

Gibran's writings – reverberating as they do with the language of the King James Authorized Version of the Bible – reveal the incantational tone of the Song of Solomon and the rhythm of the Psalms. Using wisdom stories in several works from his first English book, *The Madman*, to his last, *The Wanderer*, it is in the "esoteric, figurative, imaginative style . . . not new in Arabic literature"[154] that they are expressed. Such tales should be seen as Arab meditations recast in the English idiom, albeit one that is in itself a translation from an oriental original. It is for these reasons that any ethnocentric evaluation of Gibran according to the standards of purely Anglo-American literary tradition is inherently deficient.

There is an extraordinary diversity of critical opinion as to the literary and philosophical worth of Gibran's English works in particular. There are those who have criticized him as being effusive, sentimental, and melodramatic: "He [Gibran] writes sentimental, corny, sloppy, semi-erotic, tasteless but popular stuff . . . . To be popular one does not have to be good. They are almost mutually exclusive."[155]

There are those too, who, in blindly worshiping Gibran, as if one only needed to read *The Prophet* for life's problems to vanish away, have done him as much disservice as those who have pilloried him for his unfashionable emphasis on tolerance and compassion. Few have appreciated the essentially Lebanese character of the man and acknowledged the influences that shaped his art and poetry – the blend being no amalgam but a visionary phenomenon entirely his own.

The existing critical apparatus of Western literary criticism lacks the relevant criteria by which to judge Gibran, and opinions of his work have swung violently from the eulogistic to the condemnatory. *The Prophet* does indeed hold an ambiguous position in the field of English literature – it is neither pure literature, nor pure philosophy, and as an Arab work written in English it belongs exclusively to a unique tradition – and some critics suggest that it is time to adopt a new critical mechanism for assessing this type of literature deriving from two separate cultural traditions and bound by the prejudices and restrictions of neither.[156]

VI

All of Gibran's writings express a passionate urge to improve the lot of an exploited humanity. Some exhibit a prevailing melancholy for the cruel waste of life lost to poverty, injustice, and institutionalized violence. In an age when it was not fashionable to do so Gibran became one of the most fervent and outspoken champions of human rights. He waged a long, ferocious, and sometimes bitter battle against the vicious inequalities that exist between men and women, religious extremism, feudalism, and the sublimation of love in the name of tradition. His early works are tales of courage, stories in which the downtrodden struggle for liberty and proclaim a message of justice – a whip in Gibran's words as he unleashes his vituperation on those who exploit the poor. There is also a message of conciliation for those who struggle to be free from the shackles of nationalism, sectarianism, and medievalism.

With the moving intensity that characterizes truly significant utterances Gibran's writings project timeless universal truths, expressing passionately the deep human yearning and hunger for true liberation. Like his contemporary P. D. Ouspensky – whose book *Tertium Organum* (1912) Gibran recommended to the Arab world – he conceives the emotions as organs of knowledge, the "stained-glass windows of the soul."[157]

Early interpretations of Gibran's character have sometimes tended to denigrate the poet as a naive outsider who, besieged by melancholy and blunted by introspection, ceased to be "nourished by reality."[158] However, since the publication of the Haskell–Gibran papers in 1972 a very different picture has emerged.

We find a man at ease with others – war years aside when he felt he was "becoming like" a madman;[159] a humorous man: "never a time have we met – even when we were sad – that he has not made me laugh and laugh, at something that the moment suggested to his flashing mind";[160] a man with "gentle tact" sometimes belying the "fighter" within;[161] "intensely practical";[162] who cast lead as a lad of eight[163] and later designed jewelry, sculptured wood carvings and earned his living as a portrait painter – 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Debussy, Rodin, Jung, Maeterlinck, Masefield, W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, Laurence Housman, Sarah Bernhardt, Ruth St. Denis, the young Garibaldi, and Albert Pinkham Ryder being just a part of his eminent portfolio.

We find too a blundering businessman who once provoked an exasperated partner to cry: "Mr. Gibran this isn't any Christ-like matter – this is just plain business";[164] a self-possessed man who lived an "inner life,

despite the world" about him;[165] a man who consciously went out of his way to shatter people's images of "the kind gentle Mr. Gibran";[166] a poet who felt himself a wheel turning against all other wheels, a "human chaos" moving "amongst finished worlds";[167] and a man who strove to be open in all his relationships: "Let it be foolish, if foolishness is my best today, and let someone hit me hard. That I may be a little less foolish next time . . . there is too much of the closed heart."[168]

Unlike some writers and artists whose lives have been blighted by complex sexual liaisons – who took "sex love as it came"[169] – Gibran's love life was, on the whole, uncomplicated. He had "no code about sex except honesty,"[170] and he found in his adopted land an unhealthy attitude where people had become "slaves" to sex.[171] As a young man Gibran sometimes found the "forwardness" of Western attitudes to sexuality alien,[172] particularly when as a fifteen-year-old such a woman had "initiated" the beautiful boy into manhood – an event that quickened his return to Lebanon, as his mother struggled to shield him from further "sin and temptation."[173] Coming as he did from a culture that cherished the virtues of "honour and cleanness and decency,"[174] Gibran himself, described as "fastidiously reserved,"[175] was not the young man sometimes depicted as being "full of affairs . . . because he is passionate and is lightly regarded as freely at feast."[176] Before his long-term relationship with Mary Haskell Gibran had let only four[177] women into his private life, among these the aspiring young French actress "Micheline" and a poetess, Josephine Preston Peabody.

We find too, a man who strove for genuineness and sensed that many "virtues" are merely "social things," "reaction mechanisms," emanating from acquired personality and not true "being"[178] – which is manifest more in the likes of the "shepherd" rather than the "sophisticated" dweller in the city.[179]

Gibran became the most successful and famous Arab writer in the world. Despite our technological achievements, our "analysis galore,"[180] the modern psyche has still been left with a wound in its soul. Gibran's message is a healing one and his quest to understand the tensions between spirit and exile anticipated the needs of an age witnessing the spiritual and intellectual impasse of modernity itself. His atmospheric writings reveal the penetrating vision of a seer, who, without crusading or preaching, warns of the terrible dangers that befall an epoch intent on border consciousness, material greed, and blistering yet blind change. His work, set forth in the form of a simple lyrical beauty and a profound depth of meaning for all who endeavor to seek it, applies dynamically and with striking timelessness to the momentous challenges of today.