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GIBRAN: HIS AESTHETIC, AND HIS MORAL UNIVERSE

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Kahlil Gibran's reputation has not fared well among Western intellectuals, who have, on the whole, failed to understand his appeal or his aesthetic. His publishers, even when his books were hugely successful, treated him with condescension. His heirs have feuded over the royalties. Gibran and his patrons meticulously preserved his output, only to have it buried or mutilated. The carefully organized diaries and papers of his patroness Mary Haskell are held at the University of North Carolina, but draconian use restrictions imposed by suspicious heirs make it virtually impossible to use them even for scholarship, much less to compile new works. The major collections of his paintings are inaccessible. The works that he left to the Gibran Museum in his hometown in Lebanon are isolated by war, poorly cared for, and in some cases vandalized – ignorant but proud trustees having written their names on paintings. The two major collections in the United States, belonging to his heirs and to the Tellfair Academy in Georgia, are in storage, and in the last case, some pieces have apparently been stolen. A few of Gibran's paintings are in museums, but they are little seen since they do not fit in with current ideas about what modern art ought to be. No critical edition, or even critical bibliography, has been made of his writings, in English or in Arabic. The translations of his Arabic works are mostly not very good. It is a dismal situation for an author and artists worthy of attention on several grounds: as a major pioneer of modern Arabic literature, as the best-selling American poet of

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the twentieth century, and as a Middle Eastern modernist whose intellectual life is documented in meticulous detail.

THE NATURE OF GIBRAN'S ART

Kahlil Gibran was born in about 1883 in Bisharri, a beautiful but impoverished Maronite Christian village in northern Lebanon.[1] His father was an agent of a local warlord; his mother from a family of priests. When he was twelve, his mother left his father and immigrated with her children to America. The family settled in the slums of Boston. The social workers of the local settlement house spotted Gibran's remarkable talent for drawing and introduced him to a circle of young avant garde intellectuals, who made a pet of him, encouraged his talent for drawing, and gave him serious books to read. In 1896 he was sent home to attend high school. He spent six years in Lebanon and returned with the rudiments of an Arabic literary education superimposed on his precocious readings in 1890s avant garde literature. Once back in Boston he seriously pursued his art and also began publishing poems and stories in the Arabic newspapers of New York and Boston. In 1908 Mary Haskell, the headmistress of a girls' school and the most important of his several patronesses, sent him to a Paris art school for two years. Shortly after returning to America, he moved to New York to be nearer the centers of art and Arab-American literary culture. He spent the rest of his life in New York, never completely successful in supporting himself by his art. His ethereal paintings, though unquestionably beautiful and moving, were completely outside the mainstream of art in his time. He died in 1931. His body was taken back to Lebanon for burial in his home village.

Though in Gibran's own mind he was primarily a painter, it was his writing that made his reputation. His simple and vivid short stories and "prose poems" were immensely influential in Arabic literature. They were soon published in collections and have been in print in Arabic ever since. By about 1916 he was experimenting with writing in English. The resulting pieces were carefully edited by Mary Haskall. The first work, *The Wanderer,* appeared in 1919. His most famous work, *The Prophet,* appeared

in 1923 and became immensely popular. It was followed by several other English works.

English-speaking critics have not seen Gibran as particularly good or important. This critical disdain is not shared in the Arabic-speaking world, where Gibran is universally reckoned as one of the key figures of modern Arabic literature. Why, we might reasonably ask, has Gibran failed to win critical respectability in the English-speaking world, despite massive and continuing (though somewhat cyclical) popular acceptance? To be sure, there are some serious limitations in Gibran's works. There is never a trace of humor or irony in his writing (or in his paintings, for that matter). Everything he says is said in deadly seriousness. Of course, he is not alone among poets and writers in his lack of humor, but it is a significant limitation on his range of expression.

Gibran is also not very good at narrative. He did not write many stories, and his narrative harp has only a few strings. His longer stories are overlapping retellings of incidents from the Lebanon of his childhood. The stories of *Rose al-Hani, Broken Wings,* and *The Bridal Bed* are similar in event and theme.[2] His characters belong to allegory and folk tale, not to naturalistic storytelling, and there are not really very many of them: the girl married to an insensitive older man, the wicked priest, the pure and sincere youth, and so on. His longest work, *Jesus, the Son of Man,* is a collection of sketches from which a portrait of Jesus emerges. Clearly, Gibran's genius, whatever we may find it to be, does not extend to subtle characterization or complex plots.

There are also limitations on the Arabic side of his work. He had not mastered the hideously complex traditions and techniques of classical Arabic literature, for which he was sometimes condemned by traditionalist critics. He wrote almost nothing in the traditional poetic forms. His language is simple, colloquial, and sometimes influenced by English. This is not just a matter of style; clearly, he did not know how to write in the classical forms. He came to America when he was twelve and later returned to Lebanon to get the equivalent of an associate's degree. He never had the long and grueling literary training that would have allowed him to write classical *qasidas*.

Other criticisms might be advanced against Gibran: that his English prose was pretentious, that his ideas were excessively mystical – or just trite.

What weight ought we to give to such criticisms and limitations? More to the point, what context ought we to read Gibran in? It seems to me that three factors should be considered in evaluating Gibran's literary merit:

(1) He was primarily a painter and wrote like he painted.

(2) He belonged a tradition of modernism that lost out in the English-speaking world in the twentieth century.

(3) His aesthetic is Arabic, not American or English.

THE PAINTERLY AESTHETIC

Gibran spent his time painting pictures. When the twelve-year-old Gibran wandered into Denison House in the South End of Boston in 1895, it was his talent for drawing that its intelligent social workers noticed and that was to be his entree into avant garde circles in Boston and Cambridge. It was painting that was to occupy the bulk of his time throughout his life. His ethereal drawings and paintings are integral parts of his books. It is painterly images that are at the heart of his poetry, and in most cases his pieces can be summarized in a single arresting image. In the prose poem "In the City of the Dead", a man looks back from the hills towards a smoky modern city. In the foreground is a cemetery where two funerals are taking place, one of a rich man and the other of a poor man. In "Before the Throne of Beauty" a goddess appears in a forest clearing. In "A Vision" a cage containing a sparrow dead of hunger and thirst is seen in a field beside a brook.[3]

The same is true even in longer pieces. In *The Prophet* the people gather around the departing seer to ask questions as he waits to board his ship in the harbor of Orphalese. In *The Bridal Bed* the central image is the dying bride holding her dead lover as she rebukes the wedding guests. A few other vivid images carry the plot to and from this point: the drunken wedding feast, the bride in the garden of her new husband's house pleading with

her lover to take her away, the maid defying the priest and burying the two lovers.

Gibran turns to prose to express himself only when the narrative and didactic content of his images is too complex to explicate in his style of painting. Like the prophet Mani, Gibran painted first then used language to explicate his images. The visual quality of the images is primary; once the implications of the image are unfolded, the prose poem or story ends. For an art of this kind, we cannot expect narrative complexity, subtle characterization, ironic detachment, or even rational analysis. The image – whether in a painting or a prose poem or an illustrated story – touches the heart at a pre-rational level.

A PATH NOT TAKEN

In 1913 Gibran attended the famous Armory Show of modern art, the show that introduced European modernist painters to America. Gibran wrote to his patron, Mary Haskell, who had seen the show in Boston,

> I am so glad you liked the International Exhibition of Modern Art. It is a revolt, a protest, a *declaration of independence* .... The pictures, individually, are not great: in fact very few are beautiful. But the Spirit of the Exhibition as a whole is both beautiful and great. Cubism, Impressionism, Post Impressionism and Futurism will pass away. The world will forget them because the world is always forgetting minor details. But the spirit of the movement will never pass away, for it is real – as real as the human hunger for freedom.[4]

Gibran underestimated the modernists; it now seems scarcely likely that Impressionism will be forgotten or that Matisse will be considered "decorative". However, this letter does remind us of something important about Gibran. He was a product of the Boston avant garde of the 1890s. His links were to the Symbolists and the Decadents. The dream-like landscapes of Gibran's paintings and stories are those of the Belgian writer Maurice Maeterlinck, now remembered mainly for having written the play that Debussy made into the opera *Pelléas and Méllisande*. Gibran remained faithful to the Symbolist aesthetic

long after modernism had taken European painting and literature in a quite different direction. Gibran could look at Picasso, Duchamps, and Matisse and recognize their greatness, but he continued to follow the path set for him by the young intellectuals who befriended him in 1890s Boston. We see in Gibran the art that might have been but for the noisy modernism of the 20th century.

A FOREIGN AESTHETIC

It should also not be forgotten that Gibran was an Arab who wrote for the most part in Arabic. The writing he did in his twenties was all short pieces written in Arabic for the Arabic emigre newspapers of Boston and New York. It was not until his thirties that he ventured to write for publication in English, and even then he seems often to have written first in Arabic and then translated his story or poem into English. The style and content of his English works do not differ noticably from his earlier Arabic works, apart from being more didactic and less fresh. Books like *The Prophet* are Arabic literature written in English. The literary standards of twentieth century English literature are extreme in their demand for cool authorial detachment. Extended metaphor, elaborate rhetorical devices, earnest intensity – if they are used at all in modern English literature – tend either to be ironic or political. It is not an aesthetic ideal that Gibran shared. He was not writing bad English books; he was writing good, extremely original Arabic books. It is a distinction that readers have understood far better than critics.

GIBRAN'S CRITIQUE OF SOCIETY

So far I have discussed aesthetic issues; what we need to consider to evaluate Gibran fairly as a writer. I think that most readers of Gibran would consider the more important question to be what Gibran wishes to tell us and what the relevance of that message might be. I will deal mainly with the Arabic works. These were earlier than the English works, most having been written in the fifteen years prior to the publication of his first English book in 1919.

First, let us consider their audience. Though by the teens Gibran had reached a literary audience, his initial readers were the Syrian immigrants who read the newspapers in which his pieces appeared. Their experiences of life were not much different than his had been. Displaced by poverty from the beautiful but destitute villages of Mount Lebanon, they had ended up in the smoky industrial cities of America – in Gibran's time mostly in Boston and New York. The fact that they continued to read Arabic newspapers tells us that they had not fully adapted to American life, as their children were to do. Few were well educated.

Gibran's stories and prose poems seem to have touched his readers in a way that the classical Arabic literature could not. He used simple, colloquial language and avoided the complex language and metres of traditional Arabic poetry. His themes of exile, oppression, and separation from beauty and love touched his peasant readers, even though many aspects of his style derive from the European avant garde literature of the 1880s and 90s. The simplicity of his style gave it a timelessness and universality that have allowed his works to survive and exercise their appeal even in translation.[5]

But how does his method work and what do we get from it?

We do not get philosophy in the usual sense. Gibran did know some philosophy – he had read a lot of Nietsche, for example – but his literary method does not allow for discursive analysis. We get a vivid image with enough description and narrative explanation to allow us to grasp it. An emotional strobe light momentarily illuminates an aspect of our experience, leaving us with a picture burned onto our emotional retinas. Thereafter, we see that aspect of our experience with different eyes. Like a painting, a Gibran prose poem uses a vivid but essentially static image to tell us how we should feel about some aspect of our experience. It does not tell us how we ought to understand this link of emotion and experience.

We should not then expect reasoned ethics from Gibran, nor rational theology, nor prescriptions for reordering society. His literary tools are too simple and too far from the rational level of

consciousness to serve such purposes. What we do get is the extraordinary force of Gibran's moral seriousness turned on various aspects of life. When Almustafa answers the astronomer:

> You would adjust your conduct and even direct the course of your spirit according to hours and seasons, ...
>
> Yet the timeless in you is aware of life's timelessness,[6]

it may not be obvious to us how such a dictum is to be translated into action but we do have a sense that some significant aspect of our attitude towards time has been challenged. Gibran does not tell us what we ought to do but rather questions the assumptions on which we have based the habitual actions of our life. His paintings can only move us in an inchoate way, since there the narrative element is still obscure. His writings can challenge us directly because their images are complex, the narrative meaning is made explicit for us, and the whole is driven home by Gibran's relentless and utterly earnest sincerity and sense of the importance of what he has to say.

Gibran tends to express his moral and spiritual views in terms of dichotomies. I will discuss three such dichotomies:

city vs. country

society and law vs. nature and love

the pagan gods vs. monotheism.

CITY VS. COUNTRY

Gibran romanticizes the country and demonizes cities. This is curious, for he spent virtually his entire life after leaving Lebanon at age twelve in large cities – Boston, Beirut, Paris, New York – and was very much a city person. He loved what modern cities had to offer – theater, museums, exhibitions, and the like. He could perfectly well have settled in some small town or in one of the artists' colonies that were beginning to appear in various scenic corners of the United States – where, most likely, he would have found a congenial reception. Instead he lived a rather isolated life in New York, cut off from the mainstream of the New York art scene. His prose poems on the contrast of the

country and the city are the homage that he pays to his lost childhood in the Lebanese mountains.

Gibran's cities are of the "dark, Satanic mills" variety. In the prose poem "A Dialogue of Spirits", two lovers commune with each other across a sea. The woman is in a village in the mountains of Lebanon; the man in some unnamed city. Late at night, when the sounds of footsteps on the sidewalk outside his room have died away, the man calls in spirit to his beloved across the sea. She wakes to his call and walks out into the fields, where the dew wets the hem of her robe. Moonlight lights her valley, but smoke blackens the sky of his city. While ghosts of kings and prophets walk in the mountains of Lebanon, the air of the city contains only crime, vice, and the tormented sighs of the poor, the sick, and the oppressed. When morning at last comes, it is not the bleating of flocks that is heard in the city:

> Grey faces and worried eyes are plain to sight. The wretched trudge to the factories, death dwelling within their bodies beside life, their pinched features showing the shadow of despair and fear, the shadow that would darken the face of one sent against his will to a fearful and deadly battle. The streets are choked with people in greedy haste. The air is filled with the shock of steel, the grinding of gears, the shriek of steam. The town has become a battlefield where strong fights weak and tyrannous rich monopolize the fruits of the toil of the poor and destitute.[7]

Another prose poem, "A Lamentation in the Field", tells how the narrator went walking in the countryside only to find nature in grief. The wind sighs in the tree branches, and when he asks why, it replies, "Because I go towards the City, driven by the warmth of the Sun, to the City where the contagions of diseases will ride upon my pristine skirts and the poisonous breaths of men will cling to me. This is why you see me sad." The flowers, tears of dew falling from them, the brook, and the birds make similar complaints. "Why," the narrator asks himself, "does Man destroy that which nature builds?"[8]

On the whole, his portrait of the city is more convincing

than his portrait of the country, for in his mind the harshness of life in the countryside – which, after all, drove his family into exile – has been reduced to a few well-polished stories. His portraits of the city reflect life as he regularly experienced it.

There is another city for Gibran, the home of moral debasement and hypocrisy. In his imaginary geography, this city is the Beirut of his youth. It is a place of some beauty, a seaport dominated by the homes of wealthy men. In the story "Rose al-Hani" the narrator looks out across the city from the window of the little house shared by Rose and her lover and listens as she tells him of the city and its people:

> Look at these beautiful houses and tall and stately palaces. There live the rich and powerful among men. Their walls are decorated with silken tapestries, yet enclose coarse treachery concealed by hypocrisy. Beneath their gilded roofs, falsehood stands close by affectation. Look! and think on those edifices with care. To you they symbolize wealth, power, and happiness, but they are no more than caves in which lurk degradation, misery, and wretchedness. They are whitewashed sepulchres in which the seduction of helpless women is concealed behind eyes darkened with kohl and reddened lips. Within them the flash of silver and gold hides the egotism and bestiality of men. They are palaces whose walls rise in haughtiness and pride towards the sky, but if they could perceive the stench of the loathesome things and deceit flowing from them, they would crumble and fall to the ground in ruin. The poor villager looks at them with tears in his eyes, yet within the hearts of their inhabitants, no trace can be found of that sweet love filling the heart of that villager's wife. If he knew, he would smile with mockery and pity and return to his field.[9]

Rose goes on to tell the narrator of the corruption concealed within the fine houses: adultrous men and women, the unloved wives of indifferent husbands, the spiritual husbands of shrewish wives, the greedy, the ambitious, and the vicious.

The Beirut of his imagination is a shallow place. In the prose poem "Between Night and Morn", the poet paints the ship of his thought in gaudy colors and is given a hero's welcome when he enters the harbor of his city – yet none bother to board the ship and so discover that it is empty. Conscience-stricken, the poet enters his ship and sails throughout the seas to fill it with treasures. When at last he returns to the harbor of the city, his ship deep-laden with the choice goods of many lands and islands, he is ignored, for the bright colors with which he had painted his ship had faded on the long journey. Dejected at meeting with only mockery, he goes up to the cemetery above the city, "the city of the dead", a city more honest about its nature than the city of the living dead below and more beautiful in its combination of stillness and natural beauty.[10]

SOCIETY AND LAW VS. NATURE AND LOVE

In the story, "The Cry of the Graves", the narrator watches the splendid spectacle of the Emir passing judgment on various criminals: a young man who murdered an official, a young woman caught in adultery, and an older man caught stealing the altar chalises from a monastery church. Each arouses some sympathetic murmers from spectators – the youth for his strength and pride, the girl for her delicate beauty, and the older man for his evident poverty and suffering – but each has been caught in the act by witnesses, so the Emir, zealous for justice, must condemn each to a suitable exemplary death. The narrator, though disturbed, accepts the justice of the sentences.

The next day the narrator goes walking outside the city and, guided by the circling carrion birds, comes upon the place where the three unfortunates have been killed – beheaded, stoned, and hanged respectively – and their bodies left to be eaten by animals. The narrator contemplates the mournful scene and wonders whether justice has truly been done:

> Three, who according to the customs of men had offended against justice, so blind Law had stretched forth its hand to crush them without pity.
>
> A man slays another man, so men say, "This is a wicked murderer." When the Emir slays him, men say,

"This is a just Emir."

Do we requite a sin with a greater sin and say, "This is the Holy Law?" Do we fight corruption with wider corruption and call out, "This is the Law?" Do we oppose crime with a more serious crime and cry, "This is Justice?"

Has not the Emir destroyed an enemy in his past life? Has he not stolen money or land from some one of his helpless subjects? Has he not seduced a beautiful woman? Is he so free from these sins that he can execute the murderer, hang the thief, and stone the adultress?

And who stoned this adultress? Are they pure ascetics come from their cells, or are they only men of the flesh who commit sins and practise vileness under the concealing curtain of night?[11]

As he thinks these unhappy thoughts, the survivors of the executed criminals come to mourn and bury their dead, contrary to the orders of the Emir. Surprised in the act, each explains him or herself to the narrator. First is the girl who has come to bury the youth. She explains that the Emir's official had set an absurdly high tax on her father's land as a pretext for abducting her. The youth was her betrothed, who intervened to protect her. A young man comes to bury the adultress, explaining that they had loved each other from childhood but that her father had married her to a man she did not like while the young man was away. He had come only to see her, but they had been found and falsely accused of adultery. According to custom, all the disgrace had fallen on her for the supposed crime. Last, a poor woman appears to bury the older man who had stolen from the church. She explains that he had been a servant of the monastery, but when he had lost the strength of his youth, the monks had dismissed him with nothing, leaving him and his family near starvation.

The last of these miserable people depart, leaving the narrator to contemplate the three graves and the markers left on

them by the grieving survivors: a sword, a bunch of flowers, and a simple wooden cross:

> After that the sun disappeared in twilight as though it were weary of the cares of men and loathed their oppression .... I raised my eyes to the zenith of heaven and spread my arms towards the graves and the symbols upon them. In my loudest voice I cried, "This is your sword, O courage. It is sheathed in the dust. These are your flowers, O love. Fires have seared them. This is your cross, O Jesus of Nazareth. The darkness of night has covered it."[12]

Gibran's moral universe is marked by a radical distrust of society and its institutions. The Emir has done justice rightly, according to the lights of men and even according to the revealed Law of God. These three people *did* commit the crimes of which they were accused (except for the girl taken in adultery, whose position was nonetheless sufficiently compromising in Lebanese terms to justify a conviction). At the trials, the narrator is saddened by the convictions, but he has no doubt of their justice. It is only when his knowledge transcends that of the Emir that he understands the real truth of the three cases.

Indeed, Gibran implies that *all* social institutions, laws, and actions are flawed in this way, serving only to crush the natural and the spontaneous. In a piece called "Slavery," Gibran portrays history as a bloody history of slavery in endless varieties:

> Seven thousand years have passed since first I was born, yet I have seen only submissive slaves and shackled prisoners.
>
> I have travelled the east and the west of the world and wandered in the shadows of life and in its bright days. I have beheld the caravans of nations and peoples journeying from its caves to its castles, but until now I have seen only serfs bent beneath their burdens, arms bound by chains, knees bent before idols.
>
> I have followed man's path from Babylon to Paris, from Nineveh to New York. Everywhere beside his

> footprints in the sand I saw the marks of his dragging chains. Everywhere the valleys and hills echoed with the grief of generations and centuries.
>
> I entered the palaces, the squares, the temples. I stood before thrones, altars, and pulpits. There I saw the labourer give a slave to the merchant, the merchant a slave to the soldier, the soldier a slave to the general, the general a slave to the king, the king a slave to the priest, the priest a slave to the idol, the idol shaped from dust by devils and raised above a hill of dead men's skulls.[13]

What must wise men and women do in the face of the oppressiveness of social norms? Gibran gives two answers. In "The Storm," Yousuf El-Fakhri lives in a little hut alone in the mountains of Lebanon, leading to various rumors about his origins and the reason for his living the life of a hermit. When the narrator of the story takes shelter in Yousuf's hut during a thunderstorm, the hermit explains himself. He is not a religious ascetic, and indeed his hut is well supplied with such luxuries as coffee and tobacco. Rather

> I sought [solitude] as I fled from men, from their laws and teachings and customs and thoughts, from their clamor and cries. I sought solitude so that I would not see the faces of men who sell their souls that the price might buy that which is less than their souls in worth and honor. I sought solitude that I might not meet the women who go about with necks outstretched, eyes winking, upon their mouths a thousand smiles, and in the depths of their hearts a single purpose. I sought solitude so that I would not have to sit with those who, having only partial knowledge, see the image of a science in a dream and imagine themselves in wisdom's inner circle. While alert and awakeful they see one apparition of reality and imagine that they possess its perfect essence. I sought loneliness because I had wearied of boorish courtesy that imagined refinement to be weakness, that imagined forbearance to be cowardice, arrogance to be a form of glory.[14]

The narrator, impressed with the insight of Yousuf El-Fakhri, protests that he has an obligation to participate in society so as to guide people to a wiser life. Yousuf patiently explains that such a course is futile:

> "From the beginning the physicians have attempted to save the sick from their sickness .... All these physicians have died without hope or expectation .... The truth .... is that this evil patient murders the physician then closes his eyes and says to himself, 'In truth, he was a great physician ....' No, my brother, there is no one among men who can help men. However skilled a doctor the plowman may be, he cannot make his field to blossom in the midst of winter."[15]

True spiritual happiness, Gibran tells us, can only be found in solitude from society.

Gibran's second prescription for dealing with the oppressiveness of society is the love of man and woman, which forms a bubble of solitude within which the two can live a life of spiritual happiness. In "A Ship in the Mist", the unnamed sage – is he perhaps Yousuf El-Fakhri? His hut is in the same valley as Yousuf's – reveals that in his youth he had loved a girl who was visible only to him, "a mental shadow as a companion for me to love and befriend." They lived a life alone together amidst society as nearly constant companions. Yet when he leaves Lebanon on a trip to Venice, she vanishes. Only when he reaches the house of his host in Venice does he realize the truth, that his companion was the lonely daughter of this Venetian dignitary and that she now lies dead within the mourning house.[16]

Rose al-Hani and her young lover share a similar solitude. As a girl of eighteen, she had married Rasheed Bey Nu'man, a prosperous man of nearly forty. He treated her generously, giving her rich clothes, servants, a fine carriage, and a magnificent home. Only too late does she realize that she is only one more of Rasheed Bey's fine possessions, but she is trapped by the law of marriage that binds her to this man, who is, as the narrator knows perfectly well, not a bad man but only an insensitive one. After two years of marriage, she falls in love

with a bookish young man and runs away with him. The solitude they share is a little cottage in the hills outside Beirut and their rejection of and by the "respectable" members of society.

Romantic love is important to Gibran because it is the way in which individuals can make a refuge of the natural within society. Marriage, however, is suspect because it is the way in which society controls and warps the pure and natural realm of sexual romantic love.

THE BANISHED GODS OF BEAUTY AND IMAGINATION

Gibran was opposed to the church, as the authorities of the Maronite church pointed out when the unappetizing matter of giving him a religious funeral came up. The Christian churches, and by extension other organized religions, appear in Gibran's literary works as part of the system of oppression of the natural.

> I followed the generations from the banks of the Congo to the shores of the Euphrates, to the mouth of the Nile and to Mount Sinai, to the courts of Athens and to the churches of Rome, to the alleys of Constantinople and to the great buildings of London. Everywhere I saw slavery being carried in processions towards the altars and being called God. They poured libations of wine and perfumes at its feet and called it Angel. They burned incense before its images and called it Prophet. Then they fell down prostrate before it and called it the Holy Law.[17]

In "The Bridal Bed", it is the priest who forbids the burial of the two lovers. In various other stories and sketches the organized church is portrayed as an instrument of oppression. The church and monastery oppress their sharecropping peasants, for example.[18]

To the dark oppressiveness of monotheism, Gibran contrasts the old gods and goddesses of nature. In "Before the Throne of Beauty", the narrator goes wandering into the fields and woods. There he meets a lovely girl dressed in vines and flowers. When he asks who she is, she replies, "I am the daughter of the forests,

so do not fear." He questions her further, "Does someone like you inhabit this land of desolation and wild beasts? Tell me who you are and from whence you come." She sat on the grass and said, "I am the symbol of nature. I am the virgin whom your fathers worshipped, building altars to her in Baalbek, Aphek, and Byblos."[19] In "The Queen of Imagination", a goddess appears among the ruins of Palmyra and pleads for the rights of the imagination.[20] These old gods and goddesses have been driven out of the land, Gibran implies, and man is left out of contact with the natural. In the sketch "Among the Ruins", the ghosts of two ancient lovers meet among the ruins of the temples of Heliopolis – Baalbek in Lebanon – and renew their pledge of love.[21]

Thus it is that the one city that Gibran does not condemn is the ancient city, whose type for Gibran is Orphalese – the city at whose center is a temple served by both priests and priestesses.

READING GIBRAN WITHIN HIS OWN AESTHETIC AND MORAL WORLD

What then ought we to make of Gibran as a writer? Though he is in important ways an American writer, it is wrong to read Gibran from the point of view of contemporary American literary tastes. He is not a contemporary American modernist writer. Rather, he is several other things and deserves to be read accordingly.

First, he was an Arabic writer who eventually came to write in English. He used the flamboyant rhetoric acceptable to Arabic canons of taste, not the cool, detached style of modern American poetry.

Second, he was a symbolist, a member of a school that was already dying as he began to write. In both his writing and his painting he followed a path that other modernists abandoned, the last representative of a school that might have been.

Third, he was a painter who wrote. His writing was of a piece with his painting – haunting, ethereal images that hint at an accompanying narrative. It is no accident that he never mastered either extended narrative or abstract analysis. His stories and

prose poems are usually no more than an explication of a single arresting image, usually one slightly too complicated for him to express visually in a single picture.

As for the content of Gibran's writing, we can scarcely read him literally as a guide to life. We cannot abandon our cities to live alone at the edge of the Vale of Qadisha or to live as hermit couples in idylic cottages overlooking Beirut. What then does he teach us? What can he teach the young people who are always his most fervent admirers? Gibran brings to his writing a total and relentless earnestness, a complete faith in the supreme importance of the spiritual side of life. We cannot extract dry and practical ethical maxims from his works, but we may be kindled by the fire of his intensity. He reminds us in an emotional way that the dignity of the individual is to be found in nature, not in social institutions, that the love of man and woman is not a trivial part of life, that souls sicken without beauty and imagination. Above all, he tells us that we must face life romantically, living so that our reason and our passions are in balance, "the rudder and the sails of your seafaring souls." But Gibran cannot tell us the course we must set as individuals. His method of instructing us is well summarized by Almustafa, when asked about Teaching.

> No man can reveal to you aught but that which already lies half asleep in the dawning of your knowledge.
>
> The teacher who walks in the shadow of the temple, among his followers, gives not of his wisdom but rather of his faith and his lovingness.
>
> If he is indeed wise he does not bid you enter the house of his wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind ....
>
> And even as each one of you stands alone in God's knowledge, so must each one of you be alone in his knowledge of God and in his understanding of the earth.[22]

NOTES

1 N.B. *I will need to make some corrections to the page references.*

This account of his life is based on Jean and Kahlil Gibran, *Kahlil Gibran: His Life and World* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1974). Properly speaking, his name should be rendered Jibran Khalil Jibran; the truncated form and the spelling are due to Boston school officials.

2 Gibran's Arabic works, most originally published in Arabic newspapers in America, are collected in *al-Majmu'a al-Kamila li-Mu'allifat Jibran Khalil Jibran* (Beirut, 1961, and many times reprinted), which compiles several earlier collections. There have been a variety of collections in English. The translations cited here are from John Walbridge, trans., *The Storm: Stories and Prose Poems* (Santa Cruz: White Cloud Press, 1993; new ed., Harmondsworth: Penguin Arkana, 1997) and John Walbridge, trans., *The Beloved: Reflections on the Path of the Heart* (Ashland, Ore: White Cloud Press, 1994; new ed., Harmondsworth: Penguin Arkana, 1997). *Rose al-Hani* is *Warda al-Hani,* in *Majmu'a,* pp. 81-95, trans. *Beloved,* pp. 16-40. *Broken Wings* is *al-Ajniha al-Mutakassara,* in *Majmu'a,* pp. 146-239; trans. Juan R. I. Cole, *Broken Wings* (Ashland, Ore: White Cloud Press, forthcoming). *The Bridal Bed* is *Madja' al-'Arus,* in *Majmu'a,* pp. 106-15; trans. *Beloved,* pp. 82-97.

3 *Ru'ya,* in *Majmu'a,* pp. 250-51; trans. *Storm,* pp. 35-37.

4 Quoted in Gibran and Gibran, p. 252.

5 They were, I am told by my friend Ramjee Singh, widely read in Hindi by young Indian nationalists in the 1940s.

6 *The Prophet* (New York).

7 *Munajat Arwah,* in *Majmu'a,* pp. 316-19; trans. *Beloved,* pp. 77-81.

8 *Manaha fi'l-Haql,* in *Majmu'a,* pp. 273-74; trans. *Storm,* pp. 83-86.

9 *Majmu'a,* trans. *Beloved,* p. 30.

10 *Bayna Layl wa-Subh,* in *Majmu'a,* pp. 389-93; trans. *Storm,* pp. 73-82.

11 *Surakh al-Qubur,* in *Majmu'a,* trans. *Storm,* pp. 60-61.

12 *Majmu'a*, trans. *Storm*, pp. 70-71.

13 *al-'Ubudiya*, in *Majmu'a*, p. 362; trans. *Storm*, pp. 39-40.

14 *al-'Asifa*, in *Majmu'a*, p. 433-34; trans. *Storm*, pp. 16-17.

15 *Majmu'a*, p. 436; trans. *Storm*, pp. 18-19.

16 *Safina fi Dubab*, in *Majmu'a*, pp. 493-502; in *Storm*, pp. 93-110.

17 *al-'Ubudiya*, in *Majmu'a*, pp. 363; trans. *Storm*, pp. 40-41.

18 *Surakh al-Qubur*, in *Majmu'a*, trans. *Storm*, pp. 66-68.

19 *Amama 'Arsh al-Jamal*, in *Majmu'a*, pp. 265-66; trans. *Storm*, pp. 115-17.

20 *Malikat al-Khayal*, in *Majmu'a*, pp. 281-82; trans. *Beloved*, pp. 57-60.

21 *Bayn al-Khara'ib*, in *Majmu'a*, pp. 253–54; trans. *Beloved*, pp 67-69.

22 *The Prophet* (New York).