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KAHLIL GIBRAN
(1883—1931)

Christopher Buck

THE ARAB-AMERICAN author and artist Kahlil Gibran was a best-selling writer whose work has yet visits to Lebanon, Gibran spent to receive critical acclaim equal to his popular life—the last two-thirds of his appeal. There is no question that Gibran's work fact—entirely on American soil, dying in in Arabic was central to the development of of forty-eight. In The twentieth-century Arabic literature—in that Arab of Orphalese is often said to Romanticism begins with Gibran, the pivotal (or New York).

copee, Massachusetts, Shaughness Family Humanities. He has tions, on ethnicity, American authorship. in Arizona Quarterly, American Culture, and Eugene O'Neill. He is Out Here: Fitzgerald, berg in Hollywood Press, 2010). PIETRO

Stefanie K. Dunning.
Associate Professor of

States. Apart from a two brief return his entire adult life, in New York at the age Prophet, the city represent America

figure in the Mahjar movement of émigré Arab underscores the fact The Prophet was writers centered in New York. There is also no best-selling book of the twentieth question that Kahlil Gibran’s masterpiece, The counting the Bible, and that Gibran Prophet (1923)—a small volume of aphorisms American poets, from Walt (wise sayings) offering pithy wisdom of an Frost. According to Gibran’s almost prophetic quality—belongs to world publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, The literature, for it is known and loved the world more than ten million copies. over. As an American man of letters, however, was due entirely to its own Gibran has received scant attention from Ameri- never promoted it. Strangely, can literary critics. Since The Prophet has yet to America’s best-loved prose- be widely recognized as an American classic, and appeal continues despite criti- the author yet to be fully accepted as an American It’s true that Gibran had what writer, Gibran’s inclusion in the American Writ- double psyche, and inhabited ers series requires some justification. at once. As an Arab Ameri- Eminent scholars including Irfan Shahid can, Gibran wrote in two languages: English and Arabic. Arabic was (professor emeritus at Georgetown University in his mother tongue, and English his second Washington, D.C.) and Suheil Bushrui (professor language. As an accomplished man of letters of emeritus and current director of the Kahlil Gib- considerable influence in the Middle East, Gibran ran Chair for Values and Peace at the University of Maryland at College Park) have made the case sance in the Arab world, such that all modern Arabic poetry for Gibran’s recognition as an American writer bears the marks of Gibran’s. Yet Gibran’s work has worthy of note. According to Bushrui, America is can letters, despite had little influence in Ameri- Notwithstanding, entitled to claim Gibran as one of its sons (even if not a native son) as fully and as authentically

Shahid thinks that Gibran has not been fairly treated as an American writer. The problem is work, he became not only Gibran of Lebanon, The problem is exacerbated by the fact that, categorically, The but Gibran of America, indeed Gibran the voice Prophet exists in splendid isolation, severed of global consciousness” (1996, p. 10). After all, And so The Prophet from its Arabic cultural roots. reevaluated, on its the young Gibran spent only the first twelve years singular will have to be evaluated, or heritage. of his life in Bsharri (a village near the famous own literary merits and for its “Cedars of God”), where he was born in 1883, contribution to the American literary before emigrating with his family to the United

KAHLIL GIBRAN

BIOGRAPHY

charges. At the time, Lebanon was a Turkish province, part of Greater Syria (Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine) and subjugated to the Ottoman Empire, until its fall in 1918. In June 1895, while the elder Gibran lionized, and mythologized himself. He claimed, languished in his Bsharri jail cell, his wife, for instance, that his father was a wealthy Arab aristocrat and that his grandfather owned a grand Lebanon and mansion guarded by lions, and he did not resist America, where her brother lived. They arrived in New York on speculation that he was the reincarnation of the June 25, 1895. On December English mystic William Blake. But the real facts 3, 1895, the family moved into Boston’s betray Gibran’s humble origins, and it is necessary to demystify Gibran. Chinatown, where their cousins were living. To support her four Kahlil Gibran was born on January 6, 1883, children—Gibran, his younger sisters Marianna in Bsharri, a picturesque but impoverished Ma- and Sultana, and her son by a previous marriage, ronite Christian village, perched on a fertile ridge

Peter (Butrus)—Kamila sold cloth and lace in between Qadisha Gorge and the spectacular grove Boston’s then-wealthy Back Bay. She opened a of Lebanon cedars now known as the Cedars of dry goods store on Beach Street with Kahlil God in northern Lebanon. His original, full name and his half brother, Peter. On September 30, was Gibran Khalil Gibran—the first name his 1895, Gibran entered Quincy School, where he own; the second, his father’s; and the last, his migrant children was placed in a class for im- Gibran’s name grand- grandfather’s. Raised in the Maronite tradition, inverted (from who needed to learn English. a clerical Gibran was a sensitive boy. His father, a bully boy’s first name was shortened, with two letters In any event, and a gambler, owned a walnut grove thirty-five Kahlil Gibran, as miles from Bsharri. His father’s lordly preten- Meanwhile, sions (marked by his trademark amber cigarette tracted the to suit American pronunciation. admirers, several holder), extravagant habits, aversion to peasant- Among them was Gibran kept his shortened name, worker who, in type labor, mercurial temper, and addiction to the talent for drawing his English pen name. teacher, Florence gambling game of domma prompted young Gib- Holland Day, bran’s talent for drawing at- Day, a wealthy ran to retreat to the surrounding countryside, garde patron of attention of a growing number of and he began to which was dominated by the Cedars of God. of whom became his patrons. Among them was Contemplative, inventive, and creative, Gibran Jessie Fremont Beale, a social worker who, in had no formal schooling in Bsharri, but he talent for drawing 1896, when apprised of Kahlil’s teacher, Florence received private instruction from Selim Dahir, Holland Day, by a settlement house art teacher, Florence who taught the boy the rudiments of Arabic, his- Day, a wealthy Pierce, wrote to her friend, Fred garde patron of tory, and art. The young Gibran was also mysti- and he began to cally inclined. Early in life, Gibran interpreted nature and attached religious significance to them. use Gibran, his younger sisters,

His father, Khalil, clerked in his uncle's
 his mother as models for his
 apothecary shop until he became so indebted
 semierotic "fine art"
 from gambling that he stooped to working as a
 viewed the young Gibran's
 tax collector and enforcer (a job that was
 literary gifts as evidence of natural
 considered below repute) for Raji Bey, the vil-
 became the boy's close mentor
 lage headman and local administrator appointed
 by the Ottomans. To put it bluntly, his father was
 Gibran returned to Lebanon to study
 a thug for the village strongman. In 1891, after
 al-Hikmat ("School of Wisdom"),
 Raji Bey was dismissed following numerous
 Maronite bishop Joseph Debs in
 complaints, Gibran's father was jailed on graft
 Gibran had an ill-fated affair

his half brother, and
 own symbolist and
 photographs. Day
 artistic and
 genius, and he
 and patron.
 In 1897,
 at the Madrasat
 founded by the
 Beirut. In 1899,

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with a twenty-two-year-old Lebanese widow,
 Forerunner (1920), and finally,
 Sultana Tabit (against social taboos), memorial-
 (1923).
 ized in his Arabic work al-Ajnih? ah al-
 Gibran's brief piece, al-Músíqá
 Mutakassira, published in 1912 (translated into
 published by the Arabic immigrant
 English as The Broken Wings in 1957). In autumn
 City, marking the author's
 1899, Gibran came back to Boston, but he
 world of letters. In 1906, Gibran,
 returned again to Lebanon in 1902, as a guide
 Ottoman Turkish rule and the Ma-
 and interpreter to an American family. But when
 strict social control, published
 his mother became ill, Gibran returned to the
 work in 1906, 'Ará'is al-Murúj
 United States once more. (She died of tuberculo-
 Nymphs in the Valley, 1948; the
 sis on June 28, 1903.)
 been translated as Spirit Brides),
 an anticlerical collection of three short stories
 Day's mentorship continued to be crucial in
 serving as a caustic critique of establishmentarian
 Gibran's life; he introduced the young artist to

(1918), then The
 The Prophet
 In 1905,
 (Music) was
 press in New York
 debut into the
 who opposed
 ronite Church's
 his next Arabic
 (English trans.,
 work has also
 church and

state. The Arabic poem al-Arwáh? al-
the writings of the Belgian symbolist Maurice
(English trans., *Spirits Rebellious*,
Maeterlinck, to the work of nineteenth-century
incorporating a social critique, fol-
poets such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whit-
During this same period, Gibran
man, John Keats, and Percy Bysshe Shelley and
book about the philosophy of
also to the writing of various other British,
religiosity (also in Arabic); but that
American, and Continental poets from the turn of
published.

the century. Day’s patronage made possible
Mary Haskell sponsored Gibran’s
Gibran’s emergence as a new talent, both as artist
a three-year study at the Académie
and poet, as Gibran entered the prestigious circles
a private art school where he
of Boston’s artistic and intellectual elite. In 1903,
series of paintings titled “The Ages
Day’s friend the poet Josephine Preston Peabody
(1909–1910) and a portrait of Au-
arranged for an exhibition of Gibran’s drawings
(1910). There he was exposed to the
at Wellesley College. In January 1904, Day held,
English mystic poet William Blake
in his own studio, an exhibition of Gibran’s art.
whose thought and art had a
Another exhibition was held in February 1904 at
influence on Gibran. In 1910, Gibran,
the Cambridge School, where the headmistress
Yusuf Huwayyik met in Paris,
was a progressive schoolteacher named Mary
envisioned and drew up plans for the
Haskell; Haskell was ten years his senior, but she
renaissance of the Arab world.
and Gibran developed a close friendship that
return to Boston in October 1910,
endured throughout his lifetime. (She declined
living through portrait painting.
his offer of marriage in 1910, and Gibran re-
work on his first English-
mained a bachelor for the rest of his life, despite
manuscript, eventually published as *The*
the considerable number of women who were
Parables and Poems (1918). He

Mutamarrida
1948), also
lowed in 1908.
was working on a
religion and
book was never
In 1908,
undertaking of
Julian in Paris,
produced the
of Women”
guste Rodin
work of the
(1757–1857),
profound
Ameen Rihani, and
where they
cultural
On his
Gibran earned his
In 1911, he began
language
Madman: His

drawn to the handsome and gifted artist and with the shortcomings of the poet.) After the exhibitions in early 1904, Day's in Boston, however, and, in 1912 Harcourt Buildings studio burned, destroying City his professional home. Gibran's entire portfolio. his finest work in his studio at Not only did Mary Haskell remain Gibran's Street (which he nicknamed "The good friend and benefactress, she served as his editor as well. He continued to rely on her to Gibran published seven spiritual correct his punctuation and grammar, and oc- The Madman: His Parables asionally suggest an alternative word for greater The Forerunner: His Parables euphonic effect. From June 1914 to September The Prophet (1923), Sand 1923, he sought her advice on The Madman of Aphorisms (1926), Jesus,	was frustrated cultural scene he made New York Gibran produced 51 West Tenth Hermitage"). In total, works in English: and Poems (1918), and Poems (1920), and Foam: A Book
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the Son of Man (1928), The Earth Gods (1931), appear during his lifetime. His and The Wanderer: His Parables and Sayings back to Lebanon for burial in (1932). The publication in 1918 of The Madman arriving in the port of Beirut on established Gibran as a writer worthy of note in body was eventually interred America, inaugurating a new literary career in the monastery of Mar Sarkis English. Among his other Arabic works, Gibran Bsharri, near which the Gibran published Dam'a wa Ibtisáma (1914; English established to commemorate trans., A Tear and a Smile), al-Mawákib (1919; artistic legacy. English trans., The Procession), al-'Awás? if 19, 1984, the U.S. Congress (1920; English trans., The Storm; a collection of authorizing the building of a previously published work), Iram, Dhát al-'Imád Kahlil Gibran on federal land with (1921, one-act play set in a lost Arabian city result was the Khalil Gibran	his last work to remains were taken his home village, August 21, and his in the old chapel at in his native Museum was soon his literary and On October passed legislation memorial to private funds. The
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mentioned in Qur'an 89:7; English trans., Iram, Memorial Garden,
on Massachusetts Avenue directly opposite
City of Lofty Pillars, published in Secrets of the
the British Embassy in Washing-
Heart), and al-Badá'i' wa'l-Tará'if (1923, ton, D.C.,
which President George H. W. Bush dedicated on May 24,
English trans., Marvels and Masterpieces). 1991, calling the memorial
Fulfilling the promise he had demonstrated a tribute to Gibran's
"belief in brotherhood, his call for compassion,
as a youth, Gibran became an accomplished and perhaps above all, his passion for
visual artist as well. (Along with drawing and painting, he also executed small wood carvings.)
peace." In December 1914, Gibran had an exhibition of
his drawings and paintings at the Montross Gal-
INFLUENCES
lery, New York. In 1917, Gibran had exhibits at
Gibran's work resonates with that of Blake,
the Knoedler and Company Gallery, New York,
Keats, and William Wordsworth and of American
and the Doll and Richards Gallery, Boston. A
transcendentalists such as Emerson, Whitman,
collection, Twenty Drawings, was published by
and Henry Thoreau, and it arguably shows clear
Alfred A. Knopf in 1919. In January 1922,
marks of their influence. For instance, in Gibran's
Gibran's work was showcased at the Women's
1919 Arabic work, translated as The Procession—
City Club, Boston.
Gibran's most respected Arabic poem in verse—
In April 1920, Gibran and some fellow writ- the critic Ahmad
Majdoubeh has found lexical and philosophical
ers from the Arabic diaspora founded a group and philosophical
echoes of Emerson and Tho- reau, revealing
they named al-Rábita al-Qalamíya (The Pen the direct influence of these
the direct influence of these exponents of New
League), or "Arrabitah," as they referred to it in England transcendentalism. A
English. Gibran was elected president and the personal letter
dated November 10, 1925, from Gibran to the
Lebanese author, Mikhail Naimy, secretary. This
archbishop and metropolitan Anto- nious Bashir (who
was the first Romantic school in the Arab world. translated The Prophet into
Ardent nationalists, Gibran and other members of Arabic) offers

insights into possible further influences on Gibran's work. In this letter (translated from the Arabic by George N. El-Hage in 2005), The society published a literary and political journal, *al-Sá'ih?* (The Traveler), edited by 'Abd al-Masíh Haddád, which was widely read across the Arab world. They met regularly until Gibran's death eleven years later. *Treasure of the Humble* (1896) by the Belgian symbolist Maurice Maeterlinck (rendered from the French original); *Tertium Organum* (1912) by the Russian philosopher P. D. Ouspensky; *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament* (1918) by the Scottish

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anthropologist James George Frazer; and *The Dance of Life* (1923) by the British sexologist Havelock Ellis. Bahá, "seen the Unseen, and been filled" (Bushrui and Jenkins, p. 126). Other scholars theorize about the way in which Gibran re-visions Christianity in the light of Sufi (Islamic) mysticism. In the *Madrasat al-Hikmat*, beyond his required course of studies, 1928. Gibran immersed himself in classical and contemporary Arabic literature, including Paris al-Shidyak, Francis al-Marrásh, Adib Isháq, and the great Sufi masters Rumi, 'Umar ibn al-Faríd, al- way. The sum total of these "influ-

Gibran tellingly

translation

I believe are

written during our

symbolist Maurice

the French

the Russian

Lore in the Old

that same day, in

wrote that he

Bahá, "seen

and Jenkins, p. 126).

Ultimately,

by his

in his own

Ghazálí, Ibn Rushd (Averroes), and Ibn Síná perhaps best characterized as “conflu- (Avicenna). This immersion was to have a lasting is, the convergence of orientations influence on Gibran: the American architect were spun into prosaic gold by Claude Bragdon recalls how, at the end of his synthetic power and gilded by his own life, Gibran would freely translate Sufi poets to a genius.

circle of admirers and would recount folktales of sophomoric to the sublime, Gibran’s his native Lebanon. Thus Gibran’s early works be characterized as a form of effectively re-forge Sufi thought, in which, as literature, reaching audiences expressed by Suheil Bushrui and Joe Jenkins in spiritual—but not necessarily religious—their biography of Kahlil Gibran, Gibran’s having been said, Gibran’s sage “aphorisms, parables, and allegories closely the mouthpieces of his various resemble Sufi wisdom—the themes of paradox personae, is more inspirational than and illusion turning on the unripeness of a sleep- nature, and it rarely ventures into ing humanity attached to the ephemeral” (p. 15). social teachings that might guide a Thus in Gibran’s work (although he is by no whole.

means a “Sufi poet”), man is portrayed as on the Ideologically, Gibran urged escape from the arc of ascent, traversing spiritual degrees in draw- materialism (although sales of The ing closer to God, in which one becomes increas- him with a respectable income). ingly godlike in the process.

transcending sectarian religious Friedrich Nietzsche, Carl Jung, and Rabindra- reform in the Arab world, nath Tagore (whom Gibran met in December ideal East-West relations, in 1916) are cited as other influences, although he might play the role of Bushrui and Jenkins emphasize that Gibran was intermediary. While he promoted spiritu- drawn to Nietzsche’s form rather than his formu-

ences” are
ences”—that
and ideas that
Gibran’s
sapiential

From the
prose-poems may
secular wisdom
with a
interest. That
advice, through
literary
prescriptive in
the realm of
society as a
trappings of
Prophet endowed
He encouraged
conflict, he promoted
and he championed
which he believed
cultural
ality and

virtue, he was not a paragon of it.

lations and identified with his passion more than mystically inclined, Gibran was not a his philosophy. There is evidence of Bahá'í influence as well: the New York artist Juliet Thomp-

son, one of Gibran's artistic circle of close friends mentioning their publication in and an adherent of the Bahá'í Faith, had lent him his career, Gibran's Arabic works, a several works of its founder, Bahá'u'lláh, in the which have been translated into original Arabic. These writings impressed Gibran be treated in the following

deeply, for he later declared that Bahá'u'lláh's discussion, as Gibran's works in English are what Arabic works were the most "stupendous literature that ever was written" (Bushrui and Jenkins,

been said, Gibran's Arabic works (in p. 125). On Friday, April 19, 1912, Gibran drew, will be consulted as an aid by which in his studio, a portrait of 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844–interpret some of Gibran's salient themes in 1921), the son and successor to Bahá'u'lláh. On work.

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THE MADMAN
selves in dif-

ferent stages of spiritual development.

Out of the thirty-four parables that comprise of The Madman: His Parables and Poems (1918), Madman, Gibran's contrast of the eleven original manuscripts are preserved in Princeton Library's Department of Rare Books and undeveloped. Previously, in his Arabic work, Special Collections as part of the William H. Smile (1914), Gibran had spoken of Shehadi Collection of Kahlil Gibran. The order self" as a "spirit growing" within the in which the parables appear in the manuscripts the "flesh" or the "covering of differs somewhat from their published sequence. 789)—yet the doctrine of the greater

Although

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number of

English, will not

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In The

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and

A Tear and a

the "inner

thew and sinew of

matter" (p.

Annotations in Arabic can be found throughout. self is scarcely developed beyond the spirit/matter dichotomy. Yet The Madman is said to have been based on the theme of the benighted self and the awakened Lebanese folklore. self may be traced throughout Gibran’s mature works, where the doctrine The book’s eponymous persona, the “mad-matures as well. man,” has had seven prior lives, and he begins to recount experiences and expound parables. In the latter part of the book, Gibran experiments with THE FORERUNNER personification of a blade of grass, a leaf, the eye, sorrow and joy, and so forth. The Madman’s Most of Gibran’s work The Forerunner: His Parables and desultory nature and lack of coherence is evi- Poems (1920) is composed of tales, interspersed dence of Gibran’s developing yet unripened tal- with a few poems. The tales are very much like Sufi ent insofar as his English work was concerned. morality tales tales. Seven of the twenty-four While The Madman has been described as a The Forerunner are archived in the thought-provoking collection of life-affirming William H. Shehadi Collection at Princeton. The parables and poems, the book can scarcely be tale “God’s Fool” is set in the city of Sharia, which is an described as prescriptive in nature. It inspires obvious reference to the Islamic code of law (although self-reflection, but not a clear sense of self-direc- the reference would not have been obvious tion—except insofar as Gibran’s most basic mes- to Gibran’s readers). The tale “Dynasties” sage is concerned, as exemplified by the last which takes place in the city of Ishana, hana is one of sentence of the chapter “The Greater Sea”: “Then betrays possible Hindu influence, as Is- we left that sea to seek the Greater Sea” the five faces of the god Shiva. To what extent (Collected Works, p. 38; all citations are from Gibran’s place-names are symbolic is hard to say. this 2007 volume). If The Madman has a mes- The message, that message is that of discovering the true underlying theme of The Forerunner is the need to self—the greater sea is the greater self. spiritually awaken. Here, in contrast

In “The Sleep-Walkers,” the “freer self” is Gibran’s doctrine of the awak-mentioned. This implies another self, presumably further developed. It commands the captive of passions and other limitations. In “The reader in the opening line: “You Seven Selves,” the madman teaches that there is forerunner, and the towers you have a rebellious self, a joyous self, the love-ridden the foundation of your giant-self” self, the tempest-like self, the thinking self, the prologue opens by saying that working self, and the do-nothing self. The seven his or her own forerunner, and stages of the soul are a well-known Sufi para-has a “giant-self” within, which digm, although Gibran has taken liberties with it self” (one of the tales is “The here. In “Night and the Madman,” the Night tells Self”) and “freer self” as well. The the Madman of his “little-self,” of his “monster-self may be thought of as a “deeper self,” and that his soul is wrapped in the veil of “Out of My Deeper Heart,” Gibran seven folds (p. 33). These are neither separate “man’s larger self” (p. 73). The Mad-

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man, in his parable titled “Crucified,” had the marketplace after being freed. exclaimed: “For we must be crucified by larger partly written the second work, which and yet larger men, between greater earths and Barbara Young (the pseudonym greater heavens” (p. 39). That which is crucified Breckenridge Boughton, who will resurrect with greater power, and so the Gibran’s secretary and compan- lesser self, when crucified, will rise as a larger seven years of his life) and self in a progressing expanding consciousness. posthumously as The Garden of the The spiritual self is opposed by the materi- what extent that book actu- ally attached self—the self that must be cruci- Gibran’s authentic work is controversial.) fied—which is described in various ways. In the

to The Madman, ened self is attention of are your own builded are but (p. 53). Thus the each person is that each person is the “greater Greater greater heart.” In speaks of to death in Gibran had was completed by of Henrietta claimed she was ion for the last published Prophet in 1933. (To ally is Nineteen of the

twenty-six discourses, or poetic poem "Love," Gibran speaks of the "weaker self" well as the prologue and epilogue (or (p. 57), but later in "Beyond My Solitude," the The Prophet are archived in Prince- two selves are mentioned together: "Beyond this Shehadi Collection.

burdened self lives my freer self" (p. 86). The The Prophet is skeletal. The Forerunner's final piece, "The Last Watch," is a name is Almustafa—that is, "al- sermon by the Forerunner himself, who speaks to for "the Chosen" and one of slumberers in their sleep, right before dawn. He Muhammad)—in its more familiar speaks like the prophets of old. He has loved one Almustafa was a stranger who tar- and all, "overmuch," including "the giant and the lonely years the city of Orphalese, pigmy" (p. 87; symbols for the spiritually return to the island where he was born. awakened and spiritually undeveloped selves). mountaintop, he saw a ship with purple The message is that spiritual awakening is the mist, and he hastened to the needed. If each one is a Forerunner, as the open- There he was met by a throng of ing line explicitly says, then that Forerunner "sees great square before the temple. They with the light of God," as is said in "The Last him farewell.

Watch," which continues, "He speaks like the named Almitra entreats the Prophet prophets of old. He unveils our souls and unlocks his wisdom before he embarks our hearts" (p. 90). The Forerunner within each home. Speak, Almitra beseeches person is prophetic. Ultimately, the Forerunner love. Speak, asks another witness, becomes a Prophet, whose mission is to awaken so the Prophet speaks on topics and illumine the soul within. in human life: "On Love," "On Marriage," "On Children," "On Giving," "On Eating and Drinking," "On Work," "On Joy and THE PROPHET Sorrow," "On Houses," "On Clothes," "On Buy-

essays, as
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 ton Library's
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 Prophet's
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 the names of
 transliteration.
 ried twelve,
 waiting to
 From a
 sails slip through
 city to meet it.
 people in a
 came to bid
 A seeress
 to impart to them
 on his way back
 Almustafa, of
 of marriage. And
 that matter most

The Forerunner, according to Gibran's contemporary Mikhail Naimy, was a title chosen deliberately by Gibran as a precursor of The Prophet. Gibran conceived The Prophet, published in 1923, as the first of a trilogy, to be followed by Good and Evil, "On Prayer," "On The Garden of the Prophet" (on humanity's relationship to Nature) and "The Death of the Prophet" (on humanity's relationship to God). The first book is set on the eve of the Prophet's departure from Orphalese to his native island; the

second is set on the island itself, in the garden of the Prophet's mother; and the planned third volume would have the Prophet return to Orphalese, only to be imprisoned and then stoned less aspire, to the threshold of

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

London Review of Books, Robert Published in September 1923 by the presti-

ing and
 "On Laws,"
 sion," "On
 Teaching," "On
 Time," "On
 Pleasure,"
 Death." Of
 American
 riage," which
 wedding

These topics
 concerns.
 characterized as
 not rise, much

Haskell;
 and the twelve
 years Gibran spent
 publication of The
 Unenchanted
 Prophet as
 Gibran's

Writing in the

Irwin caricatured

Gibran's poetic craft by declar- ing that "as
latter-day Prophet, Gibran favoured a mock-Biblical
Knopf, The Prophet is Gibran's masterpiece. delivery, larded with archaisms, and inversions of
Composed, for the most part, in April and May word-order for rhetorical ef- fect." Bushrui
of 1918, its original title, as a manuscript, was The Prophet as
and Jenkins, by contrast, privilege of the twentieth
"The Counsels." Of its initial print run of 2,000, century
"the most highly regarded poem read book of the
The Prophet sold only 1,159 copies (although long-lasting
century" and as "the most widely popular culture
other sources claim that the print run was 1,300 explained, but
century" (p. 2). The broad and with the human
and that these sold out within a month or two). life, which
appeal of The Prophet in American ally provided.
To Knopf's surprise, demand for The Prophet church attendance
has never been satisfactorily religion
doubled the following year and again the year render it a
presumably it has something to do
after. The book sold 12,000 copies in 1935, and
hunger for deeper meaning in
late in World War II an edition for distribution to
established religions have tradition- ally provided.
soldiers was published by the nonprofit Council church attendance
Given the widespread decline in religion
on Books in Wartime. Sales numbered 111,000 in
and the waning influence of
1961, and 240,000 in 1964, according to a 1965
generally, does the appeal of The Prophet
article in Time magazine tracing the cultlike
surrogate gospel?
phenomenon that The Prophet had become. It
"Gospel" is, in fact, too narrow a word, in
went on to become the best-selling book of the
that The Prophet is not an exclusively Christian
twentieth century, apart from the Bible, and has
text; rather it is a fusion of Christian and Islamic
been translated into over forty languages.
(Sufi) mysticism. In religious terms, The Prophet
Of the experience of writing this book— could be considered
not a social gospel but, rather, a personal
which is of modest length (less than twenty
gospel—a gospel with a mes- sage of
thousand words) yet of immodest ethos—Gibran
salvation from the ignorance of one's

wrote to Archbishop Antonious Bashir: “You not of salvation from sin in the know that this small book is a part and parcel of Christian sense. Gibran himself my being, and I hardly wrote a chapter of it message of The Prophet: “The without experiencing a transformation in the saying one thing: ‘You are far depth of my soul” (El-Hage, trans., p. 172). you know—and All is well” Admirers of the The Prophet respond to its Jenkins, p. 238). In the chapter luminous wisdom and its approach to the Punishment,” Almustafa speaks of numinous. the “god-self” (that is, the higher nature) and Yet there is a hidden dimension to The “pigmy-self” (that is, the lower Prophet as well. Mikhail Naimy, Gibran’s friend the ocean is your god-self. ? Even and, later, his critical biographer, saw The Prophet your god-self; ? But your god-self as an intensely personal production. One is dwells not alone in your being. ? But a shapeless struck, certainly, by the visual resemblance pigmy that walks asleep in the mist searching for its own between the portrait of Almustafa and that of awakening” (p. 122) The human person is both benighted Gibran himself. One can see Almustafa as Gibran; Orphalese as New York; Almitra as Mary individual is “but one man standing in twilight

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between the night of his pigmy-self and the day While a reader may understand that passion is emotion and of his god-self” (p. 124). This is Gibran at his most pellucid moment: The giant within is the reason is pensive and therefore still, whether god-self, while the dwarf within is the pygmy reason is best described as “rest” is controversial. Yet ultimately self, which stand in polar relation to each other such definitions are not the point. The Prophet is as day and night. The relation of the pygmy self intended to be exquisitely inspirational—it is not to the giant self is developmental, progressive,

ethically explicit or morally evolving, like that of the acorn to the oak. But is it a social panacea. the god-self the spiritually awakened lesser self grown to its full potential, or is the greater self a cosmic principle, a world supersoul? There is no SAND AND FOAM consensus among scholars on this issue, but the latter interpretation seems persuasive, because it consummate aphorist, and his 1926 carries the inherent pantheism of The Prophet to Foam is primarily a collection of aphorisms, the extreme. pithy bits of wisdom, strung like In the volume's concluding discourse, "The skin of the slender volume's Farewell," Almustafa says: "It is in the vast man of the aphorisms in this work were that you are vast, And in beholding him that I other writers in Arabic, then beheld you and loved you" (p. 154). The concept Gibran into English. For instance, of the "vast man" is the key to unlocking the writes, "Love is the veil between lover message of The Prophet. By "man" is meant (p. 185). This alludes to a couplet consciousness. The greater the spiritual aware- Bahá'í founder and prophet, ness, the vaster the man. Man is asleep, benighted Bahá'u'lláh's. As it is written in an English in oblivion to a higher reality (including his own his mystical work The Seven Val- higher being), until awakened by the dawn of Valleys: "Love is a veil betwixt spiritual awareness. The seed of that awareness is loved one; More than this I am the realization that a person is far more than the tell" (Marzieh Gail, 1991). body, as the physical frame cannot contain the negative reception by critics, Sand boundless spirit. Almustafa explains, "You are popular acclaim. not enclosed within your bodies, nor confined to sustains his anthropology of the lower houses or fields. That which is you dwells above in this book, with phrasing the mountain and roves with the wind" (p. 159).

prescriptive, nor
 Gibran is the
 volume Sand and
 of aphorisms,
 pearls across the
 pages. Some
 first composed by
 translated by
 Gibran
 and lover"
 composed by the
 translation of
 leys and the Four
 the lover and the
 not permitted to
 Despite its
 and Foam won
 Gibran
 and higher selves
 such as "You

are but a fragment of your giant
 Elsewhere in *The Prophet*, the message seems to
 and “rising toward your greater
 be that love is the power of spiritual growth. It
 Rising toward the greater self is a
 manifests most intensively in the passionate love
 expanding one’s awareness and seeing
 between man and woman, yet that is merely a
 picture in a vaster panorama un-
 beginning for the wider embrace of love. Love
 limitations of narrow identities: “If
 results in unity, and that sharing or merging of
 but a cubit above race and country
 consciousness is expansive and redemptive.
 would indeed become godlike” (p.
 In “The Farewell,” the Prophet admits that
 Sand and Foam, the writer
 his teachings may be “vague”: “If these be vague
 the “other self” as the greater self:
 words, then seek not to clear them” (p. 159).
 self is always sorry for you. But your
 This vagueness has not escaped the notice of crit-
 on sorrow; so all is well” (p.
 ics who feel that *The Prophet* is overrated. As an
 evokes Gibran’s précis of the mes-
 example, in the discourse “On Reason and Pas-
 Prophet discussed above—“You are
 sion,” Almustafa says that one should rest in
 than you know—and All is well”—
 reason and move in passion, just as “God rests in
 before, that God is latent within
 reason” and “God moves in passion” (p. 130).
 as the greater self.)

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The book concludes with what may be
 all archetypally alive in the
 Gibran’s most prescriptive general counsel in
 cosmic drama.
 English: “Every thought I have imprisoned in
 Renan’s *Life of Jesus* (English trans.,
 expression I must free by my deeds” (p. 228).
 major influence on Gibran’s concep-
 Here, action follows cognition, if moved by
 His biographers Bushrui and Jen-
 volition. Mere intentionality is inert, and action
 Baha’i influence as well: “The tem-
 iaphas and Annas are
 recurring
 Ernest
 1863) was a
 tion of Jesus.
 kins claim

without knowledge and wisdom is a rudderless
unique portrayal of Jesus was
ship. In *Sand and Foam*, the reader stands on the
inspired by his meetings in 1912 with ‘Abdu’l-
shore of the ocean of grandeur, gazes on the sea
Bahá, the Bahá’í leader, whom he drew in New
of wisdom, is awakened and enlightened by the
York, a man whose presence moved Gibran to
dawn of knowledge, is inspired by the breezes of
exclaim: ‘For the first time I saw form noble
love, is uplifted like a bird, and soars in the
enough to be a receptacle for the Holy Spirit’”
atmosphere of spiritual oversight in an invisible
(p. 252). This novel hypothesis, however, remains
world that endows the visible world with mean-
undeveloped. While Gibran was clearly impressed
ing and purpose—yet the reader must inevitably
by Bahá’u’lláh’s writings in Arabic, and by
return to the rigors of daily life and find a way to
‘Abdu’l-Bahá in person, he was relatively
translate insight into action.

unfamiliar with the full scope of Baha’i teach-
ings and thus cannot be said to have subscribed
to them generally. The result was a gospel narra-
JESUS, THE SON OF MAN
rather is a patchwork

For twenty years, Gibran had wanted to write a
reminiscences by those who knew or
life of Jesus. After Alfred Knopf gave him a two-
Nazarene, creating an impressionistic
thousand-dollar advance, Gibran abandoned The
memories that would entertain, even
Garden of the Prophet in order to work on Jesus,
necessarily enlighten. ‘Abdu’l-
the Son of Man, which he began in November
than being an actual template for
1926. The book, published in 1928, was hand-
Man, could arguably have
somesely produced with some of Gibran’s illustra-
immediate inspirational presence in
tions in color. Reviews were favorable, and the
Gibran, while he was composing this
book remains the most popular of his works after
sacred portrait of Jesus.

The Prophet.

Jesus Christian? Clearly, the

The full title of this work is Jesus, the Son of

plate for his

tive that is not seamless but

of fictional

had met the

medley of

illumine, but not

Bahá, rather

Jesus, the Son of

served as an

the mind of

secular yet

Is Gibran’s

figure portrayed in

this volume is both orthodox

Man: His Words and His Deeds as Told and
extra-orthodox (not necessarily heterodox).

Recorded by Those Who Knew Him. This poly-

“John the Son of Zebedee: On the

choral and imaginal life of Jesus is Gibran’s

Appellations of Jesus,” Zoroaster, the

lengthiest work in English. It is a creative and

Persians, is identified as a previ-

reverential life of Jesus as told by seventy-eight

of Jesus, as is Prometheus and

of his contemporaries, both real and fictional,

does Gibran add apocryphal ac-

enemies as well as friends, and strangers from a

life of Jesus, he enhances a number

distance—such as the Persian philosopher who

of Jesus by taking a familiar teach-

was a follower of the Persian prophet Zoroaster.

on it. For instance, in “Simon

As such, Jesus, the Son of Man is a series of

Peter: When He and His Brother

sketches from which a patchwork portrait of

Jesus says to Andrew, brother of

Jesus emerges. At the very end, “A Man from

shores of Galilee: “Follow me to

Lebanon Nineteen Centuries Afterward” speaks,

greater sea. I shall make you fish-

saying that seven times he was born and seven

your net shall never be empty”

times he had died, that Jesus’ mother is seen in

reader might recall that “the greater

the sheen of the face of all mothers; that Mary

favorite Gibranian symbol for the Sufi

Magdalene, Judas, John, Simon Peter, and Ca-

greater self, or the “perfect man.”

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The most extensive of Gibran’s edifying edits
that is the secret of our be-

of the sayings of Jesus is in the chapter, “Mat-

In other words, the greater self, the

thew: The Sermon on the Mount,” in which Gib-

Christ-spirit is within. The begin-

ran embellishes Jesus’ beatitudes, proverbs, and

is to awaken the sleeping giant.

other teachings. This, in turn, is followed by

of their debate, the Third God

and

Curiously, in

Various

prophet of the

ous incarnation

Mithra. Not only

counts to the

of the sayings

ing and expanding

Who Was Called

Were Called,”

Peter, on the

the shores of a

ers of men. And

(p. 253); a

sea” is a

notion of the

does not see. / And

ing” (p. 431).

spiritual giant,

ning of salvation

At the height

Gibran's version of the Lord's Prayer. Sometimes "Love is our lord and master" (p. 443). the alteration or embellishment may be ac- Earth. Beyond that, the debate is accomplished by a single word, such as in Gibran's unsophisticated, with no clear version of Jesus' "cry of dereliction," as scholars in reasoning. (There is no rhyme.) call it. In "Barabbas: The Last Words of Jesus," is perhaps the least deserving of Jesus, who is still alive on the cross, exclaims, works. Its publication was "Father, why hast Thou forsaken us?"—where anticlimactic. Fortunately, it was followed by the word "us" is substituted for "me" (p. 390). of The Wanderer, which is more true Some of Gibran's sayings of Jesus are utterly more befitting legacy. noncanonical, as in this saying from "James the Brother of the Lord: The Last Supper": "Heaven and earth, and hell too, are of man" (p. 397).

THE WANDERER

Gibran here has disenchanting the metaphysical world of the principality of Satan and shifted at- the manuscript of The Wanderer: tention back to the true principal of evil—man. His Sayings during the last The biographical narrative is not sequential life. The original manuscript, and is sometimes glaringly out of sequence. For extant; after she edited the instance, "The Last Supper" appears shortly after once the book appeared in print the Crucifixion account, mentioned above. The Young destroyed it. The Wan- anecdotal accounts are interwoven with the oc- a book of fables, tales told by casual poem, typically a paean to Jesus. Jesus, traveler whom a man chances to the Son of Man, as a whole, is an artistically his home. The guest regales original and eloquent tribute to the "Prophet of family with edifying stories with Nazareth."

Some of these stories serve as social commentaries as well. Among the fifty-two parables and poems, for instance, in "The

proclaims:

Love is God on
 convoluted and
 progression
 The Earth Gods
 Gibran's English
 appearance
 to form and a

Gibran finalized
 His Parables and
 three weeks of his
 however, is not
 manuscript, and
 in 1932, Barbara
 derer is primarily
 the itinerant
 meet and invite to
 his host and
 various morals.

Lightning Flash,” a Christian bishop is asked by
THE EARTH GODS
 a non-Christian whether there is salvation for her
 As a complete work, *The Earth Gods*, published
 bishop replies that only those
 in 1931, brings Gibran’s literary work to a
 and the spirit will be saved.
 conclusion, as it appeared shortly prior to his
 strikes the cathedral, igniting
 death in same year. Illustrated with several
 is saved by the men of the
 exquisitely executed drawings by Gibran himself,
 bishop is consumed by the fire. This
 twenty-eight manuscript pages of the book
 turns on the irony of the priest
 (which correspond to pages 1 to 27, or two-thirds
 that she is destined for hell-
 of the published book) are archived in Princeton
 himself is the one ultimately
 Library’s Shehadi Collection.
 of she being saved and he, not.

The Earth Gods is a free-verse triologue
 is the antithesis of real
 among three earth-born Titans, in what may be
 considered a meditation on love. At one point,
 Prophet and the Child,” the prophet
 the Second God discloses the open “secret” that
 appears, with Gibran again drawing on
 is at the heart of Gibran’s consistent message:
 Islamic code of law. In “The
 “Yea, in your own soul your Redeemer lies
 author speaks of the “kingdom of
 asleep, / And in sleep sees what your waking eye
 466)—an Islamic term for “righteous”

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and name of Ja’far al-Sádiq (d.765 C.E.), univer-
 illustrated than in “Khalil the
 sally revered as a mystic in both Sunní and Shí’a
 Heretic”—one of the four short stories of Spirits
 Islam, and regarded as the “Sixth Imám” by all
 (although only three of the stories
 Shí’a Muslims. In “The Three Gifts,” Gibran
 Arabic appear in Anthony Ferris’ transla-
 writes of his birthplace, “Becharre” (p. 469), and
 two being “Madame Rose Hanie”
 in “The Quest,” two ancient philosophers meet

from hellfire. The
 baptized in water
 Then a thunderbolt
 a fire. The woman
 city, but the
 fabulous fable
 telling the woman
 fire, when he
 engulfed by fire;
 The salvation of dogma
 salvation.
 In “The
 “Sharia”
 the term for the
 King,” the
 S? adik” (p.
 more perfectly
 Rebellious
 from the
 tion (the other
 and “The Cry

of the Graves,” excluding “The
on a mountain slope of Lebanon much like the
Speaking transparently as the
one near Gibran’s childhood home. There is much
in this story, Gibran fictionalizes
personification throughout the stories, such as in
peasant man who challenges
“Garments” (where Beauty and Ugliness
prince, Sheik Abbas, and the cor-
verse), or “The Eagle and the Skylark,” in
church. In part 3, Khalil introduces
which a talking turtle enters into the conversation
tells the story of how he
between the two birds. There are talking oysters,
had dwelled for a time in a monastery, where the
frogs, dogs, trees, sparrows, grass, and even a
monks addressed him as “Brother Mobarak”—
speaking shadow. Like the title of the book’s final
yet they never treated Khalil as a “brother.” They
fable, “The Other Wanderer,” the book may be
dined on sumptuous foods and drank the finest
thought of as a desultory disquisition on the
wine, while Khalil subsisted on dry vegetables
mysteries of life and death, in which the reader is
and water, and they slumbered in soft beds while
left to divine the wisdom of each brief tale.
the young man slept on a stone slab in a dank
and dismal room by the shed.

Bridal Bed”).

character Khalil

himself as a young

the avaricious

rupt Maronite

himself by name. He

INTERPRETING GIBRAN’S ENGLISH WORKS BY

One day, Khalil recounts, he stood bravely
HIS ARABIC WORKS before the monks who gathered
in the garden and
criticized them for corrupting the teachings of
Gibran’s early Arabic works may offer a key to
Christ by
segregating themselves from the people
and enjoying the
better understanding Gibran’s salient themes in
unholy
fruits of others’ labor in an
English. Gibran’s eight Arabic books are: Music
parasitism. Jesus had sent these corrupt
monks as
(al-Músíqá, 1905), Nymphs of the Valley (‘Ará’is
lambs among wolves, Khalil says—
that although
al-Murúj, 1906), Spirits Rebellious (al-Arwáh? al-
they feign virtue, their hearts are
full of lust; they
Mutamarrida, 1908), The Broken Wings (al-
pretend to abhor earthly things,
but their
’Ajnih? a al-Mutakassirah, 1912), A Tear and a

hearts are swollen with greed. For his Smile (Dam'a wa Ibtisama, 1914), The Procession (al-Mawakib, 1919), and two collections of previously published work, The Storm (al-5, Kahlil the Heretic describes 'Awásif, 1920), Marvels and Masterpieces (al-Lebanon, the noble and the priest Badá'i' wa'l-Tará'if, 1923), and Heads of Grain to exploit the farmer who has worked the (al-Sanabil, 1929), (Music scarcely qualifies as a book, however, since it is only eleven pages long.) To express his ideas in Arabic, Gibran first that Sheik Abbas conspired with used the short narrative, but over time, he punish Khalil for having sought employed the literary devices of parable, aphorism, allegory, and epigram—all of which became part 6, Khalil is arrested and the distinctive stylistic hallmarks of his English Sheik's home. In part 7, before a throng of onlookers, Khalil answers his accusers, In a 1908 letter to his cousin Nakhli, Gibran, Elias, and tells them that wrote: "I know that the principles upon which I peasants are in the grip of the base my writings, are echoes of the spirit of the bodies are in the jaws of the great majority of the people of the world" (quoted over the villagers by force of in Bushrui and Jenkins, p. 87). Nowhere is this eloquence, Khalil then beseeches

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Liberty, and, in his prayer, he calls "Liberty" (p. typically represent a single arresting 687) the "Daughter of Athens," the "Sister of Gibran is also incapable of ironic detachment, or Rome," the "companion of Moses," the "beloved even rational analysis. Gibran's paintings and stories are dreamlike and ethereal.

words, Khalil
 scourged and cast
 and nights. In part
 the way that, in
 collude
 land and reaped
 from the sword of
 priest. We learn
 Father Elias to
 shelter at the
 maan Ramy. In
 brought to the
 Sheik Abbas and Father
 the souls of the
 priests, and their
 rulers. Winning
 argument and
 ary pieces
 image.
 ment, or
 ings and

688). Whether a painting, a prose poem, or an illustrated story, The story has a happy ending. We learn that Gibran's art touches the heart at a pre-rational level. a half a century later, the Lebanese people had writing uses a As in his painting, Gibran in his but he does not awakened. In the future, fifty years later, a writing uses a vivid but essentially static image, but he does not traveler, on his way to the Holy Cedars of Lebanon, is struck by contented villagers in and experience; his work is impressionistic. While one may homes surrounded by fertile fields and blooming orchards. Sheik Abbas' mansion has since fallen force of Gibran's moral seriousness as related to various aspects to rubble. As for Khalil, his life's history has should not expect of life, says Walbridge, the reader living, reforms from Gibran prescriptions for ethics, rational ters upon the pages of the people's hearts. coherent for reordering society, reasoned moral and While Nymphs of the Valley, Spirits Rebellious, and Broken Wings are all set in Lebanon, He romanticizes philosophy. Gibran tends to express his cities. Society they set the stage for Gibran's English works. systems of spiritual views in terms of dichotomies. are what benefit The advent of The Madman in 1918 marked the country and demonizes have commented on Gibran's transition to, and adoption of, English and religion, for Gibran, are as a universal language for literary purposes. as well, such as oppression, whereas nature and love are what benefit Lebanon recedes from the foreground and becomes a background, while remaining the bedrock of Gibran's persistent dualisms. (Other scholars have commented on life and death, good and evil, as well, such as In his early Arabic works, Gibran may be love and hatred.) Gibran's views do not represent practical described as a social reformer, in a visionary sort of way. In his English works, Gibran is more of cannot desert our cities to live as hermits at the edge of the a spiritual guide, offering counsels for edification

Qadisha Gorge nor can we all escape and personal transformation. But despite his in idyllic cottages overlooking strengths in these respects, Gibran had serious abandonment of society. limitations that must be acknowledged as well. are Gibran’s contributions in the John Walbridge, an authority on Gibran and the Arab world, Gibran’s influ- translator of Gibran’s *The Storm* (1998) and *The Beloved* (1998) from the original Arabic, has as “Gibranian style” was framed some of the most persuasive critical other elements, by the electric analysis of Gibran’s shortcomings. Walbridge rhythms, in the drumbeat of his notes that Gibran is not adept at narrative and repetitions; by the charm of his that “his narrative harp has only a few strings” style; in his inventive and selective (2001, online) As a writer, says Walbridge, Gib- in brave abandon of arid Arabic ran lacks the skills of subtle characterization or through the evocative power of complex plots. Everything Gibran says is deadly emotional immediacy; by rhetorical serious. There is never a trace of humor or irony “value words” such as beauty, love, in his work (nor in his art), and thus he has a justice; through structural use of bibli- significant limitation on his range of expression. inform and sustain his narratives; Walbridge sees Gibran’s English prose as preten- soul-deep symbolism—that is, the tious, his ideas as excessively mystical or just oppression), the forest (symbol trite; Gibran’s aesthetic is Arabic, not American. freedom, renewal, and immortality), Like one of his paintings, each of Gibran’s liter- tempest (symbol of destruction and

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regeneration), the mist (symbol of mystery and or may not be. If a work such eternity, or that which obscures), the child has entered the canon of “world

to live as couples

Beirut in total

What, then,

final analysis? In

ence was as

came to be known

marked, among

cadence of his

incantations and

new poetic

choice of words,

poetic diction;

words with

reliance on

power, and

cal images that

and by dint of

cage (symbol of

of sanctuary,

the storm or

American it may

as *The Prophet*

(symbol of perceptiveness and equilibrium), the then surely its author ought to be river (symbol of the course of human life), the belonging to the American literary hall sea (symbol of the great spirit or the greater self), the bird (symbol of the soul's search for the question of whether The Prophet divine), the mirror (symbol of contemplation), classic, however, or whether Kah- the night (symbol of soporific ignorance), and the lil Gibran ought to be recognized, at long last, as dawn (symbol spiritual awakening).

an American writer worthy of note, there is the These carry over into Gibran's work in Gibran's significance for the twenty- English, which is stylistically marked by a lyrical Those who promote the idea of his impulse, by rebellion against literary norms and do so not for what he was but established forms, and by impressionistic imagery for what he represents; his importance is in his with evocative power to effect emotional message of reconciliation, of peace, of elevation. Gibran's ideological leitmotifs in- brotherhood. Gibran has iconic value in the way clude—to name some of the more obvious he represents the embrace of East and West. It is themes—the veneration of love, a pantheistic quest for the mysterious in nature, the rejection greater self, as it were, that really mat- of religious and political corruption, a passion for person, but the paradigm. freedom, and a belief in human brotherhood.

In a speech in December 1995 to celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of Gibran's arrival in America, Suheil Bushrui spoke of the impor- **SIGNIFICANCE OF KAHLIL GIBRAN AND THE** Gibran's work and ideas for our time, **PROPHET** and he pointed out the dual recognition that Gib-

On July 9, 2009, the International Astronomical in the academic and public Union officially approved the naming of a crater, United States—as represented by one hundred kilometers in diameter, on the planet Maryland's creation of the Kah- Mercury after Kahlil Gibran, thanks to the efforts

literature,”
viewed as
of fame as well.
Beyond the
is an American
question of
first century.
importance today
Gibran's
ters—not the
In a speech
tance of
ran has received
spheres in the
the University of
lil Gibran chair

and the dedication of the Kahlil of Nelly Mouawad, a postdoctoral researcher in Garden in Washington, D.C. the astronomy department at the University of national recognition, said Bushrui, Maryland, in association with the university's occupies a distinctive position among director of the Kahlil Gibran Chair for Values and Peace, Suheil Bushrui. Even though a crater Prophet has enjoyed on Mercury has now been named after Gibran, Gibran's "stature and importance his identity as a significant American writer is passes," said Bushrui, because still in question. Where is Gibran's "crater" in message remains ? potent and as meaningful the American literary critical landscape? Why is ("Kahlil Gibran of America," 1996, Gibran still largely "off the map" in terms of "its emphasis on the healing critical acclaim? universal, the natural, the eternal, the Whether or not The Prophet is an American continued, Gibran's work "repre- classic, and whether Gibran himself will be ac- affirmation of faith in the hu- cepted by critics as an American writer of note, His name, says Bushrui, "perhaps Gibran's legacy transcends that category itself. of any other modern writer, is The Prophet, after all, falls outside conventional peace, spiritual values and frames of reference. It resists categorization. Yet, understanding." Gibran's work to be a great American author is, perhaps, to write secular concerns with sacred a work of universal quality, of enduring interna- enlarging individual identity with tional appeal, irrespective of how qualitatively self" of the world at large. Indeed,

KAHLIL GIBRAN

perhaps the most important element in Gibran's such as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, work for our own time is that it conveys the in their departments of English or

Gibran Memorial
 Beyond this
 Gibran also
 the world's
 appeal that The
 internationally.
 increase as time
 "his
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 process, the
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 man spirit."
 more than that
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 do not teach him

quintessential spiritual unity of Islam and Christian Literature, and it is only recently that he came to be taught, but in a non-Ivy League university and of all religions. In his parable “War that of Maryland, by Professor Suhayl and the Small Nations” (which is immediately Prophet has passed the test of time as preceded by “The Greater Self” in The work. Indeed, ten million readers can- Forerunner), Gibran’s social message is embodied wrong. Yet, The Prophet has not ied in the words of a mother sheep to her lamb threshold of the canon of American literature. (representing the “small nations”), as two eagles (p. 4) (powerful, hegemonic nations), each intent on devouring the lamb, were fighting in the sky Prophet has entered the canon of overhead: “Pray, my little one, pray in your heart Gibran does not appear in that God may make peace between your winged American literature, even in col- brothers” (p. 67). lections known for cultural diversity such as the prestigious The Heath Anthology of American Literature Gibran’s “greater self” of the individual is (where there is not a single line from transposed to the greater, collective identity not critical indifference to the author of only of nature, but of society itself. Throughout America’s bestselling book (apart from the Bible) goes far in his works (both English and Arabic), Gibran explains why The Prophet has been so marginalized in draws from a palette of natural, spatial, and situ- American literary history. That indifference is ational metaphors to convey the notion of an hardly disinterest; rather, it is a studied interior, hidden, expansive, liberated, powerful, disinheritance of something distinctively and spiritual “self”—one that has compassion for unique in the American literary heritage, and has the paradoxical others. This “greater self” is not ontologically effect of raising serious questions about the critical swallowed up by one vast, undifferentiated Over- recognition of greatness in the

soul in the Emersonian sense. Rather, the “greater overwhelming an audience response. It self” is greater by virtue of its identity with—not perfect sense that Gibran’s its identity as—the universe of other souls. Thus Prophet ought, at long last, to Gibran’s “greater self”—rather than referring to in the American canon.

some amorphous, atavistic “Oversoul”—is the Prophet is not without honor save in its socially “wider self,” progressively self- Perhaps it’s time for that to change. actualized in part-to-whole harmony with the human family, or “the world.”

Gibran’s call for reconciliation, for the realization of a “greater self,” addressed not only the need for Christian-Muslim understanding that Selected Bibliography

seems so relevant today; it acknowledged the need for religious tolerance and understanding that would encompass all religions and all GIBRAN

peoples. And, as the scholar Irfan Shahid points out, Gibran’s poetry and ideas have stood the test of time, the best of all critics. Nonetheless: Parables and Poems. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1918.

Although his Prophet has sold, according to one Parables and Poems. New York: Al- estimate, ten million copies, thus outselling all 1920.

American poets from Whitman to Eliot, the Ameri- York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1923. Reprint.

can literary establishment has not given him the and with an introduction by Suheil recognition he deserves, and has not admitted him Boston: Oneworld Publications, to the American literary canon. The Ivy League

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