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THE PRESIDENT MEETS THE PROPHET:  
CHARLES W. ELIOT'S 1910 ENCOUNTER  
WITH KAHLIL GIBRAN

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# The President Meets the Prophet: Charles W. Eliot's 1910 Encounter with Kahlil Gibran

*Paul M. Wright*

IN DECEMBER 1910 KAHLIL GIBRAN—BEST KNOWN TO US TODAY AS THE author of the cult classic *The Prophet* (1923), reputed to be the all-time bestseller in American publishing history—was a struggling, twenty-seven-year-old artist and poet.<sup>1</sup> He had immigrated to the United States in 1895 at the age of twelve with his mother, sisters, and brother, leaving his native town of Besharri in Lebanon, then conflated in the American mind with Syria as a province of the Turkish empire.

After a brief internment at Ellis Island the family found a modest tenement home on Oliver Place in one of Boston's immigrant ghettos, the multiethnic, polyglot South End.<sup>2</sup> Young Gibran, pushed and pulled by the neighborhood's swirling street life, found a refuge at Denison House, one of the pioneering "social settlements" established in major urban areas such as Chicago, New York, and Boston to assist immigrants in accommodation and assimilation to American ways. At Denison House his native talent was recognized by members of the staff, and he was eventually taken up as a

1 His name, properly Gibran Kahlil Gibran, was truncated by the Boston Public School system. Biographical information on Gibran (1883–1931) is drawn from Jean Gibran and Kahlil Gibran, *Kahlil Gibran: His Life and World*, revised and updated edition (New York: Interlink Books, 1991). This richly detailed biography is the work of the late Kahlil Gibran, the subject's namesake and cousin, and his wife Jean Gibran, who has been instrumental in providing access to documents and photographs. I am grateful to her and the Gibran Foundation of Boston for support and encouragement. And I thank Dennis C. Marnon, Coordinating Editor, and Roger E. Stoddard, Advisory Board member, of the *Harvard Library Bulletin* for their helpful readings of the draft typescript.

2 The best source for information about the South End at the turn of the century is the famed settlement house study by the South End House director Robert A. Woods and his associates, *The City Wilderness: A Study of the South End* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1898). For a vivid depiction of immigrant life at the time in the South End, see Mary Antin (1881–1949), *The Promised Land* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1912).

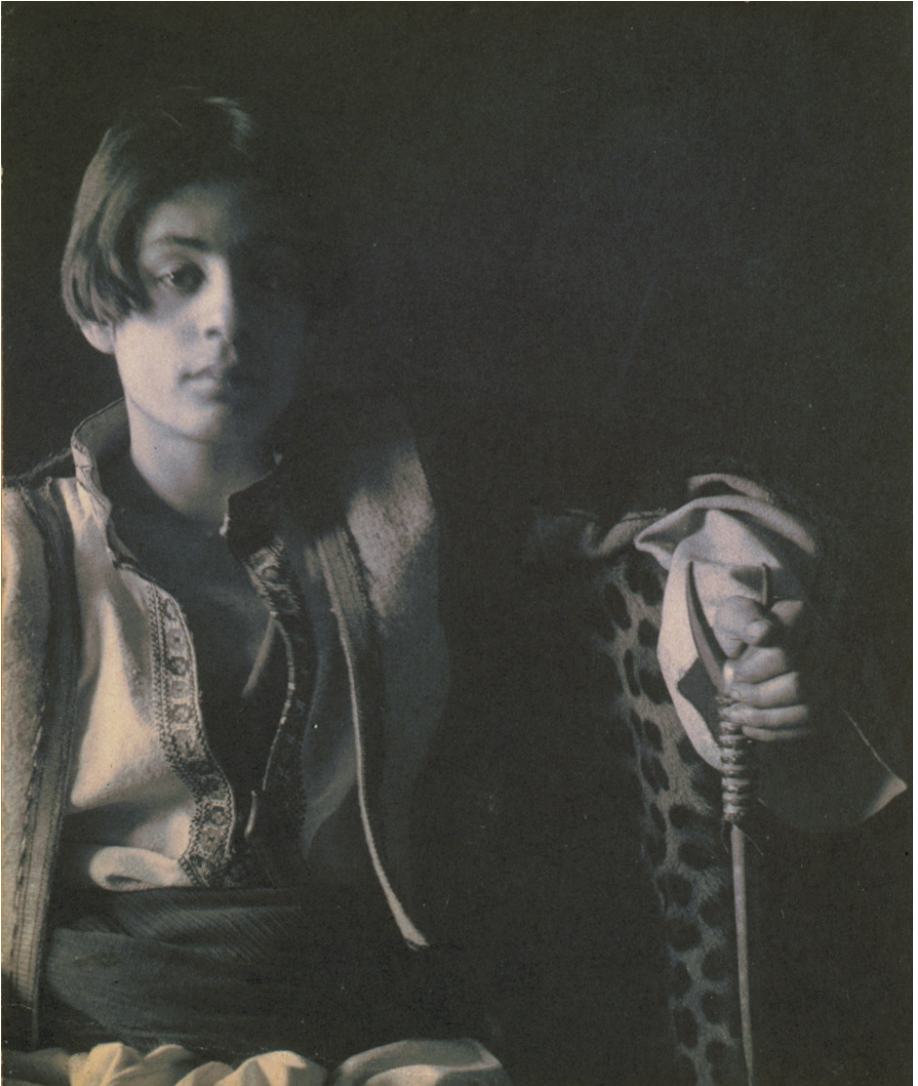


Figure 1. "Kahlil Gibran in Middle Eastern(?) Costume with Leopard Skin and Staff, Seated," platinum photographic print by Fred Holland Day, Boston, ca. 1898. Approx. 5½ in. x 4¼ in. (13.5 cm. x 10.7 cm.).  
Courtesy of the Louise Imogen Guiney Collection, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, reproduction number, LC-USZC4- 3324.

protégé by the noted art photographer and aesthete Fred Holland Day.<sup>3</sup> Day took a number of important, intentionally exotic and potentially erotic photographs of Gibran as an adolescent and young man (see figure 1), introduced him to his avant-garde cultural circle, and fostered his training as an artist. Day, as a partner in the publishing house of Copeland & Day, exposed Gibran to the firm's list and introduced him to the techniques and conventions of book illustration and design that would later bear fruit with numerous commissions by New York houses. Copeland & Day were in the forefront of fin-de-siècle aestheticism and arts-and-crafts graphic design. It has been shown by his biographers that Gibran's development as a writer and thinker was influenced by early exposure to their books, including, for example, the mystical work of Maurice Maeterlinck.<sup>4</sup>

After a return to Lebanon in 1898, supported financially by Day and his friends, for further education in Arabic at a Maronite Christian college in Beirut, Gibran came back to Boston in 1902. In May of the following year he had the first exhibition of his drawings in a group show at Wellesley College, the pleasure of which was marred by the death of his mother in June. From April 30 to May 10, 1904, a major show of his "drawings, studies & designs" was mounted at Day's Boston studio, receiving a favorable review in the *Boston Evening Transcript*.<sup>5</sup> At that exhibition he was introduced to Mary Haskell, a Boston schoolmistress, who would become his lifelong confidante, correspondent, patron, and, probably platonic but possibly physically intimate friend. Haskell, some ten years older than he, was the most important of several progressive artistic and intellectual women who would enjoy close personal relationships with the magnetic Gibran. By this time he had moved literally across the railroad tracks from the déclassé South End to a small apartment/studio at 18 West Cedar Street on the Bohemian backside of Beacon Hill, not far from the fashionable Back Bay neighborhood where Haskell lived and ran her school at 314 Marlborough Street.

After several years of development as a designer and painter, as well as a writer—in Arabic on his own, and in English carefully edited and corrected by Haskell—Gibran felt the need for further and more formal art training. Thus, starting in 1908, he studied at the Académie Julien in Paris, supported financially by Mary Haskell (see figure 2). He returned briefly to Boston in 1910, found it provincial compared to Paris, and moved on to New York City the following year. Before he left Boston, thanks to the intercession of

3 A good recent study of Day (1864–1933) and his work is Patricia Fanning's *Through an Uncommon Lens: The Life and Photography of F. Holland Day* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008). His relationship with Gibran is discussed on pp. 69–71 and passim.

4 See Joe W. Kraus, *Messrs. Copeland & Day, 69 Cornhill, Boston, 1893–1899* (Philadelphia: MacManus, 1979) for information on this short-lived but important publishing house.

5 Printed invitation reproduced and *Boston Evening Transcript*, May 3, 1904, review quoted in Gibran and Gibran, *Kahlil Gibran*, 129–130.



Figure 2. Photograph of Gibran Kahlil Gibran, by unknown photographer, Paris, ca. 1909–1910. Gelatin silver plate, approx. 9 in. x 6 in. (23,3 cm. x 15,5 cm.). Courtesy of the Museo Soumaya, Mexico City, and the Kahlil Gibran Foundation, Boston.

Ella Lyman Cabot, who wrote on progressive education, and her husband Dr. Richard Clarke Cabot, chief of staff at Massachusetts General Hospital, to whom he had been introduced by Haskell, Kahlil Gibran was put in touch with Charles William Eliot.

Charles W. Eliot, in December 1910, was a vigorous seventy-six years old and had been retired for exactly a year and half, after a forty-year tenure as president of Harvard University<sup>6</sup> In addition to his undeniable fame as the creator of modern Harvard and as one of the inventors of the modern research university, Eliot may be best known to us today for his opposition while president to intercollegiate football because of its unregulated brutality and his post-presidential role as the editor and compiler of the *Harvard Classics*, colloquially known as “Dr. Eliot’s Five-Foot Shelf of Books,” which was being published in fifty substantial volumes during 1909–1910.<sup>7</sup> Many an aspiring middle-class home in the first half of the twentieth century had Dr. Eliot as a guest in the form of an often-displayed but seldom-read set of the *Harvard Classics* and its follow-on set, the twenty-volume *Harvard Classics Shelf of Fiction* (1917).

Eliot, who was born in a Beacon Street mansion (number 31) on Boston’s Beacon Hill in 1834, was descended on both parental sides (Eliots and Lymans) from the earliest families that had immigrated to New England in the seventeenth century during the great Puritan migration from England. He was decidedly of the caste that Oliver Wendell Holmes would denominate as the “Boston Brahmins.” His father Samuel Atkins Eliot was educated at Harvard, inherited a family fortune, much of which was lost in the Panic of 1857, and served as treasurer of his alma mater.

Following in his father’s footsteps Charles graduated from Harvard in 1853. He subsequently was trained as a chemist and mathematician, traveled in Europe studying the nascent university systems there, and eventually took a position in 1865 as professor of chemistry at the newly founded Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which rivaled Harvard as a scientific school. In 1869 the Board of Overseers of Harvard, which had recently had its membership revised, feeling that their institution had become moribund, looked for new blood to assume the vacant presidency. They fixed their

6 Biographical information on Eliot (1834–1926) is drawn from Henry James, *Charles W. Eliot: President of Harvard University, 1869–1909*, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1930), which won the Pulitzer Prize for biography; and Hugh Hawkins, *Between Harvard and America: The Educational Leadership of Charles W. Eliot* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972). Henry James (1879–1947), a lawyer and historian, was the son of William James and the nephew and namesake of the famous novelist. See obituary, “Henry James, Head of Annuity Board,” *New York Times*, December 15, 1947.

7 Published by P. F. Collier & Son of New York, the preeminent subscription publisher of the period, these popular volumes were produced in the thousands under various imprints and impressions and are still in print. I am currently researching and writing a monograph on the editing, publishing, and promotional history of this set of books, which attempted to organize the grand sweep of knowledge and helped to inaugurate the “great books” movement.

sights on the energetic and forceful Eliot, who had become known for his innovative thinking on higher education, and offered him the job. Thus, thirty-six-year-old Charles William Eliot became the twenty-first and youngest president of America's oldest college.

Space does not permit a rehearsal of Eliot's long and well-known career at Harvard, which he helped transform from a provincial college into an international university, and his post-Harvard years as a public figure ("America's President Eliot" as Hugh Hawkins names him), all of which is well told elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> Eliot's actions throughout seem to have been informed by a sense of noblesse oblige derived from his knowledge of New England's history, his awareness of his Puritan ancestry, and the nineteenth-century evolution of that heritage into what he called, in a curious formulation, his "birthright Unitarianism."<sup>9</sup>

On December 19, 1910, President Eliot received a handwritten note from Kahlil Gibran that read in part:

I am making a series of drawings of the big men who represent the art and knowledge of this day. I have already drawn Rodin, Debussy, Rochfort [*sic*] and others. Will you allow me the privilege of drawing you also? Dr. Cabot has kindly given me a letter of introduction which I enclose. If I may draw you I shall greatly appreciate the honor and will wait upon you at your convenience.<sup>10</sup>

One can see from the letter reproduced here (see figure 4) that Gibran possessed a strong and confident hand. It is likely that his command of English was less sure, but we know that Mary Haskell would often edit and correct his compositions, so her presence may also be felt, especially in such formulaic phrases as "[I] will wait upon you at your convenience."

Richard C. Cabot's note was enclosed:

8 See James, *Charles W. Eliot and Hawkins, Between Harvard and America*. See also Samuel Eliot Morison, *Three Centuries of Harvard* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936); and Samuel Eliot Morison, ed., *The Development of Harvard University, 1869-1929* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1930).

9 This phrase, analogous one supposes to "birthright Quaker," appears in Eliot's later correspondence, often in the context of discussions about various Protestant sects and denominations. Eliot was intensely concerned with reports and events of World War I, during which the term "birthright Quaker" was common in discussions of conscientious objectors.

10 Charles W. Eliot Papers, Harvard University Archives, UAI 15.894, box 41, folder G, 1910. Transcribed and quoted with permission. I am grateful to the staff of the Harvard University Archives for their courtesy and assistance as I worked through the Eliot papers.



Figure 3. Photograph of Charles William Eliot, by unknown photographer, Cambridge, Mass., ca. 1910. Approx 5 in. x 7 in. (12.7 cm. x 17.8 cm.). Harvard University Archives Photograph Collection: Portraits, HUP Eliot, Charles William (39b). Courtesy Harvard University Archives.



18 West Cedar St.  
Boston  
Dec. 19<sup>th</sup>. 1910.

Charles W. Eliot Esq.  
My dear Mr. Eliot,

I am making a series of drawings of the big men who represent the art and knowledge of this day. I have already drawn Rodin, Debussy, Rochfort and others. Will you allow me the privilege of drawing you also? Dr. Cabot has kindly

Gibran

given me a letter of introduction which I enclose. If I may draw you I shall greatly appreciate the honor and will wait upon you at your convenience.

I am, Sir,

Sincerely yours  
Kahlil Gibran

Figure 4. Letter to Charles W. Eliot, December 19, 1910. Approximately 8 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 6 $\frac{1}{2}$  in. (22.5 x 17.5 cm.) folded vertically. Partially obscured portion on recto reads in its entirety "18 West Cedar St. / Boston / Dec. 19<sup>th</sup>, 1910". Charles W. Eliot Papers, Harvard University Archives, UAI 15.894, box 41, folder G, 1910. Reproduced courtesy of the Harvard University Archives.

Dear Cousin Charles

This is to introduce Kahlil Gibran an artist who wants to draw your head in charcoal within  $\frac{1}{2}$  an hour. He did mine within that time & very cleverly—to prove that he could. He has done quite splendid heads of Rodin, Rostand & [others?]

He asks no pay . . .<sup>11</sup>

With a typewritten letter dictated to his secretary Eliot responded the next day, December 20, 1910, from his house in Cambridge:

11 Harvard University Archives, Charles W. Eliot Papers, UAI 15.894, Box 41, Folder C, 1910. Transcribed and quoted with permission.

You are quite welcome to make a charcoal drawing of my head, but I should like to know what use you are accustomed to make of such drawings. How do you publish them or sell them?

It would be most convenient for me to sit to you at my house at the corner of Brattle Street and Fresh Pond Parkway, Cambridge; but there is no high light in the building, the storeys all being low. If you need a high light, you will have to make the sketch somewhere else. North, south, east, or west light can be had in this house.<sup>12</sup>

The following day, December 21, Gibran wrote back:

Thank you for the permission to draw your likeness. The light in your house will be adequate. I will call at whatever time is agreeable to you.

The series I am working on will require some time for completion. I hope eventually to publish it—probably in book form.<sup>13</sup>

Eliot responded, again in typescript, the very next day, December 22:

I could sit to you any morning next week from Monday to Saturday inclusive at this house between the hours of nine and one. My house is on the corner towards Boston of Brattle Street and Fresh Pond Parkway, about two miles west from Harvard Square.

If you propose to come out by electric car, take at the corner of West Cedar and Cambridge Streets, Boston, any car going to Harvard Square; but get from the conductor a transfer from Harvard Square to Mt. Auburn. On the latter line leave the car at Coolidge Avenue, cross a small public park to the northward, inclining a little to the left. When you emerge from the park, my house will be immediately in front of you on the corner above mentioned. Please notify me of the day and hour at which you propose to come.<sup>14</sup>

Eliot had recently moved into the house at 17 Fresh Pond Parkway, Cambridge, that he bought and renovated after he retired. Characteristically leaving nothing to accident, for the first few years he lived in the new house the man who had controlled Harvard with a tight fist would include detailed directions to correspondents, often suggesting the use of public transportation. He remained at that address for the rest of his life,

<sup>12</sup> Harvard University Archives, Charles W. Eliot Papers, UAI 15.894, Box 41, Folder G, 1910. Transcribed and quoted with permission.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*



Figure 5. Charles W. Eliot House, 17 Fresh Pond Parkway, at the corner of Brattle Street, Cambridge, Mass., ca. 1910–1926. From Henry James, *Charles W. Eliot*, vol. 2. Halftone reproduction, approx 3¾ in. x 2½ in. (9.8 cm. x 6.4 cm.).

spending summers at his Mount Desert Island estate in Maine. The Cambridge house, fronting on Brattle Street, still stands, but it is now hidden from view on both streets by a subsequently erected high, serpentine brick wall.

Thus the arrangements were made, and on the morning of Wednesday, December 28, 1910, Kahlil Gibran, who was ambitious and confident but perhaps a trifle nervous, bearing drawing paper, pencils, and charcoal sticks, would journey to the home of Charles William Eliot, the *éminence grise* of Cambridge. Mount Lebanon would come to Mount Auburn. We do not know if he took the “electric cars,” as Eliot suggested, or if he walked all or part of the approximately five miles, or if his patrons, the Cabots and Mary Haskell, arranged a carriage for him. We do know from reports in the Boston newspapers that it was a mild day for late December (34°F in the morning rising to 44°F by the afternoon), fair but with somewhat of an overcast hinting at impending rain or snow.

The sitting seems to have taken place in the venue where Eliot customarily entertained visitors, his south-facing study with full-length French windows on the second floor of an ell to the main house, appearing on the right as one would look at the building from Brattle Street (see figure 5). Assuming a low December sun, the “high light” that Eliot feared would be lacking could have been perhaps direct or softly

diffused sunlight—the latter being more appropriate to Gibran’s soft-focus style in drawing and painting as well as prose and poetry, as numerous commentators and critics have observed.

Mary Haskell recorded the event in her intimate journal for December 28:

K[ahlil] did Pres. Eliot’s head this a.m.—& had a delightful hour besides with him. Much in common: Prof. [Charles Eliot] Norton, Eng[lish] Occupation in Egypt, etc. K surprised at E’s int[erest] in near East & kdge [knowledge] of it.  
*Head one of best things yet . . .*<sup>15</sup>

One, of course, would wish to have been present at this meeting of two such disparate figures, so divided by age, education, ethnicity, class, and life experiences that it is hard to imagine that their paths would ever have converged. But thanks to Yankee patronage and progressive attitudes and Lebanese talent and persistence, they did come together, the result being an interesting, interpretative pencil portrait here published for the first time (see figure 6).

Eliot, whose right cheek was disfigured by a large birthmark, always presented his left profile, as he did in this instance, for portraits and photographs (see as an example figure 3 above). There remain only a few images that show him full face or sculpted in the round. As a public figure he was inundated with requests for photographs, often with an added request for a signature, and he had many cartes-de-visite and larger portraits taken over the years. Despite, or perhaps because of, his birthmark, he seems to have been somewhat vain about his appearance and, from the evidence of his correspondence, he and his wife agonized over choosing the right pose from photographers’ proof sheets.

Gibran’s and Eliot’s “delightful” meeting exceeded the allotted half hour for the portrait execution and seems to have lasted most of the morning in conversation. Eliot, who was an omnivorous reader of newspapers and magazines and a frequent author of editorial and political pieces on a wide range of topics, with an unabashed confidence in his own opinions, would have been conversant, to Gibran’s surprise, on the situations in Egypt and the Middle East. And Gibran, a close student of fine art, would have had knowledge of the work of the recently deceased Charles Eliot Norton (1827–1908), Eliot’s cousin, a member of the Harvard faculty during Eliot’s tenure, and the dean of American art historians. One is tempted to imagine that Eliot did most

15 Mary Haskell Collection, box 29, folder 225, in the Minis Family Papers #2725, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Transcribed and quoted with permission. Emphasis added. I am grateful to Robin Smith of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for researching this material for me.

of the talking, but Gibran was self-confident and articulate once he had assessed a situation and no doubt held his own.

Recalling their meeting almost four years later in September 1914 after his remove to New York, Gibran, who had revered Eliot as a “big” man in 1910, had altered his opinion, as recorded by Mary Haskell in her expanded journal devoted to Gibran:

“I remember so well my morning with Charles Eliot—how I spent half an hour drawing him and he kept me for two hours after, talking to me. And I listened with respect—and thot [thought] with surprise how much he knew about the near East—And afterwards I realized he knew nothing—that it was all gleanings—two + two put together to make four—I realized he was cold & dead—and that I who had listened to him as to a big man, and admired him, was a little flame, a little bit of real life———Those hours with him opened a great many other people to me, after I understood them, but I did not understand until a little while after I had been in New York.” I [Haskell] was so glad to hear him say this of Eliot, and I told him so.<sup>16</sup>

The very technique of gathering “gleanings—two + two put together to make four” that enabled Eliot to converse intelligently and empathize with a wide range of individuals from Maine farmers like John Gilley to members of the Harvard faculty like William James and had put Gibran himself at ease in 1910, seemed now “cold & dead.”<sup>17</sup>

Assessing the portrait itself one could argue that Gibran tried to impart “a little flame, a little bit of real life,” into Eliot’s corpse-cold Unitarian visage as he worked to understand and interpret the man in 1910.<sup>18</sup> The mouth seems a bit more sensuous than one might expect, the nose a bit more sculpted, and most notably, the neck and shoulder are depicted as bare rather than buttoned up in a high collar, cravat, and dark suit. The effect seems to tend toward that of a classical bust from Greece or Rome rather than a stiff painting from colonial New England.

As far as is known the projected series of portraits of famous men that Gibran hoped “eventually to publish . . . probably in book form” never came to fruition. He

16 Ibid., box 29, folder 229. Emphasis in original.

17 See Charles W. Eliot, *John Gilley: Maine Farmer and Fisherman* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1905), a biographical sketch that Eliot himself considered his best piece of writing.

18 “Corpse-cold Unitarianism” is Emerson’s critical term for what had become of the religious impulse in nineteenth-century New England. See Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, Volume IX, 1843–1847, Ralph H. Orth and Alfred R. Ferguson, eds. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 381 [Journal O, May 1846]. Interestingly, Eliot claimed to know his Emerson by heart, and Gibran acknowledged a spiritual debt to Transcendentalism, but the subject did not seem to arise during their session together.



Figure 6. Portrait of Charles W. Eliot, by Kahlil Gibran, December 28, 1910. Graphite on paper, signed and dated with monogram, 1910, Cambridge, Mass. Approx. 24 in. x 19 in. (61.3 cm. x 48 cm.). Courtesy of the Museo Soumaya, Mexico City, and the Kahlil Gibran Foundation, Boston. Image supplied by Gibran Foundation is slightly cropped.

continued to do portrait heads of notables (Yeats, for one), friends, and colleagues but his interests turned more toward his mystical writings and the illustrations that accompanied them, leading eventually to *The Prophet*, published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1923. Eliot and Gibran seem never to have met or corresponded again. It is unlikely that Eliot ever again saw the drawing after the sunny day in December 1910 when it was created. The portrait remained in Gibran's possession, managed to survive the confused distribution of his estate along with numerous other portraits, and found its way into the hands of his biographers, Kahlil and Jean Gibran. It is now in the Gibran Collection of the Museo Soumaya in Mexico City.<sup>19</sup>

Eliot passed away at his summer home on Mount Desert Island, Maine, in August 1926 at the ripe age of ninety-two, after a full and, to use one of his characteristic terms of praise, "serviceable" life. Fewer than five years later, after long period of fragile health, Gibran died of a heart attack in April 1931 at St. Vincent's Hospital in New York City. He was only 48. He was eulogized as a revered and beloved artist and writer in New York, in Boston, and especially in his native Lebanon, to which his remains were carried and where he was interred.

19 This collection of documents and artworks was amassed by the Gibrans for their biography and deposited in the museum in 2007. The Eliot portrait was reunited with others in the same "great man" vein on the same gallery wall at the Museo Soumaya's 2009 exhibition celebrating their accession (personal communication with Jean Gibran March 2011). See exhibition catalog: *Gibran: El profeta* (Mexico City: Museo Soumaya, Fundación Carlos Slim, 2010). I am grateful to Patricia Jacobs of Archivo Immigrantes Notables and Pablo Berrocal Navarro of Biblioteca y Fototeca, both in Mexico, for assistance. Other significant repositories of Gibran material are the Mary Haskell papers in the Minis Family Collection, cited above, and the Telfair Museums, Savannah, Georgia, which houses many significant Gibran pieces donated by Mary Haskell Minis.

# Contributors

STEVEN OLSEN-SMITH is Associate Professor of English at Boise State University and General Editor of *Melville's Marginalia Online*. He has authored articles on Melville and has edited two special issues of *Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies*. Currently he is engaged in research for a book-length study of the composition of *Moby-Dick*.

PAUL M. WRIGHT retired in 2006 as an editor at the University of Massachusetts Press, where he founded and managed the Press's series "Studies in Print Culture and the History of the Book." He was the recipient of a 2009–2010 Fellowship at Houghton Library, Harvard University, to research the *Harvard Classics*. In the course of that research the material was uncovered on which this paper is based.



