Modern Arabic Literature between the Nation and the World:
The Bilingual Singularity of Kahlil Gibran

Ghazouane Arslane

Queen Mary University of London

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
2019

I, Ghazouane Arslane, confirm that the research included within this thesis is my own work or that where it has been carried out in collaboration with, or supported by others, that this is duly acknowledged below and my contribution indicated. Previously published material is also acknowledged below.

I attest that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge break any UK law, infringe any third party's copyright or other Intellectual Property Right, or contain any confidential material.

I accept that the College has the right to use plagiarism detection software to check the electronic version of the thesis.

I confirm that this thesis has not been previously submitted for the award of a degree by this or any other university.

The copyright of this thesis rests with the author and no quotation from it or information derived from it may be published without the prior written consent of the author.

Signature: Ghazouane Arslane

Date: 23/12/2019

Table of Contents

Abstract **4**

Note on Translation, Transliteration and Citation **5**

Acknowledgement **6**

Introduction **7**

Chapter One: Reinventing the Religious in and against Modernity: The Poet as a Post-religious Prophet **55**

1. Re-imagining God, the Self and the World 59
2. The Poet as a Post-religious Prophet in the Modern Times 70
3. The Greater Self, or the Prophetic as *the* Impossible 84

Chapter Two: The Bilingual Chasm **103**

1. Gibran's *Ruʾyā Ḥadāthiyya* (Modernist Vision) in Arabic: Writing as a "Coincidence of Opposites" 106
2. *Ṣawt al-Shāʿir* [The Voice of the Poet]: An Arabic *Voice* of a Universal *Vision* 115
3. The Decision to Write in English: The Bilingual Anxiety 123
4. Bilingualism between Hospitality and Hostility 132
5. Arabic, Bilingualism and the Orient as Identitarian Veil 138

Chapter Three: Gibran as a Nationalist and (Post)-*Nahḍawī* **152**

1. 'Mother Syria' and the Emergent 'Syrian Idea' 157
2. The End of the War: Nationalism and the Unfulfilled Quest for Nationhood 168
3. Syria within the East: Civilizational Anxiety and Gibran's Vision of the Nahḍa 186

Chapter Four: Multiple Horizons of Expectations, Multiple Gibran*s*: Or, Gibran as World Literature **198**

1. Initial Reception of Gibran's English Works in the U.S. 203
2. The Problem of *The Prophet* in the American Cultural and Literary Field 224
3. The Translational Movement of Gibran's English Work into Arabic, or its "Arabization" 235

Conclusion **251**

Bibliography **258**

Abstract

This thesis argues that the bilingual literary oeuvre of Kahlil Gibran (Jubrān Khalil Jubrān), the Arab *Mahjari* (immigrant) writer (1883-1931), is marked by a singularity that is irreducible to biographical and culturalist approaches. This singularity, drawing on Derek Attridge, signifies the inexhaustible alterity and creative difference of his bilingual texts that my reading attempts to analyse and do justice to by focusing on their universal and national dimensions, complementary albeit not without tensions. This interpretation begins from the premise that Gibran's anglophone works should be read as Arab world literature. This ethics of reading, and this methodological perspective, is adopted because the Gibranian text is marked and fissured by a bilingual movement that enabled the creative possibility of writing in English and obscured its textual visibility in (Euro)-America. My argument develops in four distinct but inter-laced directions. First, I read Gibran's poetic enterprise in both languages as a universal endeavour to reinvent the religious in and against modernity – and the Arab Nahḍa/Awakening. Second, I focus on the discursive chasm that his bilingual movement produces, which nevertheless binds the particular and the universal. Third, I highlight Gibran's critical writings vis-à-vis the question of Syrian nationhood and the Arab Nahḍa, a crucial facet of his work as intellectual. And finally, I turn to the problematic reception of his anglophone works in the U.S. (especially) and in the Arab world, to underscore the conditions of this reception and interrogate what is rendered (in)visible by it. As an attempt to read Gibran's bilingual texts hospitably and critically, this thesis performs – and proposes – an ethics of reading that attends to the distinctness of modern Arabic literature, with Gibran as illustrative example, in its creative and problematic movement between the nation and the world.

Note on Translation, Transliteration and Citation

All translations from the Arabic in this thesis are mine unless otherwise noted. Transliterations of titles, words or passages in Arabic follow the *IJMES* (International Journal for Middle Eastern Studies) Transliteration Guide. For the purpose of convenience and accessibility, names of authors in Arabic have been transliterated without following the *IJMES* guide.

I use the abbreviated forms of the primary sources below consistently throughout the thesis:

CWs: Kahlil Gibran, *The Collected Works* (New York: Everyman's Library, 2007).

CWs in Arabic: Jubrān Khalil Jubrān, *al-Majmūʿa al-Kāmila li Muʾallafāt Jubrān Khalīl Jubrān bil-ʿArabiyya* [The Collected Works in Arabic] (Lebanon: Kitābuna li al-Nashr, 2014).

CWs in Arabic O: Jubrān Khalil Jubrān, *al-Majmūʿa al-Kāmila li Muʾallafāt Jubrān Khalīl Jubrān: Nuṣūs Khārij Majmūʿa* [The Collected Works of Jubrān Khalil Jubrān: Texts Outside the Main Collection], ed. Antoine al-Qawwal (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1994).

Acknowledgement

This work would not be possible without the generous scholarship I received from The Algerian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, for which I am grateful, to pursue my PhD in the United Kingdom. I am grateful and indebted to my first supervisor, Professor Galin Tihanov, for his kind, patient and constant support and for his constructive, critical feedback over the four years of my PhD. His belief in me and my research project has been a continuous source of strength and inspiration. I am also grateful to my second supervisor, Dr Nadia Atia, for her crucial feedback and helpful suggestions and for her warm and positive encouragement. Special thanks are due to Katie Da Cunha for reading and editing some of my work and for all the valuable and enjoyable discussions I had with her in the British Library. I have also benefited from the wonderful discussions I had with, and the useful suggestions of, Andrew Hines, Ellen Jones, John Dunn, Ruby Tuke, Emma Luce Scali, Faisal Hamadah, Abdelbaqi Ghorab, Ouissal Harize, Huyem Cheurfa, Dr Shital Pravinchandra and Dr Selma Mokrani Barkaoui, among others. My warm thanks are also due to Charlotte Terrel for proofreading one of my chapters. Over the years, I have received an enormous and warm support from my father, my stepmother, my younger brother and especially my sister, a family I am fortunate and happy to have. I also thank my extended family and good friends in Algeria, and especially Taki Eddine Gasmi, for their wonderful encouragement throughout the four years of my PhD.

Introduction

In *Ghurbat al-Kātib al-ʿArabī* [The Exile of the Arab Writer] (2013), Halim Barakat, the eminent Syrio-Lebanese novelist and scholar, laments the fact that Kahlil Gibran, one of the most prominent Arab *Mahjari* (immigrant) writers of the early twentieth century, lives in utter isolation in an unknown, solitary place in Washington, D.C., "an isolation which is not the one he loved and, inspired by it, he wrote, but a poor and stifling isolation that he has not chosen for himself but was, indeed, forced upon him."[1] Barakat is talking about a memorial of Gibran, located in an empty, non-descript place between the centre of D.C. and its suburbs, which was made in 1989. "When one ventures to visit the memorial," he writes, "one has to look in vain for a parking slot until one is driven away from the area and reluctantly decides not to pursue the venture."[2] Barakat admits that this situation has induced in him a feeling of "guilt mixed with sadness and anger," because Gibran, the revolutionary writer who inspired and instigated Barakat's literary energy and yearning for writing, has turned into a dead cultural monument established by a committee that barely knows a thing about the Arab *Mahjari* writer, except, perhaps, for his well-known book *The Prophet* (1923). What is at stake here, and this is the gist of Barakat's polemic, is the institutional domestication and reduction of one of the pioneering figures in the modern Arab world of what he calls "counter-culture," into a poet of "peace, understanding, reconciliation and consensus."[3] "I find Gibran solitary, isolated and incapable to liberate himself from the memorial to which he is confined," he adds. "He loved the solitude of Kadisha valley[4] that liberated his soul from all confinement. In his death, however, how could he relish

[1] Halim Barakat, *Ghurbat al-Kātib al-ʿArabī* (London: Saqi books, 2011), 123.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid., 126.
[4] This famous valley crosses the village of Bsharri in North Lebanon, where Gibran was born.

an aloneness that is teeming with the incessant flow of cars and from which man is absent?"[5] Barakat extends his criticism to "the ritualistic celebrations of Gibran," in Lebanon and the Arab world, that are "at the service of the very institutions, forces and trends against which he rebelled in the name of individuation and struggle, not consensus, meekness and compliance."[6] The domestication of a counter-cultural figure such as Gibran is not an exceptional case, Barakat insists, but an institutional practise that the dominant elite everywhere adopts. I take this problem as the underlying impetus for this introduction and for the thesis as a whole, which attempts to revisit Gibran's work and do justice to it due, partly, to this tendency to domesticate and/or abate its creative and critical spirit.

This introduction will proceed as follows: First, I will stress the importance of Gibran as a modern Arab writer, going on to foreground and explain the need to engage with his work today. Second, I will spell out the premise of the thesis, the argument it puts forward and the approach it follows. Third, I will demarcate and justify the selection of texts that will be focused upon, followed by a detailed outline of the thesis. Fourth, I will give a review of the literature relevant to the topic by discussing the most pertinent to it in order to demonstrate how and why the argument and approach of this thesis, along with the kind of reading it sets out to perform, diverge from the existing scholarly work on Gibran. Fifth, I will give a brief historical account of the *Mahjar* school of Arabic literature and of the Arab Nahḍa (Awakening). This is crucial because a critical (re)consideration of Gibran's work must be cognizant of the latter's specific historical and discursive context. Sixth, I will elaborate on the conceptual apparatus of this thesis and discuss some crucial theoretical problems relevant to the question of how to approach Gibran's work and Arabic literature today. Then I will end by

[5] Ibid., 127.
[6] Ibid.

acknowledging the (inevitable) limitations of this study. This introduction will be relatively and inevitably long. This is due to the nature of my argument and the methodology it entails, which warrant, in order to avoid any confusion later, an extensive contextual and conceptual elucidation.

Kahlil Gibran (1883-1931), or Jubrān Khalil Jubrān as he is known in the Arab world, is the most prominent of the Arab *Mahjari* writers and poets who lived in the United States in the early twentieth century. The rebelliousness that Barakat emphatically regards as the central impulse of Gibran's literary endeavour, his "idealism" notwithstanding, constitutes the impetus and thrust of his writings. This is most exemplified in his book *al-ʿAwāṣif* [The Tempests] (1920), in one essay of which, entitled "Slavery," he writes:

> Everywhere I saw slavery being carried in processions toward the altars and being called 'god'. They poured libations of wine and perfume at its feet and called it 'angel'. They burned incense before its images and called it 'prophet'. They fell down prostrate before it and called it the 'holy law'. They fought and killed for it and called it 'patriotism'. They submitted to its will and called it 'the shadow of God on earth'. They burned their houses and razed their buildings at its will and called 'fraternity' and 'equality'. They strove then and made every effort for it, calling it 'wealth' and 'trade'. Indeed, it has many names but one reality, many manifestations of a single substance. It is a single disease, eternal without beginning, without end, appearing with many contradictory symptoms and differing sores, inherited from the fathers by the sons as they inherit the breath of life. The ages receive its seeds in the soil of the ages, just as the seasons reap what the seasons have sown.[7]

No wonder that Gibran is deemed by many notable Arab critics and writers – Barakat himself, Adunis (Ali Ahmad Said Esber), Kamal Abu-Deeb and Boutros Hallaq, to mention but a few[8] – as a discursive turn in, if not the inaugural eruption of, Arab literary modernity. Adunis, for instance, sees Gibran as the founder of modernity *as* vision [*al-ḥadātha al-ruʾyā*] in Arabic literature and the pioneer of its articulation, in

---

[7] Gibran, *The Strom*, trans. John Wallbridge (Santa Cruz, CA: White Cloud Press, 1993), 40-41.

[8] See Adunis, *al-Thābit wa al-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ittibāʿ wa al-Ibdāʿ ʿinda al-ʿArab: Ṣadmat al-Ḥadātha* [*The Fixed and the Changing in Arabic Poetics*, vol. 3] (Beirut: Dār al-ʿAwda, 1978), 158-211; Kamal Abdel-Malek and Wael Hallaq, ed. *Tradition, Modernity, and Postmodernity in Arabic Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 315-20, 342; Boutros Hallaq, *Gibran et la refondation littéraire arabe: Bildungsroman, écriture prophétique, transgénérisme* (Arles: Sindibad: Actes sud, 2008).

that his innovative mode of writing made possible a new horizon of literary expression. He writes,

> [T]he primary significance of Gibran resides in the fact that he took a trajectory hitherto unknown in Arab writing, in that he *destroyed memory and constructed the sign*. In this sense, he represents *a beginning*…. Arab writing, starting from him, has ceased to contemplate itself in the mirrors of expression, but has begun, instead, to submerge itself in anguish, search and yearning – and hence its energization; the readers who previously fed on words now feed on the power of renewal and transformation.[9]

This emphasis on the specificity of Gibran as a turning point in Arab literary modernity should not be read in Romantic terms as the creative spirit of a solitary and mad genius who, alone and isolated, revolutionized Arabic literature. One should expose and resist the institutional attempts to domesticate, isolate and/or abate his critical-creative spirit without falling prey, nevertheless, to fetishization and adulation. Adopting this double critical attitude with respect to Gibran is more than necessary. Why? As a bilingual writer, or, perhaps more accurately, as an Arab writer in Arabic and in English, Gibran has been subject to divergent modes of reception that mystified his literary legacy and the value of his work in ways that are extremely perplexing and at times disturbing. For how can one reconcile the huge scholarly and literary interest in Gibran in the Arab discursive universe with the dearth of criticism devoted to his work in Anglo-American scholarship, exceptions notwithstanding? What is more, Gibran has been at times disparagingly treated in some pseudo-critical essays on his work in the U.S., which dismiss him, because of the enormous popular appeal of *The Prophet* (1923) since its publication and especially in the New Age movement, as a popular poet whose inauthentic prophecy and Oriental (spiritual) wisdom are signs of his work's "low" cultural status. This profound chasm in literary and cultural reception, which is visible in his name itself – on the one hand, the American and global *Kahlil Gibran*, the

---

[9] Adunis, *al-Thābit wa al-Mutaḥawwil*, 210. [emphasis in the original]

name that was imposed on him at school in the U.S.,[10] and the Arab *Jubrān Khalil Jubrān* on the other – is what initially prompted this research, as I attempted to grapple with the historical, discursive and translational forces in and beyond Gibran and his own writings. It is the bilingual singularity of his text, however, that constitutes the primary, though by no means the sole, focus of my critical reconsideration of the Arab-American poet here.

I, a native speaker of Arabic, encountered Gibran with passion and enthusiasm, as many Arab readers do, early in my life, devouring most of his writings before going to university. One later discovers that the unique lyrical flow of his words and his "rebellious" and liberating spirit consolidated Gibran as a Romantic poet and writer whose canonical status in the Arab literary universe is unshakable, notwithstanding the waning attention to his work in recent years.[11] So when I read him in English I did so with view of him as an Arab writer, and through that implicitly orienting lens, I experienced his English works as an extension of his creativity in Arabic, despite the discernible difference in the mode of writing between his anglophone and Arabic works and, consequently, in the reading experience they engender. This observation is not merely a subjective one; it is meant to accentuate that what is fundamentally at stake here is "language experience,"[12] the unique experience of words in a text as a

---

[10] For a historical account of the Americanization of his name as Kahlil Gibran, see Francesco Medici, "Tracing Gibran's Footsteps: Unpublished and Rare Material," in *Gibran in the 21st Century: Lebanon's Message to the World*, ed. H. Zoghaib and M. Rihani, (Beirut: Centre for Lebanese Heritage, LAU, 2018), 93-145. In this thesis, I shall use the name Kahlil Gibran in order to avoid confusion and make it easy for the non-Arab reader, since this thesis is written in English, to understand whom I am talking about.

[11] This is due to the numerous studies that appeared on Gibran in Arabic on the one hand, and to the rich, varied and enormous body of Arabic literary writing that has emerged since Gibran's demise (1931).

[12] Here, I draw on Ayman A. El-Desouky's emphasis on the irreducible specificity of the Qur'anic *Nazm* or voice as a language experience particular to Arabic and, by extension, on the language experience of non-European literary and theoretical traditions as that which anchors, hermeneutically, "the line of conceptual negotiation of difference in textual traditions and their histories of reception." This leads El-Desouky to propose as "critical method" in world literature the "possibilities of abstracting method from concepts naming specific practices in non-European literary, intellectual and aesthetic traditions," where "untranslatability … is not only *that irreducible of difference* in acts of understanding, translation and circulation that allows for the imaginative [, but] also theorizable as that which allows to emerge, through critical hermeneutical rigour, the conceptual on the other side of Western metaphysics, beginning with *the*

(dis)continuum within a certain language, whose impact, effect and affect are necessarily different from one language to another, and thereby from one literary sphere to another, overlaps, similarities and communalities notwithstanding. From a bilingual point of view, however, my reading experience of Gibran's English writings ineluctably carries the trace of my reading experience of his Arabic works, and it is this invisible and inescapable trace – across one language and culture to another, without privileging one or the other – that I am attempting to understand in this study beyond my subjective experience of it; the subjective here being the locus where the bigger historical, discursive and cultural (trans)formations manifest themselves, but in an *un*exhaustive manner that allows for the possibility of critique, of uncovering and interrogating – in order to lay the ground for the possibility of historically transforming – the unequal or mystified conditions of writing, reading and criticism.

Premise and Argument of the Thesis

This thesis begins with the assumption that Gibran is an Arab writer in his Arabic and English writings, and that it is as an Arab *Mahjari* writer, furthermore, that he becomes an anglophone one, which means that his English work is seen as Arabic literature in English. This is by no means a claim to cultural "authenticity" – that Gibran has become Arab-American is undeniable. Rather, this is an emphasis on the *ethical* necessity of understanding, approaching and probing the bilingual literary enterprise of Gibran without the perils of reductive de-contextualization. More specifically, one of the central critical premises of this study is to avoid "distant" and culturalist readings or domestications that highlight particular readerly experiences and histories of reception in particular and dominant epistemic locations by forgetting what is invisible and

danger in the dialogue." See Ayman A. El-Desouky, "Theorizing the Local and Untranslatability as Comparative Critical Method," in Joachim Küpper, ed. *Approaches to World Literature, Volume 1, WeltLiteraturen/World Literatures Series.* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2013), 59-86. [emphasis in the original]

seemingly untransferable in translation and self-translation, in the travelling from one language to another in the historical and double discursive context in which Gibran's work was produced and received. As my reading and analysis in this study endeavour to demonstrate, Gibran's English writing can be best appreciated, not only as American, but, most importantly, as Arabic literature in English

Gibran, I argue in this thesis, is an Arab, anglophone writer whose multi-faceted literary oeuvre in both languages is marked by a singularity that is irreducible to biographical and culturalist criticism. This singularity, drawing on Derek Attridge, signifies the inexhaustible alterity and creative difference[13] of his bilingual texts that my reading attempts to analyse and do justice to by focusing on their universal and national dimensions, complementary albeit not without tensions. Gibran moves from one language to another *invisibly*,[14] as it were, yet by no means unproblematically as evinced in the history of his work's reception in both the U.S. and the Arab world. While this study, therefore, attempts to critically address this bilingualism and the attendant problematic reception of his work, it crucially sets out to demonstrate and discuss that which is made possible by, through and beyond this bilingualism, namely, the national and the universal in their singular configurations in Gibran's text. The national or the particular and the universal or the poetic[15] in Gibran, I submit, are inter-related and at times complementary, not irreconcilable or mutually exclusive, despite the inevitable tensions between the two.

---

[13] The singularity of a literary work, according to Derek Attridge, consists in the difference or alterity that the invention/creation of the work introduces, that which is at once different, unique and creative in it, the otherness that makes it possible and that it, in turn, introduces. This alterity is ultimately accommodated by the existing culture(s) in a way that alters, however minimally, existing aesthetic and ethical norms. More precisely, this singularity is that "act-event" which "opens new possibilities of meaning and feeling (understood as verbs)," realized or enacted in the creative act of reading, which is obviously, like the invention of the work, historically and culturally situated. See Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004), 59, 63-64.

[14] That is to say, no *métissage*, hybridization or any *visible* foreignization of the same by the other as exercised and privileged in some "postmodern" and "postcolonial" writings and criticism are the case in Gibran.

[15] Gibran, as I show later, correlates poetry with the universal. I explain what I mean by "the universal" in the last part of this introduction (The Conceptual Apparatus).

Put differently, this study is an endeavour to interpret the Gibranian text hospitably and critically, at once enacting and doing justice to its singularity. This is because his bilingual oeuvre is marked and fissured by a bilingual movement that at once enabled the creative possibility of writing in the second language – English – and obscured its textual visibility in (Euro)-America. The aim is to go beyond, while exposing and interrogating, the modes of reading and reception that confined Gibran and his work to specific and reductive categorizations – the prophet of the New Age or the Romantic and sentimentalist poet. This should not be understood as a reclamation of an "authentic" Gibran. Rather, this is an attempt to look at his text afresh by critically foregrounding its universal and national dimensions within its worldly context of emergence and reception, but beyond the biographical and culturalist trends of criticism through which his work has been mostly filtered and understood.

From the point of view of reception, Gibran's literary singularity may be regarded as a discontinuous one. In other words, if we follow Attridge in positing that a literary work is *creative* when it brings into being something other, that is, hitherto un-thought, un-imagined or un-formulated, and becomes *inventive* when it alters the literary sphere in which it is accommodated,[16] then Gibran's work is both creative and inventive in Arabic, while creative and not sufficiently inventive in English, given its tepid reception in American literary criticism despite, or because of, its popular celebration. But if approached as bilingual Arabic literature, or, as I construe it, as Arab world literature, this discontinuity would cease to appear this way, for his English work has been also translated into Arabic (or "Arabized") – and into many other languages – and accommodated as part of its modern literature.[17] While keeping in mind the

---

[16] Attridge, *The Singularity*, 42.
[17] By "world literature," following David Damrosch, is meant any literary work that travelled in the original or translation beyond its linguistic and cultural "origin." Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2004), 5. Gibran's case, however, complicates this definition, because, first, of his bilingualism, that is, the initial enunciation and situatedness of his work in two

importance of Gibran's work as "Arab American," therefore, I read his bilingual text in its multifariousness as "the emergent" that "persistently and repeatedly undermines the definitive tendency of the dominant [in the Arab world and particularly in the U.S.] to appropriate [it],"[18] as a text that remains, as Attridge suggests, "a stranger, even and perhaps especially when the reader knows it intimately,"[19] without losing sight of its worldly situatedness.

The General Approach of the Thesis

Proceeding this way, Gibran is approached in this study as a worldly writer whose texts cannot be dissociated from the modern emergence of "literature" as a relatively autonomous domain[20]; from the transformation of "religion" in modernity and the Arab Nahḍa or Awakening; from the traveling, circulation, domestication and transformation of ideas, concepts and ideologies on a global scale in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; and from the interconnected locations – geographical, symbolic and imaginative – of enunciation and reception that shaped the status of his work and its value in multiple and discordant ways. In other words, Gibran's work cannot be dissociated from what Edward Said calls "the historical experience of empire as a *common* one," the separation between Europeans and non-Europeans notwithstanding.[21] Engaging with the singularity of Gibran's texts by situating them within this nexus *without reducing them to it* is, generally speaking, my method in this thesis. Arriving at this method came after realizing that reading and doing justice to

---

literary and cultural spheres, and, second, the travelling of his work in translation between these two distinct spheres, which are unevenly related in terms of power differentials, and, third, the translation of his work into more than a hundred languages and the reception that ensued, which is beyond the scope of this research.

[18] Gayatri Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 100.

[19] See Attridge, "Innovation, Literature, Ethics: Relating to the Other," *PMLA* 114, no. 1 (January 1999): 26.

[20] See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1973), 299-300; see also, Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, revised ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 183-88.

[21] Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), xxiv. [emphasis added]

Gibran's works as creative products – whatever their limitations – entails attending to them, first, in their literary singularity and, second, as entangled in the constellation of the worldly forces and conditions that made their emergence, inscription and longevity in the world possible.

The worldliness that I am emphasizing, following Said, is inherent to the being of the text itself: "It is not only that any text, if it is not immediately destroyed, is a network of often colliding forces, but also that a text in its actually *being* a text is a being in the world."[22] The text is brought into being and becomes a text in the world – how so is another question that does not so much interest me here – in that it is the reading of it as a published work by multiple subjectivities in one or more cultural locations that makes it possible as a text beyond the control of the author. But what is equally important here are the worldly conditions that make a particular text, a set of texts or an *oeuvre* possible, the historical, discursive and cultural conditions of writing against which writers as agents produce their work, the latter being the manifestation of that which either reinforces and reasserts or reformulates and reworks, with varying degrees that remain open to contestation and negotiation, existing norms, practices and habits of meaning, feeling, sensing, doing and so on. It is the bilingualism of Gibran – his "dwelling"[23] in two linguistic and cultural spheres – at a particular juncture in history that is at once modern, imperial and colonial, in the sense in which these three inter-relate in ways that are not always accounted for in terms of dominant-subordinate structure, and the intriguing (after)-life of his texts in the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty first centuries, that render his case particularly complex and difficult to approach – hence the *discontinuous* singularity. The task is therefore to avoid, as much as possible, any sort of interpretative reductionism, which could be countered by being

---

[22] Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (New York: Vintage, 1982), 33. [emphasis in the original]
[23] "Language is the house of Being. In its home man dwells." See Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," in *Basic Writings*, ed. D. F. Krell (London: Routledge: 1978), 217.

at once hermeneutically careful/hospitable and historically critical when engaging with his texts. Not an easy task, indeed, but one that I hope this study will not divert from in any conspicuous way, unavoidable limitations notwithstanding.

Reading Approach: Two Planes of Analysis

Attending to the singularity of the Gibranian text in its bilingual (in)visibility and in its multifariousness will be carried out by demarcating *planes of analysis* which, however inter-related, should not be confused with one another. This is, of course, in addition to the inevitable thematic division. What I mean by planes of analysis has to do with my approach in this thesis, which consists, I should repeat, of rendering visible the Gibranian text in its necessarily polysemic nature – which is not the same as semantic indeterminacy – by taking into account its worldly situatedness, but without determining its ultimate "value" by subduing it to such discursive or contextual overdeterminations as the East-West cultural(ist) dichotomy or the biography of the author. What is at stake here, however, is *how* one understands these cultural, discursive and biographical elements – or, in short, the "context" – in relation or in their manner of relating to the text and vice versa.[24] We know after Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida that the text has more to say than what its author meant or intended to, that the text always exceeds the author-as-cause. This should not mean, however, that the text becomes the new god, as it were. For the text, as I emphasized earlier, is a being *in the world*. We read it, that is, in the world and in relation to the world, and the more we know about the world(s) in which it is enunciated and received the more enriched our reading becomes, provided that this reading attempts to enact that which is singular in or about this text. What I mean by "world(s)" are the worldly conditions – which

[24] Of course, one cannot completely do away with certain biographical elements, which remain essential to the extent that they are not used as indices to explain (away) certain features in the text. This will be clear when I touch on Gibran's experience of bilingualism in Chapter Two, which I analyse in reference to what he reveals in his letters, but whose textual embodiment exceeds his bilingual experience as an author.

include writing, reading, (re)-appropriation, domestication, foreignization, consecration, valorisation, marginalization – that enabled the emergence of Gibran's texts and, most importantly, occasioned their persistence – conditions that resist any monocultural or monolinguistic understanding. The history and modality of this persistence is very problematic, as indicated in Halim Barakat's critical comments with which I began this introduction. To give another example, *The Prophet* is the most popularly visible of Gibran's books but the least inviting of critical attention, at the expense, at least in the U.S., of his other works in both languages, which suffer both popular and critical attention.[25]

This is why it is crucial to delineate *two planes of analysis*: the first has to do with *what* the literary text says and *how* it does so in connection to its general context of emergence – and, of course, to the actual context of reading – and how it intervenes in it *as a text*; and the second pertains to *the location(s) of and the degree to which* this changing context of enunciation and reception bears on the manner in which the text is or has been read, evaluated and valued. Both planes inevitably overlap, but it is the topical concern that entails the prioritizing of one over the other. Even though my argument would logically require the first plane of analysis, the second will be also crucial when the question of reception is addressed or, at least, is relevant to the discussion. Confusing these two planes, which are distinct but inter-connected, has led, for instance, to the tendency of accounting for the intriguingly popular appeal of *The Prophet* by returning, explicitly or not, to the author-as-cause, whereas Gibran had nothing to do with the huge celebration of the book in the New Age movement and beyond. It is the text that has survived, not its author or any implied authorial intention,

---

[25] "Popular" and "critical" are not mutually exclusive here, as I hope to show in this study.

despite the writer's inventiveness having brought the book into existence.[26] That this thesis is not solely concerned with reading but with particular (problematic) modes of reading/reception and with what they reveal and conceal would lend, I hope, more importance to the way I engage with the texts I purport to read and, more importantly, to the validity and purpose of my own argument.

Selection of Texts

Gibran began his literary career by publishing a long poetic essay in Arabic *al-Mūsīqā* [On Music] (1905), which demonstrates an experimentally audacious use of language marked by lyricism, simplicity and emotionalism. This stylistic uniqueness was combined with a thematic rebellious and anti-authoritarian spirit in his collections of short stories *ʿArāʾis al-Murūj* (1906) [Nymphs of the Valley] and *al-Arwāḥ al-Mutamarrida* (1908) [Spirits Rebellious], as well as in his short novel *al-Ajniḥa al-Mutakassira* (1912) [Broken Wings]. All of these stories are set in Lebanon against a backdrop of ecclesiastical tyranny and social injustice in the face of which his protagonists – like Kahlil the heretic or Yuhanna the mad, mouthpieces of his poet-prophetic activism – hyperbolically revolt and romantically subvert the social order, without reforming or positing an alternative social vision. Despite the occasional didacticism and sentimentality that characterize these writings, as well as their simplicity of plot and characterization, they bumped, by virtue of their unique subjective tone, lyrical flow, vivid imagery and rebellious tenor, a new energy in modern Arabic literature. This first stage of Gibran's writings ends with a publication of a collection of essays and poetic prose, which he wrote for the Arab press over the years preceding the publication, under the title of *Damʿa wa Ibtisāma* [A Tear and a Smile]

---

[26] Attridge speaks about the sense in which readers always assume that behind the words of a work they read there is an author, or someone whose inventiveness has brought into being, or is embodied, in the work, which he calls "authordness," but which he acutely differentiates from the assumption that the meaning or the singularity of the text being read lies in uncovering the intention of its producer. See Attridge, *The Singularity*, 100-03.

(1914). The second and more mature stage begins with the publication of *The Madman: His Parables and Poems* (1918) and *al-ʿAwāṣif* [The Tempests] (1920), a collection of writings across many genres: the essay, the short story, poetic prose and the play. What characterizes these works is an acute sense of social and religious revolt marked by an unmistakable Nietzschean spirit that satirizes and exposes the contradictions inherent in existing norms and moral values, both in the Arab world and in the U.S. Even though the voice of the Romantic Gibran continues to be heard in this stage, especially in *The Forerunner* (1920), *The Prophet* (1923) and *Jesus the Son of Man* (1928), what distinguishes these writings is a (post)-Nietzschean impulse in which Gibran and his poets are thinking in the horizon of thought that Nietzsche's Zarathustra made possible: exposing the nihilism behind certain values which survived by dint of what Gibran calls "the power of continuity,"[27] and re-imagining God, the self and the world, or the universal re-invention of the religious, by way of reclaiming prophetic speech. Furthermore, Gibran wrote many essays and plays for the Arab *Mahjar* press, particularly in the 1910s and the first half of the 1920s, most of which are collected by Antoine al-Qawwal and John Daye.[28] These texts are important because they reveal another crucial facet of Gibran, that of the Arab writer who is committed nationally and civilizationally to the Nahḍa (or Awakening) of the Syrian nation and the Arab East, respectively. The second phase of Gibran's writings and the nationally-civilizationally committed essays and plays will occupy a good deal of my attention in this thesis. This is due, on the one hand, to the relative continuity in the second phase of Gibran's literary writings of the thematic concern which I go on to highlight in Chapter One – the

---

[27] Kahlil Gibran, "al-ʿUbūdiyya" [Slavery] in *al-Majmūʿa al-Kāmila li Muʾallafāt Jubrān Khalīl Jubrān bil-ʿArabiyya* [*The Collected Works in Arabic*] (Lebanon: Kitābuna li al-Nashr, 2014), 215. I will refer to this collection as *CWs in Arabic* whenever I cite anything from it.

[28] See John Daye, *ʿAqīdat Jubrān* [The Doctrine of Gibran] (London: Dār Surāqia, 1988) and *al-Majmūʿa al-Kāmila li Muʾallafāt Jubrān Khalīl Jubrān: Nusūs Khārij Majmūʿa* [The Collected Works of Jubrān Khalil Jubrān: Texts outside the Main Collection], ed. Antoine al-Qawwal (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1994), referred to from now on as *CWs in Arabic O*.

poetic reinvention of the religious – and, on the other hand, to the argument and scope of this thesis, to which the national facet of Gibran's enterprise elicits a critical attention that requires a whole chapter (Chapter Three). Still, the aesthetics of two of Gibran's early pieces of poetic prose will invite close readings in Chapter Two, and I explain why in my delineation of the thesis's outline below.

Essential Points: The Poetic, the Prophetic and the Abrahamic

It is essential to remember that Gibran writes as a poet, even and particularly in his prose. That is to say, it is the poetic – the inventive force by which a language lives and survives[29] – that constitutes the driving force of his writings, beyond the conventional division of genres or of prose and poetry. What is more, poetry is often identified, explicitly or tacitly, with the universal in Gibran, in that the true poet in his text is not only indicative of the "power of invention"[30] in a certain language, but emerges as existentially exiled,[31] necessarily singing and manifesting life as such – what he refers to as "world-consciousness."[32] So the prophetic in his writings is essentially poetic; which is to say that his post-religious prophet, as I show in Chapter One, speaks primarily as a poet. This is a fundamental point that must be underlined time and again, even as far as Gibran's national, critical writings are concerned. In addition, when I speak of the prophetic, I not only refer to the modern Romantic notion of the poet-prophet, but, most importantly, to the Abrahamic as that mythic-discursive condition that allows for the Romantic appropriation of the poet as a prophet, and for Gibran and

---

[29] See Kahlil Gibran, "The Future of the Arabic Language (Excerpt)," trans. Adnan Haydar, in *Tablet & Pen: Literary Landscapes from the Modern Middle East*, ed. Reza Aslan (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2011). 6-11.

[30] Ibid.

[31] In *The Tempests*, he writes, "A Poet am I. I bring together in verse what life scattered in prose, and I strew in lines of prose what life has rendered in verse. Wherefore I shall ever be the stranger, and an exile I shall remain until death snatches me away and whisks me back to my homeland." *Kahlil Gibran: An Illustrated Anthology*, trans., ed. Ayman A. El-Desouky (London: Spruce, 2010), 210.

[32] After meeting Rabindranath Tagore in New York, Gibran wrote to Mary Haskell, "Tagore speaks against nationalism while his work does not show or express a world-consciousness." KG to MH, Jan. 3, 1917, in *Beloved Prophet: The Love Letters of Kahlil Gibran and Mary Haskell*, ed. Virginia Hilu (London: A. Knopf Inc., 1972), 283. Throughout this study, I shall refer to the date of the letter or of Haskell's journal entry whenever I cite a quote from this book.

the *Mahjar* school to embrace the same notion.[33] And since the Abrahamic points to that which simultaneously unites and divides the three monotheistic religions, of which Christianity and Islam are particularly pertinent to Gibran, it precedes and exceeds not only the Romantic embrace of the trope of the poet-prophet, which is marked by the imprint of Islam and Islamic Sufism as far as Gibran and the *Mahjar* Romantic poets are concerned.[34] It also precedes, exceeds and destabilizes the reductive culturalist logic of symbolic geography (East and West). Furthermore, Gibran's case is particularly interesting here, because despite his early profound awareness of Greek mythology, he "wrote no Greek mythological poetry," which means that "[h]e had a clear idea of what he was doing, that is, of the reason he was not writing such poetry."[35] The Greeks, as Maurice Blanchot points out, had not known the *nabis* (prophets)[36]; the prophetic, in other words, is essentially Abrahamic.

Detailed Outline of the Thesis

I begin in Chapter One, "Reinventing the Religious in and against Modernity: The Poet as a Post-religious Prophet," by highlighting what I call the post-religious

---

[33] The influential *Mahjar* literary society, Al-Rābiṭa al-Qalamiyya (The Pen Bond) – which was formed by expatriate Arab writers and poets in the U.S., led by Gibran himself, to rejuvenate Arabic literature – had in the centre of its logotype a hadith (saying) attributed to Prophet Mohammad: "How wonderful the treasures beneath God's throne which poets' tongue can unlock." See Jean Gibran and Kahlil G Gibran, *Kahlil Gibran: His Life and World* (New York: Interlink Books, 1998), 339.

[34] In his remarkable study on Arabic Romantic poetry, Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Hayy writes, "The Christian *émigrés* used it [the Sufi diction] extensively; and, indeed, it was due to them that it reached the degree of aesthetic transformation and poetic transparency that made it part of the language of Arabic romantic poetry." He gives Gibran's poem "Sukūtī Inshād" [my silence is a hymn], which resonates with one of the poems of the Sufi legendary poet Ibn al-Fāriḍ, as an illustrative example. He goes on to stress that "[i]t is this close and vital proximity to the traditional language of Sufism that gives the language of Arabic romantic poetry curves and tones characteristic to it when compared to English romantic poetry. In Arabic, Sufism is not an occult; it is a living tradition." See Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Hayy, *Tradition and English and Romantic Influence in Arabic Romantic Poetry: A Study in Comparative Literature* (London: Ithaca, 1982), 110-11.

[35] ʿAbd al-Hayy adds, "In a letter to Mary Haskell in 1913, he [Gibran] expresses his idea of the difference between the Greeks and the ancient people of the Middle East as far as their artistic creations are concerned. For him, *Greek art is visual, the other is visionary*. *The Greek artist lacked the 'third eye', which the Chaldean or the Phoenician or the Egyptian artist possessed*. Michelangelo's David overpowers Dionysius and Apollo; and Astarte or Isis are certainly more powerful than Venus or Minerva." Ibid., 146. [emphasis added]. See, also, Tawfiq Sayigh, *Aḍwāʾ Jadīda ʿalā Jubrān* [Gibran under New Spotlights] (London: Riad el-Rayyes, 1990), 250-51.

[36] Maurice Blanchot, "Prophetic Speech," in *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 79.

aspect of Gibran's poetic text. I argue that what we see in this text is an attempt to re-invent the religious in – and against – modernity. This re-invention is post-religious in that it resumes the Abrahamic mode of prophetic speech, which is appropriated as a poetic form of writing, while breaking with monotheism's vertical metaphysics of creation and morality and with its after-life eschatology, in short, by de-theologizing it. This poetic reinvention is mediated or enabled, on the one side, by Darwinian evolutionism in its Gibranian metaphysical interpretation – possible mainly after the domestication of Darwinism in the Nahḍa discourse – and, on the other, by the horizon of thought that Nietzsche's Zarathustra opened up. Thus, in the discursive and historical context of modernity (and the Nahḍa) in which religion loses its pre-modern epistemological authority, Gibran attempts to reinvent the religious by *horizontally* re-orienting the transcendental experience; by re-claiming Sufi motifs in post-religious and evolutionist terms; and by positing *the* impossible, the "Greater Self," as the condition of possibility for an alternative, poetic dwelling in the world. I focus in this chapter on Gibran's letters to Mary Haskell and her journals and, more extensively, on many texts from *The Madman*, *al-ʿAwāṣif*, *The Forerunner* and *The Prophet*, as well as his one-act play *Iram Dhāt al-ʿImād* [Iram, the City of Lofty Pillars]. Those letters, *qua* texts, are important because they reveal an endeavour to posit an original evolutionary worldview, which finds its echoes in his poetry. My reading, nevertheless, does not try to find out how this vision is manifested in his poetry. Rather, it sets out to show precisely how his poetic texts *echo* what one finds in those letters, while paying a much-focused attention to what his post-religious, post-Nietzschean poets[37] – his characters – are saying. Those figures – the madman, the forerunner, Almustafa and Āmina al-ʿAlawiyya, in particular – reclaim and re-activate the Abrahamic pre-institutional force of religion as disruption,

[37] *Post*-Nietzschean in the sense that these poets are thinking in the horizon of thought that Nietzsche's Zarathustra made possible.

migration and event – hence the prophetic as Abrahamic – in and against modernity. *In* modernity insofar as it cannot be discursively severed from this modern context and what it enables; and *against* modernity insofar as his poets interrogate its new secular gods, namely, rationalism, calculative reason and identitarianism. The kind of reading I perform in this chapter pertains to the first plane of analysis, as introduced and explained above, that of paying attention to what the text says and how it does so – its singularity – in relation to its general context of enunciation.

While Chapter One endeavours to render visible Gibran's texts from a specific thematic perspective, Chapter Two, "The Bilingual Chasm," tries to render visible Gibran's bilingualism, or what I call the bilingual chasm, partly because it has obscured the visibility of his texts, particularly in the U.S., and partly because it is itself almost invisible. I explore this bilingualism both directly and, mostly, indirectly as it were, that is, by bringing together several, seemingly distinct but arguably interlaced, aspects and specific moments in Gibran's literary and intellectual career. This is to show what is continuous and discontinuous in the shift from one language to another or in the concurrent use of the two, despite the gap, of which Gibran himself was initially cognizant, between his Arabic and English writings. These elements include the aesthetics of his early Arabic writings, of which two pieces of poetic prose are particularly illustrative, and the poetics of the universal in another important one. I highlight these elements to demonstrate that Gibran's switch to English carries the universal and effaces the particular – the aesthetic inventiveness of his Arabic work. This shift is one of uneasy self-translation, as revealed in his letters, and this self-translation is textually manifested in his conscious adoption of the biblical style that bears the trace of the Syriac Bible. I also analyse this shift phenomenologically by arguing that the originary openness or hospitality of that which is foreign to him – English – occasions his inscription into the host(ile) culture that appropriates both the

language and the foreign writer in its own terms. This is where the chasm occurs, where the Orient as Outside becomes the identitarian entity that veils the textuality of his English writings. In this shift, furthermore, I show that writing in the second language depends, for the late bilingual Gibran, on the active preservation of the first, as evinced in his essay "The Future of the Arabic Language" and other late critical writings, that the universal, in other words, is dependent on and indissociable from the particular. Thus, this bilingual chasm creates different and *seemingly* irreconcilable incarnations or functions of Gibran, yet only a close attention to his text, as my reading of his prose poem "My Friend" hopes to illustrate, would render what this (in)visible chasm makes invisible, namely, the text itself: the interpretative horizon of the text that is irreducible to – albeit inseparable from – the writer's identity and the culture of the foreign language he writes in. My discussion in this chapter combines the two planes of analysis that I delineated above, as warranted by the topic itself, but in way that attempts to retain the primacy of the first.

In Chapter three, "Gibran as a Nationalist and (Post)-*Nahḍawī*," I focus on the national and civilizational concern in Gibran's Arabic writings as warranted by, but also beyond, the question of bilingualism. This important facet of Gibran is one that demands a detailed critical examination, as the quest for Syrian nationhood was consonant, for him, with the Nahḍa (Awakening) of both Syria and the Arab East. I show that Gibran's nationalism is imagined and defined *territorially*, that is, it is the territory of Greater Syria as a pre-national, pre-state *waṭan* (homeland or, even, dwelling) that grounds his nationalism, not sect, religion or ethnicity. The *formation* of the Syrian nation, in Gibran, is inextricably bound with *liberation* – from the Ottoman Empire until its collapse, from Western colonialism, but also from what he deems the "maladies of *taqālid* [old customs and traditions] and *taqlīd* [imitation, of the past or the

West]"[38] that, for him, plagued Syria and the Arab East. The specificity of Gibran lies in his wariness of assimilationism into Euro-America as the civilizational telos of history, while clinging to an Eastern originality of *ibtikār* (innovation/creation) seen as *the* pre-requisite of a true Nahḍa, as yet lacking or "dormant" in the Syrian/Eastern subject. He is a (post)-*Nahḍawī*, thus, in the sense that his political and cultural concern pursues that of the Nahḍa, while breaking with some of its intellectual and teleological orientations. The texts with which I am concerned in this chapter include a number of one-act plays and critical essays which he wrote for the Arab press in the 1910s and the early 1920s, some of which were published posthumously. One short story, "The Tempest," will also draw my attention in connection to his stance vis-à-vis modern civilization. My reading highlights the textual intricacies, the recurrent motifs and the significatory paradoxes that mark this Gibranian national/*Nahḍawī* discourse, while locating it within its proper historical and discursive context. The question of the universal and the particular in its relation to this national-civilizational concern will crop up in this context, and my close reading of one his short texts will show how and why. My discussion in this chapter naturally entails the first plane of analysis, since what is at stake here is what the text enunciates as it intervenes in its immediate historical, political and cultural context.

Chapter Four, "Multiple Horizons of Expectations, Multiple Gibran*s*, Or Gibran as World Literature," explores the reception of Gibran's anglophone work both in the U.S. and the Arab world. This is because I take this work to be essentially bilingual, simultaneously but differently belonging, that is, to American and Arabic literatures, which is why I conceive of it as Arab world literature.[39] My critical concern in this chapter is a necessary supplement to Chapter Two, since I probe, in two-thirds of it, the early and later reception of Gibran's English-language books in the U.S., which is

---

[38] This is quoted from a letter that Gibran wrote to Al-Khoury al-Kufuri in 1913, in which he calls for "an enormous intellectual tornado" as the sole remedy to those maladies. See Daye, *ʿAqīdat Jubrān*, 367.

[39] That is, *as* Arabic literature *in English*, enunciated and received in the U.S., his work is also inevitably "American" or "Arab-American."

relevant to the bilingual chasm on which I focus in Chapter Two. I demonstrate that Gibran's books were mostly received as *essentially* and *monolithically* "Oriental" and "spiritual" in the U.S, designations that saturate and flatten his text and pre-determine its value *within* that specific cultural and normative location. I extend my examination and interrogation of this reception, by which I mean the conditions of reading and the horizons of expectations that shaped the status and value of his works, to the problem of *The Prophet* in American literature and culture. Here, I foreground the ways in which cultural translation and exoticism bear on the production of the symbolic value of Gibran's text in America, and how this value-coding has de-contextualized it, obscuring both its polysemy and the visibility of works other than *The Prophet*. Yet since I look at Gibran's anglophone texts as Arabic literature in English, the re-contextualization and "Arabization" of these texts in the Arab cultural geography are no less important, because these same texts have been subject to another regime of value and other conditions of reading, interpretation and valorisation. For reasons of space, I discuss two engagements with Gibran's anglophone text in the Arab world, one theatrical and the other philosophical, both of which are illustrative of a different mode of reading in which Gibran's text is de-exoticized but re-appropriated in Arabic. This movement is important because it disrupts the putative correlation between "English" and "world literature" in the recent rise and consolidation of the concept in Anglo-Saxon academy, one that compels us to de-privilege the Euro-American epistemic location – which means *un*forgetting but *not* privileging other locations – as far as literary and aesthetic valuation is concerned. While my reading in this chapter obviously requires the second plane of analysis – *the location(s) of and the degree to which* the changing context of enunciation and reception bears on the way the text is or has been read and valorised – the significance of what the text says in comparison to specific modes of reception is ineluctably foregrounded.

Review of the Literature

In reviewing the existing critical work on Gibran, I will evidence my argument that the work of Gibran should be read in its singularity, that is, in its bilingual visibility and invisibility as (anglophone) Arabic literature. A great deal has been written on Gibran in Arabic scholarship, and not as much in English. One striking element that straddles both, however, is the emphasis on Gibran's life in a way that makes it indissociable from his writings. In other words, one discerns that some of the most important books on Gibran are biographies, and I should, in this respect, mention Robin Waterfield's *Prophet: The Life and Times of Kahlil Gibran* (1998) and Suheil Bushrui and Joe Jenkins's *Kahlil Gibran: Man and Poet; A New Biography* (1998). Both biographies appeared because of the dearth of "serious" biographical and scholarly works on Gibran in English, and both attempt to do justice to the writer of *The Prophet* by laying bare the development of the personality behind the celebrated book and drawing attention to the fact that he wrote more than a dozen books in both languages.[40] Waterfield appears to be more critical of Gibran than Bushrui and Jenkins, in that he hones in on the psychology of Gibran as an immigrant writer with "multiple personalities"[41] striving for recognition in order to show that his creativity owes its success to his being a "troubled man," who was "crucified" on the dichotomies of "East and West" and "Man and Myth."[42] Waterfield's is a valuable contribution given that he takes pains, while exposing Gibran's troubled personality, to demonstrate the value of his English work – wrongly underestimated, in his assessment – whilst revealing the paucity of critical studies on Gibran in the Anglo-Saxon world. Nevertheless, his

[40] I should draw attention to another important biography, Jean and Kahlil Gibran's *Kahlil Gibran: His Life and World*, first published in 1974, as one of the first critical biographies that appeared on Gibran in English. I do not discuss it here because it is concerned less with Gibran's works than with his life, illuminating many aspects of Gibran the man in detail. I selected the above-mentioned biographies for discussion because they give some critical attention to Gibran's writings, but from the inevitable perspective of biographical criticism with which this thesis breaks.
[41] Robin Waterfield, *Prophet: The Life and Times of Kahlil Gibran* (London: Allan Lane, 1998), 238.
[42] Ibid., 293.

occasional judgmental tone at times dissipates the critical impulse of his biography, with his exaggerated emphasis on Gibran's confession to Mikhail Naimy that he was "a false alarm,"[43] that he did not, that is, practice and what he preached in his writings. But this is, of course, what we should expect in critical biographies, and demystification is a necessary condition if we wish to revisit the work of Gibran with "fresh, uncynical eyes."[44]

Bushrui and Jenkins's biography, however, while also critical, is one that celebrates the Arab *Mahjari* writer. Bushrui has immensely contributed to Gibran's studies in Arabic and specifically in English, and his biography is the acme of his life-long preoccupation with Gibran. The biography traces all the phases of Gibran's life and writing career, finding in Gibran that figure who, despite his ambivalence, reconciled "East" and "West." Inspired by the beauty of his homeland, by the richness of its religious, poetic and philosophical past – from the Christian Bible to the Muslim Qur'an, from Islamic Sufism to classical Arabic poetry – and by the prophetic imagination of Blake and Nietzsche in particular, Gibran, the biographers foreground, is a bilingual writer whose contribution to modern Arabic literature and to American and world literatures must be remembered and valorised. Overemphasized in the biography is the "spiritual" source and value of Gibran's work, which, in a century that witnessed the intensification of the East-West collision and of local, imperial and world wars, remains relevant and important. This importance is testified by the popular celebration of Gibran in the U.S., the Arab world and beyond. One observes, however, despite the breadth and depth of the biography, a tendency to read Gibran's texts via a spiritualist lens that somehow obscures their polysemic textuality, and East and West become poles of cultural and civilizational disparity that are susceptible to encounter, reconciliation

[43] Ibid., 3-5, 147-48, 249.
[44] Ibid., 284.

and bridging, to which the poetic and creative energy of Gibran attests. While acknowledging the immense contribution and value of these two biographies, this thesis departs from reading Gibran's text in direct reference to the life of its "author," or as essentially torn between or bridging East and West, in the attempt to regain the visibility of this text that is overwhelmingly overshadowed by these two reading orientations.

Another significant contribution to the scholarship on Gibran in English is Khalil Hawi's *Kahlil Gibran: His Background, Character and Works* (1972). Hawi shows that Gibran is steeped in what he calls the Christian literary tradition in Lebanon and its role in reviving Arabic literature, a tradition that nevertheless enabled him to develop "a literary style which was quite unprecedented in Arabic."[45] As can be evinced in the title, Hawi's is a biographical and critical study. In his insightful reading of almost all of Gibran's works in Arabic and English, which cogently demonstrates the formative influence of the Romantics and Blake on Gibran and the inventive particularity of his style, Hawi concludes that "it was [his] personal experience which guided him more than anything else,"[46] an experience to which his works ultimately owe their value. As a work of biographical criticism, Hawi's study is invaluable because of its critical impulse which exposed the limitations and biases found in such works of Gibran's friends as Mikhail Naimy's *Kahlil Gibran: A Biography* (1950), written in a fictional fashion unsuited for a biography, and Barbara Young's *This Man from Lebanon* (1956), a hagiography that reveals not so much facts about Gibran as Young's fascination with him.[47] Nevertheless, I depart from Hawi's approach to Gibran's texts as essentially inseparable from the life of their author, and my close reading will evidently produce a different interpretation based on what I see as undeniable connections or recurrent motifs in his work, which I locate in the discursive and historical context of

---

[45] Khalil Hawi, *Kahlil Gibran: His Background, Character and Works* (Beirut: The Arab Institute for Research and Publishing, 1972), 35.
[46] Ibid., 278.
[47] Hawi, "Previous Accounts of his Life," in *Kahlil Gibran*, 67-81.

modernity and the Nahḍa. That the corpus of Gibran's letters which he exchanged with Mary Haskell and the latter's journals were not available to Hawi at the time he conducted his study, I must note, is one major element that makes my reading quite different from his.

As far as the scholarship on Gibran in Arabic is concerned, the first strand of interpretation is one that highlights the bearing of Sufism and Romanticism on the intellectual and aesthetic formation of the *Mahjari* poet and his ability to transform them in his own distinctive way. In *Jubrān fī Athārihi al-Kitābiyya* [Gibran in His Writings] (1969), Rose Ghurayyib casts a focused light on the Romanticism that so profoundly inspired Gibran, with specific reference to Rousseau and the English Romantics, and to Sufism and its fundamental tenets. She concludes that Gibran's doctrine could be described as an "emancipatory mysticism."[48] This Gibranian mysticism is rebellious against rigid traditions and creeds, and does not call, furthermore, for the isolation of oneself in the caverns of asceticism and self-austerity. Along the same line of interpretation, but in a rather comparative fashion, Radwa Ashour's *Gibran and Blake: A Comparative Study* (1978) explores the affinities between Gibran and Blake by emphasizing the influence of the latter on the former and the way Gibran transformed this influence. The latter was possible, Ashour argues, thanks to common sources like the Bible, Platonism, Neo-Platonism, the mystic tradition, as well as a shared fascination with the figure of Jesus. Ashour concludes that Blake was a greater writer than Gibran, in that he had a consistent philosophical outlook and a rich symbolic repertoire that Gibran did not.[49] Nadhir Al-Azmeh also employs a comparative approach in his reading of Gibran's writings "in the light of foreign

---

[48] Rose Ghurayyib, *Jubrān fī Āthārihi al-Kitābīya* (Beirout: Dār El-Makshūf, 1969), 126.
[49] Radwa Ashour, *Gibran and Blake: A Comparative Study* (Cairo: The Associated Institution for the Study and Presentation of Arab Cultural Values, 1978), 117-119.

influences,"[50] probing the Romantic and mystical features of Gibran's work with a special comparative reference to Blake and his notion of madness. As far as Gibran's Sufi leanings, Ghassan Khaled in *Jubrān al-Faylasūf* [Gibran the Philosopher] (1983), while underscoring the influence of Sufism on Gibran's thought, maintains that his belief in the oneness of body and soul diverges from the Sufi notion that the "soul is a divine spiritual torch that descended to be worn by the body."[51] Nadhir Al-Azmeh, on the other hand, argues that Gibran was neither a Sufi nor a philosopher, in that he was a "writer who was subject to his poetical moods and the influences of certain philosophical notions and idealist mystical visions about the world, life and death."[52] While I highlight, especially in Chapter One, the Sufi motifs that permeate Gibran's work, I move beyond questions of influence – be it that of Romanticism or Sufism – in my endeavour to account for Gibran's literary enterprise as a post-religious one, that is, as one that attempts to re-invent the religious in the context of modernity and the Nahḍa, or, more specifically, in the interpretative horizon enabled by Nietzsche and Darwin. In this context, I show that Sufi motifs are re-claimed by Gibran in post-Nietzschean and evolutionist terms.

The other strand of interpretation is one that places Gibran's work under the scrutinizing eye of psychoanalysis and philosophy, of which Ghassan Khaled's *Jubrān al-Faylasūf* [Gibran the Philosopher] (1983) is illustrative.[53] Khaled foregrounds the philosophical nature of Gibran's work and endeavours to piece together what he considers the fragmentary philosophical thought of the *émigré* poet and writer. The

---

[50] Nadhir Al-Azmeh, *Jubrān Khalīl Jubrān fī Ḍawʾ al-Muʾathirāt al-Ajnabīyya: Dirāsa Muqārana* [Gibran in the Light of Foreign Influences: A Comparative Study] (Damascus: Dār Ṭalās, 1987).
[51] Khaled Ghassan, *Jubrān al-Faylasūf* (Beirut: Nawfel, 1983), 330.
[52] Al-Azmeh, *Jubrān*, 230.
[53] Another significant contribution in this regard is Ghazi Fouad Braks' *Jubrān Khalil Jubrān fī Dirāsah Taḥlīliyya - Tarkībiyya li Adabihī wa Rasmihī wa Shakhṣiyyatihī* [Gibran Khalil Gibran: A Study of His Literature, Art and Personality] (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Lubnāni, 2002). Ground-breaking in its approach and analytical rigour, as well as in its focus on Gibran's drawings and paintings, the study is nevertheless one that ultimately ties Gibran's life to his literary and artistic works.

study is original and revealing, depending almost exclusively on Freudian psychoanalysis to elucidate Gibran's adoption of and belief in self-transcendence, unity of being, freedom, rebellion against patriarchy as well as pantheism. Nevertheless, Khaled sometimes reduces the tenets of Gibran's worldview to mere reactions forged by the Oedipus complex's impact upon his character. He argues, furthermore, that Nietzsche had influenced Gibran only insofar as "form" is concerned, particularly in *The Prophet*, a contention that is rather premised on an interpretation of Nietzsche that sees in him nothing more than an anti-moral, nihilist philosopher.[54] A similar stance is also adopted by Stephan Wild in his essay "Nietzsche and Gibran,"[55] in which he argues, more cogently, that the presumed influence of Nietzsche upon Gibran was indirect, because Gibran was neither familiar with German nor cognizant of Nietzsche's works besides *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. My reading, however, will fundamentally diverge from looking at Gibran's encounter with Nietzsche in terms of "influence" or degree of influence, in that it will rather attempt to approach it by underlining Gibran's poetic thinking *with and after* Nietzsche. In this respect, Fethi Meskini's essay in Arabic, "Gibran in front of Nietzsche, or the Arabic Version of Nihilism,"[56] in which he closely reads Gibran's poetic short story "Ḥaffār al-Qubūr" [The Grave Digger] in conjunction with the thought of the German philosopher (in whose work Meskini is well-versed), inspires and partly informs my reading of Gibran's literary enterprise as a post-religious, post-Nietzschean one. The originality and insightfulness of Meskini's essay lie in demonstrating how the *Mahjari* writer's text reveals a fruitful engagement with Nietzsche *in the Arab context*, attested, for instance, by the fact that Gibran's god, unlike the European one, does not die but rather goes mad.[57]

---

[54] Ghassan, *Jubrān*, 281-82.
[55] This essay is published in Suheil Bushrui and Paul Gotch, eds. *Gibran of Lebanon: New Papers* (Beirut: Librairie de Liban, 1975), 59-77.
[56] Fethi Meskini, "Jubrān amāma Nietzsche, aw al-Nuskha al-ʿArabiyya mina al-ʿAdamiyya," in *Falsafat al-Nawābit* [Philosophy of Nawabit] (Beirut: Dār al-Ṭaliʿa, 1997), 33-47.
[57] Ibid., 46-47.

Gibran's work has been also subject to critical examinations in many articles and essays whose focus is largely placed on his metaphysics of transcendence, the development and specificity of his thought and mode of writing as well as the impact of his work. Nadeem Naimy's "Kahlil Gibran: His Poetry and Thought" briefly explores all the works of the *Mahjari* writer by analysing the underlying thought that informs and animates them. Naimy deems this thought "a state of being in poetry," which is different from thought as "a subject matter for the understanding."[58] His essay homes in on the fundamental social and metaphysical alienation of Gibran's character, which is ultimately emblematic of Gibran's "triple longing: a longing for the country of his birth, for a utopic human society of the imagination in which he feels at home, and for a higher world of metaphysical truth."[59] In "Gibran: His Aesthetic, and His Moral Universe," John Walbridge argues that Gibran was primarily a painter in that he wrote the same way he painted. By elaborating on what he calls the "painterly aesthetic" of Gibran's early short stories in particular, Walbridge explains their limitations as far as structure, characterization and plot are concerned. Another crucial argument that Walbridge puts forward is that Gibran's aesthetic is essentially Arabic, not American or English. What he writes is worth quoting at some length here because it dovetails with one of the essential premises of this thesis:

> The style and content of his [Gibran's] English works do not differ noticeably from the 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 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 understood far better than critics.[60]

---

[58] Naimy, "Kahlil Gibran: His Poetry and Thought," in *Gibran of Lebanon*, ed. Bushrui and Gotch, 32.
[59] Naimy, "Kahlil Gibran: His Poetry and Thought," 36.
[60] John Walbridge, "Gibran: His Aesthetic, and His Moral Universe," *Al-Hikamat* 21 (2001): 52. [emphasis added]

In contrast to Walbridge, Eugene Paul Nassar, in his article "Cultural Discontinuity in the Works of Kahlil Gibran," argues that Gibran should be placed more within the Western sphere than within the Eastern wisdom tradition, namely, with the company of Blake, Emerson and Whitman. The crux of his argument lies in regarding Gibran as "a tragic dualist whose exultation is fixed only in the idea of an-ever-upwards-striving human experience,"[61] beneath the lyric expression of which one finds alienation, melancholy and an unrelenting struggle for unity, a human drama of an *émigré*'s talent at home neither in the Arab sphere nor in the American.[62] All of these essays constitute and enact a genuine attempt at understanding and evaluating the works of Gibran in their singularity as literary works. My own study is in a way a continuation of this strand, and although I share Walbridge's argument that Gibran's aesthetic is Arabic in his bilingual works, my reading of his texts underlines the prophetic imagination articulated in them as a poetic reinvention of Abrahamic prophetic speech in the context of modernity, which enables this reinvention, beyond or rather because of Gibran's cultural or bilingual discontinuity, one of the concerns I also highlight and problematize.

As far as the reception of Gibran in the U.S. is concerned, two essayistic engagements must be mentioned and discussed at some length given their direct relevance to one of my central concerns in this thesis – the reception of Gibran's work in the U.S. First, Wail S. Hassan's "The Gibran Phenomenon"[63] is an important contribution. Hassan examines Gibran's status and legacy in the U.S. as an Arab-American "minor" writer with a pivotal emphasis on his role as a "cultural translator," that is, as an interpreter of his own culture to the foreign audience his work addresses.

---

[61] Eugene Pau Nassar, "Cultural Discontinuity in the Works of Kahlil Gibran," *MELUS* 7, no. 2 (Summer, 1980): pages? 24.
[62] Ibid., 35.
[63] Wail S. Hassan, "The Gibran Phenomenon," in *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 59-77.

According to Hassan, Gibran failed at this task because the popularity of his work – *The Prophet* in particular – in a country whose Orientalist discourse denigrates his own culture, boils down to the prophetic posture embraced by Gibran in his English writings. This posture is one that Hassan reduces to the stereotype of the Oriental sage in American Orientalist discourse, but which is nevertheless embraced in a way that raises the Orient out of its inferiority on the Orientalist civilizational scale; in other words, Gibran's is an "anti-Orientalist Orientalism."[64] Although Hassan takes pains to show that Gibran was no cynical manipulator of stereotypes – given his "shift to the prophetic mode" in his late Arabic works[65] – but that he rather gradually acquiesced to the role determined by "Orientalist typology,"[66] he fails to discern, on the one hand, that Gibran's prophetic imagination is a central impulse of his whole enterprise, that is, that *the prophetic* emerges as an essential motif in his early Arabic writings, and that *The Prophet* has *not* been received, on the other hand, as "offensive" by Arab readers (since Hassan supposes that that must have been the case[67]), a point on which I elaborate in the last chapter of this thesis. It is Hassan's emphasis, in his approach, on Orientalist discourse as a political overdetermination in the writings of any Arab-American writer that, in my view, leads him to read Gibran in a way that foregrounds the "phenomenon" of the latter in the U.S. at the expense of his texts, which, in Hassan's dismissive judgement, "do not reward rigorous analysis."[68] My own analysis departs from reading Gibran in these terms, in that it sets out to pay a close attention to his texts in a manner that attends to their very textuality, and in so doing critiques Hassan's approach. At the same time, it partly relies on Said's monumental critique of Orientalism – which I read in a way that is different from Hassan's[69] – in my engagement with Gibran's shift from

---

[64] Ibid., 73.
[65] Ibid., 69.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid., 70.
[68] Ibid., 62.
[69] I discuss this element towards the end of the introduction.

one language to another (Chapter Two) and, especially, in the reception of his work in the U.S. (Chapter Four).[70]

Another significant contribution to the issue of Gibran's reception is Irfan Shahid's "Gibran and the American Literary Canon: The Problem of *The Prophet*."[71] Irfan argues that Gibran has been unfairly left out of the American literary canon. His argument is laid out by presenting what he regards as the legitimate reservations of the American literary establishment vis-à-vis Gibran's work, going on to lay bare their limitations, refuting them and making the case for Gibran's canonization or, at least, inclusion in American literary anthologies. The problem of *The Prophet*, Shahid asserts, resides in its difficult literary categorization, religious tenor, Romantic spirit and uninventive language – if judged within the Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition. By comparing *The Prophet* to the form of Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and the religious spirit of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and by evaluating Gibran's biblical style as unique in its literary deployment, Shahid refutes the arguments usually invoked against *The Prophet.* Another element that Shahid underscores is the American critic's ignorance of Gibran's Arabic writings – hitherto subject to English translations that undermined their aesthetic value – and of the Arab literary heritage without which any understanding of Gibran's work cannot stand. Shahid's contextualization of the problem and his comparative approach are remarkable, yet what is absent in his account is that

---

[70] A similar, more complex argument is put forth by Richard E. Hishmeh. According to Hishmeh, Gibran strategically embraces the essentialist stereotype of the Eastern mystic in the U.S. to "survive" as a minority writer by foregrounding his "cultural uniqueness," while simultaneously situating himself within the Western tradition of the Romantic visionary to resist the dominant discourse. Thus, he is at once strategically essentialist and anti-essentialist. Hishmeh's reading lends visibility to Gibran's English writings and stresses the merits of *The Prophet* that are, by dint of its popularity, unnecessarily dismissed. The absence of any discussion of Gibran's Arabic work and of secondary literature in Arabic, however, makes his reading somewhat monocultural, that is, it privileges the (Euro)-American context and culture in its appraisal of Gibran and his legacy, a gesture I attempt to distance myself from in this thesis. However, Hishmeh's discussion of what he calls "the burden of *The Prophet*" on subsequent Arab-American poets and their negotiation of subjective position vis-à-vis the dominant culture is fruitful and illuminating. See Richard E. Hishmeh, "Strategic Genius, Disidentification, and the Burden of *The Prophet* in Arab-American Poetry," in *Arab Voices in Diaspora, Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature*, ed. Layla Al Maleh (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2009), 93-119.

[71] The essay is published in *Tradition, Modernity and Postmodernity in Arabic Literature*, 321-34.

the logic by which a canon includes and excludes is institutionally grounded and socially and economically mediated in ways that operate implicitly but effectively. More specifically, the problematic cultural status of *The Prophet* as an inspirational book of Oriental, spiritual wisdom in the U.S. and its popular appeal assigned it a "low" symbolic value, which made it illegible for literary consecration and legitimation in the American literary field, as Chapter Four demonstrates by drawing on Pierre Bourdieu.

To finish this survey, I should draw attention to two recent books that shed new light on Gibran's work, one in French and the other in Arabic. First, Boutrus Hallaq's *Gibran et la refondation littéraire Arabe* [Gibran and the Re-modelling of Arabic Literature] (2008) is an important contribution to the modern history of Arabic literature. Its reason for highlighting the work of Gibran as a rupture with the *adab* of the Nahḍa and a new beginning in Arabic literature lies in the entrenched tendency, in Arabic and Arabist scholarship and historiography, of taking literary Realism as *an absolute criterion* in accounting for the birth of the Arabic novel. Hallaq finds no epistemological or normative grounding for the unquestioned privileging of Realism over Romanticism, both of which are equally concerned with the emergence of the individual in modernity, in the historiography of the Arabic novel. Thus, he turns to Gibran in this respect because he was the first to proclaim and practice "the autonomy of literary creation,"[72] in that the literary, for Gibran, is the product of "the imagination" and "the sentiments," that is, of "individual faculties par excellence,"[73] with his novel *al-Ajniḥa al-Mutakassira* as a case in point. Hallaq's study, therefore, proceeds to expound on what he calls the dynamics of the Gibranian literary vision as it manifests itself in its three fundamental aspects: the writing of the self [*écriture du moi*], prophetic writing [*l'écriture prophétique*] and an open trans-generic practice, *transgénérisme*, an

---

[72] Hallaq, *Gibran*, 40-41.
[73] Ibid., 41.

experimental writing in and across many genres. Particularly relevant here is Hallaq's assertion that prophetic writing in Gibran's Arabic text is one whose aim is to reveal man to himself not only in his social condition, but in his "ontological status" and "metaphysical rootedness" as well.[74] If didactic, this mode of writing is distinct from the Nahḍa's in that "it manifests itself in a quest of prophetic time whose fulcrum is the here-and-now."[75] Hallaq cogently demonstrates that these three interconnected modes of writing in Gibran's Arabic works constitute a unique experience of literary creation in the Arab literary field, one that paved the way for further literary developments in the twentieth century. He does not focus, however, on Gibran's anglophone works, which occupy a great deal of attention in this thesis. Yet his reading of Gibran's texts in their literary singularity is something I pursue here, but from a bilingual point of view, and what he calls *l'écriture prophétique* will be further explored and discussed, albeit from a different perspective as I hope to show in Chapter One.

On the other hand, Fatima Qandil's *al-Rāwī al-Shabaḥ: Shiʿriyyat al-Kitāba fī Nuṣūs Jubrān Khalil Jubrān* [The Spectral Narrator: The Poetics of Writing in the Texts of Kahlil Gibran] (2015), another significant contribution to the Gibran studies in Arabic, offers a fresh, critical reading of Gibran's Arabic works. As the title indicates, its main concern is to probe the poetics of writing in the Gibranian text, writing here understood in post-structuralist terms as a manifold texture or tissue, beyond the duality of poetry/prose or the strict division of genres. What emerges, thus, is a textual reading whose multiple "strategies" reveal writing as a space of "silence between language and speech, life and death, a tacit silence, a space of tension and fear …etc."[76] In other words, she is concerned with what the text itself reveals and conceals, with silence in its multiple metaphors in the text and, ultimately, with writing in Gibran's text as "a space

---

[74] Ibid., 43.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Fatima Qandil, *al-Rāwī al-Shabaḥ: Shiʿriyyat al-Kitāba fī Nuṣūs Jubrān Khalil Jubrān* (Cairo: Dār al-ʿAyn li al-Nashr, 2015), 15.

that celebrates the signifier that defers its signified in the attempt to pose questions of the present on the past, and to grasp that instant from which is born the permanence in the movement of texts across time."[77] The significance of this kind of reading is that it severs the text from the author and the biography of the author as "original" semantic points of reference in the construction of the text's meaning. This thesis shares this critical orientation, while its reading is one which is not *strictly* post-structuralist or deconstructive, for reasons I mentioned above.

Gibran, the *Mahjar* School and the Arab Nahḍa

I stressed earlier that one should not approach Gibran as a mad genius who, alone and isolated, revolutionized Arabic literature, despite, or perhaps because of, the singularity of his texts. Further contextual elaborations are therefore warranted here, especially as far as the *Mahjar* school of Arabic literature and the Arab Nahḍa in general are concerned, influential literary and intellectual movements to which I frequently refer – the Nahḍa in particular – in the thesis. Along with other influential writers and poets such as Amin Rihani, Mikhail Naimy and Ilia Abu Madi, Gibran was part of an Arab literary movement in the U.S. that consolidated *al-adab al-mahjari* (immigrant literature) as a crucial episode in the modern experience of Arabic literature. These figures formed in 1920 *al-Rābiṭa al-Qalamiyya* (the Pen Bond), known as Arrabitah, a literary society whose aim was to infuse a new creative spirit in Arabic literature. Gibran was elected the president of Arrabitah and remained so until his demise in 1931. His work, as a *Mahjari* writer, reflects the stance of Arrabitah in its self-conscious literary activity of "breaking with the past," yet this orientation, as Naimy stresses, embodies not so much a complete rupture with "the ancients" – what has become known as *turāth* or heritage – as an interdiction of "imitation":

> For there be some among them [the ancients] who will remain to us and to those who follow a source of inspiration for many ages to come. To revere them is a

[77] Ibid.

> great honour. To imitate them is a deadly shame. For our life, our needs, our circumstances are far different from theirs. We must be true to ourselves if we would be true to our ancestors.[78]

Problems of the present and the past and of how to conceive of the pastness of the past in the present, were thus central concerns for the *Mahjari* movement's call for the rejuvenation and rekindling of creativity in Arabic literature. Crucially, the movement, which was remarkable in its influence on literary expression and decisive in the horizontal change it generated in the Arab literary domain, cannot be dissociated from the Arab Nahḍa or Awakening that had begun in the nineteenth century.

The Nahḍa was essentially a reform movement, institutionally, culturally and economically. Its initiation is usually associated with Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798, even though the so-called "modernization" process had already begun in the reign of Sultan Salim III (1789-1809).[79] The need to reform was fundamental to its articulation as a modernizing process by various thinkers, intellectuals and literati and to its bureaucratic, institutional and educational enaction in the Ottoman Empire, under the immense pressure of imperial Britain and France. The Arab encounter with Europe generated, on the one hand, an intense curiosity in the Western other,[80] seen as advanced scientifically, culturally and civilizationally – "culture" and "civilization" being concepts that emerged in eighteenth century European discourse and deemed, in the nineteenth century, at once universal categories and objects of analysis – and partly produced, on the other, the discursive conditions for Arabism, Arab nationalism and the discourse of revival to emerge and spread (pertinent to my discussion in the Chapter Three). In terms of literary activity, the Nahḍa witnessed the revival (*iḥyāʾ*) of the premodern genres of the *maqāma* (with al-Ibrahim al-Yajizi and Muhammad al-Muwaylihi) and the pastiche (*muʿāraḍa*) of the Abbasid poetry of al-Buhturi and al-

---

[78] Mikhail Naimy, *Kahlil Gibran: A Biography* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1988), 156.
[79] Stephen Sheehi, *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity* (Florida: University of Florida Press, 2003), 4.
[80] The travel narratives of Rifāʿa Rāfiʿ al-Ṭahṭāwī's *Takhlīs Ibrīz fī Talkhīs Pāriz* (1834) and Ahmad Fāris al-Shidyāq's *al-Sāq ʿalā al-Sāq fīma Huwa al-Firyāq* (1855) are illustrative examples.

Mutanabbi (with such important poets as Ahmad Shawqi and Mahmud Sami al-Barudi), both of which signalled, according to Adunis, "a return to the values of the pre-Islamic orality."[81] Putting aside the rise of the modern, now universal, category of "literature" as a putative equivalent, if not the substitution, of the Arab notion of *adab*, the literature of the Nahḍa was essentially reformist and didactic, with a clearly demarcated social function. Hence the rise, for instance, of the social novel with Salim Bustani and the historical novel with Jurji Zaydan. Yet the Nahḍa was premised on the assumption that the now and the recent past are marked by *inḥiṭāt* (decadence), projecting the Abbasid period as a "Golden age" to be resurrected and looking up to the West as the modern incarnation of civilization and progress.[82] This oscillation between the so-called glorious past and the advanced West was reflected in the literary production of the Nahḍa, which nevertheless saw the gradual introduction of literary genres – the play, the essay, the short story and the novel – hitherto alien to Arabic literature or *adab*.[83] My account here is regrettably too schematic and too limited, but the scope of the introduction and of the study itself does not permit me to be more specific here. The contextual importance of the Nahḍa lies in the fact that the *Mahjari* literary movement was, in a very important sense, enabled by and a response to it. Its distinctive Romantic orientation should be partly understood as occasioned by the Nahḍa's rationalist reformist project, which exhibited an infatuation with the West as an advanced scientific civilization whose cultural authority went, most of the time, unquestioned.[84] More pertinent to this study is the fact that Gibran's critical standpoint with respect to the

---

[81] Adunis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics* (London: Saqi Books, 1990), 79.
[82] Sheehi, *Foundations*, 37.
[83] For a reading of the Nahḍa that combines historical materialism with post-structuralist analysis, see Stephen Sheehi, "Towards a Critical Theory of al-Nahdha: Epistemology, Ideology and Capital," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 43, no. 2/3 (2012): 269-98.
[84] Sheehi, *Foundations*, 98-100. The label "Romanticism," however, cannot exhaustively account for this innovative and enabling episode in Arab literary modernity. Some aspects of the writings of the *Mahjaris*, which pertain to the language experience of Arabic and its cultural memory, do not lend themselves to the concept of Romanticism as it is understood in Europe, the influence of the latter on the *Mahjaris* notwithstanding.

Nahḍa, discussed in Chapter Three, enabled him to be creative in ways that were not thinkable in the nineteenth century. As Boutrus Hallaq puts it, "Gibran took a complete rupture with the dynamics of the Nahḍa, all the while proclaiming it in all forms."[85]

Intellectually and philosophically speaking, the Nahḍa witnessed an active movement of travelling ideas and concepts – mostly of European provenance – that were appropriated and hybridized in the Arab cultural discourse.[86] Chief among these concepts are nationalism, Darwinism (especially in its social and metaphysical variations) and socialism.[87] The domestication of Darwinism and nationalism in the Nahḍa are importantly relevant to Gibran's enterprise here, as I show in Chapter One and Three. Essentially literary but broadly national and civilizational in its commitment, thus, the literary school of the *Mahjar* was part and parcel of this history of the Nahḍa, and the work of influential bilingual writers such as Gibran cannot be adequately examined and appreciated in Arabic *or in English* without a cognizance of the Nahḍa's discursive field and the worldly forces that enabled its emergence and what it itself enabled, beyond the polarity of either local agency or foreign presence as instigators. The Nahḍa, that is, is understood as *at once* a local *and* imperial manifestation of modernity beyond Europe. Situating Gibran in this historical-discursive context is a necessary step towards a better understanding of his literary enterprise and its legacy.

The Conceptual Apparatus: Necessary Clarifications

Gibran's peculiarity lies in the fact that he wrote in both Arabic and English, that he wrote, that is, as an Arab writer in English. This bilingual and bicultural feature is often articulated through the frame of the Orient-Occident dichotomy, one which therefore necessitates some critical comments here. This is not the space to discuss this

---

[85] Hallaq, *Gibran*, 31. [translation mine]
[86] See Albert Hourani's classic, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).
[87] See Marwa Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860-1950* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), and Dyala Hamzah, ed. *The Making of the Arab Intellectual (1880-1960): Empire, Public Sphere and the Colonial Coordinates of Selfhood* (London: Routledge, 2013).

problem in detail, yet this identitarian division, which is inseparable from both modernity and Orientalism – themselves indissociable – is crucially pertinent to Gibran and his historical, discursive and imaginative universe. My concern is with *why* and *how*, precisely, this is pertinent here. In the introduction to his highly celebrated and highly controversial book *Orientalism* (1978), Said begins by giving three definitions to Orientalism, the first academic, the second imaginative and the third historical and material. It is the second definition that interests me here:

> *Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident."* Thus a very large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators, have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, "minds," destiny, and so on.[88]

This style of thought, thus, divides the world into two distinct categories of identification, both ontologically and epistemologically. In other words, this style projects trans-historical and unchanging essences onto the identitarian categories in question, and based on this essentialist distinction, knowledge about the other is produced by – and bears on the definition of – the same. But Said's concern is with writers from the Western hemisphere, with, that is, representations of the Orient by Occidental writers. Considering what Said, in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), calls the common experience of empire, what was the impact of this "style of thought" on Arab "Oriental" writers in and after the Nahḍa for instance? In what ways did they react to or interact with it? How did they think about or represent themselves? These questions are beyond the scope of Said's book, whose contours and limitations he clearly demarcates in *Orientalism*'s introduction.[89] They are also beyond the scope of this study. Yet since

---

[88] Said, *Orientalism*, 2-3. [emphasis mine]

[89] I am aware of the several critiques that Said's book elicited, but it is neither my interest nor my aim to go through them here or debate Said's thesis in detail. For a brief and critical overview of these critiques, see Wael Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 5-8. Hallaq's book – or at least part of it – is the most recent engagement with

this issue pertains to Gibran as an Arab Oriental writer in the American Occident, some clarifications need to be made.

While the division of the world into two identitarian – articulated in civilizational and cultural terms – spheres was commonplace and went largely unquestioned in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the distinction between Orient and Occident has not always been an ontological and epistemological one. This is evidenced in the Nahḍa itself and what became known in late nineteenth century as "the Eastern question" [*al-masʾala al-sharqiyya*], which unsurprisingly coincided, as Marwa Elshakry points out, with the pervasiveness of evolutionist thought in the same period, where discourses about "civilization" and progress gained unprecedented currency.[90] In this context, civilizations and cultures were understood as subject to the law of the evolution, which entails that "identity" is a variable, not a stable, entity, the division of "us" and them" notwithstanding. Yet since identity, insofar as it is produced by narratives that define the same in opposition to the other, functions as that which anchors subjectivity in an imagined stability or continuity in changing time and space, it invites less a complex and open than a static understanding of it. And because of the modern, imperial ubiquity of the concepts of "civilization" and "culture,"[91] the identification of the self and the other took on an essentially civilizational and cultural designation. This identification, thus, would pre-determine and constitute subjecthood

Said's *Orientalism*, but one that does not so much focus on the latter as it points to its limitations in order to target what Hallaq calls the larger and "deeper thought structure" of the modern (colonial) project, of which Orientalism is but one manifestation.

[90] "Indeed, for many popularizers [of Darwin in Arabic], evolution was understood as *the* preeminent doctrine of empire (which also helps to explain the later eclipse of Darwin—particularly by Marx—in the age of decolonization). After all, the most intense phase of the debate over Darwin in Arabic coincided precisely with the intensification of the Eastern Question after 1876 and the British occupation of Egypt in 1882. It was at this time that the laws of evolution—from natural selection to the struggle for survival—made their way into discussions of contemporary affairs." Eshakry, *Reading Darwin*, 10.

[91] These concepts emerged and gained currency in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. See Raymond Williams, *Keywords*, 87-93. For a critical engagement that draws on Williams's historicization of "culture" as both a category and an object of analysis and relates it to Orientalism, the colonial juncture and the Arab Nahḍa, see Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 1-5 (especially).

itself; identity, that is, would precede and define the self *a priori*. The problem, however, was that because the Occident was *materially* more advanced than – which was one potent factor that led it to rule territorially and epistemologically over – the Orient, this identification was fundamentally hierarchical and oppositional. Said shows how "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as sort of surrogate and even underground self."[92] What is intriguing, however, is that most of the Arab Oriental writers in the Nahḍa and the post-Nahḍa would refute Orientalist claims about Oriental cultural and civilizational inferiority – European civilization/culture being the normative yardstick here – without questioning the civilizational nature of the distinction and its underpinning epistemology, that is, even if they interrogated or repudiated certain ontological features attributed to the Arab Orient.[93] In other words, the Occident-Orient division of the world was – and is – a modern, imperial phenomenon shared by both "Occidentals" and Arab "Orientals." What is meant by Oriental or Occidental outside Europe, however, complicates the distinction and the way it is employed, which entails closer attention to who uses these entities as identitarian markers, how, why and in what context. The importance of this observation lies in the fact that an Arab Oriental writer in the nineteenth or early twentieth century was an *active* agent in a specific cultural and social milieu, however limited the effectiveness of his/her text on the ground, and not simply the European's "other."

Thus, while Said's critique of Orientalism has laid bare the consequences and dangers of adopting that essentialist style of thought, the persistence of entities like the West and the East, however, indicates the persistence of modern identitarian reason, which confuses inherited and narrated identity with subjecthood. National and/or

---

[92] Said, *Orientalism*, 3.

[93] Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 3-6. See also his discussion of the Arab intellectual debates about "sex" that the Nahḍa spawned, which were mostly framed in civilizational terms, in the chapter "Anxiety in Civilization," 51-98.

civilizational identity is something that emerged in and with modernity, with the scientific, economic and imperial ascendency of Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – Europe taking on the name of "the West" in the nineteenth[94]– and the concurrent colonial conquering of the world, and of what became known, more specifically, as "the Orient." Identitarian reason, thus, cannot be dissociated from the rise of modern forms of knowledge and sovereignty, of which the nation-state is the most powerful institutional incarnation. That it still lends power and persistence to entities like the West and the East, the former obviously more potently consolidated and used in public and academic discourse than the latter – which is now referred to, more or less euphemistically, as "the non-West" or "the global South" – is something we should heed with caution. Despite the globality of the Earth that renders such entities geographically relative or even invalid, their continuance should be critiqued but not easily dismissed, precisely because they are a human invention rather than an inert fact of nature. The West and the East are signifiers whose usage is problematic but, alas, at times unavoidable, which is to say that one should be aware that these loose identitarian poles – which saturate geography with symbolic and imaginative significations – are necessarily marked by semantic instability, despite the fictional homogeneity and opposition that essentialist discourse, whether Orientalist or not, imputes to them. This depends, I should reiterate, on who uses, claims and questions them, and how, why, when and where – that is, on the set of conditions and power relations that underpin

[94] For a brief but remarkable account of the complex history of the idea of the "west" as "heritage and object of study," which "doesn't really emerge until the 1890s, during a heated era of imperialism," see Kwame Anthony Appiah, "There is no such thing as Western Civilisation," *The Guardian*, 9 Nov 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/09/western-civilisation-appiah-reith-lecture

their usage[95] – beyond or because of the fact of their being "an invention,"[96] and this is particularly relevant to my analysis in Chapters Two, Three and Four. It bears reminding, however, that my analysis begins *with the Gibranian text*, not with the Orient-Occident polarity as a starting point of analysis or object of critique. For this text, as I shall attempt to demonstrate, is irreducible to such general entities, and the anti-identitarian impulse that animates it disrupts such vacuous generalities. Yet Gibran could not escape this entrenched identitarian reason, and I also try to show how and why.

A historically critical reading of Arab (anglophone) literature, therefore, should pay attention to the fact that the role and influence of Orientalism as a form of identitarian reason in the modern, imperial juncture on, in particular, "Oriental" subjects, *is necessarily different* from the way it operates in a "postcolonial" one, especially after the publication of Said's *Orientalism* and the institutionalization of postcolonial studies in the Anglo-Saxon academy. This vital historical shift means that one should not be quick in making retrospective historical-critical judgements on Arab, Oriental writers at that particular point in history – which should *not* mean absolving them of criticism – while forgetting the privileged historical and institutional vantage point – post-colonial and post-*Orientalism*, respectively – from which the judgement is made. More specifically, the task is not so much to reduce what they write to culturalist readings that interpret texts through the sole lens of colonial discourse analysis in a retrospectively evaluative or judgmental manner, as *to better understand* what is

[95] Since imperially and materially speaking, the Occident dominated and ruled over the Orient, the meaning and performativity of the latter as an identitarian marker for an Oriental writer or reformer in the Nahḍa, for instance, are not the same for an Occidental or an Orientalist using the same marker to designate or study the other – whether in negative or positive terms. The disparate material and discursive conditions that undergird the way one claims and uses those markers very often determine their semantic and performative content.

[96] I follow Said's insistence, who draws on Vico, that men make and invent their own history, and that the Occident or the Orient, therefore, are "not merely *there*," but are indeed man-made. Said, *Orientalism*, 4-5. [emphasis in the original]

textually produced through, within or beyond Orientalist imagination as we understand it today. For there are so many aesthetic, cultural, political and religious concerns in modern Arabic literature that do not lend themselves to postcolonialist readings.[97] Hence the kind of reading I try to perform in this study, that of attending to the Gibranian text in its bilingual singularity as it intervenes in, and is affected by, its context of emergence and reception, while keeping in mind the modern experience of empire in which "all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogenous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic."[98] My point, to put it differently, is *not* to look at Arab (anglophone) literature, and Gibran's text in particular, from a strictly postcolonial, culturalist lens, which at times runs the risk of falling (unwittingly) into the sort of reductionism that Said himself warned against.[99]

This leads me to foreground the problem "difference" in a modern world in which cultures and traditions are imperially and translationally inter-related, but *unevenly* and *unequally* visible and influential. Hosam Aboul-Ela crucially reminds us that "contemporary Arabic poetry presents a challenge for postcolonial studies, which is far more comfortable with novels, especially ones written in English," and that, most importantly, "non-European poetics raises issues of difference that are not easily understood through the frame of colonialism."[100] This is why I demarcated, earlier, two planes of analysis which, however interconnected, should not be confused with one another. For to start with the awareness of the text's own difference that calls for the reader's ethical responsibility of reading, which consists in attending at once to its own textual alterity/singularity and its worldly situatedness, is not the same as starting with

---

[97] See Mohamed-Salah Omro, "Notes on the Traffic between Theory and Arabic Literature," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43, no. 4 (November 2011): 731-733; and Hosam Aboul-Ela, "Is There an Arab (Yet) in This Field?: Postcolonialism, Comparative Literature, and middle Eastern Horizon of Said's Discourse Analysis," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 56, no. 4 (Winter 2010): 729-750.
[98] Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xxix.
[99] Said, *Orientalism*, 46.
[100] Hosam Aboul-Ela, "Is There an Arab (Yet) in This Field?," 744-45.

an *a priori* notion of cultural difference that interprets/appropriates the text by flattening – unwittingly or not – its own singularity in the name of "context."

It is essential, therefore, to point out that the concept of "the other" in my critical orientation is *primarily* understood as the ontologically universal other whose essence – if there is any – is inaccessible and whose singularity is inexhaustible and inappropriable, and in that sense "transcendental," that is, unobjectifiable and unfixable. This means that the other has an infinite ethical claim on the same as Levinas would say.[101] This notion of otherness precedes, exceeds and therefore resists – as opposed to negating the existence of – the culturally, racially and socially constructed notion of otherness in which the other is another term for the exotic, the inferior, the backward, the barbarian, the colonized, the infidel and so on, which is unfortunately not waning. Textual difference is of course not the same as, though it overlaps with, human and cultural difference, yet both are equally important and relevant to this study. In this respect, I follow Attridge's conception of literature as "the reader's other," which he sharply distinguishes from reader-response criticism. The other, in this conception, is "a relating":

> [I]t is not the text "itself" but my singular and active relation to the particular configuration of possibilities represented by the text that is the site of alterity. However old the text, however familiar to me, it can always strike me with the force of novelty if, by means of a creative reading that strives to respond fully to the singularity of the work in a new time and place, I open myself to its potential challenge. Rather than the familiar model of the literary work as friend and companion, sharing with the reader its secrets, I propose the work as stranger, even and perhaps especially when the reader knows it intimately.[102]

One last thing must be mentioned regarding my theoretical orientation in this thesis. When I refer to identitarian reason, I rely mostly on Fethi Meskini's critique of this modern kind of reason (*naqd al-ʿaql al-hawawī*). According to the Tunisian

[101] See Emmanuel Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 75-87.
[102] Attridge, "Innovation, Literature, Ethics: Relating to the Other," 26.

philosopher, the modern notion of national and cultural "identity," or *al-h**a**wiyya*, displaces the classical ontological notion of *al-h**u**wiyya* or ipseity, as understood in Greek and medieval Arabic philosophy. His critique of identitarian reason is a critique of, on the one side, the modern paradigm of sovereign subjectivity, in which the world turns from a divine "sign" into an "object" for domination by the transcendental subject (that is, modernity as a new form of *monotheism*),[103] and, on the other, of the anthropological/cultural concept of "identity," which generated the post-modern and post-colonial obsession with cultural "authenticity" and identitarian narratives. This obsession with identity, thus, has obscured the fundamental question that must concern the post-Kantian subject everywhere: freedom, or the horizon of a self without/before identity.[104] This critique orients the debate towards a phenomenological probing of ipseity, that is, of the question "who?" that precedes and informs any sense of subjecthood and "identity," from both a classical Arab and post-modern philosophical perspectives.[105] His complex argument has been necessarily simplified for usage here. His philosophical and theoretical work, however, is particularly important here for two reasons. The first is that Meskini is steeped in Arabic literature and philosophy, and Gibran is no exception (I critically highlight Meskini's reading of Gibran's parable "How I became a Madman" in Chapter Four as an instance of reception). The second because he thinks in the horizon of global, contemporary philosophy but from an Arab vantage point, that is, he is thinking universally in Arabic. Thus, philosophizing and theorizing in Arabic for him should interrupt the kind of reason that bears the stamp of symbolic geography, whether "Western" or "Eastern," all the while acknowledging the

---

[103] See Fethi Meskini, *Al-Hawiyya wa al-Ḥurriya: Naḥwa Anwār Jadīda* [Identity and Freedom: Towards a New *Aufklärung*]] (Beirut: Dār Jadāwil, 2011), 208-10.

[104] "Modern philosophy from Hegel to Ricoeur," Meskini argues, "has failed to realize this promise, in that it only displaced the foundation of the self to found a host of [implicit] narratives of identity." Ibid., 12.

[105] See Meskini, *al-Huwiyya wa al-Zamān: Taʾwīlāt Fīnuminulujia li Masʾalat al-Naḥn* [Ipseity and Time: Phenomenological Interpretations of the "We" Question] (Beirut: Dār al-Taliʿa, 2001), 7-12; see also his *al-Hawiyya wa al-Ḥurriya*, 9-19.

particular "hermeneutical situation" of contemporary Arab thought, where "the sources of the self"[106] – the Qur'an, classical poetry and the extremely large repertoire of theological, jurisprudent, philosophical and Sufi heritage – inevitably belong to, and ought to be creatively and universally re-claimed by, the modern Arabs. His critique of identitarian reason, thus, is both a local and universal critique,[107] hence its pertinence here.

The universal, crucially, is understood as that "pluriversal,"[108] global or world horizon of knowing, sensing and believing in which are *shared* various local ways of thinking across the globe, which are inevitably steeped in a certain form of life or tradition. A shared normative multiplicity, thus, not relativism, is the horizon of the universal, which nevertheless always carries a certain contextual, symbolic, perspectival, linguistic …etc. signature.[109] This is the sense in which I use "the universal" in this thesis, especially in relation to the religious, the poetic or the spiritual in Gibran's text. I rely and draw, of course, on various theoretical sources and reflections throughout my work, both Arab and Euro-American, with particular attention to Derrida – whose works on ethical issues such as giving, hospitality and language (as unpossessable) have been instructive and inspiring. I am especially indebted to Meskini, however, and the kind of nuanced thinking that his work displays, in ways that I had not been able to imagine before I embarked on this research project.

---

[106] Meskini adopts this term from Charles Taylor as "quiet substitute" for various, fragile categories like *turāth*, religion, origin, foundation …etc. See his *al-Hawiyya wa al-Ḥurriya*, 21.
[107] I briefly sketch out his critical orientation in the last section of Chapter Four.
[108] See Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, xiv, xxii.
[109] Meskini differentiates between *al-kawnī* and *al-kullī*, both of which translate as "universal" in European languages. *Al-kullī* is the Arab translation of the Greek notion of "to katholou," or the one of science, while *al-kawnī* refers to the normative multiplicity of the universal which is precariously but necessarily shared by humanity. See Meskini, "al-Kawnī wa al-Kullī, aw fī Hashāshat al-Mushtarak," in *al-Hawiyya wa al-Ḥurriya*, 159-76.

Acknowledged Limitations of the Thesis

I should remind my readers that this thesis does not perform an exhaustive reading of Gibran's texts, an aim which is just not possible. As stressed earlier, my reading, for thematic and methodological reasons, is inevitably selective. This selectiveness is also necessitated by the kind of close reading I attempt to perform, which seeks to lend more visibility to the Gibranian text, be it in its poetic, post-religious and post-Nietzschean incarnation – as my interpretative engagement in Chapter One tries to show – or its national and civilizational orientation – as part of Chapter Two as well as Chapter three endeavour to demonstrate. My focus on these two central aspects of Gibran's literary and intellectual enterprise aims to strike a balance between the national and the universal in Gibran, as part of my argument consists in the contention that these concerns do not contradict, but rather complement, each other, but not without issues however, as discussed in Chapter Two and Three. What is left out of the picture is the early Arabic work of Gibran, and particularly his collections of short stories *ʿArāʾis al-Murūj* (1906) and *al-Arwāḥ al-Mutamarrida* (1908), as well as in his short novel *al-Ajniḥa al-Mutakassira* (1912). An engagement with these texts, which received a lot of scholarly attention in the Arab world, would fall outside the scope and concern of this thesis. And since some of the Arabic texts with which I engage in Chapter Three are mostly overlooked or under-studied, highlighting them would lend more significance, I hope, to the argument and aim of the study. Furthermore, Gibran's late works – *Sand and Foam* (1926), *Jesus the Son of Man* (1928), *The Earth Gods* (1931), not to mention the posthumously published books, *The Wanderer* (1932), *The Garden of The Prophet* (1932) and *Lazarus and His Beloved* and *The Blind* (1981) – do not receive much attention in this study, passing references notwithstanding. This is because neither space permits it nor is it my primary concern to pay as much attention to them as I do to earlier works, *The Madman*, *al-ʿAwāṣif*, *The Forerunner* and *The*

Prophet in particular, an attention partly justified by the thematic focus in Chapter One, which I see as a thread that connects those works – *The Prophet* being perhaps the most important in terms of the appeal it has generated and the mixed critical appraisals it has elicited. Also neglected in this thesis is Gibran's art, which consists of numerous drawings and paintings, simply because I do not have the requisite expertise to engage critically with it – and I assume that it merits a separate study. Another limitation is my unavoidable inattention to the reception of Gibran's work outside the Arab world and the U.S., since it has been translated into many languages and received by many other cultures. This is because the American reception occupies a good deal of my analysis in Chapter Four – a problematic reception that warrants such an attention – not to mention the "Arabization" of his anglophone works, which is an essential and overlooked aspect that must be brought to the fore as my argument in Chapter Four entails. I hope that these recognized – and the inevitably unrecognized – limitations would not undermine the argument and the purpose of this thesis, which is ultimately an attempt to offer a fresh, critical and rounded picture of Gibran by making visible that which has been so far kept or rendered invisible by various ways of reading, modes of reception and practices of (e)valuation.

Chapter One:
Reinventing the Religious in and against Modernity: The Poet as a Post-religious Prophet

> Everything still remains open after Nietzsche.
> Paul Ricoeur.[1]

> The prophet is a normative device of an exceptional kind. It is the last of the Abrahamic inventions, after those of Adam, God the Creator, the Created World, the Sacred Books and the Thereafter …etc. This is not merely a question of religion. Rather, it concerns a wide-ranging spiritual apparatus of legislation invented by peoples of the ancient Middle East who were, by virtue of it, transformed into nomadic and open spiritual groups. The descendants of Abraham insist that the normative validity of this apparatus is universalizable, because it is a form of life that remains habitable.
> Fethi Meskini.[2]

"When speech becomes prophetic," writes Maurice Blanchot, "it is not the future that is given, it is the present that is given away, and with it the possibility of a firm, stable, lasting presence."[3] This prophetic speech is essentially Abrahamic. The Abrahamic as a concept names the "unifying and divisive" root of the three monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – without collapsing their marked differences into a monolithic notion of religion.[4] Abraham is the spiritual and pioneering Father to whom each monotheism *differently* traces its origin, "the true *Urmonotheismus.*"[5] What interests me in this chapter is not the Abrahamic *per se*, nor the communalities or differences between the three monotheistic religions, but the prophetic mode of speech as a modern literary trope, in Gibran, that bears the indelible

---

[1] Ricoeur, "Religion, Atheism, and Faith," trans. Charles Freilich, in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 447.
[2] Meskini, "al-Nabiyy al-Mustaḥīl [The Impossible Prophet]," in *al-Īmān al-Ḥurr aw Mā Baʿda al-Milla: Mabāḥith fī Falsafat al-Dīn* [Free Faith, or Post-*Milla*: Studies in the Philosophy of Religion] (Rabat: Mominoun Without Borders, 2018), 395-96. *al-Milla* is not religion, but the theologico-political community based on a certain religion.
[3] Blanchot, "Prophetic Speech," 79.
[4] I use this category, following Carol Bakhos, as a critical alternative to "Western," "elective" and "Semitic" monotheism. The Abrahamic is a modern concept, and it gained academic currency thanks, mainly, to French scholar and Orientalist Louis Massignon in the mid-twentieth century. See Bakhos, *The Family of Abraham: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Interpretations* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014), 1-5.
[5] Ibid., 1.

stamp of the Abrahamic. "The word "prophet" – borrowed from the Greek to designate a condition foreign to Greek culture – would deceive us if it invited us to make the *nabi* the one who speaks the future," Blanchot reminds us.[6] The prophetic, thus, announces an impossible future, but it also, crucially, opens up a space of transcendence arguably unknown to the Greeks: God, the Infinite, Absolute transcendence, the wholly Other, and so on. The literary and philosophical reinvention of this space in modernity, therefore, should not be confused with ideas of the persistence or degeneracy of "the sacred," of desacralization and disenchantment, to which the Abrahamic "holy," as Levinas emphasizes, is irreducible.[7] Gibran, as a post-religious poet, should be understood in this context of Abrahamic prophecy, of the religious, more specifically, as it manifests itself aesthetically in modernity, that is, in a specific historical and worldly context where the religious is not dead, but reinvented.

In this chapter, I set out to address this question of the religious in Gibran. I argue that Gibran reinvents the religious in and against Modernity by espousing an Abrahamic prophetic trope that is de-theologized and aestheticized. More precisely, Gibran's poetic reinvention of the religious dissociates the latter from monotheistic theology, eschatology and morality, while clinging to several Islamic-Sufi concepts by re-claiming and inscribing them in an *evolutionary* worldview. In this worldview, God becomes an ever-evolving force and ceases to be the prime mover and the god of authority and morality. This reinvention is also conditioned by the epistemic force of modernity that rendered obsolete religion's epistemological authority, but not its

---

[6] Blanchot, "Prophetic Speech," 79.

[7] Levinas draws an important distinction between the Abrahamic "holy" and the pagan, ancient or modern, "sacred." The former, linked to "Revelation," to the Absolute and the Infinite as such, cannot be reduced to the "sorcery" of the latter, to "[t]he "other side," the reverse or obverse of the Real, Nothingness condensed to Mystery, bubbles of Nothing in things," in short, to "the desacralization of the sacred," the latter being merely an "image" of the Absolute. For him "a truly desacralized society would be … a society in which the impure stratagem of sorcery, spreading everywhere, bringing the sacred to life rather than alienating it, comes to an end. Real desacralization would attempt positively to separate the true from appearance, maybe even to separate the true from the appearance *essentially* mixed with the true." Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 140-41, 147. [emphasis in the original].

existential, hermeneutical and experiential power and affect.[8] Moreover, Nietzsche's Zarathustra, as a post-religious poet-prophet, provided a horizon for Gibran to think the religious anew in this context of modernity. This is not merely a question of influence – in terms of which the Gibran-Nietzsche relationship has been often discussed – but of the thinking-*with*-Nietzsche that Gibran was able to perform from an Arab vantage point.[9] I am interested in Gibran, therefore, as a post-Nietzschean poet whose literary enterprise consists in annihilating or breaking with certain values and creating or reinventing others. I show that this creative encounter with Nietzsche is one that allowed Gibran to nurture and expand his prophetic imagination *beyond* Nietzsche.

I will start in section one by demonstrating how Gibran re-inscribes certain Sufi motifs in an evolutionary worldview where Life is all there is, "a fascinating cosmology"[10] where everything incessantly evolves. The Sufi notion of desire or longing (*al-shawq* or *al-tashawwuq*), as fundamentally existential and metaphysical, takes centre stage in his re-thinking of God, the self and the world. I show that this re-thinking is discursively and hermeneutically mediated by evolutionism, a mediation occasioned by the domestication of this notion in the Nahḍa discourse. This evolutionism is transformed by Gibran in a strikingly original way. My reading in this section is primarily based on the corpus of letters Gibran exchanged with Mary Haskell and her journals, which are read as texts, and not as biographical data. I then move on, in section two, to discuss how Gibran's post-religious vision, as expounded in the

---

[8] *After* Copernicus, Newton, Kant, Hegel, the Romantics, Nietzsche, Darwin and Freud – to name but a few "founders of discursivity," as Foucault would say – the premodern cosmological worldview in which the three fundamental notions of God, the self and the world were articulated and experienced no longer held sway. This does not mean, of course, that the religious was brushed aside in modernity. The religious, rather, is reinvented, transformed and articulated anew and multifariously within a modern secular space that compels this reinvention, but with no *complete* rupture with the premodern past, now conceived as "mythic." It is important to underscore in this context that under the discursive relative autonomy of what the moderns call "literature," the religious is experienced as at once religious and secular. See Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 8-9.

[9] For an excellent discussion of this encounter from a philosophical perspective, see Meskini, "Gibran in front of Nietzsche, or the Arab Version of Nihilism," in *Falsafat al-Nawābit*, 33-47.

[10] Waterfield, *Prophet*, 190.

letters, manifests itself in his prose poetry. This is not merely an attempt to tease it out, but a discussion that is essentially framed around these two fundamental questions: how does Gibran reimagine God, the self and the world *poetically*? And what does it mean to speak prophetically as a poet in the context of modernity? I demonstrate that the Gibranian post-religious poet – in *The Madman* and "Ḥaffār al-Qubūr" – interrogates the rationalist and calculative order of modern life by embracing a *nocturnal* mode of poetic thinking that aims to destroy or "bury" certain dead values in order to create the possibility of new life. God here is reinvented as a form of horizontal transcendence, as a "mad god" who becomes the thinking horizon in the night of the modern, Arab poet, and as a trace of an Outside that is invoked in order to interrupt modernity's calculative reason. In section three, I extend my discussion in section two by focusing on the prophetic – in *The Forerunner*, *The Prophet* and *Iram Dhāt al-ʿImād* – as that which announces a dwelling in the world that takes *the* impossible, the Greater Self, as its condition of possibility. More specifically, I discuss the forerunner as a mode of beginning without origin; the Mist as a post-religious name of God; faith and freedom as paradoxical movements that are experienced beyond rationalism and attainability, respectively; "religion" as a worldly mode of being; giving as being, or the de-transcendentalizing of ethics; and the spiritual – the "veiled city" of *Iram Dhāt al-ʿImād* – as an ethics of belonging that expands the body's vision *in* and *of* the world beyond place – the modern city or the nation. My reading in this chapter, and the perspective from which it is carried out, aims to show and discuss that which is singular about Gibran's poetic texts in both languages, in a manner that situates them within, and therefore demonstrates their important relevance to, the general context in which they intervene as texts. That Gibran is thinking universally as a bilingual poet in this context is necessarily underlined.

1. Re-imagining God, the Self and the World

By the beginning of World War One, Gibran's own conception of God begins to manifest itself clearly in his letters to Mary Haskell; he writes, "If God the Power, God the force, God the mind, God the subconsciousness of Life, is in all the struggles that take place on this planet, He must be in this war of nations. *He is this war*."[11] To think of God in these terms is to radicalize and repudiate the notion of God as a Perfect Being, even as agape in Christian and Islamic Sufi traditions, the profound bearing of both upon his intellectual formation and work notwithstanding. Gibran speculates that "the *Mind* [God] of this world is not free from its body [the Earth] – and as long as the body is struggling for more life, the mind will go on struggling for more life, more mind. *There is no such thing as struggle for death*."[12] God, the subconsciousness of Life, is not, in this case, separate from Life, as He is the struggle itself. Gibran goes on to assert that "there is nothing on this planet but a struggle for Life," which characterizes "every physical or mental movement, every wave of the sea and every thought or dream."[13] This radical understanding of Life as an eternal struggle renders man "elemental," a part of nature where "the elements declare war on each other,"[14] and this is how Gibran justifies the act of war, conceiving of violence, albeit implicitly, as natural as the struggle for Life itself, and reducing man to a mere element in nature, albeit one whose soul is endowed, unlike the elements, with "the desire for more of itself, hunger for that which is beyond itself."[15] This emphasis on the struggle for Life is an evidently evolutionist notion, and has its echoes in Gibran's Arabic work as I will show.

---

[11] KG to MH, Oct. 14, 1914. [Emphasis in the original]
[12] Ibid. [Emphasis in the original]
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Gibran conceives of the universe as a hierarchy, and man, though below God in this hierarchy, is above Earth and the elements. Yet they are all interconnected in a way, constituting what he calls Life, which signifies all there is.

Situating Gibran within the Nahḍa discourse will help us illuminate this social and metaphysical interpretation of evolutionism. The latter was so prevalent a notion during the Nahḍa that "evolution [for Arab readers of Darwin] was about much more than biology and more even that history: the new universal history for which it provided the blueprint was one with the power to recast the future."[16] In the Nahḍa discourse, thus,

> discussions of religion were also increasingly attached to notions of the evolution of the "idea of God" and assigned a "social function" that could be considered and compared across a universal timeline. The coming of Darwin was thus accompanied by reconceptualizations of the meaning of "religion" itself.[17]

Evolutionism, Marwa Elshakry has shown, gained currency in the Nahḍa thanks largely to *al-Muqtaṭaf*, a popular scientific journal whose role in disseminating European scientific theories and discoveries from 1870s onwards was widely influential. This induced a host of debates and discussions around the interpretation and validity of evolutionism in the Arab East.[18]Shibli Shumayyil, an influential Nahḍa intellectual and one of the pioneering proponents of Darwinism, translates and reflects on evolutionism as *Falsafat al-Nushūʾ wa al-Irtiqāʾ* [Philosophy of Evolution and Progress], the title of one of his books that was published in 1910. Shumayyil's interpretation of evolutionism is strictly materialist, albeit with mystical and pantheistic overtones to it.[19] In a one-act play published by Gibran in *al-Funūn* in 1913 and signed, intriguingly, "One of the Grave-Digger's Disciples,"[20] Shumayyil is included as a character in it. In the play,

---

[16] Elshakry, *Reading Darwin*, 12.
[17] Ibid, 15-16.
[18] "The journal was novel and expensive and attracted contributions from renowned literary and public figures such as Ali Mubarak, Mahmud al-Falaki, Riaz Pasha, Shibli Shumayyil, Salama Musa, and Jurji Zaydan—Egyptian and Syrian intellectuals, technocrats, and politicians. It quickly became a prominent forum for what the historical novelist and popular intellectual Zaydan and others termed *al-nahda al-ʿilmiya* (the renaissance of knowledge or science)." Ibid., 31.
[19] Shumayyil begins his book by citing the twelfth century Sufi-philosopher Ibn Arabi: "See Him in a tree, see Him in a stone, and see Him in everything, that is God." His materialism, thus, was monistic and pantheistic. Ibid., 99.
[20] See Gibran, "Mudāʿaba," in Daye, *ʿAqīdat Jubrān*, 238-42. I discuss the metaphor of the grave digger in section two.

Gibran, Shumayyil, Amin Rihani and Sheikh Iskandar al-ʿAzar (a Lebanese poet), sitting in a café in Lebanon, are discussing a medley of topics that revolve around Darwinism (natural selection), Turner, Keats and Nietzsche – in relation to the nature of religion, poetry and imagination – each of whom represents a particular way that seeks or reveals "truth." This discussion is joined by an ordinary man speaking in the dialect (*al-ʿāmmī*),[21] who ultimately deems himself in a better existential status than they are. What is pertinent to my discussion here is that Gibran, in a response to Shumayyil's espousal of natural selection as a principle of social reality, asserts:

> Your reason, Doctor [in reference to Shumayyil], moves between the teachings of Darwin and the principles of Nietzsche, and I share this conviction with you. However, were Darwin or Nietzsche able to truly demonstrate what is the best or the fittest? For what Nietzsche deems full of will and nobility may actually bring about weakness and abjectness. Who can say with absolute confidence that the distant visions that visit the soul of a Sufi is not one of the elements that nature selects as a mechanism to preserve the fittest and maintain the best? I am a worshipper of Power [*al-quwwa*], but I love all the manifestations of Power, not one of them only.[22]

In "al-Jabābira" [The Giants], furthermore, an Arabic prose piece published in *The Tempests*, Gibran explicitly expresses his belief in evolutionism. He writes:

> I am an advocate of the law of evolution and progress [*sunnat al-nushū' wa al-irtiqā'*], which, to me, applies to both immaterial and material (sensory) living entities, for it transforms religions and nations to the better as much as it transforms all creatures from the fitting to the fittest. Hence, there is only retrogression in appearance and decadence in the superficial.
> The law of evolution has diverse channels that are at bottom unified. Its manifestations, which are adverse, dark and unfair, are repudiated by limited thoughts and renounced by weak hearts. Its invisible force, however, is just and enlightening, for it embraces a right that is higher to the rights of individuals, aims for an end that is loftier than the goal of the group, and listens to a voice that overwhelms, in its immensity and pleasantness, the sighs of the ill-fated and the agonies of the tormented.[23]

---

[21] This is perhaps one of the earlier texts in modern Arabic literature that includes whole passages in the Syrian dialect. Gibran, also, does that in an anecdote entitled "al-Majnūn" [The Madman], who is represented as an old man speaking in the Syrian dialect, published in *al-Sāʾiḥ* periodical (23 September 1918). The anecdote is included in Daye, *Lakum Jubrānukum wa lia Jubrāni* [You Have Your Gibran and I Have Mine] (Beirut: Qub Elias Press, 2009), 338-41. Interestingly, in the same year this anecdote was published, Gibran's first book in English, *The Madman*, was also published.
[22] Daye, *ʿAqīdat Jubrān*, 240.
[23] *CWs in Arabic*, 248.

For Gibran, thus, evolutionism is not only a philosophy but a historical, social and metaphysical law [*sunna*], but the expression itself (*al-nushū' wa al-irtiqā'*) is Shumayyil's. In another context, that of the future of the Arabic language, Gibran asserts that "languages, like everything else, are subject to the law of the survival of the fittest."[24] My contention is that Gibran's espousal of evolutionism *as a law* was the offshoot of the Nahḍa, the Arab manifestation of modernity. In this context, Herbert Spenser was another celebrated figure, and the Spenserian interpretation of evolutionism was embraced to account for what became known as "the Eastern question" [*al-masʾala al-sharqiyya*].[25] Thus, "[c]ivilizational progress—like evolution—was … seen as a law of nature in the age of Darwin and Spencer, and commentators who seemed to offer scientific insights into this process were seized upon by those seeking to promote their particular policies of social reform."[26] Gibran cannot be dissociated from this particular historical and intellectual context.[27] His writings in the Arab press demonstrate that he was acutely aware of the Nahḍa's intellectual and cultural enterprise and actively interacting with it. His re-thinking of God, the self and the world, in Arabic or in English, was therefore *primarily* occasioned by this intellectual context, where evolutionism was at times subject to transcendental interpretations that made it religiously acceptable. What is peculiar about Gibran is that he went as far as re-thinking the idea of God itself, pushing it beyond the confines of orthodox religion. It was, in other words, *his own idea of God*, with all the weight, and perhaps the weakness, that accompanies this reinvention.

Gibran's conception of God as an ever-evolving absolute reflective of all struggles in and for Life is nevertheless tinged with ambiguity. The relationship between God and Life is left unexplained (apart from God being the subconsciousness

---

[24] *CWs in Arabic*, 320.
[25] See Elshakry, "Evolution and the Eastern Question," in *Reading Darwin*, 73-88.
[26] Ibid., 90.
[27] See Chapter Three.

of life in the instance of war), and this organic, and implicit, justification and purification of the violence ensued by wars and struggles reduces man to a passive element in nature who is impotent in face of the will to Life imputed to God. Gibran's encounter with Nietzsche may elucidate this re-imagining of God.[28] Gibran, like Nietzsche, glorifies Life as such, Life as all there is, Life, that is, as Being. As Nietzsche once declared, "Being – we have no idea of it other than 'living'. – How can anything dead be?"[29] Moreover, while Zarathustra despises "the preachers of death,"[30] Gibran hails true poets as preachers of Life:

> The saints and the sages of the past ages were seldom in the presence of the God of this world, because they never gave themselves to life but simply gazed at it. The great poets of the past were always one with Life. They did not seek a point in it nor did they wish to find its secrets. They simply allowed their souls to be governed, moved, played upon by it. The wise man and the good man are always seeking safety – but safety is an end and Life is endless.[31]

In another context, Gibran scorns the desire for peace and the "tiresome, illogical, flat, and insipid" insistence on universal and international Peace. "Why should man speak of Peace when there is much *ill-at-easeness* in his system that *must* go *out* one way or another? Was it not Peace disease that crept into the Oriental nations and caused their downfall?"[32] Gibran was in favour of a Syrian revolution against the Ottoman empire, a disposition that few nationalists advocated at the time. This political context aside, what is interesting here is that Gibran speaks of war in evolutionist terms: "Peace is the desire

---

[28] This encounter is well-known in the Gibran Studies. Gibran once declared to Mikhail Naimy: "What a man [Nietzsche]! What a man! Alone he fought the whole world in the name of his Superman; and though the world forced him out of his reason in the end, yet he did whip it well. He died a Superman among pygmies, a sane madman in the midst of a world too decorously insane to be mad … And What a pen! With one stroke it would create a new world, and with one stroke it would efface old one, the while dripping beauty charm and power." Naimy, *Kahlil Gibran*, 119.

[29] See Martin Heidegger, "What are Poets for?" *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 101.

[30] Fredrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1966), 44-46.

[31] In the same letter, he writes, "Beloved Mary, You and I and all those who are born with a hunger for Life, are not trying to touch the outer edges of other worlds by deep thinking and deep feeling – our sole desire is to discover *this* world and to become with *its* spirit. And the Spirit of this world, though ever changing and ever growing, is the Absolute." KG to MH, July 17, 1915. [emphasis in the original]

[32] KG to MH, May. 16, 1912.

of old age, and the world is still too young to have such a desire. I say, let there be *wars*; let the Children of the Earth fight one another until the last drop of impure, animal blood is shed."[33] He then goes on to stress that "those who *live*, those who know what it is to *be*, those who have knowledge in the Life-in-Death do not preach Peace: *They Preach Life* … There is no Peace in the art of Being."[34] The evolutionist struggle for Life is thus transformed into a Nietzschean, aesthetic affirmation and celebration of Life. God does not die in this picture; rather, "He, the mighty one, is fighting for a mightier self, a clearer self, a self of higher life."[35]

God for Gibran, thus, ceases to be the prime mover, the necessary Being, the God of morality and monotheistic eschatology, the God who simultaneously loves and judges,[36] or the God of what Heidegger calls "onto-theology."[37] Yet this God dies silently in Gibran. And this silent, quiet death – for "when gods die, they die several kinds of death"[38] – gives way to *another* God, an ever-evolving God, an absolute seeking more absolution and crystallization, as he would say. "How many new gods are still possible!" wrote Nietzsche once.[39] This new conception of God gives way to a space of transcendence which is *horizontally* re-imagined, that is, conceived *within*, not beyond, Life. Is such a transcendence possible? Or is Gibran's God an immanent pantheistic God whose immanence is Life itself? How does Gibran conceive of the human self after the silent death of the transcendent god of morality? And what kind of temporality is possible after the silent death of this transcendent god of monotheistic eschatology and messianism? To begin with, Gibran tackles the absence of eschatology

---

[33] Ibid. [Emphasis in the original]
[34] Ibid. [Emphasis in the original]
[35] KG to MH, Oct. 14, 1914.
[36] "Whoever praises him as a god of love does not have a high enough opinion of love itself. Did this god not want to be a judge too? But the lover beyond reward and retribution." Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 261.
[37] See Mark A. Wrathall, "Introduction: Metaphysics and Onto-theology," in *Religion after Metaphysics*, ed. Mark A. Wrathall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1-3.
[38] Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 261.
[39] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage books, 1967), 534.

by embracing reincarnation.[40] His concept of the human is not that of the finite being, but of the being whose existence is infinite by virtue of reincarnation. The latter can be thought of in terms of ontological *and* narrative return (as in the figure of the prophet). In the Abrahamic monotheisms, death does not designate finitude; it is a passage, a step, a bridge to the afterlife. This conception of death as passage is the crux of the notion of reincarnation too, espoused by Gibran after breaking, quietly, with the Abrahamic notion of the after-world.

In an important letter to Mary Haskell, Gibran posits his new perception of God:

> God is not the creator of man. God is not the creator of the earth. God is not the ruler of man nor of earth. God desires man and earth to be like Him, and a part of Him. God is growing through His desire, and man and earth, and all there is upon the earth, rise towards God by the power of desire. And desire is the inherent power that changes all things. It is the law of all matter and all life.[41]

The universe of Gibran, where Life is all there is, is hierarchical. Every element in this hierarchy strives for what is higher than it. Which means that pantheism is not the proper qualifier for this cosmology. By conceiving of God as a desiring force, a force that grows by virtue of desire and to which the lower elements, including the soul, rise, or *long* to rise, by virtue of the same power of desire, Gibran reinvents the Sufi notion of longing or *al-shawq* by inscribing it in an evolutionary cosmology. Desire/longing, thus, comes to assume a fundamental ontological importance in a cosmology in which all the elements are willy-nilly evolving. It becomes “the law of all matter and all life.” This desire is not born out of lack or need; it is an originary ontological force. In this worldview, there is no transcendent realm beyond Life, but this does not mean that there is no transcendental experience. For God, being the higher and most refined element in

---

[40] For more on Gibran’s belief in reincarnation and the possible Durzi, Sufi and Christian sources that might have influenced him, see Bushrui and Jenkins, *Kahlil Gibran: Man and Poet*, 76-78

[41] KG to MH, Jan. 30, 1916.

this universe, "the furthest form of life,"[42] is reinvented as a Beyond *within* Being, as it were. How does this understanding of God bear upon the notion of the human self?

The soul is, for Gibran, compared to God, "a newly developed element in Nature,"[43] a refined form of matter whose inherent properties – for it has its own inherent properties like other elements in nature – are "the desire for more of itself" and "the hunger for that which is beyond itself"[44]; Gibran sums up these properties in one word: consciousness. Other equally significant properties of the soul include "the power … and the desire to seek" God, "even as heat seeks height or water seeks the sea."[45] Thus, a primordial and impersonal metaphysical desire is attributed to the soul – and this impersonality is an essential element in Gibran's worldview – for "it [the soul] never loses its path, anymore than water runs upwards."[46] Gibran articulates this constitutive impersonality as follows: "That which is more than we think and know is always seeking and adding to itself while we are doing nothing – or think we are doing nothing."[47] Furthermore, echoing the Sufi highest stations of annihilation, *fanā*ʾ, and persistence (or subsistence), *baqā*ʾ, in God (the ultimate Desirer), "the soul," speculates Gibran, "never loses its inherent properties when it reaches God. Salt does not lose its saltness in the sea; its properties are inherent and eternal."[48] Although the potentiality of the soul to "be in God" is attainable, it does not mean that the soul becomes God; it becomes *in* God, annihilates in His Infinity, while retaining its above-mentioned properties, persisting in God, as in Sufism.[49] This insight resonates with the distinction

---

[42] "Some believe God made the world. To me it seems more likely that God has grown from the world because He is the furthest form of Life. Of course, the possibility of God was present before God himself." MH journal, Apr. 18, 1920.
[43] KG to MH, Feb. 10, 1916.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.
[47] KG to MH, Mar. 1. 1916.
[48] KG to MH, Feb. 10, 1916.
[49] "Inasmuch as human beings are not He, they are annihilated, and inasmuch as human beings are He, they subsist." William Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 89.

that al-Ḥallaj, the famous Sufi poet, also known as the Martyr of Divine Love, makes between *nāsut*, human nature, and *lāhut*, the Divine. As Reynold Alleyne Nicholson remarks, "though mystically united, they [*nāsut* and *lāhut*] are not essentially identical and interchangeable. Personality survives even in union: water does not become wine, though wine be mixed with it."[50]

For Gibran, however, "the absolute seeks more absoluteness, more crystallization," and "God too is growing and seeking and crystallizing,"[51] whereas God in Islam and Islamic Sufism is the Perfect Being, that which, in His incomparability, is beyond conceptualization, the unknowable essence, Being as such. Apart from that, Gibran asserts that "we cannot fully understand the nature of God because we are *not* God, but we can make ready our consciousness to understand, and grow through, the visible expressions of God."[52] This is, in other words, an understanding of God as *both* immanence *and* transcendence, which echoes the Sufi philosophy of Ibn Arabi in which God is He/not He. As William C. Chittick explains: ""Where can I find God?" Wherever He is present, which is everywhere, since all things are His acts. But no act is identical with God, who encompasses all things and all acts, all worlds and all presences. Though he can be found everywhere, He is also nowhere to be found. He/not He."[53]

The acts and attributes of God in Islamic Sufism, that is, God in His similarity and knowability, turn into the visible expressions of God in Gibran. But God as such, as an essence, remains inaccessible and beyond conceptualization. If Gibran abstains from

---

[50] See Reynold Alleyne Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921), 81.
[51] KG to MH, Feb. 10, 1916.
[52] KG to MH, Jan. 6, 1916. [emphasis in the original]
[53] Chittick, *Ibn Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination: The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 6.

speaking of God as such[54] – "because we are *not* God"[55] – then his statement that "God is everything and everywhere"[56] is best interpreted, in his own words, as "the visual expressions of God," that is to say, God as not He. Gibran, however, is not interested in *creatio ex nihilo*, nor is he concerned with God as He, that is, with the transcendent essence of God who is Being itself. Breaking with the narrative of God as Father and Creator, Gibran re-thinks God's transcendence horizontally and temporally, that is, as *the* impossible horizon – not non-possible, but that which is possible, paradoxically, precisely in its unattainability – of being *as* becoming. Put differently, God as such is temporally reinvented as the impossible future of the human self, the "Greater Self" that comes to us from the future, not from above. No longer spatially imagined or locatable, except for his immanence, God *as such* is no longer the transcendent vertical Being who loves and commands obedience from above, a point to which I shall return in my discussion of Gibran's prose poem "God" in the next section.

In Gibran's worldview, thus, there is no authority of a Supreme Being over the cosmos or beings; "God and the universe are two universes occupying the same space. They are but one universe."[57] In this cosmology, desire constitutes the primordial impetus or determinant of the way in which every element (from low to high) grows and evolves. The soul is the highest form of matter, endowed with this intrinsic craving to reach God, and God is the furthest form of Life, who wants man and the earth to become like Him and a part of Him. These speculations, however, are not elaborated on, but one can discern a genuine and assiduous endeavour to reinvent God and the human self without a radical transcendence at once separating and bonding them. There can be

---

[54] "God can't be demonstrated. I never tried to prove His existence. The idea of God is different in every man, and one can never give another his own religion." MH Journal, Sept. 14, 1920.
[55] In *The Garden of the Prophet*, he writes, "it were wiser to speak less of God, whom we cannot understand, and more of each other, whom we may understand. Yet I would have you know that we are the breath and the fragrance of God. We are God, in leaf, in flower, and oftentimes in fruit." Gibran, *The Collected Works* (New York: Everyman's Library, 2007), 540.
[56] MH Journal 26 and 28 Dec 1922.
[57] MH Journal, May. 22, 1920.

no radical transcendence if Life is all there is; transcendence, rather, becomes horizontal and temporal. While Gibran reconfigures Sufi-Islamic concepts by re-appropriating them in a reinvented, evolutionist fashion, his vision of God, the self and the world breaks with the fundamental pillars of Abrahamic monotheism: God as Prime Mover, as Creator and/or as a Father, eschatology and the transcendental discourses of values, of good and evil and of reward and punishment. His conception that perfection is limitation led him to purge God of any conceptual and ontological perfection, espousing, instead, an evolutionist notion of God who becomes at once the utmost *temporal* (im)possibility of the human self to dwell anew in this world and the immanent God who manifests himself everywhere *spatially*. Even more radical is the notion of the soul as the highest form of matter, which is part of Gibran's own version of the Unity of Being/Life, where all the old dualities, such as body/soul, mind/matter, immanence/transcendence, are radically, and at times loosely, rethought and reconciled, albeit not completely abolished.

My attempt to piece together a certain *Weltanschauung* out of Gibran's fragments of thought is an interpretative, not a strictly philosophical or religious, one. Gibran never endeavoured to put together a coherent picture of it. Yet, as discussed above, some elements in this worldview are evidently recurrent and bespeak an attempt to forge an original vision, however limited or conceptually undeveloped. What is crucial to my discussion here is that this evolutionist vision reconfigures some Sufi existential concepts – metaphysical longing/desire, the interplay of *fanāʾ* (annihilation) and *baqāʾ* (subsistence) and, as I shall later demonstrate, being as giving – in a modern context where religion and the fundamental notions of God, the self and the world were undergoing a radical transformation. Gibran's literary enterprise should be situated in this context of modernity as a whole and the Arab Nahḍa in particular. His poetic prose, poems and parables, both in Arabic and English, are not merely symbolic and mystical.

There is a vision that underpins and informs his writings and a worldly context of travelling ideas and concepts within which it ought to be located. To this literary output I now turn.

2. The Poet as a Post-religious Prophet in the Modern Times

How does Gibran re-imagine God, the self and the world poetically? What does it mean to speak prophetically as a poet in the context of modernity? And why poetry as that which articulates the prophetic? Let us begin with "God," a prose poem published in *The Madman*, in which Gibran speaks of God as neither Creator nor Father, echoing his afore-mentioned speculations. In the poem, the speaker tells us that when he "ascended the holy mountain and spoke unto God, saying, "Master, I am thy slave. Thy hidden will is my law and I shall obey thee for ever more," God made no answer. And God made no answer when, a thousand years later, the speaker ascended the mountain calling unto God, "Creator, I am thy creation. Out of clay thou fashioned me and to thee I owe mine all." Still God made no answer when, after another thousand years, the speaker called unto him, saying, "Father, I am thy son. In pity and love thou hast given me birth, and through love and worship I shall inherit thy kingdom."[58] In other words, God as Master, Creator and Father has died, and this death, to reiterate what I said in the previous section, is a quiet, silent death. A noiseless death: God simply made no answer. What dies in Gibran is the conception of God as Creator and Father, not God as such. More precisely, what dies is the consciousness of God as Creator and Father *inside* the speaker, in the mind of the speaker, in the history of the speaker as a human self (let us remember that this speaker is the madman, this post-religious poet who takes it upon himself to reinvent his own notion of God). Yet this death is implicit, not even announced or spoken about but only hinted at, for God simply made no answer. What dies is the past of God, the history of God as Creator, Father, Master, Commander, the

[58] *CWs*, 6.

god of love, pity and worship. Which means that the speaker is no longer the "slave," the "creation" and the "son" of God; what is more, the intimation here is that he has never been, for all this transpired "in the ancient days, when the quiver of speech came to [his] lips."[59] The poem, however, written against the backdrop of the specific worldly and historical context of modernity, is an attempt to re-write a certain past from the standpoint of the present of its emergence, where the fundamental notions of God, the self and the world were being radically questioned/transformed. In this context, the poet is re-inventing his own God, that is, his own values, by quietly destroying the Master-slave, Creator-created, Father-son relational structure. What kind of structure does this relationship take then?

That a certain notion and history of God die in Gibran means that he was not merely "influenced" by Nietzsche but was thinking with and "after" Nietzsche, in that he was writing poetically in the horizon of thought that Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* opened up: the radical rethinking of the religious by way of reclaiming its prophetic mode of speech. In other words, he was, as a poet, *thinking with*, not reacting to, appropriating or instrumentalizing Nietzsche. Towards the end of the poem, the speaker tells us that he climbed the mountain again, this time uttering the following words: "My God, my aim and my fulfilment; I am thy yesterday and thou art my tomorrow. I am thy root in the earth and thou art my flower in the sky, and together we grow before the face of the sun." It is only then that "God leaned over [him], and in [his] ears whispered words of sweetness, and even as the sea that enfoldeth a brook that runneth down to her, he enfolded [him]."[60] Purged of absolute authority and of radical and vertical transcendence, God no longer signifies a divine Fatherhood nor is He, for Gibran, a divine Creator. Rather, God is one's tomorrow insofar as one is God's yesterday: this is

[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.

the form that one's relationship with God now takes. As one's "aim and fulfilment," that is, one's Beyond, God names the future *as a form of horizontal transcendence* that is temporally (un)fulfillable. *Coming* from the future, *becoming* the impossible future, "a future never future enough" to borrow a phrase from Levinas,[61] God as such is reinvented as a transcendental condition of being *qua* becoming for the human self. After Nietzsche and Darwin – or a certain interpretative horizon that Nietzsche and Darwin made possible – Gibran re-imagines God as an ever-evolving desiring force the mystical yearning for which has not died. Rather, this mystical yearning, finding its roots in Sufi embodied concept of *al-shawq,* is re-invented in a post-religious fashion. This God, furthermore, is not only horizontally transcendent, but spatially immanent as well: "And when I descended to the valleys and the plains," the speaker tells us, "God was there *also*."[62] This "also" means that God is *both* the tomorrow of the human self – God as a horizontal form of transcendence – *and* that which is "there," that is, everywhere – God as a "visual expression," Gibran would say, God as immanence.

The madman, who announces this new relationship with God, is one of many other figures in whose name Gibran's prophetic imagination is articulated. The madman, the forerunner, Almustafa (the prophet) and Āmina (the principal Sufi character of his one-act play *Iram Dhāt al-ʿImād*) are Abrahamic post-religious figures who name and reclaim the radicality of religion in its fundamental and pre-institutional sense of rupture, migration and event. In reclaiming this Abrahamic heritage of prophecy in a modern context, these figures name the (im)possibility of repeating "religion without religion,"[63] as it were, of religion without any theological foundation.

---

[61] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingiss (The Hague; London: Nijhoff, 1979), 254.
[62] *CWs*, 6. [Emphasis added]
[63] That is to say, "a thought-provoking genealogy of the possibility and essence of the religious that doesn't amount to an article of faith… a non-dogmatic doublet of dogma…" Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death & Literature in Secret*, trans. David Wills (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 50.

As my discussion below demonstrates, religion here is restated as a disruptive force that seeks to demolish the new idols or masks of modernity. Speaking *in the name of* these prophetic figures, who *name* an Abrahamic ethical horizon whose universal validity has not been exhausted,[64] Gibran rejuvenates the prophetic as a powerful poetic and aesthetic motif through which the religious and the ethical are radically re-thought in and against modernity.

The madman, residing "outside" the predominant modes of reason, morality, identity and value – for the prophetic speaks always from an Outside[65] – begins his discourse by relating to us how he became a madman: one day he wakes up to find out that all his masks, the self-fashioned masks he wore in the past seven lives, were stolen. Walking around the crowded streets and looking for the thieves who stole his masks, he is identified by "a youth standing in a house-top" as a madman. As soon as he looks up, however, "the sun kiss[es] [his] own naked face for the first time."[66] Thus, he discovers the nakedness of his face for the first time. Thus he becomes a madman, in that he discovers the capacity to belong to himself without any veiling masks, the capacity to *reside* and *be* "outside" the reigning social institutions of reason and identity: madness as event.[67] This event is tantamount to what the Sufis call *kashf* (disclosure) or "unconcealment" in the Heideggerian sense of truth as *aletheia.*[68] This event of madness, the discovery of the face that exists beneath and beyond all identitarian and normative veils, epitomises Gibran's predominant concern in *The Madman*: belonging to oneself with no prior identifications or designations. In this respect, the "Seventh

---

[64] Meskini, *al-Īmān al-Ḥurr*, 204.
[65] Blanchot, "Prophetic Speech," 79-80.
[66] *CWs*, 5.
[67] See my discussion of Meskini's insightful reading of the parable in section three of Chapter Four.
[68] This is the ancient Greek word on whose etymology Heidegger draws in his re-thinking of the concept of "truth" as "unconcealement." See Heidegger, "On the Essence of Truth," in *Pathmarks*, ed. William MacNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 146.

Self" of the madman, reacting against his other six selves that wish to rebel against him with a pre-conceived intention and purpose, declares:

> How strange that you all would rebel against this man, because each and every one of you has *a pre-ordained fate to fulfil*. Ah! could I be but one of you, *a self with a determined lot*! But I have none, I am the do-nothing self, the one who sits in the dumb, empty nowhere and nowhen, while you are busy re-creating life. Is it you or I, neighbours, who should rebel?[69]

No wonder that the second piece in *The Madman* is the one in which God is re-imagined beyond the vertical metaphysics of creation, fatherhood and morality. For only a madman, speaking "in the ancient days" and "before many gods were born," could intervene from the "outside" of history, as it were, from below or behind the history of the gods of morality, authority and value, to announce the arrival of his own God. Retrieving and resuscitating the prophetic as a mode of poetic and ethical intervention, this madman is what Fethi Meskini would call an "impossible believer," "the *other* believer who reinvents the notion of God from within and does not consume it from without, nor does s/he borrow it from anyone."[70] The madman, furthermore, is one who laughingly buries his "dead selves,"[71] and this grave-digging, which is a recurring metaphor in Gibran, is the pre-requisite condition to overcome the history and concept of "man" – as Nietzsche would say – and create new values.

This metaphor of grave-digging is usually coupled with the metaphors of the night and the tempest, all of which are used by Gibran to designate or announce a new mode of thinking, being and dwelling in the world. It is as a poet that Gibran thinks, as a post-religious poet for whom the poetic is synonymous with the creative. The creative here is understood in the fundamental sense of (self)-creation beyond poetry as an aesthetic form.[72] This radical poetic thinking usually takes place in the night, the night

---

[69] "The Seven Selves," *CWs*. 14-15. [emphasis mine]
[70] Meskini, *al-Īmān al-Ḥurr*, 204. [emphasis mine]
[71] "The Grave Digger," *CWs*, 27.
[72] See "Mustaqbal al-Lugha al-ʿArabiyya [The Future of the Arabic Language]," *in CWs in Arabic*, 317-22.

which becomes thought's condition of possibility and the enabling nothingness where the "ghost of the mad god" becomes the thinking horizon of the poet.[73] This is the gist of Gibran's short story "the Grave Digger." In it, the poet is walking alone at night, "in the valley of life's shadow that is lined up with bones and skulls." Whilst standing "on the banks of the river of blood and tears which flows like a speckled serpent …, gazing at the nothingness," the poet is suddenly visited by "a giant, august ghost."[74] Frightened, the poet shouts, "what do you want from me?" Whereupon the ghost declares that he wants nothing and everything from the poet, that he is "aloneness itself" and that which the poet fears and fears to fear, a "double fear,"[75] that is, that the poet must confront and overcome in order to think. What emerges here is a dialogue between the poet and the ghost that essentially revolves around the poet's name, his job, his marital status and his religion. It is the discourse of the giant ghost that makes "the Grave Digger" such a powerful piece and a pioneering reflection "through and against nihilism" in modern Arab thought.[76] The ghost begins by unravelling what lies beneath the name of the poet, "Abdallah" (God's servant). The poet says that this name was given to him by his father, to which the ghost responds, "The misfortune of children lies in the gifts of their parents, and those who do not deprive themselves from the gifts of their parents and ancestors remain slaves to the dead until they die."[77] The ghost, in other words, is laying bare that which is concealed by the act of naming itself: the metaphysics of the name

---

[73] *CWs in Arabic*, 210-13. See also his poem "al-Jabbār al-Riʾbāl" [The Lonely Giant], written in a classical metric form, but with a distinct rhyme for each couplet of verses. This giant is another version of the mad god of "The Grave Digger": he is "the shadow of destiny," "the terrifying death," "the secret that sways between body and soul," Love itself and, most importantly, the elusive reflection of the poet himself: "Concealed, he said: You are I, so do not ask the earth about me or the sky/ And should you wish to know who am I, keep your eyes upon the mirror day and night," declares the giant to the poet before disappearing, leaving the poet's thought wandering in the night. Ibid., 345-46.
[74] Ibid., 210.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Meskini, *Falsafat al-Nawābit*, 36. Meskini talks about the Arab *thinker*, not the poet, as far as "The Grave Digger" is concerned. His reading, *a la* Heidegger, is a philosophical reflection that takes poetry as that which can open and expand thought's horizon. For him, the ghost or the mad god is the utmost condition of thought itself. My reading, however, places premium on the poet insofar as s/he is a thinking poet, for the poet is one who is relating this short allegorical story to us.
[77] *CWs in Arabic*, 210.

that absents the named, the poet himself, by perpetuating the presence of the absent and absenting name, which implicitly bears the father's heritage.[78] The possibility of life itself, thus, is predicated on the will and courage to say "No" to the father's gift, a gift that creates and necessitates, whether the child is aware of it or not, a feeling of indebtedness to the father, a gift that perpetuates the values of the father and thereby obscures the creative "Yes" of the child.

The ghost, then, goes on to devalue the poet's "job," which consists in writing poetry and poetic prose, by considering it to be "an old, deserted vocation that is neither useful nor harmful."[79] When the poet wonders what he could do to be useful to people, the ghost urges him to become a "grave digger" so "he could relieve the living from the piled corpses of the dead around their houses, courts and temples."[80] In other words, he is asking him to bury the dead values of the self, the law and the holy, which he cannot see because he looks with a "deluded eye" that "sees people shivering in the tempest of life, thinking that they are alive while dead they have been since birth."[81] Which is to say that life for them is still lived according to the dead and the values of the dead, not according to themselves, still shivering as they are in front of life's tempest. It is crucial to point out that it is not the destruction of the self, the law and the holy that is called for here, but the burying of what is dead "around" them, the burying of that which lost the ethical, normative and spiritual capacity to orient the living. A new life, therefore, must be re-invented and created. The tempest, crucially, is not merely a metaphor of destruction, rupture, radical change and transformation. The tempest is life itself in that it represents the antithesis of death: "The dead shiver in the tempest, while the living march with it running and only halt when it does,"[82] declares the ghost. This is the

[78] Meskini, *Falsafat al-Nawābit*, 38-39.
[79] *CWs in Arabic*, 211.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid.

thinking destiny of the poet then: to preach life as a relentless tempest, to *create the possibility of life* by digging graves for that which is dead around people's houses, courts and temples, to *be* and *think* only as a tempest, which is the condition of being in the world insofar as it means thinking it anew and creating it again every time.

"What is your religion?" is the last question that the ghost asks. The poet answers, "I believe in God, I honour his prophets, I love virtue and I have hope in a thereafter."[83] The ghost's response is worth quoting here:

> You are only saying these words, which were laid out by ancient generations, by a mere act of borrowing that placed them upon your lips. The naked truth, however, is that you believe only in yourself, you honour none other than it, you love nothing save what it desires, and you hope only for its immortality. Man has worshipped himself since time immemorial, yet this worshipped self has taken on as many names as his wishes and desires: at times he called it Lord or Jupiter, at others he called it God.[84]

With irony, however, he adds, "but how strange are those who worship themselves, and their selves are nothing but rancid corpses."[85] This ghost turns out to be the "mad god" who, averse to wisdom which he deems a sign of human weakness, is the god of his own self, born in every place and in every time. How can such a god – a god who curses the sun and the humans, mocks nature and kneels in front of himself and worships it, a god who, along with time and the sea, does not sleep but eats the corpses of people, drinks their blood and desserts with their gasps[86] – be the thinking horizon of the poet? How can this thinking horizon, the nocturnal horizon of the tempest, be a positive breakthrough for the poet?

This god, being a mad god, points to the utmost possibility of self-creation in an age in which the regnant modes of reason, authority and value are no longer alive. The mad god bespeaks a different direction of thought – that is, a different direction of reason and not the opposite of reason – that the poet must have the courage and will to

[83] Ibid., 212.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid., 213.

take: the direction of self-creation that must begin by gravedigging, that is to say, by burying his dead selves, laws and values – not the self, the law, and values as such. The poet can no longer be a crafter of poetry in this age. The poet must face the nihilism that lies behind it and overcome it. The poet must sing life as a tempest that destroys what is no longer alive – what is no longer capable of inspiring and orienting a creative life, otherwise he will remain a slave to the dead, a mere repetition of the past that is embodied in his name, his poetry and his religion, unable to bear the possibility of life as a new creation of values. The poet, in other words, must reinvent the possibility of life itself. He must reinvent himself, his law and his religion. Thus, unlike the Christian god of morality that dies in Nietzsche, Gibran's god becomes a mad god, the terrible thinking horizon in the night of the poet, the madness that can make possible a new kind of reason, attained only if the poet overcomes his "double fear" of this radical (im)possibility of thinking and being in the world.

The night itself becomes the madman's unattainable self-image in "Night and the Madman."[87] "I am like three, O, Night," declares the madman time and again. Yet the speaking Night denies him this resemblance and identification, pointing to that which he must yet become and/or overcome. For he, the Night reminds him, still looks backwards at his own large footsteps, shudders before pain and the terrifying song of the abyss, unable as he is to befriend his "monster-self" and become a law unto himself. Gibran's celebration and fascination with the night as a metaphor of overcoming, self-becoming and – as evinced in his Arabic prose poem "O Night"[88] – mystical self-

[87] *CWs*, 33-34.
[88] "There I saw you, O Night, and you saw me. You have been, with your enormity, a father to me, and I, with my dreams, a son to you. Removed are all the blinds of forms between us and torn are all the veils of doubt and conjecture over our faces. Thus, you divulged your secrets to me, and your intentions, and I disclosed my wishes to you, and my hopes … You lifted me up to you, placed me upon your shoulders, and you taught my eyes to see and my ears to hear and my lips to speak, and you taught my heart to love what people hate and to hate what they love. Then you touched my thoughts with your fingers whereupon they flowed like a running, chanting river rubbing off the withering grass, and you kissed my soul with your lips whereupon it glittered like a burning flame that devoured all the ruins of the earth." *CWs in Arabic*, 221-22.

disclosure, should be located, hermeneutically, in the context of modernity. To be more precise, it is against a particular modern regime of reason and identity, where one's personhood is predetermined and plainly demarcated in the light of the modern day, so to speak, that the madman conjures up the night as the abyss whose terrifying song the moderns are unable to bear and listen to. In the "destitute time" of modernity, as Heidegger writes in relation to Hölderlin,[89] the abyss of the night – the night as a revealing abyss – consists in the unbearable ordeal of giving oneself one's law and of building a throne "upon the heaps of the fallen Gods."[90] The madman, this post-religious poet, is the one who, building this throne, strives to think the "untamed thoughts" of the night and speak its "vast language."[91] This is the poet of destitute times who, as Heidegger would say, "attend[s], singing, to the trace of the fugitive gods."[92] Only in the night of the modern day can one retrieve the vastness of language and the abyssal, transformative power of thought, which have been tamed, as Gibran's powerful prose poem ""The Perfect World"" suggests, by modernity's calculative and instrumental reason. The madman is a poet who, against the flattening order of the modern day, invokes the night's immeasurable capacity to reveal space, that is to say, to reveal his irreducible and immeasurable soul:[93] the soul that cannot be reduced to or measured by "recording" and "cataloguing."[94]

In ""The Perfect World"," the madman laments and castigates the mathematical and rationalist order by which human life is preordained, regulated and experienced in modernity. What is initially intriguing here is that the madman's discourse is addressed to "the God of lost souls … who [is] lost amongst the gods."[95] What are these gods?

---

[89] "In the age of the world's night, the abyss of the world must be experienced and endured." Heidegger, *Poetry*, 92.
[90] *CWs*, 34.
[91] Ibid., 35.
[92] Heidegger, *Poetry*, 94.
[93] *CWs*, 35.
[94] Ibid., 47.
[95] Ibid.

And why is God lost amongst these gods? "Hear me," the madman says to this "Gentle Destiny that watchest over us, mad, wandering spirits."[96] "Hear me": thus is addressed God in the modern times, thus addresses the madman, who "dwell[s] in the midst of a perfect race, [he] the most imperfect," his lost God. The madman, the post-religious poet, is the one who addresses God amidst the proliferation of the gods, the new idols of modernity: order, perfection and calculative reason. In other words, God becomes the *addressee* of the post-religious poet, the madman who speaks from the Outside, who is an outsider to this "perfect world," the regulated world of the moderns. Because this poet is aware of the abundance of the new, secular gods of modernity, following which this "perfect race" dwells in the world, he has no addressee but God, who, albeit lost amongst those gods, can still be addressed. Yet God can still be addressed insofar as He, in these destitute times, *can only be addressed*. Prophetic speech, as reclaimed by this post-religious poet, is addressed to God, not the other way around. Prophetic speech, to put it differently, no longer comes from the Outside, but speaks *to the Outside* in that it is – and can only be – a summoning of the trace of this Outside. "Hear me," says the madman to "the God of lost souls":

> I, a human chaos, a nebula of confused elements, I move amongst finished worlds – peoples of complete laws and pure order, whose thoughts are assorted, whose dreams are arranged, and whose visions are enrolled and registered. Their virtues, O God, are measured, their sins are weighed, and even the countless things that pass in the dim twilight of neither sin nor virtue are recorded and catalogued.
> Here days and nights are divided into seasons of conduct and governed by rules of blameless accuracy.
> ….
> It is a perfect world, a world of consummate excellence, a world of supreme wonders, the ripest fruit in God's garden, the master-thought of the universe.[97]

The madman's speech betrays an acute disillusionment with what Heidegger calls *Gestell*, the (en)framing that structures modern technological Being.[98] This calculative

---

[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid.
[98] See Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (London; New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 3-35.

and technological regulation of modern life erases any empowering possibility of imperfection, being the essential condition for Life as a "never-finished building."[99] For to be human, Gibran firmly believes, is to long insatiably for a Greater Self – at once desiring more of the self and striving to go beyond it. To long presupposes imperfection, an enabling imperfection, because perfection, according to him, is nothing but a limitation. This is not solely reflective of the primordial longing that defines the human as a potentiality that lies ahead – a longing for "the Greater Sea" that always lies beyond the other seas, the absolute desiring Other.[100] It concerns the fundamental manner of dwelling in the world: one cannot dwell perfectly; one can truly dwell, to draw on Heidegger again, insofar as one dwells poetically, poetry here being that dwelling which lets dwelling itself be,[101] an opening up of Being that *cannot frame or measure* (in calculative terms).[102]

The madman, this outsider who, being an outsider, speaks to the Outside, ends his speech with a rhetorical question that announces the impossible character of being in the modern, "perfect world": "But why should I be here, O God, I a green seed of unfulfilled passion, a mad tempest that seeketh neither east nor west, a bewildered fragment from a burnt planet? Why am I here, O God of lost souls, thou who art lost amongst the gods?"[103] God becomes, in this "perfect world," the addressee – and the sole addressee – of the post-religious poet. Albeit lost amongst the many new gods that emerged in the modern world, God is invoked as a trace of an Outside that could be reached by way of questioning. This questioning is much more than rhetorical. It points to the fundamental question of being itself: the mode of being that befits the human in

[99] This is Mary Haskell's phrase, in a reply to a letter of Gibran. MH journal. Feb. 2, 1915.
[100] "The Greater Sea," *CWs*, 37-38.
[101] Heidegger, *Poetry*, 215.
[102] Let us remember that the word "verse" in Arabic – in the sense of poetic verse – is *bayt*, a word that also means a house or a dwelling. One reads poetry – one experiences the poetic – by inhabiting it, so to speak.
[103] *CWs*, 48.

this modern world where everything, as the madman bitterly points out, is pre-determined, arranged, demarcated, pigeonholed, catalogued, recorded and numbered. This God, who can only be addressed, is the trace of the Outside whose invocation aims to question and disrupt this modern mode of being. This interrogatory invocation beckons to that which lies outside these "finished worlds," to a world where one can never be reduced to a calculative, rationalist order in which the irreducible, inaccessible and incalculable essence of being human is eclipsed, even erased. This essence, lost with the abundant emergence of the new idols of modernity, is still recoverable and, therefore, must be recovered. It is the post-religious poet who attends to the retrieval of this essence, of that which remains ungraspable and unknowable as such – and in this sense transcendent – in the human being. This poetic retrieval – for only poetry can retrieve the ungraspable and sing it – is possible by way of invoking the lost trace of God insofar as it allows for a mode of being and dwelling in the world that is beyond calculation and "pure order."

The madman, this "impossible prophet"[104] who must become a law unto himself, also sets out to reclaim and reinvent "crucifixion" as a necessary condition for an "exaltedness" without atonement. By dissociating the name from the named, or the signifier from the signified, Gibran attempts to re-activate the radical, disruptive force of religion itself – a religion that announces itself only by, as it were, effacing itself – such that its name or the names that point towards it are taken beyond the history of meaning, value and authority that saturate them. Thus, crucifixion, stripped of its essential meaning in Christianity, that is, of the elements of sin and retribution that lend it its Christian particularity, is transformed into a metaphor of overcoming divorced from any discourse of good and evil or reward and punishment:

> I cried to men, "I would be crucified!"
> And they said, "Why should your blood be upon our heads?!

[104] Meskini, "al-Nabiyy al-Mustaḥīl [The Impossible Prophet]" in *al-Īmān al-Ḥurr*, 381-410.

> And I answered, "How else shall you be exalted except by crucifying madmen? and they heeded and I was crucified. And the crucifixion appeased me.[105]

Crucifixion becomes a metaphor of re-birth and self-creation, beyond original sin and salvation. This is another element that places Gibran in proximity with – because thinking after – Nietzsche, who "had at times signed himself "Dionysus" and at others "*Der Gekreuzigte* ["The Crucified One"], likewise extending these aliases beyond good and evil."[106] The smiling madman, arousing the perplexity of the crowd who is unable to fathom out this act of crucifixion, asserts,

> "Remember only that I smile. I do not atone – nor sacrifice – nor wish for glory; and I have nothing to forgive. I thirsted – and I besought you to give my blood to drink. For what is there to quench a madman's thirst but his own blood? I was dumb – and I asked wounds of you for mouths. I was imprisoned in your days and nights – and I sought a door into larger days and nights.
> "And now I go – as others already crucified have gone. And think not we are weary of crucifixion. For we must be crucified by larger and larger men, between greater earths and greater heavens."[107]

This motif, that of seeking "larger" and "greater" selves, will feature again and again in Gibran's writings. It is not difficult to discern in this longing for a Greater Self the Nietzschean echoes of overcoming as redemption: "To redeem those who lived in the past and to recreate all 'it was' into a "thus I willed it' – that alone should I call redemption,"[108] says Zarathustra. Gibran's specificity here lies in reclaiming crucifixion as an act of self-redemption delinked from the discourse of good and evil and the after-world eschatology of reward and punishment, from any messianism except that of the larger self of this world, of this Life. Like grave-digging – burying that which is dead but still directing the being of the self – crucifixion is reconfigured as a post-religious metaphor of tireless self-fashioning, whose horizon is the future of the self as a Greater Self. This crucifixion does not need any transcendent vertical morality that bestows

---

[105] *CWs*, 39.
[106] Raymond Schwab, "The Iran of Nietzsche," in *The Oriental Renaissance*, trans. Gene Patterson-Black and Victor Reinking (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 346.
[107] *CWs*, 39.
[108] Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 139.

meaning on it and accord it a certain teleology. It is rather turned into a Nietzschean "thus I willed it," so to speak, but without any Nietzschean resentment towards Christianity.[109]

3. The Greater Self, or the Prophetic as *the* Impossible

The Greater Self, which is sought by the self-crucified madman, is prophetically celebrated in the "The Forerunner" as a "giant-self" that one builds towers for its foundation, until it becomes itself a foundation: "Always have we been our own forerunners, and always shall we be. And all that we have gathered and shall gather shall be but seeds for fields yet unploughed. We are the fields and the ploughmen, the gatherers and the gathered."[110] The forerunner's self is re-cast as a beginning whose destination – that which it yearns for – will become itself a beginning. This ontological conception of the self implies a fundamental infinitude, an essential unendingness to its quest of becoming: Being is becoming, and vice versa. This embrace of beginning is posited against the notion of "origin." The forerunner is a beginning without origin. Yet even when Gibran breaks with the Abrahamic story of creation (*creatio ex nihilo*) – in its three *different* versions in Judaism, Christianity and Islam – a trace of this narrative, as interpreted by Ibn Arabi, can still be discerned here, a secularized trace that is inevitably ambiguous:

> When you were a wandering desire in the mist, I too was there, a wandering desire … And when you were a silent word upon Life's quivering lips, I too was there, another silent word. Then Life uttered us and we came down the years throbbing with memories of yesterday and with longing for tomorrow, for yesterday was death conquered and tomorrow a birth pursued.[111]

Gibran uses Life in the sense of Being, through whose "quivering lips" one is "uttered" into existence. Life, in other words, is the force that lets beings be and enables their

---

[109] Paul Ricoeur notes that "[Nietzsche's] aggression towards Christianity remains caught up in the attitude of resentment … Nietzsche's work remains an accusation of accusation and hence falls short of a pure affirmation of Life." Ricoeur, "Religion, Atheism, and Faith," 447.
[110] *CWs*, 53.
[111] Ibid.

presence. But being a silent word that awaits Life's utterance presupposes what Ibn Arabi calls the "eternal individuality"[112] of the self. In one of his early Arabic pieces of poetic prose, "The Hymn of Man," Gibran writes, "I Was, from before time!/ And, behold me now, I AM! And I SHALL BE [*sic*] till the end of time! And my being shall be without end!"[113] This piece, interestingly, begins with a quote from the Qur'an: "and you were dead and He [Allah] gave you life, then He shall make you dead, then He shall give you life, then unto Him you shall be returned."[114] The Qur'anic verse notwithstanding, Gibran dissociates this eternal individuality of the self from the metaphysics of creation. What we observe in the "The Forerunner," however, is something similar to – yet by no means as sophisticated as – the notion of "genesis" in Ibn Arabi, which is not exactly a *creatio ex nihilo* but a complex "process of increasing illumination, gradually raising the possibilities eternally latent in the original Divine Being to a state of luminescence."[115] All beings, that is, exist as possible or latent beings [*mumkināt*] in God's eternal knowledge; their coming into actual existence lies in their being revealed or manifested, and not in being *stricto senso* created from nothingness.

This notion of manifestness is one that frequently recurs in Gibran, but without reference to God as Creator or to any metaphysics of creation. It is rather articulated through the image of the Mist, the primordial Mist which is the ground of all beings: "Life, and all that lives, is conceived in the Mist and not in the crystal."[116]The Mist is therefore Life in its hiddenness, not manifestness. It articulates the fundamental ambiguous space at the heart of Being, that from which all beings as "wandering desires" emerge or manifest themselves – since desire for him is "the inherent power

---

[112] Henry Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 173.
[113] *Kahlil Gibran: An Illustrated Anthology*, 157.
[114] *The Koran Interpreted*, trans. A. J. Arberry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 2:26.
[115] Corbin, *Alone*, 217.
[116] *CWs*, 159.

that changes all things [and] the law of all matter and all life"[117] – and to which they shall also return as Almustafa says in *The Garden of the Prophet*: "O Mist, my sister, white breath not yet held in a mould,/ I return to You, a breath white and voiceless, a word not yet uttered."[118]This image, thus, is not merely figural. It is central to Gibran's reinvention of the self and the world. Its particularity, being at once phenomenal and symbolic, is strangely reminiscent of the ontological status accorded to "the creative Active Imagination" in the metaphysics of Ibn Arabi, "the Primordial Cloud" exhaled by the Divine Breathing (*Nafas al-Raḥmān*), which "*receives* all forms and at the same time *gives* beings their forms."[119] Yet, while for Ibn Arabi this Primordial Cloud – which is at once hidden in the Creator (*bāṭin*) and revealed as creature (*ẓāhir*), or the "Creator-Creature"[120] – is inseparable from the Divine Being, for Gibran the Mist is devoid of any metaphysical conceptual density or narrative of creation. The Mist becomes a post-religious name of God that alludes to Him without naming Him, because it – the Mist – still carries the Abrahamic structural signification that the name of God evokes: that from which one emerges or is revealed into Life and to which one returns until Life's second day. The Mist for Gibran becomes the destiny of the self that renders it once more a beginning: the "greater freedom" of the self.[121] As such, it is the necessary transition from one life to another, the passage to another reincarnation:

> O Mist, my sister, my sister Mist,
> I am one with you now.
> No longer am I a self.
> The walls have fallen,
> And the chains have broken;
> I rise to you, a mist,
> And together we shall float upon the sea until life's second day,
> When dawn shall lay you, dewdrops in a garden,
> And me a babe upon the breast of a woman.[122]

---

[117] KG to MH, Jan. 30, 1916.
[118] *CWs*, 556.
[119] Corbin, *Alone*, 185. [emphasis added]
[120] Ibid, 186.
[121] *CWs*, 517-18.
[122] Ibid., 557.

In a worldview where the Abrahamic afterworld (the eschatological narrative of the judgment day, heaven and hell and so on) is abandoned, death remains a passage but to another life; and one does not die but returns to the primordial Mist. Drawing on the Sufi tradition and breaking with its dense metaphysics of creation, Gibran's vision is aesthetically creative but metaphysically and ontologically weak, for the Mist remains an ambiguous image with no specific content save its fogginess – in the literal and figural sense. The death of the moral and vertical god of Abrahamic metaphysics gives way to an empty space filled only by the Mist, the promise of "our greater freedom"[123] and of the mystical union with a post-religious God who no longer bears (to bear) his name – the image of the Mist repeats the possibility of God without God, so to speak. This is, perhaps, what a prophetic post-religious poet – this preacher of Life – can offer us in the destitute times of modernity.

The faith of this post-religious poet, however, even after reinventing his Abrahamic God, remains essentially Abrahamic. In his parable "The Two Learned Men," the madman casts his irony over the futility of rationally debating the existence of the gods. We are told that two men, "who hated and belittled each other's learning," met one day in the marketplace and argued for hours "about the existence and non-existence of the gods." In the evening, "the unbeliever [amongst the two learned men] went to the temple and prostrated himself before the altar and prayed the gods to forgive his wayward past," whereas the other learned man, "the believer," "burned his sacred books" and became an unbeliever.[124] The madman suggests that a rationally validated or nullified faith is a false and untenable kind of faith, for what matters here is not the actual existence or non-existence of the gods and whether their existence can be proved or refuted with rational arguments. Rather, faith as such is an *experience* of the

[123] "Did I not speak of freedom, and of the mist which is our greater freedom?" Ibid., 518.
[124] Ibid., 44.

visionary imagination – what Gibran calls "the Eye"[125] or *al-baṣīra* – that goes beyond this mode of reason in that it is located on a supra-rational level of human experience. This experience is not reducible to statements or arguments that correspond (or not) to certain "objective" facts in the outside world. It is, as he writes in *The Forerunner*, a "skyward" *movement* of a bird rising out of the forerunner's "deeper heart" and growing higher and larger – "at first it was but like a swallow, then a lark, then an eagle, then as vast as a spring cloud"[126] – eventually filling "the starry heavens," without, however, leaving his heart. This paradoxical movement is one that the forerunner, another name of the Gibranian post-religious poet, describes in these terms, yet without referring explicitly to "God":

> Out of my heart a bird flew skywards. And it waxed larger as it flew. Yet it left not my heart.
> O my faith, my untamed knowledge, how shall I fly to your height and see with you man's larger self pencilled upon the sky?
> How shall I turn this sea within me into mist, and move with you in space immeasurable?
> How can a prisoner within the temple behold its golden domes?
> How shall the heart of a fruit be stretched to envelop the fruit also?[127]

This paradoxical movement is *the* movement of faith, and it is one that simultaneously bewilders and frustrates, perplexes and stupefies, going beyond the heart without leaving it. This faith cannot be a lazy answer but is lived as a paradoxical movement that generates questions. This is the kind of faith that can be solely experienced, to invoke Ibn Arabi, as "neither/nor" or "both/and,"[128] one that is irreducible to the Greek rationalist principle of the excluded middle – which does not mean it is "irrational." In other words, this faith, even in its post-religious configuration, remains at bottom

[125] Ibid., 43.
[126] Ibid., 73.
[127] Ibid.
[128] Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 71-72.

Abrahamic, since it can only happen “by virtue of the absurd.”[129] Gibran, pursuing this Abrahamic legacy, was aware of this fundamental and necessary paradox of faith.

This faith, nevertheless, is no longer directed towards the Abrahamic, moral God whose authority revolves around accusation, consolation, condemnation and protection.[130] It is a post-religious faith that entails breaking with the form of religion that is based on prohibition and punishment,[131] yet not with religion as such. This faith, Paul Ricoeur argues, is still possible after the death of ontotheology’s god:

> Only a preacher, or, I should say, a prophetic preacher, with the power and freedom of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra would be able to make a radical return to the origins of Jewish and Christian [I would say Abrahamic] faith and, at the same time, make of this return an event which speaks to our own time. Such preaching would be both originary and post-religious.[132]

Ricoeur’s emphasis on a “radical return” to the “Judeo-Christian” tradition is perhaps understandable given the European intellectual context in which he speaks. This European Judeo-Christian element remains, nevertheless, an *implicit* identitarian component incompatible with the universality of the (post)-religious. Gibran, however, could be said to represent that modern Abrahamic figure who draws from *both* Christianity *and* Islam in a way that *universally* reinvents the religious, disrupting any discursive divides across real and symbolic geography (Euro-America and the Arab East). His Almustafa is a prophetic post-religious preacher of Life who “would speak only of freedom but would never utter a word of prohibition and condemnation.”[133] This

[129] Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Sylvia Walsh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 39-42. Kierkegaard’s fascinating reading of the Abrahamic story of sacrifice offers us a remarkable way of understanding Abrahamic faith as such, which he describes as the impossible movement of faith.

[130] Ricoeur, “Religion, Atheism, and Faith,” 445. In this essay, Ricoeur dwells on the dialectic of religion and faith that is mediated by a “liberating and destructive” atheism. He discusses the themes of religious accusation and consolation and the death of the moral God of Christianity (with reference to Nietzsche’s and Freud’s hermeneutics of suspicion), going on to posit the possibility of a post-religious faith that goes beyond accusation and protection. His insights, albeit informed by a European “Judeo-Christian” conception of religion, are very pertinent and illuminating as far as Gibran’s post-religious enterprise is concerned here.

[131] Ibid., 442.

[132] Ibid., 447-48.

[133] Ibid., 448.

freedom goes beyond the confines of an *a priori* belonging to a particular tradition, as implied in Ricoeur, for Gibran writes in English as an Arab writer and reinvents Islamic and Christian concepts by reclaiming them beyond their discursive and cultural contours, and this important particularity has been obfuscated by the appropriative reception of his work as "Oriental spirituality" in Euro-America.[134]

Almustafa, whose name is the most prophetic amongst Gibran's post-religious figures,[135] would go as far as announcing an impossible dwelling in the world. This impossibility has been readily interpreted as idealism. Yet an Abrahamic, post-religious prophet cannot be a realist. He must herald, he must preach the impossible as the ultimate possibility of freedom. Let us attend to his words:

> At the city gate and by your fireside I have seen you prostrate yourself and worship your own freedom, …
> And my heart bled within me; for you can only be free when even the desire of seeking freedom becomes a harness to you, and when you cease to speak of freedom as a goal and fulfilment.
> …
> And how shall you rise beyond your days and nights unless you break the chains which you at the dawn of your understanding have fastened around your noon hour?
> In truth that which you call freedom is the strongest of these chains, though its links glitter in the sun and dazzle your eyes.[136]

Only a radical freedom that tirelessly questions itself as it enacts itself can combat its modern fetishization and trivialization. Almustafa is drawing attention to the conditions of freedom rather than freedom itself. For freedom not to turn into "a yoke" and "a handcuff" worn by the "freest among you," these conditions must be radically and constantly interrogated and unchained, to use his metaphor. That is to say, alertness to the conditions of freedom *is* the primary condition of freedom as such, what he calls "greater freedom." The latter remains a deferred possibility and can never be an attained

[134] See Chapter Four.
[135] Almustafa, meaning "the chosen one," is one of the attributes of prophet Muhammad. This reclamation of the name attests to a vision that does not merely break with the past but aims to reinvent it in the context of the present.
[136] *CWs*, 127.

actuality; it is realized insofar as it is hopelessly yearned for, a yearning whose hopelessness lies in relentless self-interrogation. Like faith, freedom is experienced as a paradox, at once a chain and a breaking-free from the chain, an impossible movement whose condition of possibility is the persistent awareness of this very paradox. For it must never turn, Almustafa suggests, into a doctrine or an idol that people worship, into something other than itself, in allusion to its idolization and instrumentalization in modern politics.

The qualifier "greater" is much more than a qualifier here; it represents the kernel of Gibran's thought: conquering oneself constantly, slaying one's "burdened selves"[137] in longing to attain larger and freer selves, themselves the premise of yet larger and freer selves: "And what is it but fragments of your own self you would discard that you may become free."[138] The passage ends by pointing out, in a charming poetic style, that the dialectical relationship between freedom and greater freedom is characteristic of "all things [which] move within your being in constant half embrace, the desired and the dreaded, the repugnant and the cherished, the pursued and that which you would escape."[139] This post-religious poet articulates his idea by resorting to the image of light/shadow:

> These things move within you as lights and shadows in pairs that cling.
> And when the shadow fades and is no more, the light that lingers becomes a shadow to another light.
> And thus your freedom when it loses its fetters becomes itself the fetter of a greater freedom.[140]

Thus spoke Almustafa, preaching the always already "not yet"[141] of one's freedom, its utmost potentiality that should not be confused with an "ideal freedom." Prophetic speech does not preach ideals: it points to that horizontal space beyond the self that

---

[137] "Beyond My Solitude," *CWs*, 86.
[138] *CWs*, 127.
[139] Ibid., 128
[140] Ibid.
[141] I borrow this phrase from Levinas, who uses it to describe the insatiability of the primordial strive towards un unnameable Beyond. See Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 254, 256.

should be the condition of its being and dwelling in the world. Prophetic speech radically questions the present and its conditions, shaking it up by pronouncing and heralding an impossible future. This is what *The Prophet*, in its twenty-six passages, is fundamentally announcing.

The "positive ontology"[142] of *The Prophet* resides in a vision that de-transcendentalizes ethics, that is to say, that divorces ethics from the sphere of morality and the horizon of reward and punishment. Almustafa, in this respect, could be described as what Nietzsche's Zarathustra calls "an esteemer," one who gives himself his own good and evil and *creates* his own values.[143] *The Prophet*, seen from this perspective, is a logical sequel to *The Tempests*, *The Madman* and *The Forerunner*, whose parables and prose poems radically place into question so many old values by way of laying bare the inherent contradictions that inhabit them. In those works, one discerns a glimpse of the post-religious poet's capacity to reclaim and reinvent the religious and create his own values. Yet it is in *The Prophet* that this post-religious poet fully assumes this prophetic role of value-creation, now that the destructive forces of grave-digging and the slaying of one's burdened selves have been exhausted in the discourses of the poet's mad god, the madman and the forerunner. In other words, there is no discontinuity here. To be thinking fruitfully as a poet in the horizon of thought that Nietzsche's Zarathustra made possible, means that one not only annihilates but creates values. And Gibran does so, as we have seen, with no vengeance or resentment against the god of morality or theology – who either goes mad or dies quietly without anyone reporting the news, so to speak – because the notion of God itself does not die but is reinvented as a horizontal form of transcendence whose name is the greater, larger and

[142] "Our critique of metaphysics and its search of rational reconciliation must give way to a positive ontology, beyond resentment and accusation. Such a positive ontology consists in an entirely nonethical vision, or what Nietzsche described as "the innocence of becoming" (*die Unschuld des Werdens*). The latter is another name for "beyond good and evil." Of course, this kind of ontology can never become dogmatic, or it will risk falling under its own criticisms." Ricoeur, "Religion, Atheism, and Faith," 457.
[143] Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 59.

freer self. What further distinguishes *The Prophet* is that there is no antipathy towards the "last men" or "the herd" that Zarathustra loathes. For Almustafa is *not* Zarathustra, albeit thinking with and after him. Almustafa, rather, celebrates Life insofar as it is a "longing for your giant self [wherein] lies your goodness: and that longing is in all of you."[144]

Almustafa, moreover, reclaims "religion" as "all deeds and all reflection," conceiving of it in "your daily life" where "you take with you your all."[145] In other words, he is re-naming religion by un-naming it, as it were: un-naming religion insofar as it represents, on the one hand, a differentiated social sphere – in a presumably secular society – and insofar as it refers, on the other, to a theologico-political community – *al-milla*, not religion[146] – where morality is vertically imposed.[147] This un-naming of religion by *worlding*[148] it beyond the modern secular-religious binary does not mean that it loses its transcendental particularity, for it is also "that which is neither deed nor reflection, *but a wonder and a surprise springing in the soul*, even while the hands hew the stone or tend the loom."[149] This wonder and surprise of the soul is that transcendental element of the religious which is horizontally experienced in one's daily life, that which remains, that is, transcendental about the religious – the perplexity of faith. As a horizontal kind of transcendence, it is one that springs from the soul and does not necessarily refer to a transcendent realm that commands, from above, the being of the religious self. This is what Meskini has recently called "free faith," which

---

[144] *CWs*, 140.
[145] Ibid., 148.
[146] Meskini, *al-Īmān al-Ḥurr*, 189-91.
[147] "He who wears his morality but as his best garment were better naked./ The wind and the sun will tear no holes in his skin./ And he who defines his conduct by ethics imprisons his songbird in a cage./ The freest song comes not through bars and wires./ And to whom worshipping is a window, to open but also to shut, has not yet visited the house of his soul whose windows are from dawn to dawn." *CWs*, 148.
[148] I am drawing on the Arabic words *dunya*, which means world, and more precisely, the opposite of the after-world (*al-ākhira)* and *dīn* (religion), to which it is usually used in contrast, such that the worlding of religion would entail an understanding of *dīn* without an after-world, one that would accommodate *dunya* without being synonymous with or radically transcendent from it.
[149] *CWs*, 148. [emphasis added]

"expresses an ancient actuality that pertains to the Abrahamic experiences of the holy: that faith, unlike pagan belief, is the art of acquiring the space of transcendence that exists in the crux of the self's relationship to itself."[150] Almustafa, un-naming and renaming religion, is preaching this (im)possibility of free faith by *re-orienting* the transcendental experience.

The de-transcendentalizing of ethics is most apparent in Almustafa's discourse on giving. Preaching Life as giving, Almustafa dissociates giving from the authority of the giver, much the same way he dissociates God from the absolute authority of vertical transcendence. The ethical here is severed from any transcendental moral discourse. The ethical as such becomes, paradoxically, a non-ethical mode of being that consists in giving as being or being as giving. Almustafa, in response to a rich a man who asked him to "speak to us of Giving," begins by foregrounding self-giving as authentic giving: "It is when you give of yourself that you truly give."[151] He then proceeds to declare that "those have little and give it all" are "believers in life and the bounty of life."[152] Yet, most importantly, he asserts:

> There are those who give and know not pain in giving, nor do they seek joy, nor give
> with mindfulness of virtue;
> They give as in yonder valley the myrtle breathes its fragrance into space.
> Through the hands of such as these God speaks, and from behind their eyes
> He smiles upon the earth.[153]

This is giving in its impossible embodiment, or, to draw on Derrida, the gift as *the* impossible,[154] in that it is possible *as a gift*, paradoxically, only when the giver ceases to

---

[150] Meskini, *al-Īmān al-Ḥurr*, 21.
[151] *CWs*, 109.
[152] Ibid.
[153] Ibid.
[154] "If there is a gift, the *given* of the gift (*that which* one gives, *that which* is given, the gift as given thing or an act of donation) must not come back to the giving (let us not already say to the subject, to the donor). It must not circulate, it must not be exchanged, it must not in any case be exhausted as a gift, by the process of exchange, by the movement of the circulation of the circle in the form of return to the point of departure …. It is perhaps in this sense that the gift is the impossible." Derrida, *Giving Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, tr. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 7. [emphasis in the original]

be a source of giving, when the giver is *not* recognized *as* giver and the given or the gift are *not* identified *as* gift: "See first that you yourself deserve to be giver, and *an instrument of giving*. For in truth it is life that gives unto life–while you, who deem yourself a giver, are but a witness,"[155] writes Gibran. No giver means no authority – the authority of the subject who gives – and the centrality of this giving subject is de-centred here, as the giver becomes merely an instrument of giving, a sort of Heideggerian "clearing" through which Life as bountiful Giving manifests itself. In other words, the ethical as such is conceived beyond any circuit of exchange, beyond any transcendental discourse of good and evil and reward and punishment. The ethical becomes ontological – to give is to be insofar as being is living. This prophetic speech is thereby announcing an impossible ethicality, one that can only enact itself *by* effacing itself: "They give as in yonder valley the myrtle breathes its fragrance into space." In this configuration, God speaks through the hands of those who give unmindful of virtue. Which is to say that one does not ask God to be: God *is* the giving itself. God does not command but manifests Himself *in* and *as* impossible giving: God is giving as such. This view of giving is strikingly reminiscent of Ibn Arabi's equation of giving with Being: "*ʿan al-jūd ṣadr al-wujūd* [in bountiful giving (*al-jūd*) lies the essence of Being (*al-wujūd*)]," he famously wrote.[156] Almustafa, echoing Ibn Arabi, affirms that the essence of Life/Being *is* giving: "You often say, "I would give, but only to the deserving."/ The trees in your orchard say not so, nor the flocks in your pasture./ *They give that they may live*, *for to withhold is to perish.*"[157]

Yet Almustafa goes as far as reversing the logic of giving and receiving, because "you are all receivers," emphasizing the "courage and confidence, nay the charity, of

---

[155] *CWs*, 110. [emphasis added]
[156] Muhy al-Din Ibn Arabi, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* [The Meccan Openings] vol 3, ed. Ahmad Shams al-Din (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1999), 268-69.
[157] *CWs*, 110. [emphasis added]

receiving."[158] Gibran shifts attention from the giver, from the *possible* hostility and oppression of the giver – his/her self-consciousness as a giver – to the *impossible* hospitality (openness) of the receiver (being a host) towards the incomprehensibly bountiful Other that is Life. "Assume no weight of gratitude, lest you lay a yoke upon yourself and upon him who gives,"[159] says Almustafa, preaching the impersonality of Life as the source of all personal giving, preaching, that is, the self-effacement of the ethical subject if it is to be truly ethical. It is the prophetic nature of this speech that makes possible the announcement of this impossible ethicality.

The impossibility of this prophetic vision lies also in the unhomeliness it preaches. This unhomeliness does not imply alienation, nor does it suggest what Freud calls the *Unheimlich* (the uncanny).[160] Rather, it designates a necessary detachment from place, familiarity, repetition, habit, sameness and limitation, emphasizing the spiritual as the imaginative horizon that allows for a mode of dwelling that shakes any stable relationship with place. This unhomeliness, the condition of a dwelling that attends to space rather than place, is essentially prophetic. As Blanchot points out: "Prophetic speech is a wandering speech that returns to the original demand of movement by opposing all stillness, all settling, any taking root that would be rest."[161] The spiritual is that which names this movement. As such, it should not be understood as the antithesis of the earthly or the bodily. The spiritual, for Gibran, names the unity of Being/Life, the unity of body and soul, the unity of sight (*al-baṣar*) and insight (*al-baṣīra*). It names the *disclosure* of Being in this Life and in this world. The word

---

[158] This resonates with Gibran's Arabic piece of poetic prose "How Bountiful is Life [Mā Akrama al-Ḥayāt]," in which he poignantly exalts the incomprehensible bounty of Life and laments his incapacity to be comprehensively receptive of and attentive to its magnitude. See *CWs in Arabic O*, 35-39.
[159] *CWs*, 110.
[160] "The uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar." Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works Volume XVII*, trans. Alix Strachey et al. (New York: Norton, 1961), 220.
[161] Blanchot, "Prophetic Speech," 79.

"spiritual" does not occur in Gibran's English works[162]; it does, however, in his Arabic writings, and particularly in his one-act play *Iram Dhāt al-ʿImād* (Iram, City of Lofty Pillars), published in 1921. The title of the play is taken from the Qur'an, in which it is described as a city the like of which was never created,[163] to signify a place or, rather, a space of spiritual disclosure. My reflections on the spiritual here, which is reclaimed beyond any facile connotation of it, are primarily based on this play.

The main character of *Iram Dhāt al-ʿImād*, Āmina al-ʿAlawiyya, a name whose Islamic resonance is unmistakable,[164] is a female spiritual figure whom Najeeb, the Lebanese writer, is searching for and seeking her knowledge. That this Sufi figure is a female should not go unnoticed. Āmina is a prophetic figure that has attained the knowledge – in the sense of gnosis – that her father, who "was the imam of his time in spiritual and esoteric matters,"[165] did not. That is, her "gender" does not matter here, and the masculinist monopoly of knowledge production and attainment is tacitly destroyed and overcome – let us remember that the play, published in 1921, is set in 1883. Zain al-ʿĀbidīn of Nahavand, the Persian character who is known as the Sufi, tells Najeeb that when Āmina turned twenty-five, she set out with her father to Mecca to fulfil the duty of pilgrimage. On their way, however, her father caught a fever and passed away. Āmina buried him on a foot of a mountain and stayed by his grave for

[162] "Spirit," however, does occur. My point is that Gibran never expounds on the spiritual and never mentions the word "spirituality" in his English-language writings, the name under whose rubric these writings have been mostly received in Euro-America. He rather speaks about the greater, larger and giant self, and does not separate body and soul.
[163] "Hast thou not seen how thy Lord did with Ad, Iram of the pillars, the like of which was never created in the land." *The Koran Interpreted*, 89:7-9. In a short prologue to the play, Gibran cites the aforementioned verse from the Qur'an, a Hadith (saying) believed to be Prophet Muhammad's – "*yadkhuluhā baʿḍu ummatī* [some of my people shall enter it]" and a long quote that describes the fabulous process of constructing the city of Iram, taken from *Siyasatnama* [the Book of Government], known in Arabic as *Siyar al-Mulūk* [The Lives of Kings], by the eleventh century Persian scholar Nizam al-Mulk. In the Qur'an, Iram, believed to have been located the southern part of the Arab peninsula, is the magnificent city of the people of Ad and their prophet Hud. Gibran, however, makes of Iram a city or a space of Sufi disclosure or gnosis. In other words, he is reinventing the meaning of Iram in the light of Sufism, practicing a kind of free *taʾwīl* (esoteric interpretation) upon which the play is aesthetically and religiously based.
[164] Āmina is the name of prophet Muhammad's mother.
[165] *CWs in Arabic*, 330.

seven nights, "calling unto his soul and seeking to discover the secrets of the unseen world and what lies beyond the veil."[166] On the seventh night, the soul of her father inspired her to head to the heart of the Arab peninsula, the Rubʿ al-Khali desert. The desert, indeed: "not time, or space, but a space without place and a time without production … this outside, where one cannot remain, since to be there is to be always already outside, and prophetic speech is that speech in which the bare relation with the Outside could be expressed."[167] This relation is essentially one of disclosure or unveiling (*kashf*). Āmina confronts this bare Outside on her own and *reveals* it. Āmina is the prophetic figure of a post-religious *Iram Dhāt al-ʿImād*, where Being as such is disclosed to her – insofar as her vision reveals it – in the bare desert of Arabia. After five years of disappearance, Āmina was seen in Mosul, where her emergence was "something akin to the falling of a meteor from space."[168] In the circles of Ulama (religious scholars), she spoke about divine matters and described what she saw in *Iram Dhāt al-ʿImād* with a unique eloquence hitherto unknown to the people of Mosul. Because her followers increased and her name became a threat to the city's Ulama, the governor of Mosul summoned her, offered her a packet of gold and asked her to leave the city. Disappointed, she left without taking the gold. The same thing happened to her in Istanbul, Aleppo, Damascus, Homs and Tripoli, where her knowledge did not please the imams and the religious jurists. As a result, she decided to lead a reclusive life in north-east Lebanon, where she is sought by Najeeb, the Lebanese writer.

Āmina appears at some point and both Najeeb and Zain are enraptured by her, "as though they were in the presence of one of God's prophets."[169] The dialogue that unfolds between Āmina and Najeeb reveals in an unambiguous fashion most of Gibran's central ideas as far as the religious is concerned, which are basically drawn

---

[166] Ibid.
[167] Blanchot, "Prophetic Speech," 80.
[168] *CWs in Arabic*, 331.
[169] Ibid., 332.

from Sufism: truth as *kashf* or disclosure, Longing (*al-shawq*) as the arduous bridge towards the witnessing (*mushāhdat*) of the self, understood as the microcosm of Being,[170] the Unity of Being, imagination as a disclosing insight (*baṣīra*)[171]and the transcendent unity of religions.[172] Āmina tells Najeeb that she "entered the veiled city with her body, which is [her] visible soul, and with [her] soul, which is her invisible body. And whoever tires to separate the particles of the body has been plainly led astray [*kāna fī ḍalālin mubīn*]. For the flower and its fragrance are one."[173] This notion of the Unity of Being and its imaginal disclosure is one that finds its roots in Sufism.[174] This Unity of Being, insofar as it is a Unity of Life, is nevertheless devoid from any reference to good and evil and reward and punishment or to any eschatological after-world. Āmina is not a moral preacher of the after-life; she preaches the infinitude of the human self insofar as it is a microcosm in this Life, which is essentially endless, since "every existent shall remain, and the being of the existent is proof of its eternal subsistence."[175]

What deserves attention here is the Sufi idea of primordial displacement or estrangement (*ghurba*) as a necessary condition of being in the world. Both Āmina and Zain were nomadic and migrant before settling in a small forest in north-east Lebanon.

---

[170] Āmina asserts that "Man is able to *long* [*yatashawwaq*] and *long* until *longing* uncovers the veil of phenomena over his sight so that he can contemplate or witness [*yushāhid*] his self [*dhātahu*]. Whoever is able to see his self sees the bare essence of Life." [emphasis mine] Ibid., 333. Gibran deliberately employs the verb *yushāhid* here, which is reminiscent of the Sufi *maqām* or station of *mushāhada,* contemplation or witnessing of the Real. The idea that "everything that exists resides inside you and all that resides inside you exists in Being" (Ibid., 334) resonates with the notion of the "Perfect Man" in Islamic Sufism, "who is the miniature of Reality; he is the microcosm, in whom are reflected all the perfect attributes of the macrocosm." A.J Arberry, *Sufism, An Account of the Mystics of Islam* (London: Unwin Brothers, 1972), 101.
[171] *CWs in Arabic*, 337.
[172] "Say there is no God but Allah and there is nothing but Allah and you may remain a Christian." Ibid., 334.
[173] Ibid., 333.
[174] The Imaginal is Henry Corbin's translation of what Ibn Arabi calls *al-barzakh* or *al-barzakhi*, the realm in which the "corporealization of the spirits" (*tajassud al-arwāḥ*) and the "spiritualization of the corporeal bodies" (*tarawḥun al-ajsām*) occur. The imaginal world is the world of both/and, hence *the* realm of the unveiling of Being. See Chittick, *Ibn Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination*, 15. Gibran's emphasis on the unity of body and soul and the Unity of Being cannot be understood without reference to Sufism, and this play reveals like none of his other texts the powerful Sufi motifs that permeate his work.
[175] *CWs in Arabic*, 335.

Zain tells Najeeb that he was born in Nahavand (modern-day Iran). After growing up in Shiraz and being educated in Nishapur, he went on to travel the world east and west, only to find out that he is everywhere a stranger (*gharīb*). When Najeeb responds by saying that "all of us are strangers to all places," Zain demurs: "No! I have met and conversed with thousands of people and I have only seen those who are content with their environs, finding warmth and familiarity in their limited corner of the world by turning their backs to the world."[176] This estrangement is not a negative one. It is not an estrangement vis-à-vis the nation – we should not forget, however, that the play was set in the late nineteenth century where the nation-state was increasingly becoming the sole horizon of belonging in the modern world. Nor is it an estrangement in the sense of being uprooted and not able to belong to the "mother country" after immigrating or being forced to exile. Rather, it is a primordial estrangement or exile imposed by the *originary* inability to be content with place, which is necessarily limited and demarcated as a territory in the world, that is, by the inability to feel a sense of belonging anywhere insofar as this where is a place. When Najeeb asserts that "people are naturally inclined to be attached to their place of birth," Zain retorts: "Only those who are limited in vision are naturally inclined to be attached to that which is limited in life. The short-sighted can see no more than a cubit on the track upon which they tread and a cubit on the wall upon which they support their backs."[177] In other words, the limits of one's vision (*ruʾyā*) are the limits of one's world. The spiritual here is that which denotes the possibility of the body to go beyond itself and the regime of life into which it was thrown. It does not signify a transcendent realm beyond Being, but a disclosure of Being that allows for an *expanded* experience of the world in the here and the now. *Iram Dhāt al-ʿImād*, the "veiled city" which is "a spiritual state [*ḥāla rūḥiyya*]," comes

[176] Ibid., 329.
[177] Ibid.

to designate a universal promise for the stranger (*al-gharīb*) to transcend place – the modern city or the nation – not a to a transcendent realm, but to an internal space of vision that stretches the limits of the stranger's world. In other words, the spiritual is not that which rises above the body, but the language *of* the body that widens the limits of its world. It is in this sense that we ought to understand Gibran's reclamation of Sufism as a post-religious and supra-national mode of being in the world, whether in Arabic or in English. For Almustafa, like Āmina, affirms a mode of living where space precedes and expands place:

> But you, children of space, you restless in rest, you shall not be trapped or tamed.
> Your house shall be not an anchor but a mast.
> It shall not be a glistening film that covers a wound, but an eyelid that guards the eye.
> …
> You shall not dwell in tombs made by the dead for the living.
> And though of magnificence and splendour, your house shall not hold your secret nor shelter your longing.
> For that which is boundless in you abides in the mansion of the sky, whose door is the morning mist, and whose windows are the songs and the silences of the night.[178]

Gibran's prophetic imagination, as I have attempted to demonstrate in this chapter, resumes the Abrahamic mode of prophetic speech in a modern context that compels a poetic reinvention of the religious. This reinvention, occasioned by both evolutionism – especially in its travelling to the Arab world in the Nahḍa –and Nietzsche, at once breaks with monotheism's vertical metaphysics and morality and re-claims some of its central motifs, particularly in Sufism, in post-religious, evolutionist terms. The religious that this poetic prophecy articulates is divorced from the ethical realm of good and evil and reward and punishment. By simultaneously "burying" the dead values that preclude the possibility of a new life and reinventing God as the horizon of a new, open and radical form of subjectification – the Greater Self – the

[178] *CWs*, 118.

Gibranian post-religious poet embodies a modern Abrahamic figure who insists upon the pre-institutional energy of religion to question and disrupt modernity's calculative and identitarian reason. The prophetic, that which announces *the* impossible as the horizon of dwelling anew in the world, is thus embraced by Gibran to re-direct the moderns' attention towards an *alternative* possibility – and not a ready-made answer – of being in the world, one that reinvents the past – but does not "return to" it – in order to broaden the limits of one's world that are willy-nilly imposed on us as veiling "masks" since birth. Gibran's, thus, is a genuine attempt to *un*veil and herald this alternative (im)possibility. Yet, his bilingualism – dwelling in two linguistic and cultural geographies in the modern, colonial period – has obscured and complicated his literary, post-religious enterprise, particularly in Euro-America. His switch from Arabic into English is both creative and problematic, and it is to this switch that I will turn my attention in the next chapter.

Chapter Two:
The Bilingual Chasm

> I spend my days and nights, my friend, in two worlds that are separated by a massive, bottomless abyss. What happens to me in one world, the other does not know. I live in two divergent civilizations [*madaniyyatayn*]: *The Eastern that is my mother; and the Western that has adopted me*. And what I don't fathom, my friend, is that people in these two divergent civilizations do not agree on any aspect of this small self [*dhāt*] I call "me" [*anā*]. I find myself lost, therefore, occupied less with life-thinking [*al-tafkīr bil- ḥayāt*] – and this is the vocation that suits me – than with self-thinking [*al-tafkīr bil- nafs*], a vocation from which I seek to absolve myself.
>
> From Gibran's posthumously published manuscripts.[1]

> We only ever speak one language – and, since it returns to the other, it exists asymmetrically, always for *the other*, from the other, kept by the other. Coming from the other, remaining with the other, and returning to the other.
>
> Jacques Derrida.[2]

"The gulf between the Syrian work and my own work has to be crossed every day, and that is the thing that tires me,"[3] wrote Khalil Gibran to Mary Haskell in 1918, the year he published his first book in English, *The Madman*. Is the gulf attendant on writing in and between two languages, the native and the adopted, so massive that it becomes almost impossible to bridge, or is the bilingual literary enterprise of the Arab-American poet and essayist one in which the two languages, to invoke Abdelkebir Khatibi's *Amour bilingue* (1983), occupy a space of eroticism, of mutual enrichment and exchange? Gibran's bilingualism was definitive to his social, literary and intellectual life. A panoramic and close look at his bilingual work and letters testifies to the fact his bilingual experience as a writer was a strenuous and, at times, an angst-ridden one. In this chapter, I probe this bilingualism by looking at and bringing together

---

[1] Gibran, *Iqlib al-Ṣafḥa yā Fatā: Makhṭūṭāt lam Tunshar* [Turn the Page: Hitherto Unpublished Manuscripts], (Lebanon: Gibran's National Committee, 2010), 20. [emphasis mine]. The friend to whom Gibran is speaking here is not specified.

[2] Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*, 40. [emphasis in the original]

[3] KG to MH, June 21, 1918.

several, seemingly distinct but arguably interlaced, aspects and specific moments in his literary and intellectual career. By bilingualism, not only do I mean the fact of dwelling and writing in two languages, but also the attendant straddling of two or more cultures at a specific juncture in history.

This oscillation between two linguistic and cultural geographies is both creative and problematic. Gibran alternates between the urge to rejuvenate Arabic literature and the desire to gain literary cosmopolitan appeal in the United States as an Arab writer in English. His situatedness in the U.S. at that specific historical point entailed representing, willy-nilly, the Orient. This imposed Oriental identity – that is, a *fixed* and *a priori* notion of subjectivity – created a chasm that produced different incarnations of Gibran. His shift from Arabic into English generated, therefore, a discursive multiplication of functions: an Arab revolutionary writer, on the one hand, whose creative output signalled a discursive turn in Arab literary modernity, and an Arab writer in English, on the other hand, whose texts were filtered through the vessel of the hostile cultural discourse on the *xenos*. In this double linguistic and cultural texture, I trace what is (dis)continuous in Gibran's movement from one language to another. I hope to show that while this bilingualism is culturally disjunctive, attending to Gibran's manifold writings in both languages reveals that the chasm *at once separates and connects*, that is, that the hostility of rigid cultural division could be addressed by the hospitality of critical interpretation, and that the universal in Gibran's case begins from the local and, while going beyond it, still depends on it.

In section one, I attempt to tease out, by closely reading two of Gibran's early pieces of poetic prose in Arabic, how his modernist vision (*ruʾyā ḥadāthiyya*), in the non-temporal sense that Adunis gives to the concept of poetic modernity,[4] is

[4] Adunis does not posit the 'modern' against the 'ancient'. For him, 'modern' poets such as Gibran and al-Sayyab (1926-64), "share a poetic house with the 'ancients' Imruʾl-Qays and Tarafa Ibn al-ʿAbd (538-

aesthetically staged in writing, in relation to his engagement in rejuvenating Arabic literature. This is to show that this vision is embodied in his "romantic break with the past"[5] as much as in the aesthetics of the literary text – that is, in his endeavour to write "poetic prose" that "disperses" (*yanthur*) signifiers by way of an excess of metaphor and imagery – blurring the line between content and form. In section two, I probe this *ruʾyā* (vision) in his essay "Ṣawt al-Shāʿir" [The Voice of the Poet] by shedding light on his poetics of "cosmopolitan patriotism," universal hospitality as well as Love [*maḥabba*], conceived of as justice. I focus on the textual creativity and universal orientation of Gibran's early Arabic work not only to point out its significance vis-à-vis Arab literary modernity, but, most importantly, to foreground its importance *in connection to his bilingualism* as a writer: the later switch into English would carry this universal element and efface the aesthetic particularity of his Arabic writings. Then I move on, in section three, to underscore the anxieties attendant on his decision to begin writing in English. I address this bilingual anxiety by analysing this movement as one in which English, bearing the "Syriac" trace of the Bible, represses and displaces, rather than replaces, the "language of the mother." In section four, I extend my discussion of Gibran's bilingual experience by looking at it phenomenologically. Drawing on Derrida and Levinas, I posit that language as such is inherently hospitable to the other. The originary openness of English as a foreign language occasions Gibran's inscription into the host(ile) cultural discourse that appropriates both the language and the foreign writer in its own terms. In the last section, by way of discussing his Arabic essay "The Future of the Arabic Language," I demonstrate that the mother tongue for the *late* bilingual Gibran

---

64), and with Abu Nawas and Abu Tamam who were 'modern' in relation to the pre-Islamic poets but are today considered 'ancients' when judged in terms of chronological time. All of these poets come together, beyond the simple categories of modern and ancient, in the single melting pot of poetic creativity, to form what I call the entirety of authentic Arabic poetry, or, from a historical point of view, 'the second modernity.'" In other words, the modern, within a particular literary tradition, is essentially creative, irrespective of chronological time. See Adunis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 98-102.

[5] See Sabry Hafez, *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse: A study in the Sociology of Modern Arabic Literature* (London: Saqi Books, 1993), 170.

becomes the locus of his civilizational commitment to the Arab East, arguing that writing in English as an adopted language entails the active preservation of the mother tongue and its universal potentiality. By adopting English as a language of writing, however, Gibran is adopted by the (Euro)-American culture in a way that masks his English-language texts by the identitarian veil of the Orient. I finish this chapter, therefore, with a reflective reading of his prose poem "My Friend," in which I demonstrate that between "seeming" and "being," there lies a gulf that gives rise to an interpretative horizon which is not reducible to the "identity" of the writer or to the "culture" of the language in which the text is written. By highlighting and problematizing Gibran's literary bilingualism, this chapter aims to demonstrate that while "all expatriations remain singular,"[6] the literary and intellectual experience of Gibran's expatriation offers a fertile ground for universal reflections.

1. Gibran's *Ruʾyā Ḥadāthiyya* (Modernist Vision) in Arabic: Writing as a "Coincidence of Opposites"

In this section, I focus on *vision* (*ruʾyā*) in Gibran's Arabic work insofar as it is emblematic of literary modernity (*ḥadātha*); vision as an indicator of poetic and literary innovation (*iḥdāth*) staged in *writing* itself: writing as *the* stage in which vision as event (*ḥadath*) takes place. This *ḥadath* is marked by disclosure or unveiling (*kashf*), itself wedded with innovation *iḥdāth*. Writing occasions vision (*ruʾyā*); it is that which enables his vision to *materialize*. As such, it is the terrain of linguistic and aesthetic experimentation/innovation (*iḥdāth*). I will confine my reading to two pieces of poetic prose – which exhibit what came to be known as the Gibranian style in Arabic literature.[7] This field of vision engages and plays with the senses *in* the text; vision becomes an open field of playful interactions between the senses, especially vision

---

[6] Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*, 58.

[7] This is one of his most valuable and enduring contributions to modern Arabic Literature. See Salma Khadra Jayyusi, *Modern Arabic Poetry: An Anthology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 4-5.

(sight) and voice (or sound), signifiers that are unstable and always merging into one another in the body of the Gibranian text. The visible here is always at the mercy of the invisible, but the invisible, *what is seen beyond the senses*, that *towards*[8] which Gibran was vehemently driven and with which he was creatively obsessed, is itself enabled and conditioned – in the domain of writing – by the visible, *ruʾyā* [vision - insight] as *ruʾya* [vision - sight] in its metaphoric play with other sensorial signifiers, or, more generally, with the bodily/the material. It is in and through writing – writing as material signs – that the infinite becomes finite, that is, materially circumscribed, only to become infinite again in the play of signs – their difference and deferral[9] (of meaning) *by way of metaphor*. Gibran's *ruʾyā* as *ruʾya*, vision as materialized in writing, can be described, to borrow a formula from Levinas, as "the idea of infinity in the finite,"[10] since the space of writing is that which opens the "eruption of this infinity in the finite" (of signs infinitely made to refer to each other by way of metaphor, and of vision itself as it lies at once in and beyond the senses). It could also be apprehended and approached through the prism of the imaginal, a Sufi concept to which I referred in the previous chapter, summoned here vis-à-vis the Gibranian *text* insofar as it embodies the space of writing, the 'isthmus' [*al-barzakh*], so to speak, where the invisible (the immaterial, the infinite)

---

[8] I emphasize "towards" because the "unseen" here is not merely understood as a world beyond the senses. The invisible, for Gibran, is associated with the infinite insofar as it is a "beyond" – the unknown, the future, or the infinite as an impetus not only to go beyond but to extend the visible; the *in*visible as the ultimate condition of the visible. This is what led Adunis to describe Gibran's enterprise as "Modernity as Vision."

[9] Derrida has famously coined the term *différance,* which "is not a word or concept," but the "the possibility of conceptuality," the difference and deferral of signification that disrupts the signifier/signified duality, whereby the signifier is secondary to the signified (the referent, the concept), and erupts writing, *écriture* (the Latin verb *differre*, in French *différer*, has two distinct words in English, *to defer* and *to differ*). It is here understood as embedded in Gibran's literary text by way of metaphor, that is, the signifiers are *made* different and deferred by means of an *excess* of metaphor and imagery. See Jacques Derrida, "Différance" in *The Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), 1-29.

[10] The original context in which this formula appears is different from mine. Levinas is re-defining metaphysics as "ethics or first philosophy, as opposed to ontology" in his reflection on the relation with the other: "because it opens itself to – so as to welcome – the irruption of the idea of infinity in the finite, this metaphysics is an experience of hospitality," Derrida comments. It is this reading of hospitality that I will draw upon later in my reading of (Gibran's) bilingualism. See Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michel Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 46.

and the visible (the material, the sensorial, the finite) *coincide*. The *seeming* opposites (finite/infinite, corporal/spiritual) coincide in the space of writing by simultaneously negating and affirming each other; in Derridean terms, they coincide by differing from and deferring to each other in *writing*.

I demonstrate this dynamic, first, through a reading of "Vision" [*ruʾyā*], a piece of poetic prose in *Damʿa wa Ibtisāma* (1914) [*A Tear and A Smile*].[11] In this vision, the narrator tells us that "in the midst of a field by the bank of a crystalline stream [he] *saw* a cage whose *ribs* were crocheted by a cunning hand," in one corner of which is a dead bird and in the other a "vessel whose water dried up and a plate empty of seeds."[12] We are later told that the cage has turned into "a translucent human skeleton" and that "the dead bird has metamorphosed into a human heart, and in the heart lies a deep bleeding wound, dribbling crimson blood, whose edges bear resemblance [*ḥākat*] to a grieving woman's lips."[13] The Gibranian narrator often tells us what he *sees* by emphasizing that he sees [*yarā*] and *hears* what transpires in his vision [*ruʾyā*], describing what he sees/hears – the line between vision and hearing becomes blurry – in a metaphorical language: "I *heard* a voice coming with the drops of blood out of the wound saying: I am the human heart, prisoner of matter and victim of the laws of earthly man."[14] There are some words in the passage that I want to stop at, such as the emphasized one, *hākat*; words that, when translated, are necessarily purged of their untranslatable semantic

[11] This essay was originally written in 1907, the first essay Gibran had written for a newspaper. See Masʿud Habib, *Jubrān Ḥayyan wa Mayyitan* [Gibran in his Life and Death] (Beirut, Dār al-Rihāni, 1966), 31.
[12] *CWs in Arabic*, 141 [emphasis mine]. All translations from Arabic are mine, but I sometimes depart from H. M. Nahmad's translation of *Damʿa wa Ibtisāma* into English only to adjust and refine it, a translation in which the Arabic is made to resemble, as much as possible, Gibran's English writings. This is an approach with which I take issue, because Gibran's mode of writing in Arabic differs from his English one. The poetic nature of Gibran's Arabic prose – untranslatable – is often replaced, in translation, by a prose poetry whose English is made to sound like Gibran's other English writings. This is an attempt to be "faithful" to Gibran's English texts and readers by being "unfaithful" to the particularity of his Arabic mode of writing.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid. [emphasis added]

particularity and etymological history.[15] The verb *ḥākat,* from *ḥākā, yuḥākī,* which translates as "to resemble," is very close in its etymology to *ḥakā*, *yaḥkī*, to tell or recount (a story), to narrate – both words share the same root. Thus, embedded in the *resemblance* that the wound bears to the grieving woman's lips is the act of *narration* insofar as it consists of speaking and uttering words that *disclose* a vision.

Vision (*ruʾyā*) is the horizon in which vision (*ruʾya,* sight) and voice (and what is seen and heard) are coupled within the realm of language. It is within language that vision as *ruʾyā* materially takes place. Vision is unthinkable without a language into which it is inscribed and disclosed; without language, it remains immaterial, unembodied, *non-literary*. The signs of language, of writing, disclose the content of vision and determine its (unstable) semantic sphere. "I *heard* these words [uttered out of the bleeding wounds of the human heart] and I *saw* them coming out with the drops of blood from the wounded heart, whereupon I no longer saw anything, nor did I hear a sound, so I returned to my reality."[16] As the heart bleeds, the words are simultaneously heard and seen in this vision. The words are heard and seen *because* and *as* the heart is bleeding (not metaphorically); in other words, the words are produced with the bleeding of the heart. Is it by coincidence that the Arabic word *kalima,* which means "word," shares its etymological root with *kalm*, wound? Words [*kalimāt*] are the *traces* of wounds [*kilām*] as Chaouki Zine's 'hermeneutymology' (a combination of hermeneutics and etymology) has shown in another context.[17] This Gibranian vision/insight brings vision/sight and voice together in the scene of the bleeding heart which, as it bleeds,

---

[15] I am not arguing for the "purity" and "exceptionality" of the original in the context of translation, but one should be aware of Abdelfattah Kilito's injunction "Thou Shalt Not Translate Me," that is, that the untranslatable is that which, defying translation, demands an inexhaustible translational effort. See Kilito, *Je parle toutes les langues, mais en arabe* [I Speak all Languages, but in Arabic] (Arles: Sindibad-Actes Sud 2013), 53-55.

[16] *CWs in Arabic*, 141 [emphasis mine]

[17] See Mohammad Chaouki Zine, "Tafkīkiyyat Ibn ʿArabī: al-Taʾwīl, al-Ikhtilāf, al-Kitāba" [Ibn Arabi's Deconstruction: Hermeneutics, Difference, Writing]. *Kitābāt Muʿāṣira* [Contemporary Writings] 36, no. 9 (March 1999): 53-59.

utters visible words; a scene that betrays, coincidently or not, the etymological history of the Arabic words *kalima* (word), *kalām* (speech), *kalm* (wound) and *kilām* (wounds). The wounding body of the word is seen and heard, a body whose history is linked with *kalm*, wound. The materiality of language, the sensorial effects of words – words seen and heard – disclose, paradoxically, the immateriality of vision (vision, in Ibn Arabi's definition, is disclosure/unconcealment). This is also reminiscent, as mentioned earlier, of Ibn Arabi's imaginal world, which corporealizes the spiritual and spiritualizes the corporeal: vision as the site where the corporeal and the spiritual (that which is 'supra-sensory') coincide.

This dynamic can be also seen in Gibran's long poetic essay *al-Musīqa* [On Music], published as a pamphlet in 1905, which was his first published work. In it, Gibran embarks on a poetic and Romantic description and veneration of music. What interests me here is the textuality and rich imagery of the text. Gibran's vision of music is imbued with metaphors and images that engage the senses – music here is always described analogically, in a fashion that is melodramatic or overtly imaginative.[18] As such, it attests to what it essentially is, a phenomenon that is only accessible, to speak phenomenologically, through what Edmund Husserl calls *appresentation*,[19] that is, it could be only apprehended through analogy. The latter is this case is exaggerated, amplified and dramatized by virtue of the estranging and defamiliarizing of the literary text. Let us not forget that this vision of music is materialized in writing: what matters here is not music itself or *what* the text presumably refers to outside it, but *how* the text discloses what it refers to, that is, its very textuality. What is at play in this vision is the

---

[18] Gibran, writing about music as seen in Greek and Roman mythology, recognizes that what had been said and believed about music in ancient times is now deemed "myths created by illusions." Yet he, in a patently Romantic gesture, wonders rhetorically: "what would harm us if we called those [ancient] stories a *poetic exaggeration* created by the subtlety of emotions and the love [*maḥabba*] of Beauty. Is this not, in the custom [*'urf*] of poets, poetry itself?" *CWs in Arabic*, 12. [emphasis mine]

[19] *The Essential Husserl: Basic Writings in Transcendental Phenomenology*, ed. Donn Welton (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 146.

way it fuses *sound* and *sight*, so much so that music becomes seen by what Gibran calls "my hearing eye" (*ʿayn samʿī*): "I *saw* the effects of my beloved's heart with *my hearing eye*, whereupon I became distracted to the content of her speech by the substance of her emotions, which was *embodied* in music, the *voice of the self*."[20] Not only does he hear music when his beloved sighs, but he also sees it with his "hearing eye" as his beloved's emotions are now embodied in and through music such that music itself becomes "the language of the soul."[21] Again, the immaterial is made material, the emotional is embodied and becomes simultaneously seen and heard. No signifier is stable in the body of the Gibranian text, as Fatima Qandil has also shown.[22] The signifiers of the senses, especially voice and sight (and what is heard and seen), embody one another in the space of writing. The essence of music, if there is any, becomes dispersed in the body of the text, in the play of the senses, signifiers that are *made* volatile and spectral, to use Qandil's description of the Gibranian texts, as they freely wander and embody one another by way of analogy, metaphor and metonymy. Here is a passage that illustrates this spectrality: "Music is akin to a lamp […] and the melodies in my space are the spectres of the true self or the shadows [*akhīla*] of animated feelings. And reflected in the self, which resembles a mirror standing before the events of Being and its affects, are the drawings of those spectres and the images of those shadows."[23]

Music is light, that is, is it understood – or rather imagined – as illumination. The melodies it produces are spectres and shadows which spring from the "true self" and "animated feelings" whose "drawings" and "images" are reflected in the "soul," that which is (like) a mirror. The melodies, in short, turn into images, (in)-visible, spectral images, only because they are now subject to language, language as writing. The field of hearing and listening merges into the field of vision and seeing, and this

---

[20] *CWs in Arabic*, 10. [emphasis mine]
[21] Ibid.
[22] See Qandīl, *al-Rāwī al-Shabaḥ*, 13.
[23] *CWs in Arabic*, 10.

fusion is encapsulated in what Gibran describes as the "hearing eye." The (literary) text metamorphoses the melodies, so to speak, into spectres and images. One is therefore lost in signifiers that ceaselessly refer – or, rather, that are made to refer – to other signifiers by means of metaphors and similes such that imagery at once supplements and supplants, following the Derridean logic of the supplement,[24] that which it describes: music becomes everything which it is not in the body of the text. It is even "the *tongue* of all the nations of the Earth,"[25] which in its invocation of Kilito's question about the tongue of Adam,[26] creates ambiguity as to whether it is the tongue as language or the tongue as organ. This metaphor suggests that music is a universal language by virtue of everyone's ability to *taste* it, as the double meaning of the tongue indicates. The essay abounds in such metaphors and imagery that revolve around a centre (music) whose essence is dispersed or fragmented throughout the text; it is a centre insofar as it is de-centred, and it is an essence insofar as it is dispersed, a dispersion (*nathr*, which also means 'prose') that is essentially metaphoric and poetic: poetic prose.

By writing a prose that is poetic, Gibran seeks to blur the lines between form and content, prose and poetry, because (Arabic) language for him should not be hampered by the "laws of poetry" and should even incorporate colloquial expressions in its liberating and liberated flow, as he avers in his late essay "Lakum Lughatukum w lia Lughatī" [You have your language and I have mine]. It is interesting to note that poetry in Arabic is associated with *naẓm*, that is, with versing. In classical Arabic poetry, which is still very much alive today, one verses poetry, so to speak, but does not write it. The etymology of *naẓm*, as Kilito observes, suggests "order, arrangement, harmony" and so on. The opposite of *naẓm* is *nathr*, which literally means prose, but whose

---

[24] Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: The Athlone Press: 1981), especially 53.
[25] *CWs in Arabic*, 12.
[26] Kilito, *The Tongue of Adam*, trans. Robyn Creswell (New York: New Directions Paperwork: 2016), 3.

etymology suggests "dispersion, separation, division, fragmentation."[27] Many of Gibran's early lyric essays are marked by this *poetic dispersion*, as it were – not prose poetry, but a prose that is poetic. The poetic dispersion of his (literary) text does not mean that poetry precedes prose or vice versa, that in the beginning there was either poetry or prose; these questions of "origin" do not matter for Gibran. I have highlighted this specific aspect of his writing to demonstrate that the aesthetics of the text – its "form" – is intertwined with its "content" – both reflect a relentless hostility towards any restraining "laws" whether in the textual, aesthetic or social domains. This poetic dispersion, therefore, is itself an act of "rebellion" against the political, social or religious modes of thought and action that perpetuate obsolete modes of literary expression.

Indeed, Jayyusi asserts that this kind of "poetry-in-prose" experiments, at least as I have attempted to show in the two examples above, led by Gibran and Rihani, another influential Arab *émigré* writer in America, prompted "the gradual disintegration of traditional formal concepts in Arabic poetry."[28] Bearing immensely on the Arab literary generations of the twenties and thirties, "[Gibran's] experiment was initially offered to an audience devoted to the inherited, balanced metrics of Arabic poetry, and *this would have created the greatest resistance were it not for the positive outlook Jibran (and al-Rayhani) had towards their homeland*."[29] I have emphasized the last statement because the experiment did generate a staunch resistance *despite* the *émigré* writers' attachment to their homeland. In the case of Gibran, the "positive outlook" towards his homeland manifested itself in an idealized version of Lebanon which, as apparent in his essay "Lakum Lubnānukum wa lia Lubnāni" [You Have Your Lebanon and I have Mine], serves to denounce the politics of identity and westernization in

[27] Ibid., 53.
[28] See Jayyusi, "Modernist Poetry in Arabic," in *Modern Arabic Literature*, ed. by M.M. Badawi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1992), 143.
[29] Ibid. [emphasis mine].

Greater Syria.[30] Suffice it to foreground for now, as Jayyusi reminds us, that thanks to these experiments "Jibran [*sic*] laid one cornerstone for the modernist poetry of a much later period [1940s and1950's]."[31]

No wonder that Adunis refers to Gibran as a visionary writer [*kātib ruʾyawī*] whose work was seminal in the experience of modern Arabic poetry and vital in "erecting the concept modernity in Arabic literature."[32] This vision is innovative insofar as it *invents* by *investing in* the literary/spiritual sources of the Arab self: *ḥadātha* (modernity) as *iḥdāth* or *ibtikār* (innovation) of the self and its "old sources," to the extent that these sources carry a spiritually and philosophically rich heritage, often truncated by supressing and marginalizing what is deemed transgressive, subversive and, to use Gibran's preferred word, "rebellious" in it.[33] Thus, being and belonging, for Gibran, are no longer defined or imagined as the inscription, by birth, into a certain "tradition" and "culture"– belonging as a historical *given* within a nation into which one is *thrown* by chance[34]– but to belong insofar as belonging entails a laborious effort of cultivating and carving out a new self out its old sources[35]; in other words, modernity as a practical vision whose horizon, to invoke Adunis again, is by necessity the future, the unknown – understood as the ultimate possibility of knowledge – and the infinite.

---

[30] See Chapter three, especially sections one and two.
[31] Ibid.
[32] See Adunis, *al-Thābit wa al-Mutaḥawwil*, 156.
[33] Gibran celebrates in some of his short essays what he deems "rebellious" figures in the history of Arabic poetry and thought, such as al-Maʿarri, the author of *Risālat al-Ghufrān* (The Epistle of Forgiveness), and Abu Nawas*,* the poet who is often described as "decadent" (*mājin*). See *CWs in Arabic O,* 40-45 and 66-68.
[34] I borrow this concept of "thrownness" from Heidegger. See his *Being and Time*, trans. John Macqurrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 174.
[35] I am here drawing on Meskini who, in a radical gesture, ponders the horizon of a "post-identarian self" liberated from identity as an "*a priori* apparatus of belonging inherited without any personal experience, [as] every individual has become less a *person* than an identitarian product." This "identarian liberation" is predicated on his "organic critique of identitarian reason [*al-naqd ḥayawī li al-ʿaql al-hawawī*]." Because national identity is an invention of modernity, he argues, it remains merely "one of the legal terms of belonging, and not an existential problem." So the answer to an "identity without a self" is not "a self without identity," but a "self *before* identity," Meskini argues, or, as I read it in relation to Gibran, a self that relates to its identity insofar as it *invents* by *investing in* its old (forgotten) sources, and thus re-defining and broadening identity itself by liberating it from any adherence to its "façade," on the one hand, and from any imitative and selective inheritance of "tradition," on the other. See Meskini, *al-Hawiyya wa al-Ḥurriyya,* 10-16.

Albeit not conceptually elaborated or crystallized in Gibran, this is a vision of modernity that emerged, crucially, in the *Mahjar*, away from the Arab world which it affected. I now wish to show how this *ruʾyā*, in addition to its linguistic and aesthetic embodiment, is additionally reflected in an Arab cosmopolitan disposition that disrupts the nexus of language, nation and culture, despite or perhaps because of the fact that Gibran was not a citizen of an autonomous nation-state at the time.

2. *Ṣawt al-Shāʿir* [The Voice of the Poet]: An Arabic *Voice* of a Universal *Vision*

In "The Voice of the Poet," a short piece of poetic prose published in *Damʿa wa Ibtisāma*, we may discern how the vision of the poet is embodied in his voice; a voice whose silence is supplemented and supplanted, in the body of the text, by the vision that the poet holds, one in which patriotism and cosmopolitanism become complementary rather than contradictory.[36] The title is, nevertheless, somewhat puzzling: does the poet belong to the world as such, a belonging to which his voice testifies? Why the voice and not, for instance, the words? As discussed earlier, Gibran's *ruʾyā* is marked by this tendency to engage the senses, sight and voice in particular. This is by destabilizing and dispersing, by way of metaphor, imagery and analogy, the signifiers of voice and sight such that one signifier – since *ruʾyā* is necessarily staged in a written (literary) text – is almost always made to refer to something other than itself, deconstructing itself, as it were, in its literary, linguistic embodiment. In this section, I am rather concerned with the content of this *ruʾyā* because it is relevant to my critical concern in this chapter and in the thesis as a whole: is the voice of the poet – and should it be – at once local and universal, patriotic and cosmopolitan? If so, how? And what is implied in the poet as metaphor? Gibran begins the essay by invoking the notion of giving as being that he

[36] See Pauline Kleinmgeld, *Kant and Cosmopolitanism: The Philosophical Ideal of a World Citizenship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 26.

underscores elsewhere, as discussed in Chapter One.[37] The poet is the one who "reaps" what the invisible force "sows" inside him, the one who lights up the lamp that Heaven has filled up with oil. In other words, the poet, *as* poet, gives expression to the force of giving itself: "*I do these things because I live by them*, and if the days were to thwart me and the nights were to shackle my hands, then death would be better for a prophet cast out in his nation and a poet exiled amongst his own people."[38]

What is significant to my discussion here is that the poet-prophet, in contrast to "people [*al-bashar*[39]] who are divided into sects and tribes and belong to countries and regions," is everywhere a stranger and an outsider. "*All the earth is my homeland and the human family is my tribe*," he declares, "because I have realized that man is weak and is further weakened by dividing upon himself. It is therefore a folly that the earth, which is too narrow, is partitioned into kingdoms and states."[40] Thus, Gibran proclaims his belonging to the world as such, espousing the Romantic view that the poet, unique and exceptional, is by necessity a hopeless exile. As he goes on to lament humankind's "destruction of the shrines of the spirit" and "construction of the temples of the body," a motif prevalent in his early writings – that of championing the spiritual and the platonic and dismissing the bodily and the earthly – he, "standing alone in mourning," "hear[s] a *voice* of hope from within saying: as love [*maḥabba*][41] revives the human heart by means of pains, so does folly show it the ways of knowledge. Pains and folly create a pleasure that is great and a knowledge that is perfect, because perennial wisdom has created no thing in vain under the sun."[42] The voice of the poet, the voice heard from

---

[37] I discussed the notion of giving as being (living) in the first chapter, particularly in *The Prophet*.
[38] *CWs in Arabic*, 192. [emphasis mine]
[39] There is no English equivalent to the Arabic word *al-bashar*, whose etymology – it is derived from *bashara* (skin) – suggests those whose skin is visible, that is, human beings.
[40] Ibid. [emphasis mine]
[41] It must be noted that Gibran often uses the word *maḥabba* in Arabic, which, in comparison to *ḥubb* (often used to connote sentimental or erotic love), suggests universal or non-sentimental love. We could also understand *ḥubb* as Eros and *maḥabba* as Agape, as far as Gibran is concerned at least.
[42] Ibid., 192-93.

within, heard by the poet from within himself, is a voice of hope, the voice of a poet whose prophetic vision it invokes, a voice that carries words of hope in what he deems a cynical world. A *voice* of an optimistic *vision*. This Romantic vision by virtue of which, its idealism and magnifying of the exceptional role of the poet notwithstanding, the poet is a prophet, the poet whose voice, the voice heard from within the poet, is prophetic, leads to a declaration of what we may call, after a certain reading of Kant, a "cosmopolitan patriotism"[43]:

> I long for my country because of its beauty and I love the people of my country for their misery, but if my people, motivated by what they call patriotism, fell upon the country of my neighbour, plundered its goods, murdered its men, orphaned its children, widowed its women, watered its soil with the blood of its people and fed the flesh of its youth to its prowling beasts, then I would hate my country and the people of my country.[44]

In this passage one can evidently observe how patriotism – or national belonging in general – are important for Gibran insofar as the land of one's nation[45] is one's place of birth, the home that witnessed one's up-bringing. One's love of one's country, should it become a pretext – under the banner of nationalism, patriotism or jingoism – to invade other countries and conquer other territories, turns into hate, hatred of one's country. This is Gibran espousing patriotism to the extent that it is not, or does not become, transgressive and imperialist, to the extent that it holds other nations and territories in respect in that all nations belong to the world, to the extent that one's allegiance and loyalty is to one's nation as much as it is to the world – that is, to the world of my nation but also to *the* world, the world *as* other nations, the world *of* other nations. Thus, patriotism and cosmopolitanism – which seem incompatible at face value – become necessarily complementary. Gibran is not concerned with the relationship

---

[43] Kleinmgeld, *Kant and Cosmopolitanism*, 26.
[44] *CWs in Arabic*, 193.
[45] I am not unaware of the semantic and political nuances between terms such as "land" and "nation": land or territory as one of the modern nation-state's foundational tenets. What is interesting here is that Gibran speaks of his "country" insofar as it means his "homeland," and not of "the nation-state." I focus on Gibran's national(ist) writings at length in Chapter Three.

between the state and its own citizens. Rather he is interested in the relationship between one nation and its inhabitants (presumably its citizens) on the one hand, with other nations and their inhabitants, on the other. Also, as the title of the essay indicates, this is (still) "the voice of the poet," the voice heard from within the poet, and not the reflections of a political philosopher.

Gibran goes on to bring up another crucial matter in this regard, that of hospitality:

> I sing eulogies for the place of my birth and I yearn for a house wherein I was raised, but if a wayfarer passes by, seeking shelter in that house and ailment from its inhabitants, and is turned away, then I would substitute mourning for eulogy and consolation for longing, and I would say in myself, '*the house* that refuses bread to the needy and a bed to the seeker is most meriting of destruction and ruin'.[46]

This passage is reminiscent of Kant's "cosmopolitan right" of hospitality, that one should be hospitable, not hostile, to the stranger and the foreigner, the *xenos*, that the latter have the right to hospitality "by virtue of their common possession of the surface of the earth, where, as a globe, they cannot infinitely disperse and hence must finally tolerate the presence of each other."[47] The way in which Gibran associates hospitality with one's love for one's country, interestingly, is such that the failure to be hospitable, that is, hostility towards the stranger, entails hatred towards one's country: "the *house* that refuses bread to the needy and a bed to the seeker is most meriting of destruction and ruin." This is "the voice of the poet" that has now become, as the formulation of this statement suggests, the source of a law. To put it otherwise, and let me invoke Kant again, hospitality is not a matter of philanthropy, but a (matter of) right, and if this right is not received (by the stranger) and not given (by the inhabitant), then the house of the inhabitant had better be destroyed, according to Gibran. This right is also beyond the

[46] Ibid., 193. [emphasis mine]
[47] Quoted in Seyla Benhabib, *The Rights of Others: Aliens, Residents and Citizens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 27.

law here in its unconditionality, at once within and beyond the law, to invoke Derrida's reflections on hospitality.[48] What is particularly interesting here is that Gibran speaks of the house, not its inhabitants; such a house whose inhabitants are hostile to the stranger should be destroyed, Gibran says, but why the house in particular? As Levinas and Derrida remind us, it is in the nature of a house to be hospitable[49]: should its inhabitants deny the foreigner who seeks shelter in that house the right to hospitality, the house is denied its essence too; the inhabitants would be acting in such a way that the house is stripped of its essence, "its essence without essence," that of hospitality, because "the *hôte* [the *host*, the inhabitant, who is also *a guest* in his own house] offers the hospitality that he receives *in* his home; he receives it from his own home – which, in the end, does not belong to him,"[50] hence Gibran's assertion that such a house "is most meriting of destruction and ruin."[51]

Again, this is the voice of the poet that oscillates between love and hatred, praise and elegy, longing and consolation for his country, depending on the treatment of his country and its people towards other countries and their people on the one hand, and towards the stranger and the foreigner who come to his land and seek shelter in it, on the other. A voice of an exilic poet – an originary exile – whose longing for his place of birth is far from being blinding in that the longing itself is not (only) subject to the poet's emotional and existential state but (also) to the manner in which his country, the

---

[48] Anne Dufourmantelle and Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, trans. Rachal Bowlby (California: Stanford University Press, 2000), 23-27.

[49] I am here referring to Derrida's reading of Levinas regarding hospitality: "The implacable law of hospitality: the *hôte* who receives (the host), the one who welcomes the invited or the received *hôte* (the guest), the welcoming *hôte* who considers himself the owner of the place, is in truth a *hôte* received in his own home. He receives the hospitality that he offers *in* his home; he receives it from his own home – which, in the end, does not belong to him. The *hôte* as host is a guest. The dwelling opens itself to itself, to its "essence" without essence, as a "land of asylum or refuge"." Derrida, *Adieu*, 41.

[50] Ibid. [emphasis in the original] The French *hôte* is the word for both host and guest.

[51] I must note that the imperative of hospitality towards the guest as traveller is steeped in Islam as religion, tradition and culture, and Gibran must have been aware of that. As Mona Siddiqui points out, "Islam holds hospitality as a virtue that lies at the very basis of Islamic ethical system, a concept rooted in the pre-Islamic Bedouin virtues of welcome and generosity in the harsh desert environment. The concept can be found in the Arabic root *ḍayāfa*. The Prophet is reported to have said, 'There is no good in the one who is not hospitable.'" Siddiqui, *Hospitality and Islam: Welcoming in God's name* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), 10-11.

country of his place of birth, acts towards other countries and people of other countries stopping by his own. Or, perhaps, a voice of an exilic poet whose *blindness*, the Romantic obsession with the poet as essentially solitary, exceptional and exilic, is that which preconditions and enables his *insight*, to invoke Paul De Man.[52] Gibran, in "The Voice of the Poet," proceeds: "I love the place of my birth with some of my love for my country, and I love my country with a portion of my love for the land of my country. And I love the Earth *with my all* because it is the pastureland of humanity…."[53] This passage is testimony to the cosmopolitan patriotism I mentioned above. Love of Earth, of the world, for Gibran, outweighs, but does not erase – in fact it corroborates – love of one's place of birth and love of one's country and land. Being cosmopolitan, thus, requires one to be patriotic, but patriotic in the strict sense that Gibran attributes to it: to love one's country insofar as the land of one's country and one's place of birth belong to the Earth; to love the latter is to necessarily love the former (and vice versa), in such a way that the latter takes precedence over, but does not eliminate or eclipse, the former.

In the third part of the short essay, Gibran abruptly shifts attention to address the other, his "brother" in humanity: "You are my brother and we are both the children of one universal holy Spirit … You are a human being, and I have loved you, my brother."[54] Gibran goes on to assert that whatever "you may say of me," "take from me" or "do with me," "you are my brother and I love you," but not before pointing to the limits of transgression that the other, his brother, can inflict upon him, reminding him that "you are unable to touch my essence … [and] incapable of jailing my thought, because it is as free as a breeze in a space boundless and measureless."[55] "I love you when you prostrate yourself in your mosque, when you kneel in your synagogue and

---

[52] Paul De Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).
[53] *CWs in Arabic*, 193.
[54] Ibid., 193.
[55] Ibid.

when you pray in your church," he continues, in what we may deem a Romantic, humanist manifesto, evinced in its belief in a higher indeterminate "Spirit" that unites humankind irrespective of religious and ethnic divergences – this is the early Gibran whose post-religious vision is articulated in Romantic, pre-Nietzschean terms. We should not forget that this is "the voice of the poet," an Arabic voice that speaks in a historical period of transformation and turmoil in the Middle East, the poet who takes it upon himself to voice his cosmopolitan and universal ideals of Love and justice – and we shall see why justice is aligned with Love – in a world of constant unrest and enormous promises and threats.

"You are my brother and I love you, but why do you fight me?" wonders Gibran, "why do you come to my country striving to subjugate me in order to satisfy leaders who seek glory in your words and joy in your labouring?"[56] in reference to colonialism (Ottoman in the Middle East before World War One, and Western all over the world). Protecting the rights of the other, Gibran emphasizes, is "the noblest and finest of man's acts," and "should my survival entail the annihilation of another, then death would be better and sweeter to me [than life]".[57] The voice of the poet, crucially, is not reactionary or defensive here. Rather, it is one that radically interrogates the universal obsession with the same by foregrounding the responsibility for the other. It is a voice that, in addressing the other in the name of Love, *maḥabba*, seeks to transcend the obsession with the individual or collective self, the self that is nevertheless subjected, in his case, to the oppression and subordination of this other. This *maḥabba,* interestingly, is solely realizable if conceived of as justice, such that it becomes the opposite of selfishness in its primary responsibility for the other: "I love you and you are my brother, and *Love is justice in its highest manifestations*," Gibran writes towards

[56] Ibid., 194.
[57] Ibid.

the end of the essay, "and if I were not just in my love for you *everywhere* [*fī kulli al-mawāṭin*], then I would be a deceiver who conceals the monstrosity of *selfishness* beneath love's fine raiment."[58] Gibran's cosmopolitan and universal vision, thus, is fundamentally ethical is its equation of *maḥabba* and justice, in its very emphasis on Love *qua* justice, whose universality entails that it must be enacted *anywhere* on Earth, "in all lands," not within the boundaries or in the sole interest of one's own nation or country, in allusion to colonialism and the crimes committed and justified in the name of patriotism or national interest. To put it otherwise, justice is not conditional on place (nations), time, circumstance, interest …etc.; justice as *maḥabba,* justice as such, is unconditional or else it is not justice: "Where is the justice of authority if it slays the slayer and imprisons the robber then falls upon a neighbouring country to kill thousands of its people and rob many of its goods? What say the zealots of killers who punish murderers and robbers who reward plunderers?"[59]

It should be remembered that this essay is written in Arabic, in one of Gibran's early works, at a time when he was still a monolingual writer. Gibran voices his universal vision in an unambiguous fashion, in a style that is not tersely symbolic or allegorical as is the case with his later work in English. My reading has shown that the text, however "exhaustedly" the oeuvre of its writer has been read, always escapes prejudice, categorization and pigeonholing, that the text challenges – the presumptions we have about – Gibran as a bilingual writer. Gibran's (later) work in English does not fully break from his (early) work in Arabic, especially in terms of its prophetic register, as the voice of the poet anticipates the multi-lingual expansion of his universal, prophetic imagination: "I came to be for all [*lil-kul*] and with all [*wa bil-kul*] … and what I say with one tongue now will be uttered by many tongues to come."[60] His vision

---

[58] Ibid., 195. [emphasis added]
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.

in this particular essay – which also testifies to the *singularity* of a single text that disrupts the supposed homogeneity and is at odds with the *imagined totality* of the oeuvre to which it belongs – interrupts the bond of nation, language and culture such that language becomes disruptive of the bond itself. Having said that, I should highlight that the language of writing bears, prospectively speaking, not solely on the mode of writing, on language as a terrain of aesthetic experimentation, but also on language as that which bears a horizon of promise and threat in its embeddedness in a specific cultural milieu. As Gibran turns to English as a language of writing, as he becomes a bilingual writer, the second language is the one that will most visibly carry his universal vision, which would be understood, ironically and paradoxically, as *essentially* Oriental in the (Euro)-American culture that hosted him. If language disrupts the bond of language-nation-culture, it is culture – in its appropriation of language, in its discursive capacity to absorb and contain the different and the subversive – that reaffirms it, but it does so only *insufficiently and ineffectually*. The bilingual fissure that marks Gibran's literary and intellectual enterprise therefore commands further probing. The rift is created, as I now hope to demonstrate, as soon as Gibran embarks on the endeavour to write poetry in English in the mid-1910s. The switch for him was by no means an easy one, accompanied as it was with some self-interrogatory moments that are particularly relevant and revealing here.

3. The Decision to Write in English: The Bilingual Anxiety

Gibran's bilingualism cannot be probed without considering his status as an Arab *émigré* writer in America. His decision to begin writing in English, after producing works in Arabic – works short in length but wide and influential in terms of their immediate impact on and lasting appeal in Arabic literature – was one that dwelled on him a great deal. This is due to his self-consciousness of being a poet who wishes to write in a language that is not his native or "mother tongue," with the enormous

linguistic and cultural challenge that this enterprise entails. It is worth noting that Gibran continued to write in Arabic after publishing his first book in English, *The Madman* (1918). *Al-Mawākib* [The Processions], his first serious attempt of writing metric and rhythmic poetry (in Arabic) was published in 1919, followed by *al-ʿAwāṣif* in 1920 and *al-Badāʾiʿ wa al-Ṭarāʾif* in 1923. In the same period, Gibran published *The Forerunner* (1920) and *The Prophet* (1923), going on to write *Sand and Form* (1926), a short book of aphorisms, and *Jesus the Son of Man* (1928). He continued to write non-fiction essays for the Arab press, however, an aspect of Gibran's writings that is often overlooked in Arabic and English scholarship despite its significant contribution to debates that concern the Arab Nahḍa and Arab literary modernity.

I now dwell on Gibran's decision to write in English, a decision haunted by intermittent anxieties and (self)-doubt. Jean Gibran and Kahlil G. Gibran (a cousin of Gibran), in their biography of the Arab-American poet, reveal how unsettling it was for him to write in English, wondering, "what led him to compose in English?"

> When Mary showed him a copy of *Light of Dawn*, the recently published poetry of Aristides Phoutrides, *he was still questioning whether any poet could successfully use a second language.* He was "much interested in Phoutrides' book," she wrote, "… but … he said, 'He's word ridden – But after all, *foreigners can't write English poetry …. Yet I keep on trying*.'[61]

What Gibran was questioning is not uncommon. W.B Yeats, for instance, lambasted Tagore for translating his own poetry into English, wondering rather condescendingly, "Tagore does not know English, no Indian knows English."[62] In a similar vein, T.S Eliot contended that one cannot be a bilingual poet, asserting his unawareness "of any case in which a man wrote great poetry or even fine poems equally well in two languages,"[63] a reminder of his own failure at writing poetry in French. These dispositions, coming from canonical figures of Western modernism, are not merely personal but may

---

[61] Jean and G Gibran, *Khalil Gibran: His Life and World*, 313. [Emphasis added]
[62] Steven G. Kellman, *The Translingual Imagination* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), x.
[63] Ibid.

function as taste-makers and gate-keepers. One is reminded, however, of the extraordinarily successful attempts of Vladimir Nabokov and Samuel Becket at writing "equally well" in two languages, to mention but two towering literary figures that led George Steiner to dwell on what he named the "exterritoriality" of (exilic) twentieth century literature.[64]

But if "foreigners can't write English poetry?" why was Gibran insistent on doing so? Is it the urge to be recognized as an Arab cosmopolitan writer in America? Will this bear on his writings in Arabic, and if so, how? The aforementioned biographers attach Gibran's decision to write exclusively in English to the scathing criticism heaped on the form and language of *al-Mawākib,* his long Arabic poem written in classical form but somewhat experimentally. The criticism, they claim, "did inhibit his Arabic production, and finally ended it."[65] We read:

> His last truly creative poem had been *The Procession*, and this work, so important to him, was attacked not only for its "corrupt images" but for its linguistic and metrical weaknesses. Faced with the choice of continuing to struggle for acceptance by the Arabic world of letters or of confining himself to expression in English, he took the latter course. With this decision he resolved the last major dichotomy in his life.[66]

The point is well taken, but to ascribe Gibran's late exclusive espousal of English as a language of writing poetry to the supposed failure of his Arabic poem is slightly reductive and unconvincing. After all, the poem, for all its weaknesses, was not a failure, but an experimental attempt that helped loosen the then rigid and unquestionable form of classical Arabic poetry, and the scope of this chapter prevents me from going into further detail in this regard.[67]But to go as far as claiming that his decision to write –

---

[64] Ibid., 16.
[65] Jean and G. Gibran, *Kahlil Gibran: His Life and World*, 370.
[66] Ibid.
[67] The poem's structure and its Rousseausian celebration of the primordial goodness of nature are at the centre of many critical accounts of it, especially that of Mustafa Mahmud al-ʿAqqad. For a very brief survey of the early criticism and interpretation that the poem invited as well as a critical reading of it in relation to William Blake, see Hawi, *Kahlil Gibran*, 219-22. Some critics, like Nazik Saba Yard in her introduction to the 1992 edition of the poem, argues that Gibran was poetic in his prose, not his poetry – a point that Jayyuzi has also emphasizes.

and the fact that he wrote –almost exclusively in English after *al-Mawākib* "resolved the last dichotomy of his life" is to undermine his status as a foreigner who adopted English, his adopted language, as a language of writing. It is, furthermore, to turn a blind eye to the anxieties that often accompany the bilingual writer who lives in a country and writes in a language that is not his native. For Gibran did struggle to be recognized in the U.S. as a writer of poetry in English, and his insistence on improving his use of English attests to his stubborn and strenuous endeavour to challenge his own assumption that "foreigners can't write English poetry."

This self-awareness of being a foreigner and a bilingual who inhabits two linguistic and cultural worlds – without fully inhabiting them – deepened his sense of exile, as both realms represented terrains of continuous challenge and incessant struggle for him. Forging a new literary mode of writing in Arabic poetics that would gain recognition and break with the outdated modes of expression was no less laborious than the endeavour to write poetry in a language which was not his native and in a culture that deemed him an outsider. The first enterprise, however, has undeniably left its indelible mark in the history of modern Arabic literature, while he is hitherto uncanonized in American literature despite, or because of, the popular appeal of his work, mainly *The Prophet*.[68] I am aware of the fact that breaking with a certain tradition of writing or thought often triggers sharp counter-reactions, especially in a historical juncture where traditional modes of writing and thought were highly venerated and perpetuated by the political and religious institutional authorities, and that the struggle to revive the Arab literary scene, therefore, was one that he must have anticipated.

That Arabic was his native tongue, however, is a vital element whose role and impact on his English writing – and the decision to do so – should be taken seriously as

[68] I touch on this issue in section two of Chapter Four.

far as his bilingualism is concerned. His anxieties about his own English haunted him for years. In 1918, he wrote to Mary Haskell,

> *English still fetters me*. I don't think without looking for words. In Arabic I can always say what I want to say. I have coined words and phrases in the Arabic – *to say what I wanted in the way I wanted – in my way*. When I was a boy it was my desire to write Arabic as well as anybody ever wrote in Arabic. And in all these years, even from the time I first began at sixteen to publish or to be known – with all that has been said and written against my ideas – *no one has ever criticized the way I said it or called it poorly said.*[69]

Until 1918, Gibran claims that no one had criticized the way he writes in Arabic; it was the *what* that had been subject to criticism, not the *how.* He wants to achieve the same in English, but, alas, English "fetters" him. But why this strong insistence and determination to write in English? Is it to do with his creative urge to be acknowledged as a universal poet in the U.S.? Or is it the realization that any recognition of the work he produces in the language of the host country would guarantee him the trans-national appeal that would make his work reachable to the Arab world through translation, a reminder of Abdelfatah Kilito's rather poignant remark that "to be [for an Arab writer] is to be translated [from Arabic to a Western language or the other way around, as the recognition would always involve the West]?"[70] This disquieting question should remain an open one, its rhetorical nature notwithstanding. Now the second language for Gibran, the adopted language which he wants to adopt as a language of writing, "fetters" him. Yet he insists on unfettering himself, so to speak, by way of naturalizing it, of making it akin to his native language and the way he dwells in it, by way of 'de-foreignizing' it, in short.

Dwelling – speaking and writing – in two languages is not as liberating as one might think, especially if the adopted language is the language of the adopted country whose literary history goes beyond the U.S. (*Euro*-America), and whose (then) current

---

[69] MH Journal, May. 6, 1918. [emphasis mine]
[70] Kilito, *Je Parle toutes les langues*, 50.

poetic usage he was not (perhaps) profoundly aware of, as his confession to Mary Haskell in 1922 reveals,

> I have a fear about my English. For years I have wondered about this, but I have not said it to you. Is my English, modern English, Mary, or is it the English of the past? For *English is still to me a foreign language. I still think in Arabic only*. And I know English only from Shakespeare and the Bible and you.[71]

Arabic implacably lurks in the background, devouring, as it were, his second language, to use the metaphor of bestiality that Abdelfattah Kilito employs to describe the experience of bilingualism: "When two languages live side by side, one or the other will always appear bestial. If you do not speak as I do, you are an animal. The "I" in this case must occupy the dominant position; if I am the weaker party, it is I who am the animal."[72] Yet Gibran's initial experience of bilingualism is not essentially explainable in terms of power. Rather, it is one in which the adopted language would never outweigh the native or "mother tongue" – even if it appears to do so – but would hopelessly occupy a secondary importance in relation to the first, such that the latter will invariably, often unbeknownst to its user, tinge or haunt, as it were, the adopted. Kilito's metaphor of bestiality, so far as bilingualism is concerned, is challenged by Abdelkebir Khatibi's metaphor of eroticism in his *Amour bilingue* (1983): the two languages that live side by side in the same tongue inhabit a space of eroticism, of mutual exchange and enrichment.[73] This creative mutual enrichment, however, takes place *somewhere*, that is, in a specific cultural, historical and social context where the text is culturally translated in accordance with the mode of reason and ways of reading dominant in that cultural milieu. More specifically, by *adopting* the host language as a language of writing, the culture in which Gibran's text is produced would *adopt* the text itself according to its own discursive codes, a point to which I shall return later. Gibran,

---

[71] Jean and G Gibran, *Kahlil Gibran: His Life and World*, 363-64. [emphasis added]
[72] Kilito, *The Author and His Doubles*, trans. Michael Cooperson (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 108.
[73] See Wail Hassan, "Introduction" in Kilito, *Thou Shalt Not Speak my Language*, trans. Wail Hassan (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2017), xiv, xviii, xix.

furthermore, is in a muddle as to whether his English is "modern" or that "of the past." One is inevitably driven to wonder why it was the case that "[he knew] English only through Shakespeare and the Bible and [Mary]" in the cosmopolitan climate of the early twentieth century New York. Was he not also acquainted with Blake, Keats, Shelley, Carlyle and Whitman as his letters and writings demonstrate? Or did he confine himself to the heated literary and intellectual debates that captured the Arab scene at the time? The latter case seems to be more plausible, as his various articles and essays on Arab literature, language and writing reveal. I shall come back to one of these essays later, which is significant in its contribution to those debates and relevant to my concern in this chapter.

Gibran's bilingualism warrants further attention and invites me, partly because it has been deemed secondary or left unnoticed in critical appraisals of his work, to raise more disturbing questions. I am raising these questions to disturb, more precisely, the tendency to either "resolve" or "politicize" Gibran's bilingual experience, this shift from one language to another that is either taken granted by *forgetting* the question of power on the one hand, or accounted for in terms of discursive acquiescence to the dominant culture by *over-emphasizing* the question of power, on the other. If language, following Derrida, bears the structure of promise and/or threat,[74] even before it reveals itself, before the disclosure of its content, then, to push Derrida's formulation a bit further, was the literary adoption of the adopted language in Gibran one that held the promise of what the mother tongue could not offer, namely, trans-national literary recognition and appeal? Did it not offer, also, the promise of coming to terms with the worldly experience of immigration and exile, of the (painful) pleasure that exile affords the bilingual writer whose concern with his native language and culture is confined to his country or place of birth – Syria and, more broadly, the Arab East? Did this adoption

[74] Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*, 21-22.

signify a kind of threat to the mother tongue, not because the latter was *replaced*, but because it was *repressed* and, thereby perhaps, culturally mis-translated, as the text of the adopted language becomes identified with the vague “civilizational” other – the Orient – that the repressed mother tongue represents? Or, was this adoption a *betrayal*, in the double sense of the word, of his origin, his being an Arab *and* an Oriental, that is, no longer Arab but only an Oriental when writing in English?

“The irreplaceable uniqueness of the mother tongue,”[75] its untranslatability, to summon Derrida again, is precisely what renders it replaceable. It is replaceable *because* it is untranslatable; untranslatable, incomprehensible, *in the host(ile) country*, translatable only by way of replacement, which would not completely replace it in Gibran’s case – the mother, the unique, the “place of madness itself.”[76] Rather, English would repress and displace his mother tongue, as I show below; it would not replace it. It must be remembered that it is Gibran’s own displacement that entailed the adoption of his second language, the language of the host country, as a language of writing poetry. The style of this poetry, however, is one which is conspicuously biblical and parabolic; in other words, it is out of touch with the radical transformation of poetic sensibility in the U.S. in the first two decades of the twentieth century. This style, nevertheless, is not merely a “belated” one. The Bible, for Gibran, “is Syriac literature in English words … the child of a sort of marriage.”[77] Adopting the biblical style in English is an assertion, in other words, that his writings bear the trace of “Syriac literature,” that what he writes in English remains “Syriac,” with which he identifies, remains, that is, a trace of the imagined collective self. “There is nothing in any other tongue to correspond to the English Bible. And the Chaldo-Syriac is the most beautiful language that man has made – though it is no longer used.”[78] English has repressed his

---

[75] Ibid., 86-88.
[76] Ibid., 87.
[77] Jean and G Gibran, *Kahlil Gibran: His Life and World*, 313.
[78] Ibid.

mother tongue because the style he would adopt in it is invocative of the Bible, of Syriac literature in English, which is to say that English is *secondarily* important here, that it does not have the power, because of its secondary importance, to *replace*. It can only repress his first language because it bears the trace of Syriac literature, the literature of the dead mother tongue – can one have two mothers, two "mother tongues," one dead, but not forgotten, the other alive, but repressed? English, thus, by being associated with a dead mother tongue, would not be entirely alien to him. Nevertheless, this dead mother tongue, "Syriac," remains dead, invoked only as an imagined old source of the self that is retained, by way of translation, in the English Bible.

Hence, what is forgotten here is not Syriac but translation; what is lost, forgotten, eclipsed, buried or unnoticed is not that which is translated but translation itself. Gibran's adoption of the parable and the biblical style is thus a self-translation that invokes what is dead by forgetting itself, by forgetting the movement from Arabic into English and what this movement entails. One should highlight, in this respect, two essential things. The first is that some of the texts he published in *The Madman* were written and published in Arabic first[79]; and the second is the paramount role that Mary Haskell, the woman who was his close friend and financial supporter for a great number of years, in editing his English work before publication, and the evidence suggests that she was a consistent and meticulous editor.[80] We should not forget, furthermore, that his adoption of the parable and the biblical style also boils down to the post-religious nature of his literary enterprise – one reinvents the religious by adopting a somewhat religious

---

[79] These texts, which were published in *al-Funūn*, include: "al-Layl wa al-Majnūn [Night and the Madman]" (July 1916, 97), "al-Falakī [The Astronomer]" (Dec. 1917, 673), "al-Namlāt al-Thalāth [The Three Ants]" (Feb. 1917, 781), "al-Ḥakīmān [The Two Learned Men]" (Nov. 1917, 275) and "Bayna Faṣl wa Faṣl [Said a Blade of Grass]" (Nov. 1917, 275). See Hawi, *Kahlil Gibran*, 179.
[80] See, for instance, MH to KG, Oct. 20, 1917; KG to MH, Feb. 5, 1918; MH to KG, Feb. 10, 1918; KG to MH, May 29, 1918; MH to KG May 31, 1918; KG to MH June 5, 1918; MH to KG, June 9, 1918; KG to MH June 11, 1918; and KG to MH July 11, 1918. Gibran famously dedicated his *al-Ajniḥa al-Mutakassira* (1912) [Broken Wings] to Mary Haskell: "TO THE ONE who stares at the sun with glazed eyes and grasps the fire with untrembling fingers and hears the spiritual time of Eternity I dedicate this book. – Gibran. Kahlil Gibran, dedication in *The Broken Wings*, trans. A. R. Ferris (London: Heinemann, 1959).

language. Nor should we deem language only a means, a tool of expression, severed from the culture that appropriates it and that it, in turn, articulates. This would lead me to foreground the question of hospitality, of the *hospes* (the host, the master, the guest and the stranger) and a whole "chain of significations" that links hospitality to hostility in relation to language. It would also lead me to underline the possibility of *ḍiyāfa* (hospitality) and *istiḍāfa* (hosting, receiving) as *iḍāfa* (addition or contribution), as far as Gibran's bilingual movement is concerned.

4. Bilingualism between Hospitality and Hostility

In this section, I wish once again to ask, and discuss the important question raised by the afore-mentioned biographers: What led Gibran to compose in English? If the last part of the previous section was an at attempt to account for the choice of Gibran's style in his English writings, here I discuss what drove him to write in English in the first place. This entails that the question be tackled phenomenologically, but within the worldly context of immigration, exile and foreignness. Drawing on Derrida's reading of Levinas, I address the question of language and bilingualism through the prism of hospitality and hostility. By way of ethicizing phenomenology, so to speak, Emmanuel Levinas postulates that the other is always already hospitable, *passively* hospitable, because the face of the other always already signals a *yes*: "there is no face without a welcome."[81] The originary *yes* of the other, therefore, is necessarily a welcoming; the face, in its *intentionality*, receives and welcomes the other, and hence, it is essentially hospitable. If the face of the other is inherently hospitable, so is the *language* of the other, I would suggest, which does not, crucially, belong to him/her. Writing in the language of the other is a "yes *to* the Other," the responsible *yes* that not only "precedes the *yes of* the Other,"[82] as is the case with the face, but does not even

[81] Derrida, *Adieu*, 24.
[82] Ibid. [emphasis in the original]

depend on it. The language of the other, like the face of the other, is inherently hospitable, yet language, unlike the face, does *not belong* (to the other). As the other which does not belong, language does *not* lend itself to possession. In its connection to the face, however, language is *appropriated*, not possessed, as native. Hence its foreignness, and openness, *to* those for whom it is not native. The openness of the host – the face of the other, the language *as* other – necessitates the openness of the guest, and this (double) openness is perhaps what the French word *hôte* seems to encapsulate, as it is the word for both the host and the guest. This originary linguistic hospitality, however, does not always occasion cultural hospitality – in fact it may entail the opposite, that is, cultural hostility. Language, albeit essentially hospitable, that is, inherently open to the other, is necessarily appropriated in and by (a certain) culture. The foreigner, therefore, would be subject(ed) at once to hospitality and hostility, as s/he is not only foreign to the language, but to the culture in which this language is appropriated as the culture's "own" language.

I am here thinking about hospitality, openness, foreignness and hostility in relation to language – and the experience of writing in a language which is not "maternal" as a foreigner, a *xenos*, an outsider – this "house of Being"[83] that one inhabits but never possesses, a house for all, by nativity or adoption, a house that receives and hosts its guests in a hospitality offered by language, language as such. And since in every hospitality lies an *addition*, a contribution of some sort, writing in the adopted language bespeaks that which lies in every hospitality, namely, that the *guest* is fundamentally (bringing) an addition (to the *host* language, country, culture, etc.), a contribution captured by the lexical/etymological proximity between the two Arabic words *ḍiyāfa* (hospitality) and *iḍāfa* (addition), and even between the latter and *istiḍāfa*

[83] See Heidegger, "Letter to Humanism," in *Basic Writings*, 217.

(hosting, receiving).[84] "What is added to Being is that which is hosted from addition itself [*mā yuḍāf fil-wujūd huwa mā yustaḍāf mina al-iḍāfa nafsihā*],"[85] writes Chaouki Zine. He goes on to note that "immigration, translation and language are the manifestations that attest to hospitality as addition [*ḍiyāfa* as *iḍāfa*]."[86] It follows that writing in the adopted language is not an act of (self)-betrayal, because one is inherently and unwittingly hospitable and open to the other. This is the case even if one betrays hostility to the guest, since what preconditions hostility is intentionality, a movement towards the other that is essentially hospitable as it moves to, receives and hosts the other. For Gibran – and many other exilic/*émigrés*, bilingual writers – writing in two languages reflects and materializes, as it were, the welcoming response to the welcoming *yes* (of language) that "begins" and "commands."[87]

This might explain why Gibran was so insistently keen on writing in English, his self-awareness of his status as *xenos* notwithstanding. Did he feel bound to answer to the hospitality of the host country and its language by writing – and insisting to do so – in that very language, the strenuous endeavor that might have led him to capitalize on his status of an Oriental *xenos* as a strategy of appeal, even of "survival" as Richard E. Hishmeh argues[88]? One is indeed reminded of his struggle to gain literary recognition in the U.S. and his decision to write parables in English despite his awareness that "English is not the language for parables."[89] This decision could be seen as a 'foreignization' of English, as that which testifies to *ḍiyāfa* as *iḍāfa* (hospitality as – that which entails – addition). In other words, unable to write in English as a native could,

---

[84] See Mohammad Chaouki Zine, "al-Hijra, al-Maskūnia, al-Manzil al-Mafqūd: ʿAnāsir fī Hājis al-Gharāba," [Migration, Habitability and the Lost Home: Elements in the Apprehension of *Heimlich*]. *Majallat Yatafakkarūn* [Yatafakkarun Journal], no. 11 (2017): 14-31.
[85] Ibid., 20.
[86] Ibid.
[87] "But since everything must begin by some *yes,* the response begins, the response commands." Derrida, *Adieu*, 240. [emphasis in the original]
[88] Hishmeh, "Strategic Genius, Disidentification, and the Burden of *The Prophet* in Arab-American Poetry," 65-92.
[89] "English is not the language for parables, but one is apt to find faults with his tools when he cannot use them well. The fault lies within me. But I will *learn* how write in English." KG to MH, May. 16, 1916.

he would nevertheless write in it as an Arab Syrian to whom English still carries a "Syriac" trace, an English tinged with an imagined trace of the same, insofar as the same includes the old sources of self. His shift into English would therefore efface the aesthetic particularity of his Arabic mode of writing, for he could not be as linguistically creative in English as he was in Arabic. This does not mean that his English work is not creative; it means that he was not able, in the second language, to be as stylistically inventive as he was in the first.

His literary contribution in English, thus, would not be evaluated on its own terms, that is, by considering *both* its limitations *and* merits in a manner that does not eclipse the latter by the former. His English mode of writing, prophetically staged and ethically and universally oriented, would be deemed "belated" and "Oriental,"[90] for better or worse, in the imaginary and discursive universe of the metropolitan culture. Hospitality, thus, becomes entwined with hostility, a rather subtle and invisible one, and therein lies its discursive potency. This subtle hostility forces the foreign, Arab writer and his English text onto the identitarian category imposed on him in the host(ile) culture. It forces the foreign, Arab writer to be a representative of the Orient in the Occident, and as a representative of the Orient, his text would become nothing more than an emanation of that Oriental essence, which he and his text thereby cannot escape. One might be inclined, however, to view Gibran's English work in light of what Srinivas Aravamudan has termed "Guru English," the cosmopolitanization of south Indian religion through English. Following Aravamudan, we could hazard the contention that Gibran's English work reveals an "underground religiosity without fully-fledged religion, self-orientalization without colonialist orientalism, and

---

[90] The Orient as an identitarian category here precedes and pre-determines the literary value of the text. See my discussion and interrogation, in Chapter Four, of the early reception of Gibran's works in the U.S.; in particular, *The Nation*'s review of *The Madman* and *Poetry*'s reviews of The *Forerunner* and *The Prophet.* See also, Waterfield, *Prophet*, 216.

transidiomatic universalism without the need for a foundational universalism."[91] But this would obscure, on the one hand, Gibran's prophetic imagination and the post-religious force – at once Nietzschean and Abrahamic – of his writings in both languages and, on the other hand, the important intellectual and worldly context that enabled their emergence and enunciation, as discussed in Chapter One.

The originary hospitality of language, this universal hospitality of language as a house of Being, is that which conditions, in Gibran's case, both the contribution (*al-iḍāfa*) and its hostile, albeit subtle, domestication in the host culture, the appropriative culture that separates the same and the other, that identifies, by way of discursive strategies and rules, what falls within and without.[92] To be more specific, by writing in the second language, the language of the host(ile) culture, Gibran's English text is identified as *essentially* "Oriental," and this identification is one that Gibran took for granted because the civilizational separation of the world into Orient and Occident had been discursively ossified in modernity and the Nahḍa. But as to what the signifier "Oriental" – or, for that matter, "Occidental" – signifies, the signified becomes so many things at once. I deliberately avoid, therefore, using the term "self-Orientalization" in this specific context, because it presupposes, on the one side, an agential condition, or a set of conditions, where the Oriental *can* evade being an Oriental in that cultural location at that specific point in history but chooses not to – which was *not* the case.[93] It also presupposes, on the other side, that the Oriental can refer to one and only one thing, an essentialist Orient that is ontologically distinct from and inferior to the Occident – which was *not*, also, the case. Self-Orientalization becomes, in this respect, nothing more than a political judgement or a culturalist assumption based on a monosemic and

---

[91] See Srinivas Aravamudan, *South Asian Religion in a Cosmopolitan Language* (Princeton; Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2006), 264.
[92] Every culture, *as* culture, does that, but it becomes problematic when it is carried out in essentialist, racialist and hierarchical terms.
[93] Which does not mean, crucially, the s/he was/is not able to question it, directly or indirectly. The point is that the identification, because ubiquitous, was almost impossible to avoid.

unchanging notion of symbolic geography, which forgets the discursive and historical conditions in which "Orient" and "Occident," as entrenched identitarian categories that often went unquestioned in the modern, colonial period, held specific and varied designations and generated different performative acts depending on who uses them, where and for what purpose.[94]

In this context, Gibran speaks Abrahamically but as an Oriental, and the Abrahamic – more specifically, the prophetic – cannot be reduced to the Oriental. The anti-identitarian impulse of his anglophone text, which is generated in modernity and against its identitarian reason, attests to the fact that what mattered for him was neither Orient nor Occident – nor, for that matter, the "bridging" of the two – but the identitarian veils that mask our faces *everywhere*, which was my concern in Chapter One. But because he speaks as an Oriental, because of that pervasive identitarian reason, the post-religious thrust of his writings is filtered through that discursive prism of identity. The agential space within which he could act as an Arab writer in English was therefore very limited. In other words, he could only speak as an Oriental, as an outsider, and this Orient as Outside would supplement and, alas, often supplant the Abrahamic as Outside – *the* impossible/the future as the horizon of being and dwelling in the world.[95] The Outside, in this context, becomes therefore undecidable.[96]

---

[94] Gibran did identify as an Oriental, but not as a stereotypically fashioned Oriental in the imaginary of the Occident. One, therefore, should not look at his English text from a culturalist perspective that sees it as nothing more than an acquiescence to the Orientalist distinction between a "mystical" East and a "materialist" West. This is partly because any textual engagement with his texts from a bilingual and worldly perspective would inevitably show a complex texture occasioned by the travelling of ideas across time and space on a global scale in modernity and the Nahḍa, and across which the prophetic as an aesthetic and ethical motif is a consistent element.

[95] See sections two and three of Chapter One.

[96] I am here drawing on Derrida's notions of the "supplement" and the "undecidable." The latter refers to the fundamental and irreducible semantic ambivalence/instability that at once inheres in and destabilizes hierarchical oppositions – such as presence/absence, speech/writing – of which Plato's "pharmakon" in *Phaedrus* is an illustrative example. See Derrida, "The Pharmakon," in *Dissemination*, 95-117. In this case, the *aesthetics* of Gibran's text is inevitably confused with – and obscured by – the *politics* of its reception in the U.S. See sections one and two of Chapter Four.

The chasm that Gibran wanted to cross between his Syrian and English work is perhaps unbridgeable. But this chasm goes beyond his own writings, which, as I tried to show in Chapter One, disrupt and transcend identitarian reason. This gulf is therefore the by-product of his bifurcating experience as an *émigré* bilingual writer in the worldly and cultural context in which he lived. Both here and there, neither here nor there, but seeking no "third space," his bilingual experience is one in which the two languages in question *depend on one another* (as I show in the next section), but in such a way that one, Arabic, *overwhelms* the other, English, which resulted, for him, ironically, in continuing to write poetry in the second despite the entrenched and overwhelming presence of the first. His attachment to Arabic therefore never withered, and it manifested itself, not in his English work – which afforded him with the possibility of literary recognition as an Arab cosmopolitan writer in the U.S. – but in his engagement with debates concerning Arab literary and cultural modernity, the Arab Nahḍa and, more specifically, the Arabic language.

5. Arabic, Bilingualism and the Orient as Identitarian Veil

Gibran's attachment to Greater Syria – the geographical space that includes, nowadays, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine/Israel – was unwavering even though he lived in the U.S. for almost thirty years.[97] English never outweighed his deeply intellectual and cultural attachment to the Arabic language. The alien tongue, to put it otherwise, was not tempting enough for him, but was tempting all the same, strongly and persistently preoccupied as he was with the linguistic, cultural and civilizational status of Syria and the Arab world at the time. Not only is this evinced in his literary and poetic writings, but it is voiced, most importantly, in the numerous articles and one-act plays that he wrote for active Arab press in the *Mahjar* over the years. I will focus

[97] He emigrated to the United States in 1895, returned to Lebanon in 1898 to study Arabic, and in 1902 he went back to America where he lived until his demise in 1931.

on the national orientation of his literary and intellectual enterprise at length in the next chapter. Since I am, in this chapter, interested in Gibran as a bilingual writer, I now turn to his late Arabic writings, and particularly to his essay "Mustaqbal al-Lugha al-ʿArabiya [The Future of Arabic Language]." This essay testifies to and exemplifies his relentless preoccupation with the Arab East as a civilizational space, even when he was writing poetry exclusively in English in the 1920s. But I highlight this aspect in relation to his bilingualism: namely, what each language represented and meant for him as a bilingual writer.

In "The Future of Arabic Language" – first published in 1920 in *al-Hilāl* periodical, republished in *al-Badāʾiʿ wa al-Tarāʾif* (1923)[98] and later translated into English, but not entirely, by Adnan Haydar in 2010[99] – Gibran lends the utmost significance to what he calls the "the power of invention," which stands, for him, as that upon which the future of the Arabic language is ultimately contingent. "Language is one manifestation of the power of invention in a nation's totality or public self," he writes. "But if this power slumbers," he goes on, "language will stop in its tracks, and to stop is to regress, and regression leads to death and extinction."[100] Gibran warns that unless invention is present "in all the nations that speak Arabic, the future [of Arabic] will be like the present of its two sisters – Syriac and Classical Hebrew."[101] He predicates his argument on the poet as at once an epitome and a metaphor for *ibtikār* (invention) and

---

[98] This was originally an interview with Gibran and that was later turned into an essay when republished in *al-Badāʾiʿ wa al-Tarāʾif.*

[99] Haydar avoided the translation of two sections, entitled, in the form of questions, as follows: "Will the spread of Arabic be propagated at higher and lower levels of education, and will all of the sciences be taught in it?"; and "Will *al-fusḥa* [the standard] triumph over the different dialects and unite them?" I speculate that the translator abstained from translating these two sections because of the controversial and sensitive nature of the issues discussed therein – the problem of education and the issue of standard/dialect – not to mention Gibran's defence of the dialect in the essay and his advocacy for its creative integration into the standard.
See Kahlil Gibran, "The Future of the Arabic Language (Excerpt)," in *Tablet & Pen: Literary Landscapes from the Modern Middle East, ed. Reza Aslan* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co. 2011). 6-11.
All the following quotes in my discussion of this essay are cited from Haydar's translation unless otherwise noted.

[100] Ibid., 6.

[101] Ibid.

ibdāʿ (creativity) such the figure of the poet becomes everything which an imitator is not. The poet, for him, is "the father and mother of the language"; and if so, he argues, "the imitator is the weaver of its shroud and the digger of its grave." The poet is, by definition, "every inventor, be he big or small, every discoverer, be he strong or weak, every creator, be he great or humble, every lover of pure life, be he a master or a pauper and everyone who stands in awe before the day and the night, be he a philosopher or a guard at a vineyard."[102] The life and revival of the language and, by extension, the countries[103] in which this language is spoken, are contingent upon the poetic – that is, in Gibran's logic, the inventive as opposed to the imitative – energy and rigour of its speakers, not solely in poetry or writing but, as Gibran's stretched metaphor of the poet indicates, in every domain of life. Language, for Gibran, is understood as Life, that is, as Being, and since Life for Gibran is "a formidable procession" that "forever moves forward," language, whose survival hinges on the inventive urge of its speakers or lack thereof, would therefore either move forward or lag behind. Language is the Life/Being *of* its own speakers. The absence of invention means imitation, that is, death. Gibran's modernist vision (*ruʾyā ḥadāthiyya*) in this essay is premised upon invention (*ibtikār*) as the event (*ḥadath*) that would guarantee the innovation (*iḥdāth*) of language and its own speakers. The "power of innovation," as "hunger, thirst, and longing for the unknown,"[104] is that which would liberate the Arab self from sterility, from being hostage to its own identitarian closure, that is, to its past as the sole horizon for its *raison d'être*. Language should never cease to be regenerated by the creativity of its

---

[102] Ibid., 9.

[103] As far as Arabic is concerned, we cannot speak of "national" literature in the modern European sense of the term. Arabic literature (*adab*), which predates modernity – Arabic as a language has not witnessed a dramatic transformation in and after modernity; the Qur'an or any premodern "text" in Arabic is legible and comprehensible to the modern Arabic reader, although with some difficulty – cannot be understood as strictly "national," that is, as confined to one particular national state. It is, in a sense, already trans-national; or, perhaps more accurately, the "colonial" birth of the modern nation-state in the Arab world has transformed Arabic from a pre-national cosmopolitan language into a trans-national one, whose literature is thereby necessarily trans-national and diverse.

[104] Gibran, "The Future of the Arabic Language," 6.

speakers, who are incumbent with the task of opening up language to its potentiality of *ibtikār* and *iḥdāth* because, to quote Yacine Nourani in his analysis of the national ideology of language as self-generating in the reformist project of the Nahḍa, "if the language fails to grow, it reflects the passivity, the internal moral failure of its speakers."[105] To put it in Heideggerian terms, Gibran, by bestowing upon the poet the role of reviving the language, calls for a radically "poetic dwelling" in the world, insofar as "poetic" designates that which invariably sets out to liberate language from its orthodox spectrum of expression, that which enables us to experience Being in novel and *innovative* ways, as Gibran's metaphor of the poet powerfully suggests.

Gibran, furthermore, employs the image of the poet, so steeped in Arab culture, by extending it to encompass every domain of social, cultural and economic life, with the underlying aim of "reviving" the Arab "civilization." In this regard Gibran must be seen as a pursuing the Arab Nahḍa's intellectual trajectory. Although he does not embrace the positivist and rationalist paradigm that some of the prominent Nahḍa intellectuals and reformers espoused,[106] he cannot but consider the West, as did the Nahḍa reformers, to be leading the "procession" of history which the Arabs had led in the past, and in whose "rear" they now "march." This historical universalism is employed here, as indeed it had been adopted in the Nahḍa,[107] to justify the Arab "civilizational retardation" and accentuate its entanglement in modern history. Unlike the Nahḍa reformers, however, Gibran does not regard the West as *the* model of civilization and progress. In other words, the civilizational trajectory that the Arabs would carve out for themselves, Gibran argues, should not take as its model that of the West. The revival of this civilization should rather spring from within, from the Arabic

[105] See Yaseen Noorani. "'Hard and Soft Multilingualism." *Critical Multilingualism Studies* 1:2 (2013): 24.
[106] See Sheehi, *Foundations*, 24-25.
[107] Sheehi refers to a "nomenclature of reform" whose telos is modern civilisation (*tamaddun and hadara*) that prevailed almost amongst all Arab reform discourses throughout the nineteenth century. Ibid. 24-25.

language itself as the locus of its speakers' "power of invention." Any borrowing from the West or the Arabo-Islamic past is inevitable, but this inevitability entails an alert, critical attitude. This is an Arab, Gibranian vision that is at odds with the Nahḍa's positivist and rationalist epistemology of "civilization and progress," which embroiled modern Arab subjectivity in a strained Hegelian interaction with West and its colonial modernity.[108] Yet Gibran's essay, it must be remembered, was written when Greater Syria fell into the hands of colonial France and Britain, which resulted in the well-known partition of the area whose effects are still felt today. His concern for the future of the Arabic language is not only reflective of the primacy of Arabic for him, but it is, most importantly, part of a resistance movement that sought to ward off the colonial and cultural influence of the West on the Arabs, who must preserve their particularity – *not* particular*ism*, but an emphasis on the *universal potentiality* that this particular form of life still possesses – by generating the power of invention necessary for their civilizational survival.

Gibran goes as far as defending the dialects and foresees, albeit soberly, their integration into the "body of *al-fusḥa* [the standard]" by drawing on the example of the creative use of Italian by Dante, Petrarch and St Francis of Assisi, and its decisive role, as he sees it, in transforming Italian from a vernacular into a standard language. Towards the end of the essay, Gibran makes a plea for an Eastern authenticity and originality in Arabic literature that breaks with the outdated modes of poetics that are no longer able to answer to the (then) Arab social, political and cultural status quo:

> Let your self-esteem prevent you from composing eulogies, elegies, and occasional poems, for it is better for you and for the Arabic language to die despised and cast out than to burn the incense of your hearts before the idols and the monuments. Let your *national zeal* spur you to depict the mysteries of pain and the miracles of joy that characterize life in the East, for it is better for you and for the Arabic language to adopt the simplest events in your surroundings

[108] Ibid., 33-36.

> and clothe them with the fabric of your imagination, than to translate the most beautiful and the most respected of what the Westerners have written.[109]

I wish to stress two points here. First: “national zeal” for Gibran becomes a strategic incentive for rejuvenating Arabic literature in that its subject matter should derive from the local “imagination” and “surroundings” of the Arab subject. To put it otherwise, “national zeal” should encourage an *ibtikār* of national language rooted in the local “imagination,” itself contingent upon the material conditions of the present and detached from the past, that is, from tradition insofar as it perpetuates modes of expression that are unable to articulate the present of the Arab subject in its yearning for a better future; in short, tradition *as* traditional*ism*. Second: this national literature, however modest, becomes, according to Gibran, better than any translation of Western literature, however great. Gibran might be alluding to Lutfi al-Manfaluti, whose rather “unfaithful” and “domesticating” adaptations of French literature[110] marked the Arab literary scene at the time. But why is Gibran, arguably one of the pioneers of Arab literary modernity whose work in Arabic exhibits many “Western” influences, astonishingly dismissive of translation and supportive of a notion of Arabic literature that is premised, albeit strategically, on an Arab national spirit? Was the kind of literature he wrote possible at all without the influence of modern Western literature? Gibran is not referring to modern *forms* of literature whose provenance is undeniably European, but to literature’s capacity to articulate the local reality and imagination of the Arab subject. This capacity would potentially preserve the Arab cultural and social particularity but in a literary form whose “universality” is taken for granted. In a

[109] Gibran, “The Future of the Arabic Language,” 11. [emphasis added]

[110] Most of the works of Mustafa Lutfi al-Manfaluti (1876-1924), except *al-Nadharāt*, are Arabized or adapted, rather than translated, versions of French texts, which render them faithful to the Arab literary tradition by being unfaithful to the original French language and cultural, literary context. Al-Manfaluti, after all, did not speak any European language. On the impact of al-Manfaluti’s work on modern Arabic literature, see Kilito, *Thou Shalt Not Speak My Language*, 3-5.

response to a question regarding the influence of Western civilization on the Arabic language, Gibran writes:

> The Western Spirit is at once our friend and our enemy. It is a friend if we can vanquish it and an enemy if it can vanquish us, a friend if we can open our hearts to it, and an enemy if we offer it our hearts, a friend if we borrow from it what suits us and an enemy if we place ourselves in situations that suit it.[111]

This passage should be read in its proper historical context, that of colonialism. Gibran, as a colonial subject, however remote or cut off he might be from his roots, advocates a critical version of nationalism and a poetics of language whose "power of invention" should come exclusively from within the sources of the Arab self. Translation without innovation is undesirable and must be avoided; cautious and critical borrowing, however, is preferable –indeed recommended – because "the Western civilization," being at "the forefront of [life's] procession," is by necessity the one that would exert influence on "the nations that walk last in the procession," the imitators.[112] Is not this cautious borrowing – borrowing "what suits us" – an instrumentalization? Since the Arabs are no longer at the forefront of the civilizational procession, since, in other words, they have no agential and civilizational capacity to influence the other, the sole horizon for their language and literature to thrive is to carry out an "inventive" borrowing that would not eclipse their particularity. Otherwise, the "enemy" would simply "vanquish" them.

The bilingual Gibran who, in the same year published *The Forerunner* in English, is a staunch defender of the Arabic language. Its survival, as he sees it, depends on "the power of invention" from within the (re)-sources of the Arab, Eastern self. Imitation, of the past or the West, would cause the regression and death of the language,

[111] Gibran, "The Future of the Arabic Language," 8.
[112] In his one-act play *Assilbān*, published in *al-ʿAwāṣif* (1916), the preservation of the supposed "purity" of Arabic literatures – according to one of the characters, Yusuf Masarra, a writer and litterateur – would bring about the death of the language and its literatures. "The old nations which do not benefit from what the new nations produce run the risk of literary death and spiritual extinction," Yusuf responds to Khalil Bik (a government employee), who believes that "the influence of the Western literatures on our language is a pernicious thing." *CWs in Arabic*, 270.

and, for that matter, of its speakers. This would be understandable if Gibran were a monolingual writer. His bilingualism, however, means that English for him – the *second* acquired language – is necessarily and unsurprisingly *secondary* in its cultural and civilizational importance. But if it holds this secondary importance – which does not mean it is unimportant – this is because it is simply *not* "the language of the mother." So, what happens to the latter when one writes in the second language? Does writing in the second language necessarily entail or presuppose the forgetting of the first? Gibran writes in the second language, the language of the civilization that "adopted" him,[113] only by remembering the mother, defending the mother, perpetuating the mother. The language of the mother must be maintained, and this maintenance is the condition of writing in the second language. In other words, writing in the adopted language depends on the active remembrance and maintenance of the first. Thus, to write as a poet in English, for Gibran, requires the active preservation of Arabic, the tongue that lost its universal force but that nevertheless still retains, and is able to enact, its potential for universality, which hinges upon the innovative, poetic spirit of its speakers.

Yet, to write as an Arab writer in English, to enact the universality of the prophetic in a Western language as an Arab writer, entails both an assiduous effort of self-translation – translation in the sense of carrying oneself across from one language to another,[114] a transformation whose outcomes would go beyond the "intentions" of the self-translated writer – and a struggle for recognition in the cultural space that "adopted" him. This recognition would assuage the anxiety and affliction of living in a country which is not his own and writing in a language which is not his native, and would further mitigate those adverse aspects of exile that are deliberately marginalized

[113] See the first epigraph of this chapter.
[114] I am drawing on the Latin root *translatio*, which combines *trans* (across) and the past participle of *ferre*, *latio*, meaning "to carry" or "to bring." *Translat*, that is, "carried across," is the past participle of *transferre*.

in the liberal cosmopolitan imagination of the metropolis,[115] but only at the cost of cultural translation. As an Arab, Oriental immigrant in that linguistic and cultural territory, Gibran faces the double challenge of writing well in the adopted language and gaining the cosmopolitan recognition of the culture that adopted him. To *adopt*, therefore, a language whose "civilization" is leading the procession of history, is to be willy-nilly *adopted by* its culture. How would this culture adopt him then, he who writes as a post-religious, prophetic poet – the madman, the forerunner and the prophet – who sets out to demolish the new gods of modernity and announce an impossible, poetic dwelling in the world? I will address this question in detail in Chapter Four, but suffice it to point out for now that this culture would *essentially* adopt him as an Oriental, as an outsider who speaks in the name of, who speaks, as it were, the Orient, in an Occidental cultural sphere. I am here speaking of the Orient as fashioned in the imperial imagination of the Occident: essentially mystical, mysterious and strange, the simultaneously threatening and desirable Outside that is constitutive, by virtue of its domesticated distance, of the self-definition of the Occident itself.

Thus, by writing in the adopted language Gibran is not so much seen as linguistically and culturally different as ontologically distinct, because "Oriental," from the Occidental culture. Filtered through discursive prism of the host(ile) culture, he becomes the incarnation of the Oriental as a culturally constructed other. In other words, far from being the universally equal other whose essence remains inaccessible and unamenable to the appropriation of the same, he is automatically categorized as an appropriated other, which necessarily entails that his text would be culturally mis-

---

[115] "Conceiving of exile solely as an engine for the production of cosmopolitan attitudes can, and often does, leave out its other essential aspects: the need to circumscribe one's experience in the constraints of a new cultural framework, the imperative to begin to translate that experience in languages that are often not yet one's own, and to grope one's way through the loss and trauma intrinsic in this process of transition." See Galin Tihanov, "Narratives of Exile: Cosmopolitanism Beyond the Liberal Imagination," in *Whose Cosmopolitanism? Critical Perspectives, Relationalities and Discontents*, ed. N. Glick Schiller and A. Irving (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2015), 141-59

translated, that is, understood and interpreted in culturalist and reductionist terms, as I show in detail in Chapter Four. Yet his text, as a self-translated text, as a bilingual offspring, cannot be reduced to an Oriental, identitarian designation. The Orient, here, functions as an identitarian entity that veils the text itself and haunts it, so to speak, that pre-determines the understanding and interpretation of the text by reducing it to an imagined essence and genealogy: the Orient; while the latter remains one discursive element, among others, in the multi-layered act of reading, understanding and interpretation. This means that, in a (Euro)-American cultural context, both his post-religious, anti-identitarian vision *and* the Orient as identitarian veil simultaneously and paradoxically inhabit his English text, two elements that should *not* be confused with one another but that ought to be hermeneutically exposed and critically unveiled, respectively.

I wish to finish this section by discussing one of Gibran's powerful prose poems in English, "My Friend," published in *The Madman*. This is a text that offers us the possibility of closely reading it in relation to what I have been discussing so far, namely the questions of the text, identity as a mask or veil and what lies beneath or beyond any bilingual or bicultural chasm. Who is this friend that the anglophone Gibran is addressing in the prose poem? And why friendship? We should, perhaps, not so much inquire about "who" the friend is – that is, his "identity" – as about what the madman is saying to this hypothetical friend:

> My friend, I am not what I seem. Seeming is but a garment I wear – a care-woven garment that protects me from thy questionings and three from my negligence.
>
> The "I" in me, my friend, dwells in the house of silence, and therein it shall remain for ever more, unperceived, unapproachable.[116]

[116] *CWs*, 7.

Seeming and being, the madman is saying, are two different things. We may conjecture that this friend has mistaken the madman's "garment" for his being. The madman therefore responds by revealing in a prose poem addressed to this friend, that his being, his "I," remains "unperceived" and "unapproachable," irrespective of his "garment." But the garment protects the madman from the friend's questionings and protects the friend from the madman's negligence. Does this mean that without the garment the madman would neglect the curiosity of the friend, that the "care-woven" garment – identity – is a necessary tool of protecting the self from the other and the other from the self? The madman goes as far as telling the friend that he would not have him understand his "seafaring thoughts," visit him in his Hell, "hear the songs of [his] darkness nor see [his] wings beating against the stars"[117] at night. The prose poem, paradoxically, discloses *all this* to the friend. It informs him that not only is he not able to perceive and approach the essence of the madman, but that he is everything the madman is not, though even when the friend calls him "across the unbridgeable gulf, "My companion, my comrade," the madman would call back "My friend, my comrade"."[118] We may infer that the friend is the hypothetical other, perhaps his American reader – since the poem is written in English and published in the U.S. – but also the other in general. What Gibran is saying is that the "I" remains essentially inaccessible to the other, irrespective of the cultural and social garments that we wear, irrespective of the language that we use or inhabit. In other words, ipseity precedes identity and remains "unperceived" and "unapproachable," regardless of the identity of the friend and whether one shares it with her or not. Identity, nevertheless, is a necessary protective "garment," but nothing more than a garment. But why would the madman reveal that which he does not want the friend to see, hear, visit or understand?

---

[117] Ibid., 7.
[118] Ibid.

Why would he say to his friend, "thou art good and cautious and wise; thou art perfect – and I too, speak with thee wisely and cautiously. And yet I am mad. *But I mask my madness*. I would be mad alone."[119]? Can we reveal, in writing, that which we mask because, paradoxically, we do not want it to be seen? The mask, thus, does not mask the "I" but the "madness" of the "I," that is, its different mode of reason. After all, the madman is he who lost his masks, who belongs to himself without pre-fashioned masks, but when he is with his friend, he has to mask his madness again and announce, paradoxically, that he would mask it, that is, that he "would be mad alone"[120] in order to protect the friend from his negligence. The madman, however, does not seem to care about the way the friend perceives and approaches, not his "I," but his garment. Is this because "seeming" is inessential, secondary and only necessary because protective? If "seeming" is inessential but necessary, does this also apply to the identity of Gibran as an Arab, "Oriental" writer in English?

What I wish to emphasize, before I address this question, is that writing becomes both the mask and that which the mask is masking. In other words, writing reveals, not the madness behind the mask, but the mask in its masking of the madness: "I am not what I seem," but I mask it nonetheless! It is the text that reveals what it simultaneously conceals, that which cannot be, in its essence, revealed: the inaccessibility of the "I." But this text is written in English, in Gibran's adopted language, which masks both his native language and his individual style in that native language. The point is that the language in which the text is written is not reducible to the "culture" that appropriates it as its "own," that adopts the foreign writer who adopts this language as a language of writing, and that a close attention to the text and what it reveals and conceals would "protect" it from being reduced to its own "garment," from the reader who would

[119] Ibid., 8. [emphasis added]
[120] Ibid.

mistake seeming for being. And because we cannot approach and perceive being as such, we can nevertheless approach that which lies between seeming and being – across one language and another, one culture and another – both of which, like form and content, or identity and ipseity, remain indissociable. Thus, the chasm would become *interpretative*, not culturalist or identitarian. The chasm would cease to be an essentially bilingual one: "My friend, thou are not my friend, but how shall I make thee understand? My path is not thy path, yet together we walk, hand in hand."[121]

Gibran's "path," as a versatile bilingual writer, is thus necessarily multiplied. And this multiplication, attendant on the simultaneously creative and problematic bilingual chasm, is one that I have attempted to explore in this chapter. In the creative multiplicity of Gibran's path, I have ferried from the aesthetics of his early Arabic text to its poetics of the universal, from the uneasy decision to write in English to the challenging double enterprise of being a poet in English – at once pursuing the poetic, universal vision of some of his early Arabic works and effacing their aesthetic particularity – and committing to the national and civilizational cause of Syria and the Arab East, respectively, in Arabic. The latter, as a crucial facet of his literary and intellectual enterprise, will attract my focused attention in the next chapter as entailed by, but also beyond, the question of bilingualism. What this chapter has meant to show is that the universal and the particular in Gibran's bilingual enterprise coexist and depend on one another in ways that are not readily perceptible, albeit not without inevitable tensions. What I have been calling the bilingual chasm is that space between one language and another that simultaneously allows for the creativity of the guest and subjects him or her to the identitarian reason of the host(ile) culture. Gibran's case is illustrative of this tension, yet this text, *as a literary text*, betrays that what is at stake here is as much about bilingualism – dwelling in two linguistic and cultural spheres – as

---

[121] *CWs*, 8.

it is about hermeneutics: that is, the subtle hostility of culture can be countered with a subtle hospitality of reading.

Chapter Three:
Gibran as a Nationalist and (Post)-*Nahḍawī*

> He who empties his heart from the illusions and false dreams of the Ottoman state only to fill it with the promises and ambitions of the foreign states resembles one who runs from fire to hell. The Syrian has only his self-reliance and his talents, intelligence and excellence to rely on.
>
> Kahlil Gibran.[1]

> I am a Lebanese and I'm proud of that,
> And I'm not an Ottoman and I'm also proud of that.
> I have a beautiful homeland of which I'm proud,
> And I have a nation with a past –
> *But there is no state which protects me.*
> No matter how many days I stay away
> I shall remain an Easterner – Easterner in my manners,
> Syrian in my desires, Lebanese in my feelings –
> No matter how much I admire Western progress.
>
> Kahlil Gibran, "To the Muslims from a Christian Poet."[2]

By the end of World War One, the Ottoman Empire had fallen and the map of what we call today "the Middle East" was fundamentally reshaped in accordance with the colonial interests of the then Great Powers, Britain and France. The victory of the Allies left its indelible stamp in the modern history of the area, of which my interest in this chapter, in relation to Gibran, lies in "Syria," in the strict sense of "geographical Syria," "Greater Syria" or "natural Syria," many names of what has been historically recognized, especially after the dawn of Islam, as *bilād al-Shām.*[3] This is the geographical space "stretching from the Taurus Mountains in the north to the Sinai

---

[1] This is from a speech that Gibran gave at a gathering in 1911 of *Jamʿiyyat al-Ḥalaqāt al-Dhahabiyya* (the Society of Golden Circles, whose aim was social and political reform in Syria) in Boston. See Hani J. Bawardi, *The Making of Arab Americans* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), 67. For a historical account of the society and Gibran's role in it, see Daye, *ʿAqīdat Jubrān*, 21-33.

[2] This is taken from an open letter to Islam that Gibran published in *al-Funūn* in 1913. This translation is cited in Jean and G Gibran, *Kahlil Gibran: His Life and World*, 290. [emphasis added]

[3] "Gibran's Syria is equivalent to Bilad al-Sham, a name devised by the Arabs after the Muslim Rashidun victory over the byzantine Empire at the Battle of Yarmouk (AD 636). Meaning left or north, Bilad al-Sham is so called because it is left of the holy Kaaba in Mecca." See Adel Beshara, "A Rebel Syrian: Gibran Kahlil Gibran," in *The Origins of Syrian Nationhood: Histories, Pioneers, Identity*, ed. Adel Beshara (London; New York: Routledge, 2011), 149-50.

Peninsula in the south, and from the Mediterranean in the west to the Syrian desert in the east."[4] It should *not* be construed, nevertheless, that Syria as a nation has always existed, in a Primordialist or Perennialist sense,[5] though the usage of the name "Syria," Greek in its form and etymology, can be traced back to the late fifth and early sixth century BC.[6] The emergence of a Syrian national, self-conscious discourse can be discerned in the writings of the Nahḍa's intellectuals, reformers and literati in the latter half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, chief among whom, to name but two towering and influential figures, are Butrus al-Bustani and Jurji Zaydan, whose work was paramount in constructing notions of Arab historical consciousness,[7] Arabism and Syrianness.[8] This discourse of Awakening emerged against the background of a political contentious and turbulent period marked by European colonial interest and imperial, capitalist expansion, initiated by Napoleon's 1798 invasion of Egypt, and the Ottoman struggle to maintain its political and economic control over the area – by introducing and enacting reforms – in the face of a medley of local and foreign challenges. It is this Nahḍa discourse that, consciously or not, occasions, informs and allows for the emergence of Gibran's national(ist) writings. His nationalist engagement, therefore, cannot be probed in isolation from the discursive field that enables its emergence.

This chapter examines Gibran as a nationalist and (post)-*Nahḍawī* writer by looking, mostly but not exclusively, at some of the essays, articles and plays that he

---

[4] Leila Tarazi Fawaz, *A Land of Aching Hearts: The Middle East in the Great War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014), x.
[5] For a short account of the paradigms of Perennialism and Primordialism in relation to the ideology of nationalism, see Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), 53-60.
[6] For an account of the history of the word Syria, see Lamia Rustum Shehadeh, "The Name of Syria in Ancient and Modern Usage" in *The Origins of Syrian Nationhood*, 17-29.
[7] Zaydan's historical novels are a case in point.
[8] See Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), especially in the chapter "Arab Nationalism," 275-277; Hisham Sharabi, *Arab Intellectuals and the West* (Baltimore MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), 64-65; and Thomas Phillip, "Jurji Zaydan's role in the Syro-Arab Nahda" in *The Origins of Syrian Nationhood*, 79-90.

published in the active early twentieth century *Mahjar* press in the United States.[9] These pieces, written in Arabic, display and testify to Gibran's relentless commitment to the Syrian national cause and to the Arab East as a "civilizational" horizon. I demonstrate that Nationalism, for Gibran, is imagined and defined *territorially*, in that it is the territory of geographical Syria as a pre-national, pre-state *waṭan* – homeland or dwelling in the spiritual sense of belonging[10] – that grounds this nationalism, not sect, religion or what Anthony Smith calls "*ethnie*."[11] The question of Syria – its formation as a nation – is entwined with the question of the Nahḍa in Gibran. This *formation* is inextricably linked with *liberation* – from the Ottoman Empire until its collapse, from Western colonialism, but also from what Gibran refers to as the "maladies of *taqālid* [old customs and traditions] and *taqlīd* [imitation, of the past or the West]"[12] that, for him, plagued Syria and the Arab East. While I highlight the textual intricacies, the recurrent motifs and the significatory paradoxes that mark this discourse, I situate it within its historical and discursive context. The specificity of Gibran, in this Nahḍa context, lies in his wariness of assimilationism into Europe or the West as the civilizational telos of history, while clinging to an Eastern originality[13] of *ibtikār* (innovation/creation) seen as *the* pre-requisite of a true Nahḍa, as yet lacking or "dormant" in the Syrian/Eastern subject, hence the post in the (post)-*Nahḍawī.*

---

[9] For an account of the Syrian *Mahjar* Press in the U.S., see Bawardi, "The Syrian Nationalism of the *Mahjar* Press" in *The Making of Arab Americans,* 54-80.
[10] This is indeed one of the essential connotations of the word *waṭan* before the advent of Arabism, Arab nationalism and the modern nation-state. In Gibran's nationalist discourse, the nation, to draw in Anthony Smith, becomes "a *felt* and lived community, a category of behaviour as much as imagination, and one that requires of the members certain kind of action." Smith, *Nationalism*, 11. [emphasis mine].
[11] Ibid., 13-15.
[12] This is quoted from a letter that Gibran wrote to Al-Khoury al-Kufuri in 1913, in which he calls for "an enormous intellectual tornado" as the sole remedy to those maladies. See Daye, *ʿAqīdat Jubrān*, 367.
[13] Here, I deliberately avoid the term "authenticity," used mostly to translate the word and concept of *aṣāla*, which Gibran never used in its modern and contemporary predominant sense in Arab intellectual discourse, that of clinging to a supposedly uncontaminated and continuous notion of the same. As my discussion in section three of this chapter shows, what is at stake here is an Eastern *originality* of invention or innovation, albeit not without essentialist overtones, and not a culturalist identitarian authenticity that the term *aṣāla* has come to designate.

The essays and plays with which this chapter is concerned span the period before, during and after World War One. In section one "'Mother Syria' and The Emergent 'Syrian Idea'," I place my analytical focus on *Badʾ Thawra* [The Beginning of a Revolution], a short play published in 1914, in which the yet-to-be-crystallized "Syrian idea" is the centre around which the dialogue initially revolves. The Syrian idea is subsumed under an East-West civilizational discussion set in religious – Muslim/Christian – terms. I focus, moreover, on Gibran's nationalist posture during the War by highlighting his espousal of a cautious nationalism, one that is fuelled and sometimes justified by the catastrophic, the famine tragedy in Syria. In section two, "The End of the War: Nationalism and the Unfulfilled Quest for Nationhood," I turn my analytical focus to a short play, *Bayna Layl wa Ṣabāḥ* [Between Night and Morn] (1919) and a long essay, "Sūria ʿalā Fajr al-Mustaqbal [Syria on the Dawn of the Future]" (1919), both of which capture the dilemma into which Greater Syria had plunged following the decline of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the War and prior to the official partition of the area by Britain and France. In the essay, Gibran manifestly deploys nationalism as a requisite ethical and ideological force for the formation of the nation on the one hand, a formation that hinges on individual "will to work" and collective (national) creative output and unity, and as the foundation, on the other, upon which a critique of the factors that deter its formation is premised. To understand the identification of Syrians as Easterners, or the complementarity of nation-building and civilizational Awakening, I move to section three: "Syria within the East: Civilizational Anxiety and Gibran's Vision of the Nahḍa." I start this section by looking at a posthumously published short essay entitled "Ilā al-Sharqiyyīn [To the Easterners]," whose significance lies in the way in which Gibran addresses his fellow Syrians, appealing *at once* to their "Eastern conscience" and to their "alienated souls in every place." This discussion will lead to me to revisit Gibran's stance towards "civilization"

in his fiction, particularly in his short story "The Tempest." Here, I argue against the contention that he was an anti-urban Romantic who saw no worth in modern civilization, that is, as a Romantic who is at odds with "civilization as urbanity." I will end my discussion with an interview, turned later into an essay, on "the Awakening of the Arab East," where Gibran spells out his critical position and vision vis-à-vis the Nahḍa. Over the course of my discussion I also refer, when necessary, to other works from Gibran's oeuvre. In laying bare and discussing this crucial facet of Gibran's work as intellectual, this chapter has the double aim of highlighting that the nation, in the wider sense of Syria and the Arab East, was a fundamental concern for the bilingual writer – as indicated in the previous chapter – and that this concern, insofar as it is essentially ethical, is reconcilable with the universal vision that animates his poetic writings. And this is best demonstrated, as my overall argument in this thesis insists, by paying a close attention to his texts as they intervene in their political, cultural and social context without, crucially, reducing them to it.

A caveat should be stressed here. Gibran firmly and consistently believed in the geographical unity of Greater Syria, while remaining sceptical and suspicious of appeals and endeavours aiming to divide the area, even *after* the colonial partition. His well-known essay "Lakum Lubnānukum wa lia Lubnāni" [You Have Your Lebanon and I Have Mine], published in 1923 (under the French mandate) reflects his acute dismay and disappointment at the kind of politics in which Lebanon was mired in the aftermath of the Mandate and the creation of Greater Lebanon in 1920.[14] The demonstrable idealization of Lebanon in that essay, rather than being a mere sentimentalizing of homeland as is mostly claimed, testifies to his disposition that consists in regarding Lebanon as a *mawṭin*, a homeland in the ideal sense of the term, the attachment to

[14] For an account of the historical circumstances leading to the partition, see T.G. Frazer, *The First World War and Its Aftermath: The Reshaping of the Middle East* (London: Gingo Library, 2015), 10-11.

which is spiritual and apolitical, rather than a *patrie* or a nation in the modern, European sense of the term.[15] The potentiality of nation-state realization for Gibran had been envisioned in Greater Syria before the partition, of which Lebanon was part.[16] This position is pronounced in most of the essays and plays analysed or referred to in this chapter. Any discussion, therefore, of his "Lebanonization" or "Syrianization" by referring to Lebanon or Syria as the nation-states existing today, that is, by forgetting the specific historical context in which Gibran was situated, is off the point.

1. 'Mother Syria' and the Emergent 'Syrian Idea'

I focus in this section on the emergent articulation of "the Syrian idea" and Gibran's sense of nationalism before and specifically during the War. "The Syrian idea" emerges in Gibran's writings in 1914, particularly in his short play *Badʾ Thawra* [The Beginning of a Revolution],[17] edited and published by John Daye[18] in 1988. The year 1914 marks the beginning of World War One, and the title reflects that the War was considered an opportunity to liberate Syria from the Ottoman Empire. The two characters of the play, one identified as a Muslim, Ahmad, the other as a Christian, Farid, are engaged in an intense conversation, on a rainy day in February 1914 at the Café of the Sea in Beirut, over the present and future of Syria as a nation. Farid

---

[15] The first half of the essay creates and invokes a Romantic and idyllic version of Lebanon, hence my contention that Lebanon for Gibran is more of a *mawṭin* (in the spiritual or spatial sense) than a *waṭan* (in the politicised sense that impregnated the term in the Nahḍa discourse). The post-Partition Lebanon, which for Gibran is "your Lebanon" or the bad Lebanon, is the subject of his scathing criticism in the essay (levelled over the "westernization" of the area and the lack of ethical, national commitment). He writes, for instance, "Your Lebanon is at times attached to Syria and at times detached from it. Then it contrives against both positions to become at once knotted and unfastened. While my Lebanon is neither attached nor detached; nor does it magnify or belittle itself." See *CWs in Arabic*, 305.

[16] This is, it must be stressed, the stance *of* Gibran, who was not, of course, alone in his political orientation. The idea of an autonomous state in the whole of 'geographical Syria' dates back to the second half of the nineteenth century, with its roots in Butrus al-Bustani's periodical *al-Jinān*, in which he speaks of the Ottoman Empire as our *waṭan* and Syria as our country or *bilād*. It is important to remember that there were calls for an autonomous state in Mount Lebanon during the same period. See Hoorani, *Arabic Thought*, 274-76.

[17] It is significant to stress that Gibran was not pleased with the Syrian Arab Congress that was held in Paris in 1913, to which he declined an invitation to give a speech on the grounds that it did not reflect his own disposition. Mary Haskell notes in her journal that "Gibran wants revolution … It need not be planned. Revolution even failing will be met with Home Rule, succeeding, will free Syria and Arabia." MH Journal. June 22, 1913.

[18] Daye, *ʿAqīdat Jubrān,* 249.

contends that "the Syrian idea" has been crystallizing for two years, "expanding against the backdrop of freedom, reform and the noble principles that produced Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Voltaire, Patrick Henry, Garibaldi and many others who lifted freedom as monuments in the heart of the Westerners," only to be thwarted by the "magical anaesthetic that was concocted by the brains of the Ottoman politicians since the beginning of the nineteenth century."[19] He goes on to maintain that it is the cunning of the Turks and their acute knowledge of "the Syrians' acumen and the Arab character" that enables them "to determine the spot in the Syrian body where the ailment exists, spilling their extracts of deception over it."[20] Ahmad, however, repudiating this argument, vents his criticism at the Syrians' idiocy, lostness and blindness, because of which the Turks appear to the Syrians in the guise of cunning. That Farid is using the phrase "the Syrian idea," and not nationalism (which Gibran elaborately invokes in a later essay), is not surprising: the *emergent* idea denotes the first stage of national consciousness, not identity,[21] necessary for the liberation of Syria from the Ottoman empire. The idea is still taking shape because Syria was still part of the Empire and because those who advocated liberation from the Ottomans were a minority in comparison with the majority, who were either hesitant or in favour of staying under the protection of the Ottomans given the burgeoning threat posed by the Western colonial powers at the time.[22]

---

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

[21] National consciousness precedes and grounds – although it does not necessarily lead to – a nationalist movement or ideology necessary for the formation of a national state, which consolidates this sentiment in terms of national identity. On the distinction between national consciousness and nationalism, see Smith, *Nationalism*, 6.

[22] It is important to draw a distinction between Arabism as a potent notion that emerged in the intellectual discourse of the Nahḍa and Arab nationalism as a political movement with clear ideological goals, which, as Ernest Dawn points out, was not a palpable political force until after 1914. Arab Nationalism, however, is premised on and indissociable from Arabism. Syrian nationalists who opposed Ottoman governance and Ottomanism remained a minority until 1918, Dawn notes. Of the *émigré* nationalists, Dawn only mentions Ameen Rihani. See Dawn, "The Origins of Arab Nationalism," in *The Origins of Arab Nationalism*, ed. Rachid Khalidi et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 11-12.

What is furthermore interesting in the dialogue is that Ahmad's diagnosis of the status quo – in which he ascribes idiocy to both sides – lays importance on "Islam" to the extent that it constitutes the "body" in which the "heart" of "the Arab powers" reside.[23] Castigating and ridiculing both the Turks and the Arabs in bestial terms – he uses the pejorative word "*baghlana*" which, derived from "mule" or "donkey," connotes idiocy, mindlessness and stupidity – he asserts that he knew "the greatness of Islam" when he lived in "Europe," yet upon returning to his homeland he found himself a stranger amongst his own people. That, he goes on, has not blinded him, being amongst "blind Muslims" notwithstanding, to what he describes as "the glory of Islam."[24] Islam, for Ahmad, in agreement with his friend Farid, is "an absolute, abstract reality," that is, one "that should remain abstracted [*mujarrad*] of the excrescences [*al-zawāʾid*] that purge it of determination and life,"[25] in the words of the Christian character. Ahmad proceeds to proclaim that if these "excrescences" preoccupy the contemporary Muslims, it should not follow that the malady resides in Islam, "as some Westerners wrongly assume," but precisely in the Muslims:

> Do not forget that Islam is not solely a religion, as English Orientalists like to think, but a religion *and* a civic law [*sharīʿa madaniyya*] or way of life whose enormous wings encompass all the needs of humankind in every age. The true Muslim, albeit following a spiritual emotion [*ʿāṭifa rūḥiyya*], is an individual in and member of a civic collectivity and a grand civilization.[26]

I construe this discourse as a performative one, that is, as an attempt to perform or produce a Syrian, Muslim subject, in agreement with a Syrian, Christian one, on the nature of religion beyond the Orientalist, colonial outlook on Islam as merely a "religion," and therefore as "un-culture."[27] Yet in the play, Islam is simultaneously

---

[23] Daye, *ʿAqīdat Jubrān*, 250.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid. [emphasis mine].
[27] Here, I am relying on Reinhard Schulze who argues that since "decadence" was attributed to Islam at the birth of the colonial *mission civilisatrice*, Islam acquired the status of "un-culture" for "the Europeans spectators of the Orient," because "culture was used as a synonym of humanity, reason and freedom,"

posited as ahistorical – that is, abstracted as a metaphysical essence – and civilizational – that is, grounded in and manifesting itself in history –, with Muslims, not Islam, as the sole cause of their own "decadence." This metaphysical binary of a- or trans-historical *essence* and historical *manifestation* permeates Gibran's nationalist and civilizational discourse,[28] partly because it was prevalent at the time.[29] What is more pertinent to my discussion is the attempt to enact a Syrian sceptical subject who is not only suspicious of the association between Islam and Muslim "decadence," but also of that established between "Western civilization" (*al-madaniyya*[30] *al-gharbiyya*) and Christianity. When Farid deems Christianity "a basis for the European and American civilization,"[31] Ahmed demurs, invoking the irreconcilability between the moral teachings of Christianity and the actions of the modern Christians: "The Christian loves his enemies in the Church, yet outside the Church he is preoccupied with the effective means that would annihilate his enemies," something that stands in stark opposition to "Islam" that "teaches and acts in accordance to its teachings."[32] This should not be read at face value, that is, as a preference for Islam over Christianity, because it is not religion *per se* that is at stake here. The moral domain was central in pre-modern Islam (as a historical and civilizational reality), whereas in modernity, a historical transformation that

---

only to obtain, after the colonial encounter, a "traditional" sense of culture deemed the antithesis of "modernity." See Schulze, "Mass Culture and Islamic Cultural Production in the Nineteenth Century Middle East," in *Mass Culture, Popular Culture and Social Life in the Middle East*, ed. George Stauth and Sami Zubaida (Frankfurt; Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), 190.

[28] In his essay "al-Umam wa Dhawātuha [Nations and the Selves of Nations]," he postulates that "every people [shaʿb] has a Collective Self [dhāt], analogous in its essence and nature to the individual self. Although this Collective Self derives its being from the individuals of a nation… it is nevertheless independent from the people in that it possesses a particular life and a unique will." *CWs in Arabic*, 251-53. This postulation is reminiscent of the notion of the nation's spirit or *Volksgeist* prevalent in post-Enlightenment Romanticism, especially that of Herder or Renan.

[29] This notion of an essence that defines the historical subject in terms of "an alternance in a continuity of decadence and health" was pervasive in many revivalist projects in modernity, of which the Nahḍa is one example. See Aziz Al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities* (London; New York: Verso, 2009), 97-100.

[30] Gibran, interestingly, seldom uses the word *ḥaḍāra*, which is equivalent for civilization, but *madaniyya*, which also translates as civilization, but whose etymology demotes civilization *qua* urbanity. When Gibran speaks of *al-madaniyya al-gharbiya* in the context of the Arab Nahḍa, he most often means the *material* aspects of Western civilization, of whose appropriation as a sign of an Arab Eastern Nahḍa he is very suspicious and critical, as I show in the last section of this chapter.

[31] Daye, *ʿAqīdat Jubrān*, 250.

[32] Ibid., 251.

witnessed the secularizing of Christianity, the moral domain was marginalized, particularly with the rise of the nation-state, the capitalist system and the modern interdependence of knowledge and power.[33] This backdrop helps us understand Ahmad's distinction between Euro-America as a civilizational power that separates the moral and the political on the one hand, and Islam in its ideal version to which that separation is not constitutive, on the other. In other words, his criticism is an ethical one, however uncritical his invocation of an ideal Islam. He stresses towards the end of the dialogue, however, his respect for Christianity insofar as it is divorced from the actions of the Western Christians. For "there was only one Christian [here he intriguingly invokes Nietzsche] and he died on the cross," adding, "If Jesus of Nazarene was back to this world [referencing, interestingly, "Gibran Khalil Gibran"], he would die a stranger, in hunger and solitude."[34]

Christianity, deemed not solely the basis but the equivalent of the Euro-American civilization by Farid, is put into question through the lens of a Muslim character, himself very critical of Muslims, yet not of Islam as such, which is abstracted as a force that precedes, exceeds and transcends Muslim decadence. In other words, if Islam is severed from the "decadence" that European Orientalism has "discovered" in it,[35] it is nevertheless abstracted as an "essence" irreducible to the "dormant" Muslims who are unaware of its enormity. Similarly, Ahmad's anger is vented less on Christianity *per se* than on the colonial wars and looting done in the name of "the Christian West," on the double standards of this Western Christianity. It is useful to note, in this regard, that the early Gibran considers *al-kulliya* or universality to be "a

---

[33] I am drawing on Wael Hallaq who, relying on Carl Schmitt, Thomas Kuhn and Michel Foucault in his use of such concepts as "paradigms" and central of peripheral "domains," argues that the moral was the central domain in pre-modern Islamic governance or Sharia, while in modernity, the moral has become a peripheral domain, subject to the legal mechanisms of the modern nation-state. For more on this see Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 6-13.
[34] Daye, *ʿAqīdat Jubrān*, 251
[35] See Schulze, "Mass Culture," 189.

general Christianity,"[36] a term – *al-kulliya* – he uses to denote cosmopolitanism in the sense of *citizens of the earth*, and which he defines as "the preservation of the just rights of the self as well as the sacred rights of the other."[37] This might explain why Ahmed is averse to the Christian West that does not preserve these "sacred rights of the other," this other who became an object over which European sovereignty presided in colonial modernity. What we observe in the play, thus, is a discursive endeavour to rescue Islam from (Eastern) Muslims and Christianity from (Western) Christians, and to sever "religion" from, indeed to (re)-imagine an "essence" of religion beyond, Orientalism and imperialism. In other words, the version of religion proposed here is one that seeks to transcend its historical and political configuration or "deformation" in modernity. It is one that aims to rescue what it takes to be the nature of religion, whose essence is irreducible to its manifestation in history, but whose civilizational worldliness, in the case of Islam, is yet to be (re)actualized.[38]

The occasional essentialism of this discourse aside, what is intriguing in the play is that twice do the characters refer to Gibran in the text. Ahmad regards him as an exaggerator who "gazes at the Eastern condition from behind a black cloud,"[39] while appealing to Farid who, in turn, declares that he used to deem him a pessimist. The self-referentiality of the play is not coincidental. The play serves as a platform in which ideas of reform, channelled through critique and debate between Syrian "Muslims" and "Christians," take shape. It is a space that allows for reform ideas and scepticism to emerge in conversational or dialogical terms across confessional boundaries, where the

---

[36] This is taken from a short essay that Gibran wrote in response to Jamil Maalouf's criticism of his essay "Ṣawt al-Shāʿir [The Voice of the Poet]" which I analysed in the previous chapter, where Gibran posits *al-kulliya* against *al-ʿaṣabiyya*. See Daye, *Lakum Jubrānukum*, 274.
[37] Ibid., 274.
[38] Gibran, in an interview conducted with him in 1915 (*al-Sāʾiḥ*, issue 240), maintains that "reclaiming the glory of Islam is a beautiful dream, yet the power of Islam has waned, and almost nothing has remained of the Islam that various nations in the past, different in their religious and worldly aspects, had adopted, except for withered emotions which are unable to unify these divided nations today." Daye, *ʿAqīdat Jubrān*, 330.
[39] Ibid., 249.

Muslim and Christian characters, both Syrians, are represented in a way that disrupts and invalidates any religious divisions inside Syria. These characters are the ideal subjects that Gibran's national discourse seeks to produce, that is, the Syrian subjects whose agency manifests itself in a spirit of interrogation and (self)-criticism across and beyond religious differences, contesting and/or affirming Gibran's own dispositions – these characters are, unlike Gibran, optimistic about the "future of the East."[40] In other words, the play as a form is deployed to create an atmosphere of conversation and debate across religious boundaries in Syria, where certain identifications and associations such as "Christianity" and "the West" or "Islam" and "the Turks" are destabilized, albeit by occasionally resorting to abstraction and essentialization, and where self-referentiality serves as a tool of self-reflexivity that interrupts or contests the authority of "the author" that lurks behind his text, foregrounding his "Syrian," indeed "Eastern," not religious or confessional, identification. Ultimately, "the Syrian idea," as this play demonstrates, is inextricably linked with the wider East-West civilizational context such that its potential realization is indissociable from "the Eastern question."[41]

It should be remembered that the above-discussed play, published posthumously, was written in 1914, at least as far as the setting suggests, and the year, as we know, marks the beginning of World War One, which some Arab nationalists, particularly those who advocated independence from the Ottoman Empire, saw as the event that would bring the Ottomans down and grant Syria its longed-for independence. Hence the title of the play, "A beginning of a Revolution," a revolution of thought that

---

[40] Ahmad declares, "I am not, albeit living amongst idle [*moqʿadīn*] Easterners, desperate about the future of the East." Ibid., 250.

[41] Ahmad's views are not so different from Gibran's. An article in *al-Sāʾiḥ* periodical, "Gibran and Islam" (25 May 1916), reports a speech that Gibran gave at a ceremony organized by the American Association of Religions, where he stressed the influence that the Arabs of Andalusia had exerted on European art and science, while attributing the modern degradation and decadence [*inḥiṭāt*] in the Muslim countries mainly to the conquests of the Ottomans and their lack of the elements of creativity and innovation. The writer of the article goes on to foreground, in a laudatory manner, that Gibran talks about the merits of Islam in the West as a Christian Arab, quoting his words, "Jesus resides in half of my heart and Mohammad resides in the other," and pointing out, following Gibran, that if Islam does not triumph over the Ottoman state, the East will fall into hands of the West. See Daye, *Lakum Jubrānukum*, 296-98.

would bring about a revolution of action.[42] The War, however, was not conducive to the Syrians. In addition to the terrible famine tragedy during the War, the complex web of colonial interests in the area put the victorious Allied and Associated Powers in a position of unprecedented dominance and control over the region in 1919, and the map of the modern Middle East, and particularly that of Greater Syria, had been reshaped mostly by France and Britain. The (in)famous Sykes Picot Agreement, the results of secret negotiations between the French and the British in 1916, had been instrumental in foreshadowing the partition of the region amongst France and Britain after the War.[43] By the time the War broke out, however, the Syrian nationalist activists, especially those in the *Mahjar*, placed some of their hopes in France and, much less, in Britain, while aware of the colonial interests driving the actions of those Powers, interests that would jeopardize any sovereignty of a state to be potentially liberated from the Ottoman Empire. The situation was indeed very complex, and it is not my concern in this chapter to go into it in detail (politically and historically speaking). What I am rather concerned with here is how Gibran's writings at the time reflect and approach this complexity of events and interests in light of the horizons of actions and expectations permitting or hampering the realization of Syrian nationhood.

One should be aware, therefore, of the intricacy of this situation, the paucity of options available as well as the risk that accompanied the decisions that he or the committees and organizations under which he worked were to take, especially during the War. Twists and shifts in perspective, expectation and direction of the struggle for

[42] Mary Haskell records in her journals that for Gibran, neither the diplomatic appeal to the Powers of Europe nor Turkey's diplomatic consent would give the Syrians Home Rule. Only a revolution could make it possible. MH Journal, June 22, 1913.

[43] The title of the Agreement refers to the two men who carried out the secret deliberations, Charles Francois Georges-Picot, the French consul-general in Beirut before the War, and Sir Mark Sykes, a British conservative member of Parliament, who authored two books on the Ottoman Empire. The French had their eyes on Syria, while the British were seeking to control Mesopotamia, and the Agreement was crucial to the partition of the Arab territories by the end of the War. "This projected division of these territories," writes T.G Frazer, "as yet theoretical and negotiated away from the public eye [in 1916], took no account whatsoever of the possible wishes of the people who lived there, but simply reflected the priorities which London and Paris had at the time." Frazer, *The First World War*, 6.

the national cause should not surprise us, the persistence of the commitment to the cause notwithstanding. John Daye has delineated three phases in Gibran's political activism: the first starts in 1910 and ends by mid-World War One, where Gibran's disposition is revolutionary but less "practical" than "theoretical"; the second, characterized by reformism and partisan activism begins with the foundation of the Syria Mount Lebanon Liberation Committee (1917) and terminates with the end of the War; the third and the last, marked by "revolutionary theorizing," begins in the early 1920s and gradually wanes in the years approaching Gibran's demise (1931).[44] This delineation, carefully outlined and chronicled by Daye, is useful to understand the proper historical and discursive context that informs and occasions what he calls Gibran's "political literature," though I insist that the latter, as literature *explicitly* engaging in political matters, should not be probed in isolation from his other work, which is *not explicitly* political.

In an article published in 1916 in *al-Mirʾāt* periodical, entitled "Haffār al-Qubūr wa al-Mubakhirūn" [The Grave Digger and the Vaporizers] Gibran performs and vehemently defends his "grave-digging" enterprise – laying bare, and burying, all the forms, illusions and relics of servitude and blind submission to religious, political and social authorities, all of which are deterrents of a true Nahḍa – which is central to his call for reform and Awakening. While "The Grave Digger," the short story published in *al-Awāsif* [The Tempests] (1916), is poetically and philosophically oriented, as discussed in Chapter One, this one is straightforwardly addressed to the Syrian people with a markedly critical and satirical tone and style (the Syrians are addressed in the plural 'you') and much less abstract and allegorical in its content. "What did the Syrian people achieve in the last millennia?"[45] wonders Gibran, the first of several rhetorical

---

[44] Daye, *ʿAqīdat Jubrān*, 15-16.
[45] Ibid., 252.

questions that concern Syria's political, social and cultural situation, whose deplorable conditions he flagrantly lays bare. He goes on to ridicule the Syrian – and, by implication, the Arab – Awakening [*al-yaqaẓa*], deeming it no more than "dull translations of European books [*kutub al-ifranj*] and some volumes of sterile, ancient poetry that do not exceed, in form and content, the boundaries of salutation, praise and eulogy."[46] "Do you take pride in your patriotism," he continues, "and if the Turks confer a medal upon one of you, he becomes a Turk?" Unapologetically polemical, the article illustrates the primacy that Gibran, particularly in the second half of 1910s and the first half 1920s, accords to collective self-criticism as a stance of civilizational survival and cultural and social revival by means of "grave-digging." The Syrians, for whom this particular article is addressed, are subject to reproach, scorn and derision, the aim of whose *rhetorical* deployment is none other than what Gibran conceives of as a "true Awakening," and not "a faint echo of modern Western civilization," as he declares in a later essay.[47] "There are those amongst you who know that the deepest sense in my being is the embodiment of saying 'my country has the right and capacity to exist' [*bilādi muḥiqa wa maḥqūqa*], but I have realized that the emotions attendant on patriotism [*al-ʻaṣabiyya*[48]] have blinded our literati and thinkers and halted our advancement and progress,"[49] Gibran asserts towards the end of the article.

This sense of critical and cautious nationalism is voiced in another article published later in the same year under the title "I love my country," where Gibran is adamant to assert that one should only love one's country with insight, that is, without falling prey to the "blindness" that patriotism (in the sense of *al-ʿaṣabiyya*) induces.

---

[46] Ibid., 253.
[47] Ibid., 345.
[48] *ʿAṣabiyya*, in Ibn Khaldun's sense, means "mutual affection and willingness to fight and die for each other." In the educational discourse of the Nahḍa, however, and especially in regard to Rifaʿa Rafiʿ al-Tahtawi, Hoorani points out that the term takes up the meaning of *ḥubb al-waṭan* (love of homeland or country), that is, that "of solidarity which binds together those who live in the same community and is the basis of social strength." See Hoorani, *Arabic Thought*, 23, 78-79.
[49] Daye, *ʿAqīdat Jubrān*, 255.

Loving one's country and the people of one's country "thoughtfully," "insightfully" and "wakefully"[50] stands in opposition to lame "praise" and "infatuation," he avers, for this love – one that takes precedence over, and assumes a more important status than the country, the object of love – is "an agreeable, simple force that neither undergoes change or transformation nor does it ask anything for itself."[51] But, interestingly, what propels and lends ethical justification and weight to his national commitment, and what furthermore profoundly binds him to his fellow Syrians and compels him to engage, at times reluctantly, in the Syrian nationalist cause, is the catastrophic. That is to say, the catastrophic is that which entails and amplifies the ethical necessity, urgency and immediacy of the national and the political. Before the War, it was the subjugation of Syria by the Ottomans and the ensuing suffering of the Syrians that, he asserts, forced him to commit himself to the Syrian cause, because

> *I am an Absolutist,* Mary*, and Absolutism has no country – but my heart burns for Syria*. Fate has been cruel to her – much more than cruel. Her gods are dead, her children abandoned her to seek bread in faraway lands, her daughters are dumb and blind, and yet she is still alive – alive – and that is the most painful thing. She is alive in the midst of her miseries.[52]

By the catastrophic, I am more specifically referring to the famine tragedy in Greater Syria during the War. This tragedy, which is often overlooked in modern world history, is one of the reasons that led historian Leyla Fawaz to describe the area that witnessed it as "a land of aching hearts."[53] This tragedy deeply affected the Syrian and Lebanese *émigré* writers in the U.S. Their humanitarian activism during the War – the foundation

---

[50] Ibid., 260.
[51] Ibid.
[52] KG to MH, 22 Oct 1912. [emphasis mine]. For Gibran, the universal, or what he considered "world-consciousness" or "life-thinking," should be the locus of aesthetic and ethical engagement, not the national, which for him stands for parochialism. But because it is precisely the ethical that calls for the national – the aching and suffering of Syria – he had no choice but to be nationally committed, as revealed in many of his letters to Mary Haskell and her journals. See Tawfiq Sayigh, *Aḍwāʾ Jadīda ʿalā Jubrān* [Gibran Under New Spotlights] (London: Riad el-Rayyes, 1990), 141-43.
[53] For more on the social history of the great famine and its unspeakable consequences (over half a million people died in Great Syria alone during the War), see Fawaz, *A Land of Aching Hearts*, 99-110, 277.

and activity of The Syria Mount Lebanon Relief Committee,[54] to which Gibran's efforts and time were devoted – testifies to the fact that their homeland, as *émigrés* and exiles in the U.S., remained a foremost priority for them. Of notable importance here is Gibran's piece of poetic prose "Māta Ahlī" (Dead are my People) which, despite its prevailing mood of bitterness and powerlessness – the War as experienced by a Syrian *émigré* in America – places faith in, and draws optimism from, the generosity and solidarity that is required from the Syrians to build a new future.[55] He writes,

> The tempest that compels you, my Syrian brother, to give something of your life to those who are on the verge of losing theirs is the only thing that makes you worthy of the day's light and the night's quietude.
> And the penny that you put into the empty hand stretching towards you is the golden link in a chain that binds what is human in you to that which is over-human.[56]

2. The End of the War: Nationalism and the Unfulfilled Quest for Nationhood

After discussing "the Syrian idea" and the East-West civilizational context under which it is subsumed, as well as Gibran's critical or cautious nationalism before and during the War, I now look at his post-War writings that concern the present and future of Syria, which would be decided upon by the Great Powers, France and Britain, not by the Syrians. By the end of the War, however, and before the official partition of the area, Gibran published a short play, *Between Night and Morn*, and an essay, "Syria on the Dawn of the Future," in *al-Sāʾiḥ* periodical, both of which highlight, denounce and lament, among other things, the divisions of the Syrians into religious or ethnic sects, each of which loyal to an external Power. In this interregnum, so to speak, there was a sense of hope in Gibran, bespoken at least in the afore-mentioned titles, of establishing

---

[54] For more on this see Daye, *ʿAqīdat Jubrān*, 69-80.

[55] Fawaz, *A Land of Aching Hearts*, 284.

[56] This is my own translation from Arabic, which differs from the one translated by Anthony Ferris. Ferris, apart from adopting the form of free verse in the target language, translates the last sentence, *mā fawqa al-bachariyya* – which I rendered as "over-human" – as "the loving heart of God." I tried to be more "faithful" to the Arabic text by capturing the extension of the giving self to that which is beyond or over it. For the Arabic text, see *CWs in Arabic*, 249-51. For the translated text, see *A Treasury of Kahlil Gibran*, trans. Anthony Rizcallah Ferris, ed. Martin L. Wolf (London: Heinemann, 1974), 339-45.

a Syrian national state[57] that is liberated from the Ottoman Empire and self-dependent in its formation, "a Syria for Syrians only."[58]

The play's tenor is less ideological and subtler than the essay, whose form does not permit the literary subtlety of the play in capturing this moment, namely, the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the end of the War. Set in a dark prison on the outskirts of Beirut at the midnight of 9 January (in 1919 presumably – it was published on 16 January of the same year), the play's characterization and dialogue reflect the disunion of the Syrians, each sect or confession of which – a Muslim, a Christian, a Durzi, a Jew and a poet (the adjectives used to identify the characters' backgrounds) – pledges loyalty to and places faith in an external Power in the hope of erecting a new future for Syria. This is the case for the all characters in the play, except for the poet, Yusuf Karama, whose allegiance is vowed to Syria alone.

"O Syria! Mother without children!" Yusuf cries out, addressing his fellow Syrians in the prison during a heated conversation marked by sectarian divisions over Syria's future:

> O Syria, how great is your affliction! The souls of your children do not pulsate in your fragile and wasted body, but, alas, they pulsate in the bodies of foreign countries. For their hearts have forgotten you and their thoughts have abandoned you … O Syria, O nation of tragedies! While in your arms the bodies of your children dwell, their souls have run away from you, one strolling in the Arab peninsula [The Muslin Ali Rahman], another sauntering in the streets of London [The Durzi Sharaf al-Din al-Hoorani], another soaring above the palaces of Paris [The Christian Salim Balan] and yet another counting money while asleep [The Jewish Musa Haim]. O Syria, my childless mother![59]

In response to this long lamentation, Ali and Sharaf dismissingly describe Yusuf as a poet who adorns his imagination with beautiful words, that is, as someone who is cut off from *realpolitik,* a view against which Yusuf defensively retorts, "Yes I am a poet and not a politician. I love my country and the people of my country, and this is all I wish to

[57] For the use of "national state" instead of "nation-state," see Smith, *Nationalism*, 17.
[58] Daye, *ʿAqīdat Jubrān*, 294.
[59] Ibid.

know about politics."[60] He proceeds to declare that it is his country's powerlessness and the injustice to which it has been subjected, as well as the fragmentation and confusion of its people, that drove him to devote his love to it; a disposition that Gibran proclaims, as discussed in the previous section, elsewhere. The dialogue continues with each character insistently clinging to a foreign Power, under whose leadership and guardianship each envision the future of Syria to be, except for Musa, who is portrayed as a money-worshipper (mumbling of money while asleep), a stereotypical depiction that Gibran astonishingly employs in the play. The mere presence of a Jewish character, however, suggests that Arab (Syrian) Jews for Gibran were regarded as an integral part of the future national state by virtue of their dwelling in the Syrian territory for centuries before the War. The heated discussion ends up with another long lamentation of Yusuf, whose anguish leads him to discern the predicament of Syria as one identical to, or analogous with, the fall of Babel, an evocation that is at once metaphorical and historical or mythological

> O Babel, O city of dispersion! Has God's shadow abandoned you like ruins standing alone in the desert? O Babel, O nation of conflicts and grudges! Did you, in your dreams, build a tower whose head reaches out to the sky, outraging the Lord and driving Him to confuse your tongues and scatter your people upon the face of the earth? O Babel, O city of no inhabitants! Will your people return to construct your walls and temples? Will God visit you a second time to lift you out of disgrace? O Babel, O city whose houses are pain, whose streets are wounds and whose rivers are tears! O Babel, city of my heart![61]

This metaphorical and mythological reference to Babel in this context should be understood as an evocation of the past that not only seeks to reconnect or construct a connection with it. It is also one that aims to reckon with the chattered present in the light of this evocated reconnection. In other words, the (nascent) nation is imagined in the present by reconnecting it with a past whose mythological evocation serves as a validation of its presence in the present, as a way of coming to terms with the

[60] Ibid., 295.
[61] Ibid., 295-96.

fragmentation and disunion of the Syrians, and as one possibility of *reconstructing* Syria in the future ("Will your people return to construct your walls and temples?"). That is, in the mythological destruction of Babel lies its potential historical re-emergence in the present, in that the destruction of the homogenous One should entail the construction of a unified multiplicity: Syria as an idea and a nation to which the different ethnic and religious groups who inhabit its land are faithful, without negating their differences. The evocation of a mythological past, thus, enables the horizon of a future nation the material construction of which is, in one sense, a reconstruction of a past with which it is (imagined to be) territorially connected.

Later in the play, a woman is heard talking to her son, who is very hungry and wants some bread. "Sleep, my child, sleep until morning," his mother tells him, "God will send us bread tomorrow and we shall all eat."[62] But her son dies of hunger moments later, whereupon someone is heard saying, "Your son has died, and you are still calling unto God?! I told you that God Himself has died of hunger!"[63] This is, of course, a scene that alludes to the great famine that swept over Syria during the War, an event that poignantly affects Yusuf who, in a moment of desperation that epitomizes Syria's predicament at the time, cries out:

> O Syria, crossroad of conquerors, will I live to see a new conqueror? Let it be should the pockets of its troops are full of bread. Let it be should there remain a brother to shield me and a sister whose voice I could hear… But, alas, how selfish I am, pleading to remain alive to see the faces of my brothers and sisters, while my life, had it been of any value, would have been taken by now.[64]

The play closes with the liberation of the prisoners and the entrance of the Allied troops to the city of Beirut in the following morning, announcing the defeat of the Ottomans. Yet Yusuf, unlike the other jubilant prisoners, remains sober and sceptical, albeit not without an inevitable sense of hope for a "true freedom" outside the prison.

---

[62] Ibid., 296.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.

The significance of the play lies in its capacity, its shortness notwithstanding, to register the disunited and conflicting voices and political interests of Syrians from divergent backgrounds over the best future they each envision for their country. The appeal of these groups to external Powers to intervene in Syria is premised on the politicized ethnic or religious proximity/affinity that they believe to exist between them and those Powers (Islam in the case of the Arab Ali, and Catholicism in the case of the Maronite Salim, for instance). Equally important here is the setting of the play, the prison, for it is precisely *inside the prison*, simultaneously real and figural, that those "prisoners" place their hope in countries other than Syria to liberate it from the Ottomans, who are thought to have imprisoned them in their own country. That is, the intimation here is that the *moral prison* into which the Syrians are *willingly* caught – their faith in, and the loyalty they pledge to, political entities whose (economic, political or symbolic) strength is believed to be of advantage to Syria should they resort to them – is as pernicious as the Ottoman oppression to which they were subjected. "Listen to me," cries out Yusuf angrily, "you who are imprisoned in a prison within a prison within a prison [*ayyuhā al-masjūnūna fi sijn ḍimna sijn ḍimna sijn*]: Syria belongs neither to the Arabs, nor to the British, the French or the Jews. Syria is yours and mine alone."[65] The ending of play confirms and sustains this double signification – at once real and metaphorical – of the prison, as "true freedom" is all that Yusuf pines for, albeit without enthusiasm. Therein lies the power of the play as it captures the historical and political dilemma into which Syria was thrown by the end of the War, a conundrum from which Gibran envisioned no other way out but the realization of a Syrian nationhood whose legitimacy is grounded in the sense of a shared and unified Syrian *waṭan*, not in religion, sect or ethnicity.

---

[65] Ibid., 294.

In this context, it should be remembered that Gibran reiterates that since antiquity, Syria had been invariably susceptible and subjected to foreign conquests, and that it has *survived* despite being repeatedly invaded by Others, a sign of its eligibility for nationhood in the age of national states.[66] One can discern the social and historical Darwinism that renders Syria as *waṭan* eligible, because it has survived, to join the modern order of national states. This social Darwinism was part of the *Zeitgeist* of the period, and Gibran was no exception. What remains essential here is that the geographical unity of Greater Syria stands as that which grounds and justifies this nationalism, a discourse upon which hinges the formation and realization of the nation, as I shall now demonstrate in an essay published shortly after the play.

This essay, given the context, is unsurprisingly entitled "Syria on the Dawn of the Future." Explicitly ideological and political in its content and message, it sets out to analyse the factors that are believed to have deterred national unity in Syria. Gibran begins the essay by invoking, once again, the metaphor of "the prisoner," writing: "Like a prisoner going out of his dark prison, vacillating between certainty and doubt as to his salvation, stands Syria today on the dawn of the future to proceed with the living nations in the procession of Life that is teeming with walkers and spectators."[67] He then goes on to foreground that "the spirit of the age into which Syria is entering will despatch the Muslim Syria, the Christian Syria and the Durzi Syria. Religious fanaticism will be erased out of its heart, and the long-awaited tolerance will supersede it."[68] "The age" in this context does not connote a strictly temporal dimension, a new phase in the history of Syria. It is an age to whose "spirit" Syria is entering or is hoped

[66] See "al-Hijra wa Futūḥ Sūria" [Migration and Syria's Subjection to Foreign Conquests] in Gibran, *Iqlib al-Safḥa*, 119-120. As for Syria's nationhood, in an interview conducted with Gibran in 1915 for the *al-Sāʾiḥ* periodical, he asserts that "the glorious future that [he] envision[s] for Syria is for it to become a republic," going on to maintain that all the pre-modern kingdoms should now turn into republics, for "the republic is the sole track upon which a country proceeds towards prosperity." Daye, *Lakum Jubrānukum,* 300.
[67] Daye, *ʿAqīdat Jubrān*, 298.
[68] Ibid.

to enter, that is, one that has already *taken place* – modernity in its political and civic configuration – whose mode of existence is nothing else but "time," as Meskini postulates. Time here is not understood from the perspective of "what," that is, not as an object of inquiry, but insofar as it denotes the "the mode of existence of the 'we', that which is *ours* every time (…) We are "our" time every time, that is, we are our mode of existence in a certain age as being the ultimate sense of the dwelling [*al-waṭan*] that *concerns us*."[69] Beyond any religious delimitation of *waṭan* (from an Arab point of view or position), that is, beyond the positing of the question of Arab identity in terms informed by the exhausted self-other binary of Islam and/vs. the West, *waṭan* takes up the ontological sense of *home* or *dwelling*, deriving from the age (*al-ʿaṣr*) – "the modern times" – its own emergence and existence, its own ontology, one whose "Western" premise is nevertheless de-Westernized in the non-Western world by virtue of the latter's radical "contemporaneity" (*muʿāṣara*, derived from *ʿaṣr*) to "the West."[70] I should stress that this is the main dimension of the age – modernity's political transformation and the emergence of the national state as the sole horizon of a "people" to exist in the form of a recognizable entity in the nineteenth century – to which Gibran subscribes in his own Nahḍa discourse (anti-Ottoman and anti-colonial nationalism). "The spirit of the age," thus, is hoped to provide a new home – that is, a new mode of existence in which religious tolerance as a supposedly modern civic achievement is actualized within the secular nation – to which Syria, as a potential national state, will

---

[69] See Meskini, *al-Huwiyya wa al-Zamān*, 36. I added emphasis on "us" and "we" because Meskini is speaking from *a certain position*, that of "an inhabitant of the south of modernity" as he once put it, in which the dilemma of Arab, Muslim identity is entrapped in the Turāth-Ḥadātha (tradition-modernity) debate, where the West is *both* the cultural and anthropological "other" *and* the epistemological model to follow (being equated with "modernity"). In his endeavour to move away from this conundrum, Meskini posits the "contemporaneity" (*muʿāṣara*) of the Arabs to the modern, "Western" age (*al-ʿaṣr*) as the efficient, *non-identitarian* mode of resistance against the metaphysical dominance of the West over the rest of the world (the objectification of non-European humanity).

[70] For more in this, see Ibid., especially in the chapter, "Man Huwa al-Zamān? [Who is Time?]," 27-43.

enter, optimistically precipitating the end of any definition of Syria in religious or confessional terms.

Gibran, however, admits the optimism of this prospect in which "Syria is portrayed as it should be, not as it is," and addresses his "Syrian brother" only insofar as he is a "patriot":

> My Syrian brother, whether you are a Muslim, a Christian, a Durzi or an Israeli, whether you are aligned with the Ottoman state, France, Britain or Russia, whether you are in agreement with me as to our eligibility for self-rule or not, there is an essential point at which we should stop: it is patriotism [*al-waṭaniyya*].[71]

Only those who are identified as "patriots," in the sense of longing for and having the readiness to sacrifice oneself for the Syrian nation, are concerned with what Gibran has to say in the article. He then proceeds to reflect on what he deems the four factors – religious fanaticism, ignorance, lack of self-reliance and despotism – that have torn asunder the "national collectivity" of the Syrians. What is remarkable about the article is its lucid and down-to-earth (albeit at times problematic) analysis of the social and political conditions that have impeded the realization – that is, the liberation and formation – of the Syrian national state. This is an analysis whose impetus lies in the force of nationalism as an ideology capable of directing intellectual and activist energies towards the aim of realizing that which the ideology attempts to articulate and precipitate, namely, the construction of the nation as a realizable idea and the embodiment of the idea in the establishment of an autonomous and unified national state.

To that end, Gibran conceives of what he calls "national life" [*al-ḥayāt al-qawmiyya*] as a natural, inherent human property. The naturalization of nationalism, in the Arab context, should be comprehended in relation to the notion of *ḥubb al-waṭan*[72]

---

[71] Daye, *ʿAqīdat Jubrān*, 298.
[72] Hoorani points out that the term has acquired in the Nahḍa "the specific meaning of territorial patriotism in the modern sense." Hoorani, *Arabic Thought*, 79.

(love of homeland) that found articulation in the revival of Arabism and the construction of modern Arab subjectivity – occasioned by the domestication of nationalism in the Arab world – in the Nahḍa's nineteenth century discourse,[73] leading to a confusion that is often made between *homeland* (place of birth and up-bringing) and *nation* (in the modern sense of the word), both of which the sense of term *waṭan* readily lends itself. This is evinced in the following passage towards the end of the essay:

> National life [*al-hayāt al-qawmiyya*] is a powerful spirit that emerges from the general interest of the nation and propels it toward a single Aim regardless of the preferences and inclinations of its individual members. It is a genuine and deeply penetrating psychological sentiment of love for the land in which man was born and reared, for the people to whom he belongs, for the customs to which he had become adapted, and for the language that he speaks. It is a patriotic sentiment in the path of which [or, for the sake of which] man sacrifices his wealth and life.[74]

I must note, first, that Gibran, speaking of "national life," uses the term *qawmiyya* not *waṭaniyya,* with the former usually translated as "nationalism" and the latter as "patriotism," though the confusion at times arises. *Qawmiyya* is derived from *qawm*, meaning kinsfolk, tribe or clan in the strict sense of the word, and, in its general and frequently invoked sense, a community with which one identifies. It is this fact of being born in and raised within the circle of a certain *qawm* (people) with shared language, customs and traditions, that leads Gibran – in addition, of course, to the ethical and ideological drive of his message (the realization of the Syrian national state) – to perceive nationalism in natural or organic terms. For Gibran, love of one's country (*maḥabbat al-waṭan*) necessarily connotes love of one's birthplace. This love of home*land*, the land into which one is rooted, is perceived by Gibran as an inherent human sentiment whose goodness is realizable only if this sentiment "is engulfed and

---

[73] Sheehi, *Foundations*, 9-10.
[74] This passage is cited in translation by Adel Beshara in "Gibran Kahlil Gibran: A Rebel from Syria," in The *Origins of Syrian Nationhood*, 151.

propelled by wisdom"[75]; for it readily lapses into a "vice," pernicious and detrimental individually and collectively, if it is infused with "pretence" and "vanity."[76] This sentiment, in its insightful embodiment, is thus transformed into a driving force in the nationalist quest for nationhood.

One discerns, furthermore, that nationalism has a specific "aim" in this discourse, rendering it at once an intrinsic human sentiment and an instrument for the formation of a national education necessary, as I shall later demonstrate, for the independence of the nation. The "general interest of the nation," moreover, is taken as that which "generates" this nationalism, identified here, unsurprisingly, as "national *life*." In other words, love of homeland, which precedes and exceeds nationalism as an ideology, becomes that which naturalizes nationalism itself – the use of the word "life" is not arbitrary. Thus, the nation (*al-umma*) in the modern sense emerges out of the deeply rooted love (literal translation of *hub mutaʾaṣṣil*) for the homeland. What emerges as problematic – which often passes as unproblematic in the modern Arab context – is the use of the word "*al-umma*" as an equivalent of "the nation." It is the (enduring) religious connotation of *al-umma* as a community of people who share a common religious belief (Islam) that allows for the domestication of the (Western) category of "the nation" or "*le patrie*" in the Arab context. This domestication has confused its meaning by at once aligning it with Islam and the modern nation in the Arab discursive landscape to which it has "travelled."[77]

---

[75] He maintains this in his short article "Uḥibbu Bilādī [I Love my Country]." Daye, *ʿAqīdat Jubrān*, 260-61.
[76] Ibid., 260.
[77] The point here is not to foreground the "origin" of the concept and therefore (de)-legitimate its appropriation, but to account for the conditions and consequences of its appropriation, universalization and naturalization – which nonetheless should be questioned – as it travels and embodies itself in non-Western forms of life.
Talal Asad, relying on Benedict Anderson's concept of the nation as inherently limited and sovereign, has maintained that the term *umma*, being used today to denote the Arab nation (*umma ʻarabiyya*), "is cut off from the theological predicates that gave it its universalizing power, and is made to stand for an imagined community that is equivalent to a total political society […] in a secular (social) world." Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 197-98. My point, however, is that the entrenched religious sense of the word

It is the ideological force of this nationalism, which takes as its premise the natural love of *waṭan*, that conditions and frames Gibran's scrutiny of that which hampers the concrete realization of what he calls "national life." It is crucial to remember that Gibran does not posit a coherent theory or vision of nationalism; rather, his nationalist reflections are fragmentarily sketched out, warranted by specific historical moments or events within a certain field of discourse. A pattern, however, can be discerned: Gibran posits the inter-relatedness of national independence, self-reliance and Awakening, held together in a causal relationship. While national independence is dependent on the self-reliance of the Syrians in their quest for nationhood, self-reliance is predicated on "moral independence," a notion upon which Gibran lays a huge emphasis. And without moral independence neither is the enactment of an original Eastern Awakening possible, nor is self-reliance – and by necessity, national independence – realizable. In other words, the Awakening, which is premised on moral independence and self-reliance, needs to take place for the nation to emerge, and the national state is the logical (institutional) result of the Awakening of Syria as an Arab, Eastern entity. Yet this "moral independence" should not preclude the Syrians, as revealed in his letters to Emile Zaydan between 1919 and 1922, from seeking out foreign (Western) "tutelage" in "scientific, economic and agricultural" matters, provided that the Syrian "national character" [*al-ṣibgha al-sūriyya*] is upheld.[78] Following the passage quoted earlier (on national life), Gibran identifies the necessary, lacking elements for Syria to become a recognizable nation:

> Tolerance, knowledge, independence and courage [*al-iqdām*] are the elements we lack to become a significant nation whose word is recognized in the international arena. Creating a scientific Awakening (*nahḍa ʿilmiyya*) that

---

umma is that which had occasioned the domestication of the modern concept of the nation, a domestication that has nevertheless regionalized and de-universalized its original sense (that is, one that has confined it to the Arab and, in this case, Syrian nation), all the while retaining its religious connotation, making it readily prone to a (Derridean) "undecidability."

[78] Daye, *ʿAqīdat Jubrān*, 369-70.

> educates our men[79] in every science and art is the foremost of our priorities. For when these educated men are present amongst us, having created a *national literature, a national philosophy, a national music and a national industry and commerce*, once we realize this aim in the course of progress, there will be no power under the sun that would forestall our independence. And to the Syrian people, who are known for their intelligence and adaptability, this aim is not unrealizable.[80]

This is a discourse on national independence that is predicated on the formation of "a national literature, a national philosophy, a national music, and national industry and commerce," all of which are requisite for the establishment of an independent national state; an independence that is dependent on the self-dependence of the Syrian people, on whom Gibran's faith and hope for Awakening are placed despite, or because of, his critical account of the conditions which he thinks are deterrent to national unity inside Syria. This is a healthy move, in my view, for it takes as its point of departure collective self-criticism, an agential self-affirmation that must not be confused with collective self-loathing, before highlighting the essential ingredients necessary for collective unity and self-transformation – for which nationalism acts as a robust ethical and ideological impetus and guarantor. I emphasize Gibran's concern for collectivity and collective action because it constitutes that which he deemed lamentably and gravely wanting in the Syrians, that which would affirm and sustain their entity as a recognizable nation, hence nationalism as an ideology that manifests itself in the form of collective identification and solidarity.[81]

What is striking, however, is that Gibran's discourse reveals (or conceals) an incognizance – one might say an underestimation – of the British and French colonial interest in the area, addressing the issue as though Syria had been immune from foreign,

[79] It is astonishing, one must remark, that Gibran speaks only of "men" when it comes to education and Awakening, all the more so because he was a staunch advocator of women's rights in Syria, as many of his early short stories attest.
[80] Ibid., 303. [emphasis added]
[81] In "Ḥaffār al-Qubūr wa al-Aḥyāʾ [Grave Digger and the Living]," he foregrounds the existence of "living seeds" suitable for growth in the Syrian as an individual and the absence thereof in the Syrians as a collective whole, hence his emphasis on *al-ḥayāt al-qawmiyya*, national or collective life. Ibid., 256-57.

colonial intervention. This may boil down to the fact that the region had not been officially parcelled out until 1920, that is, one year following the publication of the essay, and that the results of the Sykes-Picot Agreement had remained secret until 1919.[82] Also, the manifesto of The Syria and Mount Lebanon Liberation Committee, of which Gibran was a Secretary of Foreign Correspondence, published in 14 June 1917 in *al-Sāʾiḥ*, reflects the Committee's unawareness of the true motives of the Allies. The manifesto announces that the Committee's strategy for the liberation and independence of Syria from the Ottoman Empire, advocated by Gibran, consists in the enlisting of Syrians of all backgrounds (but especially those in America) in an Eastern military campaign to fight with the Allies, France in particular, against the Ottoman Empire. This agenda mirrors the military orientation of the Committee, which, as John Daye points out, saw the War as an opportunity to gain military and political victories for Syria.[83] This is despite its caution and awareness, in the words of Amin Rihani, another influential *Mahjari* writer and nationalist, that "the salvation of one nation by another is one that necessarily entails foreign sovereignty over one's nation, and [that] any foreign sovereignty, however just and beneficial it could be, is an option that we would never be content with."[84] We should not forget, furthermore, the wide appeal to Woodrow Wilson's endorsement of the right of "national self-determination" that was announced in 1918, which was regarded by the Committee (based in the U.S.) as an immense political support to their cause.[85] Yet this strategy – fighting with the side of the Allies – was neither effective on the ground, not did it bear political fruits for Syria after the War. It was, in short, miscalculated, but understandable given the scarcity of options

---

[82] Frazer, *The First World War*, 10.
[83] For a short historical account of the committee's foundation and activity, see Daye, *ʿAqīdat Jubrān,* 81-90.
[84] Ibid., 82.
[85] "Wilson was talking in the context of Europe, and national self-determination came to be a major feature of how the continent emerged from the Paris Peace conference, but the idea was understandably taken up with alacrity in other parts of the world, including the Middle East." Frazer, *The First World War*, 8.

conducive to their struggle at that juncture in history, and not as simply naïve as some have argued from today's privileged standpoint.[86]

Apart from this crucial political context, Gibran insists that the realization of national collectivity is predicated on the Syrians' (awakening of their) "moral independence," hence his essential reconfiguration of independence as an intrinsic property of being whose actualization warrants one's self-consciousness of its existence *within* (oneself). This self-consciousness, that is, must precede and predicate an independence *from* (any encroaching or colonizing Other). "The Westerners," he wrote to Emile Zaydan after World War One, "might be able to help us scientifically, economically and agriculturally, but they cannot grant us *moral independence*, [*al-istiqlāl al-maʿnawī*], without which we cannot emerge as a living nation."[87] This independence is moral insofar as it is radically and universally human, but it can solely take the form of a unique "national character" by virtue of which one's *difference* is articulated and preserved. In other words, Gibran is positing moral independence as a universal category whose embodiment manifests itself (only) within the spectrum of national difference, with each nation having its own distinct character but within a *similar* spectrum of difference (the modern, universalized category of the nation). The "Syrian character," the adherence to which is necessary for moral independence to crystallize, is that which would preclude the Syrians from being "shewn, ingested and

[86] Adel Beshara contends that Gibran was not unaware of "international diplomacy and Western colonial interest in Syria," but he "never imagined the Allies, brought up in the spirit of democracy and liberal morality, would allow their imperial interests to completely eclipse their war-time pledges to the newly-liberated people of the world and trample all over them as though they had no intrinsic human value." Beshara, "A Rebel Syrian: Gibran Kahlil Gibran," 154. The point is indeed well-taken, but the situation was far more complex than Beshara put it. Gibran was cognizant of the dangers and repercussions of colonialism, voiced before and after the War in his 1916 article "Grave-digger and the Living, " in his letters to Emile Zaydan (1919-1922) and in his recently published manuscripts, but saw foreign "tutelage" as inevitable and necessary. This is due to his firm belief in a (national) social, cultural and economic Awakening as a precondition for the foundation of the nation. What is intriguing here is that Gibran, before the official partition of the area, considered foreign "tutelage" to be separable from colonialism. Whether this was naïve or strategic is hard to tell.
[87] Daye, *ʿAqīdat Jubrān,* 370, [Emphasis mine].

digested" by the "tutelage" of a foreign, "developed" country.[88] It is this emphatic and adamant concern for Awakening (incumbent upon the "slumberous" Syrian subject) that blinded Gibran to the logic of *realpolitik*, to the gulf between Enlightenment ideals and colonialist politics. His cautious belief in France or Britain as a "tutor" for the Syrians – a transitory tutelage – is nevertheless revoked in his recently published manuscripts.[89] In one of them, unfortunately undated, he writes that "the Westerner" is an "enemy" who is driven by his own interests when he turns his face to the East, and that "his virtue resides only in the West."[90] In another, he avers that there is no distinction between a mandate and an occupation, urging the Syrians to ground any action they set out to undertake for Syria or in their struggle against France on wisdom, caution and thoughtfulness[91] (and one can readily infer that the French Mandate was the context in which this statement was written).

These manuscripts reveal a profound disappointment with the post-War turn of events in the region, namely, the partition of Greater Syria and the demonstrably colonialist nature of the French Mandate. For Gibran's vigorous commitment to "maintenance of the unity of geographical Syria and the independence of the country under a national, representative system"[92] was not fulfilled, neither was his (somewhat far-fetched) call for the provisional and conditional placement of Syria under foreign "tutelage" after the War.[93] Notwithstanding the failure of this political activism and vision, which he shared with other notable Syrian writers, activists and reformers in the

---

[88] Ibid.
[89] Some of these manuscripts have been published by John Daye (1988) and others transcribed and assembled in an edited collection published in Lebanon in 2010, available in Gibran's Museum (Bsharri, north Lebanon).
[90] Daye, *ʿAqīdat Jubrān*, 374.
[91] Ibid., 375.
[92] Ibid., 369-70. For a translation of one of the letters he sent to Emile Zaydan, see Beshara, "A Rebel Syrian: Gibran Kahlil Gibran," 154.
[93] Gibran asserts that "If Syria is placed under the tutelage of America, France or England – or all of them as some Syrians are calling for – there are fundamental things that we must insistently and persistently cling to, namely, *the geographical unity of Syria, national, participatory governance, compulsory education and the permanent priority and official status that should be accorded to the Arabic language*." Daye, *ʿAqīdat Jubrān*, 370. [emphasis added]

U.S., what is remarkable and worthy of critical attention is his unwavering belief in the dire necessity and potentiality of enacting an original Syrian – and, by extension, Arab Eastern – Nahḍa, and in the urgent need for a collective Syrian unity that was hoped to ward off any Western colonial infringement.

In "Syria on the Dawn of the Future," he warns against the dangers of falling prey to "religious fanaticism," one deterrent to national unity and Awakening, ridiculing any reduction of nationalism to it. Addressing the leaders of the Syrian parties towards the end of the essay, Gibran reiterates his demand for national collective unity:

> If you your patriotism does not triumph over every emotion of zealotry in your being, and if you do not unite your demands before it is too late, there will come the day where you look at the map of Syria being tinged with different colours as is the case in black Africa, colours indicative of its division into spheres of influence and foreign colonies.[94]

Syria was indeed divided as Gibran had anticipated, yet the main cause of its division was not the disunion of its political parties, but the decision of the victorious Allies, France and Britain in particular, to partition the region that was formerly part of the Ottoman Empire in line with their colonial interests and in complete indifference to the people who inhabited it.[95] As far as Gibran is concerned, it is *the position* from which he spoke, that of the Syrian, Eastern subject concerned as a committed writer and reformer to Syria and the Arab East, that led him to *overemphasize* the role and responsibility incumbent upon the Syrians in the making of their own history, especially after what became known as centuries of "decadence [*inḥiṭāt*]"[96] under the Ottoman

[94] Daye, *ʿAqīdat Jubrān*, 303.

[95] An Allied commission, proposed by President Woodrow Wilson, was sent to the Syria "to ascertain the views of the population" as to their future following the War. The findings of the "shelved" report reflected that "the overwhelming opinion in Syria was against a French Mandate and that nine tenths of the population was opposed to Zionism." See Frazer, *The First World War*, 10-12.

[96] Recent scholarship has moved away from the "decadence paradigm" in their approach to the Nahḍa's intellectual enterprise. See, for instance, Stephen Sheehi, "Towards a Critical Theory of al-Nahḍah: Epistemology, Ideology and Capital," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 43, no 2/3: 269-298. That this cultural "decadence" is an Orientalist discovery does not negate the fact that Greater Syria and the Ottoman provinces in "the Orient" were *not* as advanced, materially, economically and militarily speaking, as Euro-America at the time. As Sadiq Jalal al-Azm writes in his well-known critique of Said's *Orientalism*, "That 19th century Europe was superior to Asia and much of the rest of the world in terms of productive

governance, and to regard as secondary any foreign, colonial role in the potential reshaping and remaking of the area.

In the same the essay Gibran attributes the deplorable political and social conditions in Syria, among other factors, to “Eastern despotism,” a gesture that seems to attest, *at face value*, to the extent to which Orientalist epistemology went often unquestioned in the Nahḍa and post-Nahḍa intellectual enterprises that sought to comprehend and provide a panacea for the dilemma of “progress” in the Arab world.[97] Gibran proclaims that the “Syrian” lacks, “as an Easterner,”[98] an awareness of his own “rights” and “duties”: the right to social welfare and the right to criticize the governor or the clerk on the one hand, and the duty of the individual, on the other hand, vis-à-vis the community [*al-jamāʿa*] as a collectivity within which the individual exists and operates as a social agent. Here, it is not clear, initially, whether Gibran considers docility, lack of individual autonomy and susceptibility to despotism inherent to the “the Easterner,” or whether these elements are merely historical, and therefore changing or changeable. However, if the aim of his critical engagement in the national cause lies in contributing to the construction of a democratic national state to which notions of individual autonomy and collective good are central to its functioning, then it becomes clear that this so-called Eastern despotism is eradicable, and therefore not a stable, ahistorical element that is intrinsic to the Syrian *qua* Easterner. “When the social collectivity neglects its duties towards the individual,” he writes, “the latter will absolve himself of

---

capacities, social organization, historical ascendency, military might and scientific and technological development is indisputable as a contingent historical fact. Orientalism, with its ahistorical bourgeois bent of mind, did its best to eternalize this mutable fact, to turn it into a permanent reality past, present and future. Hence Orientalism’s essentialistic ontology of East and West.” See Sadiq Jalal al-Azm, “Orientalism and Orientalism in reverse,” in *Orientalism: A Reader*, ed. A. L. Macfie (New York: New York University Press, 200), 227-28.

[97] See Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 4-6, 14-15.

[98] Daye, *ʿAqīdat Jubrān*, 302.

his responsibilities towards it, and therein lies the defect that would take the form of disorder and despotism."[99]

In the same passage, he abruptly shifts attention to "the massive gulf that exists between us and the nations that are civilizationally advanced," and endeavours to bridge it – a bridging that aims to invalidate the dichotomy of *inherent* backwardness or advancement – by suggesting that "progress" is a project that could be carried out in a short temporal span, citing the U.S. as an evidence of its realizability within a period of fifty years.[100] His premise consists in the fact that "it was science [in the last fifty years] that made possible all these astonishing miracles [all the material and technological advancements of modern life in the U.S.]," and science, he avers, is a universal "light" that shines not on one part but on the whole of the Earth: "Do we remain asleep, then," he wonders rhetorically, "or shall we awaken to move in its light?"[101] Thus, what emerges as "lacking" in the Syrian subject is not a modern scientific backdrop against which "progress" is actualized *a la* Europe, but "a will to work" and "a persistence in work,"[102] a diagnosis that locates the civilizational slumber *within* the Syrian subject as a historical agent – albeit one that cannot be dissociated from the Euro-American civilizational challenge. In other words, the lack is not a lack of "civilization and progress" materially realized in the Western other (one that defines the self as "backward" vis-à-vis the "civilized" other), but a lack of the will to work and the persistence in work *within the subject itself at that historical juncture*, having once led the (historical) "procession of Life" as he puts it. This way, Gibran inscribes the collective self in a historical universalism in which history is divided into chapters, with one distinct civilization as the protagonist of a chapter, as it were, leading the

[99] Ibid.
[100] "If you contrast the massive gulf that exists between us and the nations that are civilizationally advanced," he asserts, "you would readily assume that our nature [*ṭīna*] is inferior to theirs." He then goes on to refute this surface observation as I explain above. Ibid., 302.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Ibid., 303.

procession of Life at a specific epoch in history, yet with no clear teleology. Euro-America is a not *the* civilizational telos for Gibran, but the one leading the procession of Life in the modern times. This will lead me to touch more closely on the Eastern civilizational question and the way Gibran approaches the predicament of the Syrian Nahḍa, insofar as he deems it an essentially Eastern one.

3. Syria within the East: Civilizational Anxiety and Gibran's Vision of the Nahḍa

In the previous section, I discussed a play and an essay published by the end of War, in which the predicament of Syria, torn between the colonial threat and the disunity of its people, is theatrically displayed and critically analysed by Gibran. His commitment to the national cause, as I have shown, is indissociable from the question of the Nahḍa: the establishment of a Syrian national state presupposes a social, cultural and economic Awakening, both of which are premised on, and constitute the fruitful embodiment of, moral independence. In this section, I pursue this discussion by highlighting this issue of the Nahḍa in relation to the wider civilizational sphere: the Arab East.

In an undated short text entitled "To the Easterners," found in the manuscripts that John Daye published in 1988, Gibran draws an important distinction between "his Eastern conscience [*wujdān*]," which he invokes to address those to whom the short article is written, and his "alienated soul in every place": "I address you now as a man and not as a poet, and I appeal to your Eastern conscience with my own Eastern conscience, not with my soul that is alienated in every place from your souls that are alienated in every place."[103] Of notable significance here is Gibran's statement at the outset, "I now address you as a man and not as a poet," which echoes his self-consciousness of a certain poetic identity, voiced in his play *Between Night and Morn*

[103] Ibid., 374 [emphasis mine].

and elsewhere,[104] that is purportedly at odds with "politics" as a practise of power and vying interests, yet inevitably entrenched in "the political," or, as Jacques Rancière puts it, literature "doing" politics *as* literature (albeit in another context).[105] Thus, Gibran provisionally suspends his being a poet in his endeavour to engender and revive the Syrian will to work necessary for the realization of the Nahḍa, the intimation here being that poetry addresses the universal, the soul that is *everywhere* alienated. In other words, poetry as such cannot be national or identitarian. Rather, it speaks to the human as such, even if it is articulated in a certain language and within a certain tradition or culture, as also indicated in Chapter One. Yet, why the "Eastern conscience" in this context? "Eastern" here, as a label of "imaginative geography,"[106] to use Said's phrase, at once stands for and encompasses the Syrian. The use of this qualifier should not be readily construed as an instance of essentialization, precisely because of the above-mentioned distinction. Gibran is addressing his fellow Syrians as Easterners insofar as they are aware, or *made* aware, of their own cultural and imaginative identity – in the anthropological sense – in a specific historical moment (the Near East is *not*, after all, the West). That they are Easterners or how they became so, however, is taken for granted.

Addressing the Eastern conscience of the Syrians with his, Gibran writes,

> You are seeking freedom and yearning for independence; you are aspiring for an Eastern civilization that rivals the Western one; and you wish to dispense with the foreigners, nay you want the foreigners to come to you asking for your friendship instead of you asking for theirs. I address now as a man and not as a poet, and I appeal to your alienated souls in every place, so listen….[107]

Gibran, in other words, is addressing the identitarian layer of their being, insofar as "identitarian" denotes the cultural and anthropological identification of the self,[108]

---

[104] In his manuscripts Gibran reiterates that he is not a politician and he does not to be a politician (in the context of nationalism). See, Gibran, *Iqlib al-Ṣafḥa*, 102.
[105] See Jacques Rancière, "The Politics of Literature," *SubStance* 103 vol. 33, no. 1 (2004): 10.
[106] Said, *Orientalism*, 49-73.
[107] Daye, *ʿAqīdat Jubrān*, 374.
[108] See Meskini, *al-Huwiyya wa al-Zamān*, 7-8.

located in a specific geographical *and* symbolic space demarcated – imagined, constructed and entrenched – as the East. Yet he is invoking this layer in the specific context of "civilizational" rivalry and survival, where "the West" as *the* civilizational, identitarian other is not solely a challenge and a threat, but that which instigates, occasions and sets the terms of an "Eastern" quest for a "civilization" of its own. Interestingly enough, however, one discerns that Gibran, towards the end of the above-cited passage, is not addressing this layer but appealing, "as a man and not as a poet," to the Syrians' "alienated souls in every place." This should not be taken for granted. For in this discursive shift, Gibran is addressing what he takes to be the human as such in his fellow Easterners/Syrians, that is, the originary ontological structure of being human in the world as he understands it. For the self as "soul alienated in every place," if one apprehends it in the light of Gibran's thought, is the existentially alienated self by dint of being in the world, *anywhere* in the world – that is, its alienation, not conditioned by lack, is constitutive.[109] More specifically, he is addressing the originary layer of the self that lurks behind the "veils" of national, cultural and imaginative identity. No wonder that he is using the word "alienated" here [*gharīb*, meaning "estranged," takes up the connotation of "alienation" in the existential sense that the word *ghurba* denotes], which designates the primordial, displaced sense of the self that comes before any cultural, social, national, in short, identitarian veiling. I should note that I am not so much concerned with alienation *per se* in my analysis here as with this "universal" underlying structure – for Gibran – at the core of being human in the world irrespective of, or in tandem with, its identitarian layer. By appealing to this radical pre- or non-identitarian self, Gibran attempts to (re)invigorate the will to work requisite for the Awakening of women, the plantation of the fields (on which a great emphasis is placed) and the education of the youth, all of which the Syrians are keen on realizing yet only, as he

---

[109] See my discussion of his play *Iram Dhāt al-ʿImād* in the last section of Chapter One.

asserts, "with [their] silent will."[110] The ambivalence of the Syrians, as he diagnoses it – willing to work but working in words, to paraphrase him – is a sign of a double, conflicting personality: "one liberating itself [*tataḥarrar*] in secret, the other submitting (itself) [*tamtathil*] in public."[111] This is an Awakening that is solely possible if the self is understood and addressed – the addressing and addressed self – beyond or beneath its identitarian surface, albeit an Awakening that manifests itself, paradoxically and inevitably, in identitarian terms, that is, as an Eastern one. This is why "the identitarian" (*al-hawawī*) is a veiling: it conceals that which enables its manifestation.

Along with his emphasis on the will to work and the embodiment of the will to work or lack thereof in the Syrian/Eastern subject, it is crucial to accentuate the weight that Gibran lends to the force of *ibtikār* (innovation or inventiveness) and *ibdāʿ* (creativity) to foster an *independent* Arab Eastern Nahḍa. This is not only manifested in his concern for the future of the Arabic language, which is contingent upon the "power of invention" in the collective body of its speakers as discussed in Chapter Two, but also in his scepticism vis-à-vis the Arab Nahḍa itself, one that tormented him a great deal as revealed in his manuscripts. "Is it a Nahḍa," he wonders, "or a short wakefulness that precedes death? Are we assiduous to recover a lost glory, or are these dreams so embodied in the remembrance of the past that we've taken them for facts?"[112] This scepticism arises out of certain diagnosis that attributes imitation of the past ("traditionalism"[113]) or the West ("westernization") to the shrinking "capacity to innovate and create in the nation's spirit [*nafs al-umma*]," which leads to an inevitable imitation of "what other nations innovate"[114] or, in case one is not an imitator of the

---

[110] Daye, *ʿAqīdat Jubrān*, 374.
[111] Ibid.
[112] Gibran, *Iqlib al- Ṣafḥa*, 115.
[113] I use this word in the sense that Abdallah Laroui lends to it, that is, as an ideological deployment of "tradition," wrongly posited as "the anti-thesis of progressive change," which usually intensifies when there is foreign pressure or threat. Laroui, *The Crisis of Arab Intellectuals: Traditionalism or Historicism?* trans. Diarmid Cammell (Berkley; London: University of California Press, 1976), 33, 42-43.
[114] Gibran, *Iqlib al-Ṣafḥa*, 105.

West, to an "enchantment" with ancient, glorified "effects," a sign of "slavery" to the past to the extent that it denotes submission to the "power of continuity" [*quwwat al-istimrār*], of which he speaks so robustly and elaborately in his poetic essay "Slavery."[115]

In "Nahḍat al-Sharq al-ʿArabī [The Awakening of the Arab East]," an interview conducted with Gibran in *al-Hilāl* periodical in 1923, later turned into an essay, he spells out his take on the Arab Nahḍa, which he deems "no more than a faint echo of modern Western civilization [*al-madaniyya al-gharbiyya al-ḥadītha*]."[116] This is because "this blessed Nahḍa," according to him, "has created nothing out of itself, and what it has hitherto produced lacks the stamp of its unique character, the colour of its own imprint."[117] He then goes on to lament, after asserting that "the East, in its entirety (…) has become a huge Western colony," the fact that "the Easterners, those who take pride in their past and boast of their traditions and their ancestors' achievements, have become slaves, with their thoughts, preferences and leanings, to the Western idea [*al-fikra al-gharbiyya*]."[118] He is quick to maintain, however, that what concerns him is not "whether the Western civilization is, in itself, good or not" – it is still alive after and despite World War One, he asserts, a sign of its survival and persistence. He is rather dwelling on the question of whether the Arab nations are wakeful (*nāhiḍa*) or not, and to that end, he suggests looking into the various connotations of the word *nuhūḍ* [Awakening], and what each connotation entails in the (then) Arab context. Thus, should we take the word in the sense of "apprenticeship," that is, importing, adopting, appropriating and superficially imitating the (material) manifestations of Western civilization [*madaniyya*] in order to "amend" the ruinous and dilapidated social, economic and cultural reality of the Arab nations, then the latter, asserts Gibran with

---

[115] *CWs in Arabic*, 213-215. The translated version is available in Gibran, *The Storm*, 39-44.
[116] Daye, *ʿAqīdat Jubrān*, 345.
[117] Ibid.
[118] Ibid.

irony, "have awakened to the point of reaching out to the galaxy."[119] Gibran's use of the word *madaniyya* is not arbitrary, it seems to me, for unlike *ḥaḍāra*, *madaniyya* in this context connotes that which is *materially visible* in the modern West, embodied in its metropolitan centres (the word shares its root with *madīna*, city; it can be also understood, therefore, as *urbanity*), hence the ridiculing of any unquestioned imitation or appropriation of it. "If Awakening, however, manifests itself by way of inventing and innovating, then the Arab nations are still in slumber," he states. Yet, interestingly, "this is indeed the case if we look at invention and innovation with eyes captivated by Western civilization and its mechanical novelties."[120] What Gibran is staunchly at odds with here is any instrumentalist appropriation of Western modernity in its technological facet and, more precisely, its re-appropriation *as* an Arab Nahḍa. Any technological infatuation with the West, therefore, is scorned and dismissed as a mere imitation that results from a dwindling and dying capacity to innovate in the Arab, Eastern subject. This stance is not simply a Romantic backlash against the epistemological nomenclature of the Nahḍa's "reform-rationalist paradigms," as Sheehi points out.[121] It is also a position that seeks to dispense with both traditionalism and westernization by carving out an original Awakening that is almost exclusively predicated upon the force of invention insofar as it invests in the "Eastern" yet-to-be excavated "treasures," the unstirred (re)sources of the Arab Eastern self, so to speak.[122] Paying attention to Gibran's fiction alone is what prompted Sheehi to conceive of Gibran's ideal subject (in his fiction) as a Romantic one who does away with "civilization as urbanity."

---

[119] Ibid., 346.
[120] Ibid.
[121] "The romantic subject," argues Sheehi, "distinguishes himself from the previously seen reform subject by finding his ontology in a criterion exterior to civilization understood as urbanity." Sheehi, *Foundations*, 98-100.
[122] Towards the end of the same essay, he asserts, "In the East, our old house, there are countless treasures, riches and wonderful things, yet they are all confused, amassed and veiled by a layer of dust. It is commonly known that the West has mastered the art of organization [*tartīb*] to an extreme degree… If imitation is ineluctable, let us imitate this art provided that we imitate none other than it." *ʿAqīdat Jubrān*, 350.

Gibran, I argue, is wrongly understood as being averse to civilization *per se*, a reputation he acquired based on his early fiction and especially his long poem *al-Mawākib* [The Processions] (1919), in which he contrasts the idyllic, innocent world of *al-ghāb* (the forest) with the corrupt, materialistic world of the modern city. In his short story "The Tempest" (1916), one is bewildered by the renunciation and isolation – not the asceticism, as it first appeared to the narrator[123] – of Yusuf Fakhri, the principal character of the short story who has decided to live in a hut away from the city, the emblem of "civilization as urbanity," and who delights in walking amidst "the storms" in the mountains of north Lebanon. The narrator, trying to find a safe refuge from a howling storm that has taken him aback, tells us that he chanced upon Yusuf's hut, where he was indeed admitted and hosted. The long dialogue that unfolds between the narrator and Yusuf is an intriguing case of discussing and contesting the worth of modern civilization. Yusuf, to the narrator's surprise and admiration, evinces a critical awareness of all the "maladies" that have swept over society, as he explains why he forsook the city, having chosen to distance himself altogether from what he deems the very source of those maladies, "the city" itself. This is to the dismay and bafflement of the narrator who finds in him, having diagnosed those "ills," a "physician" who would have contributed to the "healing" of society. What is notable is that Yusuf, his cynicism notwithstanding, regards the "wretchedness of the East" as "the wretchedness of the whole Earth," because "human nature is the same and people differ from each other only in extraneous features, which should not be taken seriously."[124] He goes on to express his profound scepticism vis-à-vis the advancement of the West in that "slavery – slavery to life, slavery to the past, slavery to teachings, customs and fashions, and

[123] The narrator is surprised to have found "wine, tobacco, and coffee in his [Yusuf's] cell." "I do not blame you," Yusuf said, "for you, like many, imagine that isolation from men means isolation from life and from the natural pleasures and the simple delights of life." Gibran, *The Storm*, 15.
[124] *CWs in Arabic*, 260. I rely, in part, on John Walbridge's brilliant translation, which is nevertheless not without inaccuracies.

slavery to the dead – remains slavery even if its face is painted and its dress is changed, even if it calls itself freedom."[125] This is how he shuns the idea of a "backward East" and an "advanced West," ending up by dismissing civilization altogether as "a vanity." All that he yearns for and venerates now is a "wakefulness [*yaqaẓa*] in the depths of the self; he who has witnessed it cannot disclose it in words, whereas he who has not does not and will not attain its secrets,"[126] a vision drawn, unsurprisingly, from Sufism. While this can be readily construed as a Gibranian Romantic aversion to "civilization" – a reading that fails to be attentive to the dialogic nature of the short story and the intricacies of the exchange between Yusuf and the narrator – the narrator's reflection reveals not so much a concurrence with Yusuf but a contesting rumination. He does not dismiss civilization/urbanity in favour of a "spiritual wakefulness," which is nevertheless hailed as "the aim of Being," but sees the former, "with all its obscurities and ambiguities," as being "one of the causes" of the latter. "How is it possible to deny an existent thing when its very existence is evidence for the truth of its right?" he wonders.[127] Even if "modern civilization is a passing accident," the narrator believes that "eternal Law" will have made of it a step in the "staircase … that reaches to the absolute substance."[128] The metaphysics that informs the narrator's judgement aside, his contestation suggests that Gibran is not against civilization as such, that "modern civilization" for him is a cause of ambivalence and perplexity as much as it is a phenomenon that should not serve as a yardstick to gauge "progress" and "backwardness."

As for his non-fictional later work, exemplified by his essay "The Awakening of the Arab East," it discloses an understanding of a Nahḍa whose trajectory must be radically different from the one taken by Western civilization. This is because it must

[125] Ibid., 261. See also my reading of Almustafa's passage on Freedom in *The Prophet* in Chapter One.
[126] Ibid., 262.
[127] Ibid., 262; *The Storm*, 26.
[128] *CWs in Arabic*, 262; *The Storm*, 27.

derive its urge and "moral wakefulness" [*yaqaẓa maʿnawiyya*] as well as its independence from the "essence" and "spirit" of the Arab East, holding on to the belief that a true, original Nahḍa is one that embraces an Eastern spirit of *ibtikār unmediated* by the West. This stance is held by Miss Warda, one of the main characters of his short play *al-Wujūh al-Mulawwana* [The Chameleonic Faces], published in 1916 in *al-Sāʾiḥ*. Miss Warda hopes for the awakening in the young Syrians of "those elements that brought about the awakening of the Western nations," by which she means a "*moral awakening* that made of their lives a continuous ceremony on the stage of Being."[129] This is why in a polemical essay, published posthumously, Gibran heaps his criticism on Kamel Ataturk for failing to realize that reform should not be enacted by "importing the modern glittering shells" of Western civilization [*qushūriha al-barrāqa al-ḥadītha*] while oblivious to its "essence" or "kernel" [*lubāb*], where its true meaning (for him) resides.[130] Gibran, however, is not unaware of the inevitability of influence, as revealed in his play *Assilbān* for instance,[131] yet his suspicion of "borrowing" and "emulation" lies in their potential transformation into a "lethal venom" and a "grave" for the borrowing Easterner[132]: the extent to which what is borrowed could erase "the character" of the borrower and efface his or her particularity. Hence the metaphor of "digestion": transforming that which is borrowed from "the West" into "the Eastern being," in other words, to domesticate it in fear of becoming "quasi-Western," a state about which Gibran is deeply anxious.[133] What is the ontological underpinning, one wonders, of Gibran's line of thinking here? "The creative nature [*fiṭra*] of the Eastern self is akin to a harp's strings whose notes are," he maintains, "divergent by their nature from every note of every string in a Western harp. The Easterner cannot bring together

[129] *CWs in Arabic*, 266. [emphasis mine]
[130] See "'Amān Allah', The Afghan King" in Daye, *ʿAqīdat Jubrān*, 379-80.
[131] This is mainly in relation to literature. See *CWs in Arabic*, 270.
[132] Daye, *ʿAqīdat Jubrān*, 349.
[133] Ibid.

the tones and silences of two distinct notes without corrupting one or both."[134] It is not difficult to discern the essentialism underlying this statement, which Gibran at times acquiesces to and at times disrupts or complicates as my discussion has shown. It is nevertheless an essentialism that is not based on a hierarchical opposition between the East and the West, but on an imagined notion of cultural difference that, in that specific civilizational and imperial context, is articulated in identitarian yet non-hierarchical terms.

Thus, while alert to the perils of an uncritical appropriation of Western civilization *qua* urbanity, of espousing "westernization" as a means to generate progress in the East, of glorifying and unquestioningly submitting to the past ("traditionalism") as a way of confronting the urgencies of the present, Gibran nevertheless relies on the metaphysical binary of essence/appearance in his rather Eastern-oriented approach to the question of the Nahḍa. Furthermore, Gibran never paid attention to the role of modernity and colonial capitalism in the reshaping and destabilization of the region since Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798,[135] that is, to the extent to which Western imperialism was instrumental in the restructuring of the area despite local resistance (the asymmetrical power relation need not be overstated here). He was, however, as displayed in the essay, mindful of what he deemed the Western colonialist logic of power, driven by imperial, economic interest, that would hamper any possibility of Arab unity.[136]At any rate, his concern was the not the past but the future of Syria and the Arab East, which for him required a radical transformative and practical vision that cannot do away with identitarian reason as a strategic choice for civilizational survival and Awakening. This vision is at odds with the ways in which Arab intellectuals tackled the conundrum of the Nahḍa by espousing either westernization or traditionalism.

---

[134] Ibid., 350.
[135] Fawaz, *A Land of Aching Hearts*, 10, 11, 25, 33, 34.
[136] Daye, *ʿAqīdat Jubrān*, 374.

Instead, it sought to lend legitimacy to originality, the appeal to which arises in moments of civilizational survival against imperialist hegemony, by infusing it with a *Geist* of *ibtikār* indispensable for it very enaction.

In this chapter, I have attempted to demonstrate that Gibran's intellectual commitment to the Syrian national cause is concomitant with his concern for the Nahḍa; the one presupposes the other. Gibran's nationalism, although inevitably ideological, is fundamentally ethical. This is not only attested by the idea that the Syrian *waṭan* or homeland is the sole unifier of its inhabitants. It is also evinced in the vision that the liberation/formation of a national state in Syria hinges on the Syrians' "moral independence," which is the primary condition for any original Awakening to emerge on the one hand, and for the persistence of the Syrian "will to work" that this desired Awakening requires on the other. Also, while embedded in the discursive universe of the Nahḍa, Gibran's discourse disrupts and interrogates some of its identitarian and teleological premises. Sceptical of the Nahḍa's alternance between traditionalism and westernization, he envisions an alternative Nahḍa that derives its spiritual and moral (re)sources from the (Arab) Eastern self, an enterprise whose validation would solely lie in embracing a *Geist* of *ibtikār* (innovation/invention) that would legitimate this agentic but defensive appeal to identitarian and cultural particularity. Ultimately, however, the modern/colonial logic of power reigned supreme. The colonial partition of Greater Syria by the end of the War meant the impossibility of realizing the quest for nationhood and the Nahḍa. Yet Gibran's diasporic voice and its persistent echoes attest to an early "de-colonial" intellectual vision whose realizability was impeded by the colonial conditions of impossibility. This intellectual, national commitment notwithstanding, Gibran never ceased conceiving of himself as essentially a poet, poetry being that which, however linguistically and culturally situated, is concerned with the universal as such. Thus, the national and the universal are, as I have argued throughout, complementary or, at least,

contextually different in Gibran. Yet this singular versatility has been lost on the mixed reception that his anglophone work has elicited in its linguistic and cultural travelling beyond the nation and back to it, which is the subject of my next and final chapter.

Chapter Four:
Multiple Horizons of Expectations, Multiple Gibran*s*:
Or, Gibran as World Literature

> Je ne connais pas d'autre exemple, dans l'histoire de la littérature, d'un livre [*The Prophet*] qui ait acquit une telle notoriété, qui soit devenu une petite bible pour d'innombrables lecteurs, et qui continue cependant à circuler en marge, comme sous le manteau, sous dizaines de millions de manteaux, faudrait-il dire, mais sous le manteau quand même, comme si Gibran était toujours écrivain sacré, un écrivain honteux, un écrivain maudit.
>
> [I am not aware of any other example, in the history of literature, of so renowned a book [*The Prophet*], which has become a small bible for countless readers, and which continues nevertheless to circulate on the margins, as if under the coat, under tens of millions of coats, one must say, but under the coat all the same, as if Gibran was always a sacred writer, a shameful writer, an accursed writer.]
> Amin Maalouf.[1]

> The East is not a simple (dialectical, speculative, culturalist) movement toward the West. They are for themselves the beginning and the end. And we are trying to go toward a planetary and plural thought, this other-thought, that is built step by step and without a certain end.
> Abdelkebir Khatibi.[2]

Where and how do we locate Gibran in the world today? To locate a bilingual immigrant writer such as Gibran somewhere is, of course, to place him in more than one geography. The question of location in this sense goes beyond geography in the territorial sense. It is cultural, imaginary and epistemic. And to tackle this question is to locate oneself in, and carry oneself across, these different geographies. In the case of Gibran, this would entail the encounter of many problems, not the least of which is the fact that Gibran is seen as a popular sage prophet in one location (the United States), and as a rebellious modernizing poet and writer in another (the Arab world). To view Gibran in this manner, however, is to locate oneself in two different languages and cultures *separately*. Yet Gibran's bilingual chasm, upon which I dwelt in Chapter Two,

[1] This is from a preface to a new translation of *The Prophet* into French: Khalil Gibran, *Le Prophet*, trans. Janine Levy. Preface by Amin Maalouf (Paris: Editions de la Loupe, 2003), 10.
[2] Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Plural Maghreb*, trans. P. Burcu Yalim (London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2019), 21-22.

is a chasm that *separates and connects* at the same time. This chasm has produced different incarnations of Gibran that are sometimes irreconcilable, due mainly to what is masked and unmasked, what is lost and gained, in (cultural) translation. No wonder that this chasm is most apparent in the divergent modes of receiving his English work in the U.S. and the Arab world, where it is "Arabized." Tracing this chasm and the worldly conditions of its emergence and persistence, that is, tracing and interrogating specific modes of reception that vary in their influence on the perception of that which is received, is my concern in this chapter.

Gibran, I argue, is a writer whose English work is bilingual, because it belongs at once to Arabic and American literatures, despite the lack of critical recognition in the American literary field.[3] As such, it is an instance of "world literature" par excellence, not only in the sense that his work, following David Damrosch,[4] travels in translation beyond the culture of origin, but insofar as it inhabits two literary systems to neither of which it *fully* belongs. Hence, any appraisal of it should simultaneously consider its reception in these two literary spheres. I demonstrate that Gibran's English text has been often received as *essentially* and *monolithically* "Oriental" and "spiritual" in the U.S., designations that saturate and flatten this text *within* that specific cultural and normative location. When the same text travels to the Arab world, it is given another hermeneutic life in that context, compelling us to approach it as world literature beyond English, as world literature, that is, in Arabic. The American reception will occupy most of my analytical attention in this chapter. This is because Gibran's presence in American literature is vague and perplexing: on the one hand, *The Prophet* has enjoyed a massive popular appeal since its publication in 1923; on the other, Gibran sits outside the canon of American literature. What is more, his other English works and Arabic

[3] Insofar as it is enunciated, situated and received in the U.S., Gibran's anglophone work belongs to American literature, or at least it is "Arab-American" (even if uncanonized), without losing its fundamental status as Arabic literature in English, which is the condition of its becoming "American."
[4] Damrosch, *What is World Literature?*, 4-5.

writings have been eclipsed by the phenomenon of *The Prophet*. This problem, therefore, warrants a focused attention to the way(s) in which his books have been received in the U.S., to the American conditions of reading and horizons of expectations, more specifically, that have shaped specific modes of reading, (e)valuation and categorization (section one and two). Yet, the American reception remains one side of the picture. Of no less importance is the re-contextualization and "Arabization" of the anglophone Gibran in the Arab cultural geography, where he is subject to another regime of value[5] and other conditions of reading and interpretation (section three).

In section one, I focus on the initial reception of Gibran's English books in the U.S. For reasons of space, I highlight the reception of *The Madman* (1918), *The Forerunner* (1920), *The Prophet* (1923) and *Jesus the Son of Man* (1928), arguably the most important of Gibran's English *oeuvre*.[6] It is not possible to study all the reviews, but those discussed in this section are the most frequently cited in biographies of Gibran. As such, they are illustrative of the early reception of his English-language books. The pattern that emerges in this reception is the emphasis on Gibran's Oriental identity in a way that precedes his text and predetermines its meaning, value and categorization. Nevertheless, it is a pattern that is disrupted by some instances which I refer to and discuss. As I highlight this reception, I interrogate the underlying presuppositions behind various value-judgements. This interrogation will be supplemented by an intervention, a close reading of a parable in *The Forerunner*, "God's fool." Such an intervention is not only supplementary but inevitable, as its very enaction has the aim of circumventing the kind of totalizing judgments we often

[5] A regime of value could be described as "a semiotic institution generating evaluative irregularities under certain conditions of use, and in which particular empirical audiences or communities may be more or less fully imbricated." John Frow, *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 144.

[6] *Sand and Foam* (1926) is a short book of aphorisms and has not attracted much attention. *The Earth Gods* (1930) is a late work of Gibran and is not very different from his early works in Arabic and English.

encounter in culturalist or spiritualist readings of his work, a reminder of his text's singularity that necessarily exceeds those kinds of judgements. In section two, I underscore the problem of *The Prophet* in American literature. While hitherto uncanonized, its huge popularity has turned Gibran into a phenomenon in the U.S. I demonstrate that the popular appropriation of the book as an Eastern "spiritual guide" has thwarted the certification of Gibran as "high literature" worthy of joining "the canon." Here, I foreground the ways in which cultural translation and exoticism bear on the production of the symbolic value of Gibran's text in America, and how this value-coding has de-contextualized it, obscuring both its polysemy and the visibility of works other than *The Prophet*. Since my argument is that Gibran's anglophone work is bilingual, I turn, in section three, to its "Arabization" in the Arab cultural geography. This is by discussing, first, what this Arabization presupposes and produces, with the multiple translations of *The Prophet* into Arabic as evidence, and, second, by focusing on two *different* engagements with his work: Mansur Rahbani's play *Jubrān wa al-Nabiyy* [Gibran and the Prophet] (2010), performed as an operetta in 2005, and Fethi Meskini's philosophical essay in Arabic, "The Veils of Reason, or Gibran and the Mad I."[7] I discuss these two examples because they are *illustrative of* the *re*-contextualization of Gibran's anglophone text in the Arab world. My discussion will not only emphasize their content but will attempt to reveal the strategies of re-contextualization and the conditions of reading that occasion their enunciation. What emerges is *another* Gibran, de-exoticized and re-appropriated in Arabic, reminding us that this movement is one that disrupts the putative correlation between "English" and "world literature" in the recent emergence and consolidation of the concept in the Anglo-Saxon academy. By "forgetting English," so to speak, one remembers "the varieties of one-world thinking"

[7] The essay's title in Arabic is "Barāqiʿ al-ʿAql, aw Jubrān wa al-Anā al-Majnūn" in Fethi Meskini, *al-Kujīto al-Majrūḥ: Asʾilat al-Hawiyya fī al-Falsafa al-Muʿāsira* [The Wounded Cogito: Questions of Identity in Contemporary Philosophy] (Algiers: Editions el-ikhtilef; Riyadh, Beirut: Dhifāf Publishing, 2013), 191-96.

to use Aamir Mufti's phrase,[8] the cultural, normative and imaginative plurality of the world. This last section is a reminder of that.

Theoretically, I draw on Pierre Bourdieu's sociological approach because it has the capacity to elucidate some of the issues that pertain to Gibran's American reception. For Bourdieu, the cultural/symbolic and the economic are interrelated but irreducible to one another, both of which are ultimately crucial in the social process of valuation and "consecration" of a literary work within a particular literary/cultural field. Despite its silence on essential elements such as race and gender,[9] Bourdieu's sociology of art and literature is helpful to illuminate *some* of the conditions that left Gibran outside the canon of American literature. Along with Bourdieu, I use Hans Robert Jauss' concept of the "horizon of expectations."[10] Jauss' "aesthetics of reception" does not pay attention to literary works that are constituted by and received in two different linguistic and cultural spheres. Nevertheless, I use his concept, expanding it beyond his model (as a criterion of a literary work's aesthetic worth), to designate the discursive conditions and backgrounds against which specific modalities of reading or (re)-appropriating Gibran are produced, cemented and/or disrupted, in both the U.S. and the Arab contexts. I understand that Bourdieu's approach may not be reconcilable with hermeneutics, but I am not combining and using them uncritically. My approach is rather pragmatic. Both are useful to my analysis because my discussion includes several elements which demand eclectic and careful theoretical attention. Crucially, the (after)life of literary texts resides in a world of *multiple* social, cultural and hermeneutic spaces across imagined or real geographies; and this multiplicity commands a worldly critical

[8] Aamir Mufti, *Forget English! Orientalisms and the Institution of World Literatures* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 5.
[9] Frow, *Cultural Studies*, 5.
[10] Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti, intro. Paul de Man (Brighton: Harvester, 1982), 22-28.

attention that is aware of the dialectics of text(s) and context(s), without one subsuming the other, as this chapter aims to show.

1. Initial Reception of Gibran's English Works in the U.S.

The importance of tracing this initial reception of Gibran's English works lies not only in revealing whether his works were positively or negatively received. It resides, most importantly, in exposing the historical as well as the normative and evaluative framework within which his works were placed and according to which they were assessed. Critics have so far only pointed out that *The Madman* and *The Jesus the Son of Man* are the two books of Gibran that received a positive critical reception in the U.S. – two books that remain relatively unknown compared to *The Prophet*. But, who and how and in which historical and cultural context is this judgment made, what Bourdieu would call "the symbolic production of the work" and its value[11]? What is the regime of value that informs these evaluative judgments? What was highlighted in the reviews and what was absent and why? These are the fundamental questions that my discussion in this section endeavours to address.

To speak about this reception is to situate Gibran within the American literary field at the time. There were crucial changes in terms of literary and aesthetic taste in the aftermath of World War One.[12] "American literature" had not yet acquired, before the War, an institutional status that demarcates its boundaries and history, but the formation of its canon began in 1910s and 1920s.[13] Tradition had to be invented, and T.S. Eliot's well-known essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," has altered the

[11] Bourdieu calls for "a sociology of art and literature [that] has to take as its object not only the material production but also the symbolic production of the work, i.e. the production of the value of the work or, which amounts to the same thing, of belief in the value of the work." Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, trans. and ed. Randal Johnson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 37.

[12] This change – which devalued writers such as Benjamin Franklin, Washington Irving and William Dean Howells, to name but a few, while valuing others like Henry Melville, Mark Twin and Henry James – was reinforced by an institutional configuration that consisted in "the professionalization of the teaching of literature, the development of an aesthetic theory that privileged certain texts [New Criticism], and the historiographic organization of the body of literature into conventional "periods" and "themes."" Paul Lauter, *Canons and Contexts* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 24-27.

[13] This formation excluded black, female and working-class writers. Ibid., 27-32.

perception of tradition from something inherited to something that is obtained by assiduous labour. Eliot speaks about novelty in relation to an existing order of "European, English literature,"[14] in relation, that is, to "the mind of Europe."[15] The implicit and "natural" assumption here is that to write poetry in English is to belong to a European tradition of writing, to be conscious of this tradition as it inhabits the present. Moreover, Eliot's concept of novelty, embodied in his impersonal theory of poetry, posits the depersonalization of the poet in a way that transforms emotion into palpable feelings manifesting themselves detachedly and creatively in *form.*[16] Eliot attacks the "metaphysics of mysticism"[17] and "the metaphysical theory of the substantial unity of the soul."[18] He leaves no place for a *variety* of mystical experiences in poetry, or for poetry that is ethically engaged. Thus, "the generation of literary critics who, following T.S. Eliot, began to come to prominence in the 1920s, were doubtful – if not altogether suspicious – of the power of art to shape behaviour at all."[19] The "New Critics" diverted attention to a literary work's language and form, seen as that which represents human creativity, by bracketing, if not dismissing, its subject matter or the values it promotes.[20] They were suspicious of "mass society" and keen on protecting culture by stressing the value of art *per se*, not the way it shapes conduct. As Paul Lauter puts it, this "formalist aesthetic played an implicit role in the narrowing of the canon," as these "arbiters of taste" often excluded black and female writers whose mode of writing did not invite the then predominant approach of New Criticism. Instead,

---

[14] T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932), 15.
[15] Ibid., 16
[16] Eliot talks about the "perfected medium in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations." Ibid., 18
[17] Ibid., 21.
[18] Ibid., 22.
[19] Lauter, *Canons and Contexts*, 34.
[20] "Formalist criteria of excellence developed in the 1920s by critics like John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, R.P. Blackmur, and Tate, have emphasized complexity, ambiguity, tension, irony, and similar phenomena; such standards are by no means casual. They place a premium on the skills of the literary interpreter: *He* shall unpack the ambiguities and tensions to the uninitiated students, the products of a degraded "mass education."" Ibid., 35. [emphasis in the original]

> upper-class white Americans in the twenties acknowledged the lives of black people, and the work of black writers, only in "their place" – as "exotic," like a taste for Pernod or jazz, a quaint expression of the "folk." It was very well to visit Harlem, but decidedly inappropriate to include blacks in the anthology or the classroom, much less in the Modern Language Association.[21]

This account is of course schematic, but it illustrates the general literary and aesthetic climate of the post-World War One America, which was crucial to the formation and consolidation of the American literary canon until 1960s and 1970s. Locating Gibran – a writer of an invisible "ethnic minority" in the U.S. – within this context will help us understand the American reception of his work. Gibran's English writings, whose concern is mostly ethical, cannot be appreciated by looking at them through the lens of Eliot's impersonal theory of poetry or New Criticism, nor by casting them as "exotic" in relation to the dominant European, white male norms of writing and thinking. That was, however, explicitly or implicitly the case.

Gibran's first book in English, *The Madman,* was generally well-received, yet, as two of his biographers observed, he "often was portrayed as a mysterious hero, ready-made genius, and Near Eastern counterpart of Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore. His impoverished origins in Bsharri, adolescent days in the South End, and cultural apprenticeship in Boston were overlooked."[22] This comparison to Tagore – who was well-known in America at the time – placed Gibran in the vague category of "Oriental" poetry, with the Orient as an essential, over-arching civilizational identity that *precedes* the text itself and determines, *a priori*, its value. This judgment was not without (weak) foundation, though, as Gibran adopts the parable form in his English writings, despite his own realization, as I noted in Chapter Two, that "English is not the language for parables,"[23] that is, for his own parables which were first imagined or even written in

---

[21] Ibid., 36.

[22] Jean and G Gibran, *Kahlil Gibran: Beyond Borders*, 304.

[23] "English is not the language for parables, but one is apt to find faults with his tools when he cannot use them well. The fault lies within me. But I *will* learn how write in English." [emphasis in the original] KG to MH, May 16, 1916.

Arabic. The parable, however, is not necessarily an Oriental form. What is at stake here is not the parable as such but the identity of the writer in question, and how this identity informs the act of (e)valuation itself.

Joseph Gallomb, in his interview with Gibran for the *Evening Post* in 1919, following the publication of *The Madman*, observes that a formal similarity between Tagore and Gibran exists, but quickly stresses the contrast between the two:

> Roughly speaking, what Tagore is to the East, Kahlil Gibran is to the Near East … Both employ largely the parable. Both have written in English with as fine a command of the Western tongue as of their own. And each is an artist in other forms besides poetry. But there the resemblances end and the differences appear, the most striking being their physical appearance. Tagore, with his long, picturesque hair and beard and his flowing robe, is a figure from some canvas Sir Frederic Leighton might have painted of a religious mystic. Gibran is Broadway or Copley Square or the Strand, or the Avenue de l'Opera – a correctly dressed cosmopolitan of the Western World.[24]

Wail Hassan is sceptical about this portrayal in his assessment of "the Gibran phenomenon,"[25] because for Gallomb there seemed to be "a chameleon-like ease of adaptiveness about [Gibran]," an Oriental who is "a correctly dressed cosmopolitan of the Western World."[26] At issue here, however, is not Gibran but Gallomb's appraisal, because for the latter Gibran could either be an Oriental *a la* Tagore or an Occidentalized Oriental – that is, seeming is mistaken for being here, to invoke Gibran's poem "My Friend" which was closely read in Chapter Two. The *Evening Post*'s review, for its part, highlighted the Near Eastern creative source of Gibran's *The Madman*, especially in its capacity to accommodate diverse cultural sources, "a blend of Tagore, La Fontaine, Nietzsche, and Dr. Sigmund Freud – a blend which, in *The Madman*, is surprisingly successful."[27] It is precisely this blend that makes *The Madman* irreducible to Orientalist and culturalist readings. By contrast, *The Nation*'s review considered the

---

[24] Gallomb, "An Arabian Poet in New York," N.Y. *Evening Post*, 29 March 1919, book sect., 1, 10.
[25] Hassan, "The Gibran Phenomenon," 67-68.
[26] This is one of the essential elements upon which hinges Hassan's argument that Gibran acquiesced to Orientalist representation in the U.S. Ibid, 59-77.
[27] Jean and G Gibran, *Kahlil Gibran: Beyond Borders*, 304.

book appealing only to "disciples of the modern cult of things Eastern," because "most Westerners will find the work repellent in its exotic perversity, and will lay it aside with an uncomprehending shake of hand, for East is East and West is still West."[28] Note here that "West is *still* West," meaning that what is deemed exterior to the West, "the East," has not been able to change what it takes to be "the West ," particularly if those "Easterners" are culturally active inside this "West." For "Tagore has not really succeeded in bridging the chasm between them, nor do we think Gibran will do."[29] The Orientalist ontological distinction between – and the potential "bridging" of – "Orient" and "Occident" is clearly at work here. In other words, this is not so much an issue reducible to authorial inception – of course that remains significant as far as the historical and discursive conditions of writing are concerned – as it is a matter of a specific mode of reception informed by its Western-centeredness in an historical period of high imperialism where the Occident ruled territorially, epistemologically and imaginatively over the Orient. The fact that the U.S. was not involved in the territorial colonization of the Orient does not mean that its *imaginary* was not informed by the conceived superiority – racial, cultural and civilizational – of the Occident.[30]

If culturalist reactions to Gibran's work such as the above prevailed, as I demonstrate in this section, Marguerite Wilkinson, in her anthology *New Voices: An Introduction to Contemporary Poetry* (1919), had a different view:

> Kahlil Gibran is writing poems and parables that have an individual music, a naïve charm and distinction and a structural symmetry based on symbol, contrast, repetition and parallelism. [It] is almost entirely a poetry of symbolism. His poems are parables, not designs in rhyme, rhythm or imagery, although his rhythms are clear and pleasing. In … *The Madman*, we have the best parables that can be found in contemporary poetry.[31]

---

[28] Ibid., 305; *The Nation* 107. Dec 28, 1918: 510.
[29] Ibid.
[30] The genocides inflicted upon the indigenous people of the land and the doctrine of "Manifest Destiny" attest to this imaginary.
[31] Wilkinson, *New Voices: An Introduction to Contemporary Poetry* (New York: Macmillan, 1919), 27, 95.

Wilkinson did not ground her brief examination on an East-West outlook on poetry and literature. What mattered for her was, first and foremost, the poetry itself, and she did not refer to the parables as "Eastern." Albeit brief, an interpretation of Gibran's text of this sort has been rarely registered. Although Wilkinson's approach detaches the text from its "worldliness" and "circumstantiality," to use Said's words,[32] her focus on the aesthetic as such is not without significance. An incorporation of Gibran in an anthology of American literature such as Wilkinson's is significant precisely because it abstains from evaluative judgements based on an Occident-Orient cultural dichotomy, which informs so much of the reviews and criticisms of Gibran's texts.[33]

Another point to accentuate here is that this incorporation occurred *before* the publication of *The Prophet*, that is, before the instant and spontaneous popular appeal that "overshadow[ed] literary approval from postwar elite intellectual circles."[34] I shall return to the problem of *The Prophet* and how its reception eclipsed Gibran's other important works later, but it is important to note that aesthetic considerations are never divorced from, but are not reducible to, the social and cultural circumstances of reception. A horizon of expectations, therefore, cannot be solely understood in aesthetic terms, because what is at stake here is a bilingual writer whose shift from one language to another (and from one culture to another), whose mode of writing adopted in English (considered Romantic, belated, anachronistic, aphoristic and so on) and whose perceived cultural distance or foreignness at that specific historical juncture complicate any appraisal of his anglophone writings. Formally, Gibran did not create a horizontal change in English the way he did in Arabic, but his English texts are, as it were,

---

[32] Said, *The World*, 39.

[33] To the best of my knowledge, this remains, along with *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab-American Literature* (Utah, University of Utah Press, 1988), the only two serious anthologies of American literature to include Gibran's work.

[34] Jean and G Gibran, *Kahlil Gibran: Beyond Borders*, 353.

constituted by translation,[35] which is to say that they are bilingual texts even if they do not exhibit that on the surface.[36]What should be emphasized in this context is not aesthetic innovation but his work's "response to *questions of meaning* such as they could have posed themselves within the historical life-world of its first readers."[37] Tracing this response, following Gadamer and Jauss, should be complemented by a hermeneutic "application," that is, by highlighting the work's relevance to the horizon of the present.[38] *The Madman* critically engages with many aspects of life in modernity, and not only with perennial human concerns such as God[39] and friendship,[40] for instance, albeit Gibran does that against the backdrop of a specific historical and worldly context as discussed in Chapter One. Some of those modern aspects include calculative reason and the quest for "perfection" in (post)modernity, and his powerful poem ""The Perfect World""[41] is a case in point:

> I dwell in the midst of a perfect race, I the most imperfect.
> I, a human chaos, a nebula of confused elements, I move amongst finished worlds – peoples of complete laws and pure order, whose thoughts are assorted, whose dreams are arranged, and whose vision are enrolled and registered.
> Their virtues, O God, are measured, their sins are weighed, and even the countless things that pass in the dim twilight of neither sin nor virtue are recorded and catalogued.
> …
> It is a perfect world, a world of consummate excellence, a world of supreme wonders, the ripest fruit in God's garden, the master-thought of the universe.
> But why should I be here, O God, I a green seed of unfulfilled passion, a mad tempest that seeketh neither east not west, a bewildered fragment from a burnt planet?
> Why am I here, O God of lost souls, thou who are lost among the gods?[42]

---

[35] I use the present tense here because the text itself – the way we understand, reconstruct and interpret it – is still an open process, but that process is one that should be critically accounted for. What is unchangeable is the actual materiality of the text, not the text itself.
[36] Hence, their trajectory into the repressed/displaced language (see Chapter Two) should be taken seriously as part of the history of the reception, or the construction, of the text itself.
[37] Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, 146. [Emphasis mine]. Jauss takes account of both form and meaning in "the interpretation of a literary work as a response." Since formal innovation was relatively lacking in Gibran's case, I foreground the question of meaning.
[38] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Masrhall (New York: Continuum, 2004), 306-07.
[39] See my reading of his poem "God" in section one of Chapter One.
[40] See my reading of his poem "My Friend" in the last section of Chapter Two.
[41] The inverted commas were deliberately included in the title.
[42] *CWs*, 47-48.

The poem, written in the second decade of the twentieth century, is an acute reflection on the maddening regulation of human life that turned bodies into commensurable and surveyed entities in the modern – and the post-modern – age. Its prescience, therefore, must be appreciated. The point here is that a close attention to his texts, however rarefied they seem, with a simultaneous cognizance of their historical situatedness and their relevance to the contemporary situation, *eo ipso* nullifies the kind of judgements that prevail in most accounts of his work, be they laudatory or derogatory – is there, for instance, anything *intrinsically* Oriental or mystical in the poem I cited?

The Forerunner, Gibran's second book in English, published in 1920, received less critical attention than *The Madman*. Most of the reviews were unkind,[43] but it is crucial to note that the East-West cultural identitarianism was the primary, if not the sole, prism through which the book was assessed and valued. In his response to *The Bookman*'s review (December 1920) of the book, which found in it "the exotic fancy and mysticism of the East," Robin Waterfield writes that "this had become already a meaningless cliché from reviewers of Gibran's books: there is nothing peculiarly Eastern about *The Forerunner*," going on to stress that "Gibran's models might just as well have been Aesop's or some of the short allegorical prose pieces in Stephen Crane's *The Black Riders and Other Lines*."[44] Again, the East as Gibran's civilizational or cultural genealogy predetermines and therefore produces the symbolic value of his own English text in the U.S. No wonder that the exotic – and there is nothing *intrinsically* exotic about *The Forerunner* – serves as a "symbolic system"[45] that operates in the host(ile) culture by conferring a specific value on objects, in this case texts, deemed strange, culturally different, in short, non-Western, thereby assimilating and evaluating them in accordance to that system. Exoticism, by bridging the imagined distance of the

[43] Waterfield, *Prophet*, 216.
[44] Ibid.
[45] See Stephen Willian Forster, "The Exotic as a Symbolic System." *Dialectical Anthropology* 7, no. 1 (September 1982): 21-30.

East, obscures the text itself by subsuming it in its representational and assimilationist potency. There is no attempt, that is, at attending to the difference of the other without falling prey to an exoticizing that eradicates its inexhaustible alterity. Other reviews, such as the one by Isidor Schneider in *Poetry,* did not welcome the didacticism of the book as well as its form, "which a world grown sceptical is tempted to snub," judging it to be lacking "the authenticity of prophecy" and leaving us only with "a pompous dramatization of only half-individualised platitudes."[46]

What is at stake here is not simply a "highbrow contempt"[47] that Gibran's non-elitist poetry evokes, but a certain implicit *expectation* of what a work of poetry should exhibit – in form and content – in an age which is increasingly becoming "sceptical" from an American point of view, which is to say, in a Western age. *The Forerunner*, because it is written in a form, style and lexicon that collide with the *general backdrop* against which a literary horizon of expectation is met or not, or even created, did not initiate a horizontal change. Its use of the parable and of an English reminiscent of Victorianism is quickly deemed archaic, Eastern and (therefore) not in keeping with the "spirit of the age," although the book, a collection of prose poems and parables, is not as didactic and prophetic as *The Prophet.* Such a judgement misses the power of the parable in its subtle reflection on the subject it ponders. The book, furthermore, neither satisfied nor broke an aesthetic horizon of expectation, because *its own horizon of meaning* demands an interpretative effort that does not shed its form *a priori*, but that rather engages closely with the text without losing sight of its worldly context and cultural situatedness and polyvocality, irreducible to the East or, for that matter, to Eastern mysticism. It is important to remember that the first poem in the collection, for instance, invokes Nietzsche in a strikingly obvious way: "You are your own forerunner,

---

[46] Waterfield, *Prophet*, 216.
[47] Ibid.

and the towers you have builded [*sic*] are but the foundation of your giant-self. And that self too shall be a foundation," and goes on to underline the idea of continuous "beginning" as opposed to "origin."[48] What is neglected here is the text's own plane of meaning, a neglect that is not only prompted by the text's lack of formal innovation if judged within the Western poetic tradition, but, also, by the *imagined* cultural distance or strangeness attributed to its author. This strangeness, imaginarily constructed, is one that obfuscates what lies beyond, beneath or before strangeness itself. The essential question therefore is not strangeness *per se* but to/for whom one is a stranger.

To speak to *The Forerunner*, as it were, from our own inescapable present horizon of meaning, to (try to) enact, that is, its singularity, let us look closely at one parable in the book, "God's Fool," precisely because it touches on this question of the stranger. We are told that a man, "a dreamer from the desert" went to the city of Sharia the language of whose inhabitants he cannot speak nor they his own language. He was served dinner at a vast inn, which he initially thought to be a shrine. Upon entering the inn, he reckoned a feast was given "by the prince to the people, in celebration of a great event."[49] When asked to pay for the dinner by a large man whom he thought was the prince himself, he "did not understand and thanked the man heartily."[50] The large man called four watchmen from the city, which "the stranger" thought to be "men of distinction" due to "the ceremoniousness of their dress and of their manner."[51] The watchmen took him to the House of Judgment. There, he mistook the judge for the king, who appointed two advocates, "one to present the charge and the other to defend it," but "the dreamer thought himself to be listening to addresses of welcome."[52] Unbeknownst

[48] "And we, sun and earth, are but the beginning of a greater sun and a greater earth. And always shall we be the beginning." *CWs*, 53. See, also, Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 164.
[49] *CWs*, 54.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid., 55.
[52] Ibid.

to him, a sentence was passed, "that upon a tablet hung about his neck his crime should be written, and that he should ride through the city on a naked horse, with a trumpeter and drummer before him."[53] As the sentence was being carried out, people were running after the noise and laughing at him, and he became ecstatic, deeming the tablet the king's blessing and the procession an honour. Suddenly, he sees a man from the desert and cries out, "Friend! Friend! Where are we? What city of the heart's desire is this? What race of lavish hosts? – who feast the chance guest in their palaces, whose princes companion him, whose king hangs a token upon his breast and opens to him the hospitality of a city descended from heaven."[54] The man did not reply, but smiled and nodded, and the procession went on.

How does one read and engage with such a text *now*? There is, primarily, the question of language in relation to the foreigner, to the *xenos* as an absolute stranger, of hostility and/as hospitality or vice versa.[55] Which is to say that the parable is an occasion for a philosophical reflection that should be nonetheless contextualized, for Gibran himself was a Syrian immigrant in the U.S. (he spent his childhood in the poor South End district of Boston) at a time where racialist discourse determined immigration policy in the U.S. – the immigrant Syrians were generically classified as Turks.[56] This context, however, does not subsume the text, but it remains important so far as the social, cultural and political circumstances surrounding the text are concerned. This absolute stranger is a dreamer, and it is no coincidence that he is described as dreamer, one for whom every gesture from a hostile host is a gesture of lavish

---

[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid., 55-56.
[55] Derrida's well-known reflections on hospitality instantly come to mind, as he ponders the question of absolute hospitality, which, in its absoluteness, is not offered as a "right" or "duty" to a *known* foreigner (conditional hospitality), but to the foreigner who is unnamed, anonymous and, therefore, an absolute other. See Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 24-26.
[56] The first wave of Syrian (from Greater Syria) immigrants to the U.S. (1880-1924) were classified as Turks, not as Syrians, as the area was still part of the Ottoman Empire then. The immigrants, however, identified themselves as Syrians and loathed the Ottoman repression of the Syrians. See Tanyss Ludescher, "From Nostalgia to Critique: An Overview of Arab American Literature," *MELUS* 31, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 39.

hospitality, not without a hint of irony though, captured in the smile of the other man from the desert who does not reply but merely watches and shakes his head. By highlighting the stranger's attitude and the way he perceives the (for him) strange city, the city of Sharia, Gibran underscores the psychology of particular kind of stranger, "God's fool," who unwittingly subverts, in his absolute distance from the host – that is, in his dwelling in a language which is absolutely other – the very hostility of the host, who can only recognize this *surface* strangeness. One can only be "God's fool" by not knowing, not knowing the host's language – the host who does not know the stranger's language either – thereby radically misrecognizing the signs of the host's culture and the host's law. That the city is called "Sharia" is not coincidental either: transgressing the law is punishable, be the transgressor an insider or an outsider. In other words, the law in this city is applicable to everyone. But the stranger does not recognize the law or the language of the law. Thus, he exposes and pushes the law to its own limits. He misrecognizes, unbeknownst to him and to his host, the law and the language of the law. This mutual misrecognition, occasioned by the absolute strangeness of both the stranger and the host (to each other), obscures the line between hospitality and hostility: the host becomes *at once* hostile and hospitable.[57] This is why "the dreamer's face was uplifted and his eyes were overflowing with light": the irony is unmistakable, and the parable resists any reading that eliminates this inherent paradox of the situation – by invoking, as does Bushrui for instance, the Sufi figure of the fool and the dreamer's "purity of vision."[58] This dreamer is a stranger to the city, and his naiveté as dreamer is conditioned by his absolute linguistic otherness. The primary issue here, therefore, is not one of vision, but of the figure of the absolute stranger who could solely be God's fool by being and remaining *absolutely* foreign, thereby drastically misreading the

---

[57] Derrida refers to a chain of signification that links the *hostis* to the *hospis* when reflecting on the etymology of ipseity, the "I can," rather than "the capacity to say I," that precedes any identity of the subject. See Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*, 14.
[58] Bushrui and Jenkins, *Kahlil Gibran*, 203.

cultural codes and the law of the host's city. And the host is also a stranger – perhaps even a fool – to the extent that he does not know the stranger's language and does not recognize the stranger's misrecognition of his hostility, to the extent that his law is recognizable as law only if inscribed in language, in his own language. Only a "God's fool" can show and transgress, albeit unwittingly, the limits of the law.

It bears repeating that this brief close reading of the parable is a reminder of the hermeneutic carefulness that should be adopted when engaging with Gibran's texts. This carefulness serves to avoid homogenizing readings that veil its polysemic textuality. Exoticism here remains a para-textual and relational element. As such, it should not pre-define the text but must be rather demarcated within a specific cultural field in which it operates. Otherwise we run the risk of collapsing a potentially multivocal textuality into a culturalist notion of a text defined, approached and flattened by exoticism. Laying bare the discursive and cultural tools of exoticism is necessary but limited. What is critically needed is a hermeneutic movement that pays *close* attention to the text, that makes it *visible*, by inscribing rather than forgetting its worldliness: a care for the text – and its singularity – that is *not* preceded by the identity of its writer but that nonetheless takes it – as a linguistic, cultural and discursive factor rather than a rigid identitarian element – into account as part of the hermeneutic movement itself.[59]

I should now turn my attention to *The Prophet*. The "strange little book"[60] received far less critical attention than *The Madman* and *The Forerunner*.[61] Upon publication, however, the book generated a "spontaneous popular appeal,"[62] even though it was never advertised, let alone "exoticized" so far as the book cover of its first

---

[59] And this was the aim of the kind of reading I perform in Chapter One and, partly, in Chapter Two.
[60] This is how Gibran described the book to his friend Mikhail Naimy. Naimy, ""A Strange Little Book"," *Aramco World* 15, no. 6 (Nov/Dec 1964). https://archive.aramcoworld.com/issue/196406/a.strange.little.book.htm

[61] Waterfield, *Prophet*, 260-61.
[62] Jean and G Gibran, *Kahlil Gibran: Beyond Borders*, 358.

edition is concerned.[63] It is this very popularity, coupled with its non-European mystical aesthetics, that thwarted serious critical engagement with the book since its publication, exceptions aside. *The Prophet* was not aimed at the high literary circles of the time – in Bourdieu's terms, it was not produced for other producers – but was self-consciously written in a simple style[64] in such a way that the optimistic message of the book merges perfectly with its biblical, incantational rhythm. The issue here is not solely aesthetic. It is one of cultural and racial difference insofar as they relate to aesthetics. To demonstrate this, let us look at a review in *Poetry* by poet Marjorie Allen Seiffert, as it shows and exemplifies the lukewarm interest in Gibran within the New Work literary circles at the time. This tepidness towards his work is prompted, primarily, by the foreign, "mystical" element it represents, one that does not fall within the space of "our" culture:

> Kahlil Gibran has written a third book, *The Prophet*, following two others of the same genre, a book that will have a deep appeal for some readers and leave many others cold. *It is a bit of Syrian philosophy*, *a mode alien to our culture* and yet one in which many restless and unsatisfied spirits of *our race* and generation find a curious release….
> The discourse on beauty ends with the following lines:
>
> > Beauty is eternity gazing at itself in the mirror.
> > But you are eternity, and you are mirror.
>
> This seems to relapse into the sheerly mystical, and as the poem curves on to its end, one feels that it could never be a satisfying interpretation of our world. Moreover, the book lacks vigor… One feels that the poem could be a sort of decoration for us, like a faded Buddhist painting, that it could hang on our walls, *but it would never be part and parcel of our house*… Doubtless this book will awake response in many readers, for it is not without beauty, and the essence of the book, which is its spiritual significance, *cannot satisfy the robust hunger of the occidental spirit*.[65]

---

[63] The cover of the first edition was a very simple one: dark brown with a small circle below the title that apparently contains one of Gibran's drawings – an open hand from which bodies are floating upwards. In other words, there was no marketing that supposedly capitalized on the imagined identity of Gibran as an exotic Easterner. Joan Acocella notes that "[a]part from a brief effort during the twenties, "The Prophet" has never been advertised." "Prophet Motive: The Kahlil Gibran Phenomenon," *The New Yorker*, 30 Dec 2007.
https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/01/07/prophet-motive

[64] "I have just one rule in writing – to say it in the simplest way I can." MH Journal, 20 Aug 1920.

[65] Seiffert, "Foreign Food," *Poetry* 24, no. 4 (January 1924): 216-218. [Emphasis mine]

Note the references to "our culture" and "our race" as *the* grid through which to judge the book. Again, the work's perceived foreignness and civilizational distance – that is, its *different* normative and imaginative source, which is imagined rather than grasped – preceded it and determined its literary and aesthetic value. Of course, one can dislike the book or may find it too vague and mystical, as she did, but what I am concerned with here is how and on what grounds an evaluation such as this one is made, not the aesthetic judgment itself. Therefore her comment that "the book lacks vigour" remains a subjective, and valid, aesthetic judgment. What is rather problematic here is a demarcation of "our" culture in opposition to what is "alien" to it, not the aesthetics and mysticism of the book as such. And since *The Prophet* "is a bit of Syrian philosophy" – how so we are not told – an alien mode of thinking, its aesthetic worth could not escape this pigeonholing; it is rather deemed a "curious release" for certain "restless and unsatisfied souls of our race."[66] Nor could it be approached in its own terms, which is to say taking seriously, aesthetically and hermeneutically speaking, this foreign element that makes it a "mode alien to our culture."[67] The end of the passage sums up Seiffert's point: the spiritual significance of the book "cannot satisfy the robust hunger of the occidental spirit." There is no room here for what Chaouki Zine calls *ḍiyāfa* (hospitality) as *iḍāfa* (addition) or, even more importantly, for evaluating this addition by going towards the other in the attempt to understand what it has to say, not by falling back to the sphere of the same as the sole arbiter, the "occidental spirit" whose others

[66] Waterfield also notes, contrastingly, the favourable review of the Chicago *Evening Post*, in which the book was hailed as a "little bible," praising Gibran for daring to be idealist in a cynical age. I am referring to Waterfield because I could not, unfortunately, get hold of the review. See Waterfield, *Prophet*, 261. Mary Haskell notes that Gibran informed her about this review, "in which all of his "Work" was quoted." MH Journal, Nov 26, 1923.

[67] This totalizing contrast of Orient and Occident in relation to *the Prophet* can be also discerned in the brief review of *The Bookman* (1923): "Oriental philosophy holds a strange fascination for occidental minds. And doubly attractive is this philosophy when couched in the beautifully simple poetic prose of Kahlil Gibran's "The Prophet" (Knopf). A modern, mystic touch is imparted to the book by the twelve drawings with which the author ornaments his text – highly artistic drawings of graceful nudes rising from chaos, as if to illustrate the striving toward clarity of more or less complicated ideas." "Recent Books in Brief Review," *The Bookman* (Feb 1924 Issue): 673-74.

can speak only to satisfy its "robust hunger." But, ironically, the increasing sales of the book since its publication and the global "afterlife" of the book, to use Walter Benjamin's well-known description of translation,[68] indicate that it speaks to something in the *human* spirit beyond the Orient-Occident divide.

The Irish poet George William Russell has praised the book for the same mystical element that Seiffert found alien and undeserving of ("high") literary and aesthetic worth. "I do not think the East has spoken with so beautiful a voice since the *Gitanjali* of Rabindranath Tagore as in *The Prophet* of Kahlil Gibran, who is artist as well as poet,"[69] writes Russell. Although Gibran here is still seen through the prism of the civilizational category of the East, that is, as a representative voice of the East in the West, the essential poetic character of *The Prophet* is nevertheless underscored: "I have not seen for years a book more beautiful in its thought, and when reading it I understand better than ever before what Socrates meant in the *Banquet* when he spoke of the beauty of thought, which exercises a deeper enchantment that the beauty of form,"[70] declares Russell, going on to quote the well-known passage on children in *The Prophet* and another on dwelling. What we see here is not merely an appreciation inspired by the Eastern spirit of the book, but an understanding of it that locates its aesthetic innovation and the "enchantment" it engenders in "the beauty of thought" rather than that of form. This brief appraisal should be read in the context of modernism, where so many *formal* transformations radically changed English poetic conventions – with the seminal work of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein and others. In the U.S, this transformation was institutionally reinforced by the New Critics whose approach excluded other forms of writing that did not fit within this new aesthetic norm, as I explained earlier. Russell's emphasis on *The Prophet*'s beauty of thought, thus, betrays his awareness of its

---

[68] Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Collins/Fontana Books, 1973), 71.
[69] George William Russell, *The Living Torch* (New York: Macmillan, 1937), 169.
[70] Ibid.

difference from contemporaneous English poetry. This appreciation can be also understood in light of Russell's life-long interest in Celtic mysticism and theosophy in general, as his acclaimed *The Candle of Vision* (1918) testifies. Beyond this element of mysticism, however, or maybe because of it, one can discern a genuine interest in the book and a cultural openness exemplified in the following passage:

> How profound is that irony of Gibran's about the lovers of freedom "who wear their freedom as a yoke and a handcuff". Have we not seen here souls more chained to their idea of freedom than a prisoner is limited in his cell? The most terrible chains are those that gnaw at the soul. I wonder has the East many more poets to reveal to us? If Europe is to have a *new renaissance* comparable with that which came from the wedding of Christianity with the Greek and Latin culture it must, I think, come from a second wedding of Christianity with the culture of the East. Our own words to each other bring us no surprise. It is only when a voice comes from India or China or Arabia that we get the thrill of strangeness from the beauty, and we feel that it might inspire another of the great cultural passions of humanity.[71]

Russell's reference to a "new renaissance" that weds "Christianity with the culture of the East" is reminiscent of Raymond Schwab's *La renaissance orientale* (1950), in which he argues, in contrast to Russell who thinks that Europe is yet to have such a renaissance, that Europe had actually witnessed a second renaissance with the massive Orientalist discovery in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of the languages, literatures and philosophies of the East, whose huge impact can be discerned in European thought itself.[72] Russell's comments, however, speak more of Gibran who actually weds Christianity – Gibran's Christianity[73] – with Sufism and Nietzscheism, a blend that resists, as I have argued throughout, a categorization of the book as Eastern spirituality. Russell does not so much accentuate Gibran's mysticism here as he draws attention to important passages in *The Prophet* that reveal what he considers the "beauty

---

[71] Ibid., 170.
[72] See Raymond Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance*, trans. Gene Patterson-Black and Victor Reinking (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), and especially Edward's Said's remarkable forward to the book.
[73] By which is meant a de-institutionalized Christianity that conceives of Jesus in Nietzschean terms, that is, as a man who champions power rather than weakness, and as a poet who embodies Gibran's "Greater Self." This Christianity manifests itself, formally, in Gibran's own fascination with the biblical style in English, which for him resonates with its old Syriac version, as discussed in Chapter Two.

of thought." Allowing difference to speak, thus, Russell listens to the East as it manifests itself in poets such as Gibran, an openness that nevertheless runs the risk of not recognizing how the East itself received Western ideas and domesticated them (in the Arab Nahḍa); for "The East," as Abdelkebir Khatibi reminds us, "is not a simple (dialectical, speculative, culturalist) movement toward the West. They are for themselves the beginning and the end."[74]

It remains a fact, however, that *The Prophet* is one of the least reviewed books of Gibran upon publication.[75] It was privately well-received, nevertheless, as recorded by Gibran himself in Mary Haskell's journals: "Yes – *The Prophet* has been more than well received. I have been overwhelmed by letters."[76] Mary Haskell herself, in a prescient remark about the book's success, writes in a letter dating back to October 1923:

> The book will be held as one the treasures of English literature. And in our darkness we will open it to find ourselves again and the heaven and earth within ourselves. Generations will not exhaust it, but instead, generation after generation will find in the book what they would fain be – and it will be better loved as men grow riper and riper.[77]

It is no coincidence, to reiterate, that the book's appeal since its publication would hinder serious critical evaluation of it. Its perceived Eastern source, its "spiritual" tenor and soft didactic tone, as well as its Romantic *simplicity* of style and captivating beauty of rhythm, have contributed to make the book the popular phenomenon that it has become. All these elements, however, cannot exhaust the singularity of the text. Albeit simplicity runs the risk of falling into platitude,[78] the above-mentioned elements are essential to the message Gibran wished to convey, but his vision in the book cannot be reduced to them.[79] This is an important point to underline. And I insist on it by way of

---

[74] Khatibi, *Plural Maghreb*, 21.
[75] Waterfield, *Prophet*, 260.
[76] MH Journal, 26 Nov. 1923.
[77] Letter to MH, 2 Oct. 1923.
[78] Waterfield, *Prophet*, 224.
[79] See my reading of some passages from the book in Chapter One.

resisting "a formidable mechanism of *omnipotent definitions* [that] would present itself as the only one having suitable validity for your discussion [about the Orient]."[80] In other words, this is an insistence on the need to avoid systemic analyses whereby discursive overdeterminations and homogenizing entities like the Orient and the Occident are employed in a way that erases the multi-faceted nature of that which is analysed. This way one also avoids the rigid distinction between high and low literature, to neither of which a text as such *The Prophet* can be said to belong, precisely because it destabilizes the dichotomy and shows – in the contested way in which it has been received since its publication and in its travelling beyond the U.S. where it is accommodated and valued in a fundamentally different way – that its worldliness resists the specific symbolic production of its value in the American cultural geography. The paucity of reviews of *The Prophet*, therefore, has less to do with the work itself than with the dynamics of the American literary and cultural field within which it initially emerged, where the work could not escape its imagined Oriental genealogy that determined and produced, for self-imagined Occidental readers, its aesthetic, cultural and symbolic value. In other words, it fell outside "the mind of Europe" within whose contours T.S. Eliot posits his conception of poetic novelty and tradition, for *The Prophet* embodies the very mysticism that Eliot, and the New Critics after him, discarded. This symbolic value was also determined by the increasing sales of the book since its publication, and particularly in the New Age movement.[81]

Before tackling the problem of *The Prophet* in its later reception, I should draw attention to Gibran's longest book in English and the most important after *The Prophet*, *Jesus the Son of Man* (1928). In the years between the publication of these two books,

[80] Said, *Orientalism*, 156. [emphasis added]

[81] "In 1957, the millionth copy [of *The Prophet*] was sold and by 1965 the book had passed the 2.5 million mark. By the 1970 *The Prophet* was continuing to sell at a rate of approximately 7000 a week, its total sales having grown to more than 4 million copies in America alone." Bushrui and Jenkins, *Kahlil Gibran*, 330 (note 107).

Gibran published *Sand and Foam* (1926), a book of sayings and aphorisms that was not well-received.[82] For reasons of space, I briefly focus on *Jesus the Son of Man*, which embodies Gibran's fascination with Jesus in a remarkably poetic manner. It is the book that received the most favourable critical attention amongst his English works.[83] In it, Gibran recasts Jesus as an essentially powerful man and poet, "the Master Poet"[84] who represents the ideal of the Greater Self, that is, one who realizes the divinity within *as* a man and a poet. The book, written in a charming biblical style, is an imaginative collection of how certain historical and fictitious contemporaneous figures of Jesus thought of him. What is interesting about the book is that it gives an unconventionally diverse and rounded portrait of Jesus as reflected in the minds of those who speak about him, favourably or not. As such, it is a literary, not a historical, book, concerned with the humanness of Jesus and the potency of the symbolic prototype he incarnates. This is what Gibran had to say about his vision of Jesus to his friend Naimy:

> Jesus has been haunting my heart and imagination for some time past. I am sick and tired … of people who profess to believe in him, yet always speak of him and paint him as if he were but a sweet lady with a beard. To them he is beautiful, but lowly, humble, weak and poor. I'm also weary of those that deny him, yet present him as a sorcerer or an imposter. Still more weary I am of 'the scholars' who are ever digging into antiquity to produce lengthy and stupid arguments *either for or against* the historicity of his personality which is the greatest and most real personality in human history. What shall I say of the senile juggleries of theologians which make of Jesus a sort of hybrid, half-God and half-man? My Jesus is human like you and me … To me he was a man of might and will as he was a man of charity and pity. Lowliness is something I detest; while meekness to me is but a phase of weakness.[85]

---

[82] The *Transcript* review of the book (Boston, Dec 1926) described it as "a mixture of pungent observations, absurdities and meaningless mysticism." In another Gibran was praised as a "Syrian Humanist." See Hawi, *Kahlil Gibran*, 233. Gibran himself described the book as a "stop-gap between *The Prophet* and the next book," though it reflects many of the themes and concerns of his other works and is useful if looked at in the larger context of his thought. See Naimy, *Kahlil Gibran*, 207.

[83] Waterfield, *Prophet*, 264-65.

[84] "Aye, He was a poet whose heart dwelt in a bower beyond the height, and His songs though sung for our ears, were sung for other ears also, to men in another land where life is for ever young and time is always dawn … the Poet who is the sovereign of all poets"; "Master, Master Poet, Master of our silent desires, The heart of the world quivers with the throbbing of your heart. But it burns not with your songs." *CWs*, 304-05; 411.

[85] Naimy, *Kahlil Gibran*, 207-08. [emphasis mine]

Indeed, Gibran's Jesus was born naturally in Nazareth, not miraculously in Bethlehem,[86] and he is described as "the Mighty hunter" and "the mountainous spirit unconquerable,"[87] a "stranger," "a madman"[88] and "a man of Joy,"[89] to mention but a few unorthodox descriptions the most recurrent of which is that of the mighty. The book was praised in *The New York Times* as a "certainly unusual, possibly unique" adoption of this "immortal theme," and Gibran was credited for "his aptitude for simile."[90] The different views about Jesus, writes P.W. Wilson in the same review, "are often brilliant in phrase and accurate in perception."[91] The book, furthermore, was critically acclaimed in *The Springfield Union*, *Manchester Guardian* and *Herald Tribune.*[92] This positive critical reception boils down to the nature of the topic itself and Gibran's mastery of the English biblical style – his anxieties over English as a second language could be said to be have been overcome at this stage – together with his capacity for reinventing Jesus in/for the twentieth century. This is a post-religious Jesus to the extent that he represents a rupture with the orthodox conception of Christ in Christianity, transcending such rigid binaries as secular and religious. That the book is both literary (imaginary and fictitious) and religious, insofar as both reflect one another for Gibran, is therefore a response to a horizon of expectation silently waiting to be fulfilled, as it were. For what we have here is a hermeneutic of reinvention that breaks with what is perceived as tired religious – or, for that matter, anti-religious – narratives (whether scholarly or not) only to put forward its own. To transcend these narratives, it relies not so much on the historicity of Jesus or

---

[86] For an account of the differences between Gibran's Jesus and Jesus of the Gospel, see Ibid, 210-12.
[87] *CWs*, 287.
[88] Ibid., 271
[89] Ibid., 294.
[90] The book was reviewed together with Walter Russell Bowie's *The Master: A Life of Jesus Christ*, published in the same year. See "Jesus Was the Supreme Poet: That Is the Conception Animating These Two Books About Him." *New York Times*, December 23, 1928.
https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/12/13/specials/gibran-jesus.html

[91] Ibid.
[92] Jean and G Gibran, *Khalil Gibran: Beyond Borders*, 294-97. Claude Bragdon went as far as talking about "Gibranism." See Bragdon, *Merely Players* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1929), 141.

lack thereof – that is, its concern is not historicist, positivist or rationalist – as on the imaginative and interpretative force of reinvention to rejuvenate the figure for the twentieth century. Which is to say that a *modern* discursive field lays the ground for such a poetic reinvention to take place: the epistemological retreat of Christianity in modernity and the persistence of a certain imaginary of Christ led Gibran to adopt a poetic hermeneutic of reinvention that dislodges the figure from *both* traditionalist, lazy understandings of Jesus *and* modernist endeavours to rescue or deny his existence, because the figure *lives on* irrespective of such attempts. This reinvention derives its poetic force from the biblical style that Gibran consciously and beautifully deploys. What is important here, as far as the book's reception is concerned, is that because what Gibran embarked on is a *re*invention of such a central figure in human history and not an invention of a post-religious poet-prophet as is the case of Almustafa in *The Prophet*, *Jesus the Son Man* did not provoke the culturalist, sceptical responses[93] that *The Prophet* sometimes induced, nor did it generate the same popular appeal. Yet the book, despite the critical attention it initially enjoyed, has been eclipsed by the phenomenon of *The Prophet*, whose Almustafa is nevertheless not so dissimilar from Gibran's Jesus.[94]Hence, I return to the problem of *The Prophet*.

2. The Problem of *The Prophet* in the American Cultural and Literary Field

As I stated earlier, *The Prophet* is a problem insofar as its popularity and idiomaticity – its Romantic, mystical and abstract lexicon – are at once embraced and rejected in the American cultural and literary field: embraced by millions of readers and rejected by the mainstream institution of criticism, to put it somewhat schematically. Its

[93] Gibran's Syrian origin was deemed an element crucial to the uniqueness of the book, given that the "holiness" of Lebanon and beauty of its cedars – which Gibran invokes – are well-known in the Bible. For this reason, Gibran was not perceived in this case as an Oriental whose mode of thought and writing is radically different, exotic or incomprehensible. In other words, his Christianity, however unorthodox or subversive, and not exoticism, has bridged the gap of his Oriental distance.

[94] Hence the importance of paying attention to it – and, for that matter, to the other works of Gibran – in reading *The Prophet* itself.

initial reception in the U.S., as discussed earlier, encapsulates this tension, one that would continue and intensify with the increasing sales of the book, which rocketed in the New Age movement, up until today. Moreover, *The Prophet* has been translated into 104 languages, according to a recent research.[95] This is indeed a phenomenon, and it can be understood in the U.S. by situating it within the dynamics of the American literary and cultural field.

The uncanonical status of Gibran in American literature, I argue, is due to the massive and continuous popular appeal of *The Prophet*, not despite it. This popularity, furthermore, boils down in part to Gibran's Romantic and biblical style and optimistic, post-religious message, which in the context of English poetic modernism would be shunned by critics, if not ridiculed. Irfan Shahid, in defending the case for the canonization of Gibran, underlines his particularly Romantic idiom, the overlooked importance of his Arabic works and the Arab heritage – inaccessible to the American critic – that shaped both his Arabic and English writings.[96] He even contends that *The Prophet*, if judged by applying the American philosophy of pragmatism on it, is a success. Shahid's contextualization of the problem is remarkable, yet his argument misses a crucial point: the American literary field does not abide by a pragmatist logic. It is the popular spiritual appropriation of *The Prophet* in American culture, which turned it into a quotable text in weddings and social occasions, a sort of "secular Bible"[97] or a spiritual fetish, that entailed the categorization of the book as "Eastern spirituality" or, more specifically, as "mind, body, spirit" in Western bookstores,[98] and

---

[95] Galen Kalem, "Translations of *The Prophet*," in *Gibran in the 21st Century: Lebanon's Message to the World* (Papers of the 3rd Kahlil Gibran International Conference) (Beirut: Lebanese American University, 2018), 105.
[96] Irfan Shahid, "Gibran and the American Literary Canon: The Problem of *The Prophet*," 321-334.
[97] This is how the early review of the Chicago *Evening Post* described the book. See Waterfield, *Prophet*, 261.
[98] This is the section in which I found Kahlil Gibran's *The Collected Works* at the Waterstones bookshop, for instance. Poet D. H. Melhem tells us that *The Prophet* is categorized as "Eastern religions" at Barnes & Noble bookstore in the U.S. See footnote 105.

left it therefore uncanonized. This is a mode of reception that has produced and reproduced the symbolic value of *The Prophet* as a religious work, not a literary one. Mediated by an exoticist discourse in terms of which cultural difference is approached and domesticated, this mechanism of value-coding has been one deterrent to *The Prophet*'s literary legitimation. In other words, the book, and by extension Gibran's English works, has not acquired enough symbolic capital in the U.S. to be consecrated as high literature, which is a condition of canonicity.

This is all the more complicated by the imagined Eastern genealogy of Gibran and his work: "entirely of the East, with no shading of Western thought and content," as mentioned in the blurb of the 2011 penguin edition of *The Madman* for instance.[99] This Eastern spirit is seen as essentially constitutive of his work, believed[100] to be an emanation of a cultural difference whose value and meaning are produced, in part, by "an exotic system that domesticat[es] the foreign while retaining its otherness."[101] These social and cultural conditions of reading are essential not only to the shaping of the literary, cultural and symbolic value of *The Prophet*, but, subsequently, to the manner in which it is read and hermeneutically approached. What is more, this has disadvantageously affected the way in which Gibran's other English works, overshadowed by *The Prophet*, are read, appraised and valued.

Another important point to underscore here is the vision that Gibran puts forward in *The Prophet* and its relation to the book's celebration in the New Age movement. As I argued in Chapter One, Gibran's post-religious vision, not solely in *The Prophet* but in his Arabic and English writings generally, is predicated on an

---

[99] This is quoted from Barbara Young, a late friend of Gibran, in her biography (or hagiography) *This Man from Lebanon: A Study of Kahlil Gibran*. It is indeed a strange comment, for how could the whole book "be entirely of the East"? What does the East stand for here and where do we hermeneutically locate it in the text? Comments such as these have done a big disservice to Gibran's English works.
[100] I am using "belief," following Bourdieu, in the context of value, which is symbolically produced insofar as we *believe* in it. Bourdieu, *The Field*, 35-37.
[101] Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marking the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 20.

evolutionist reinvention of religion that de-theologizes it. Occasioned by Sufism, evolutionism – domesticated in the Nahḍa and embraced by Gibran as a biological, social and metaphysical law – and Nietzscheism, this de-theologized religious vision as articulated in *The Prophet* dovetails with many intellectual and religious currents of New Age thought.[102] This affinity made the book prone to spiritual(ist) appropriations which, in the American context, are inseparable from commodification. This American spiritual consumption, furthermore, is conditioned by an "aesthetics of de-contextualization"[103] essential to dynamics of the postmodern, late-capitalist market, hence the exponential increase of *The Prophet*'s sales in the 1960s and 1970s and the concurrent inattention to Gibran's other English and Arabic works. The book has indeed become a kind of post-religious manifesto for an alternative spirituality the need for which is specific to Euro-American socio-cultural conditions.

This brings us to the difficulty of categorizing *The Prophet*. The book is first and foremost a work of prose poetry, however religious, philosophical or spiritual it can be understood.[104] One essential distinction to be made here, drawing on John Guillory, is that between the *function* and the *use* of a literary work, between its aesthetic function as a work of art/literature and the uses to which it is or can be put.[105] I emphasize this

---

[102] Motifs such as "I am God," "Higher Self," "holism," "reincarnation" and "universal interconnectedness" prevalent in the New Age movement dovetail with Gibran's notion of the Greater Self and the evolutionary religious vision that underpins it. The vision, however, remains essentially Abrahamic, if unorthodox, evolutionist and non-eschatological, as I showed in Chapter One. For a remarkable scholarly account of the New Age thought, see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esoterism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Utrecht: Universiteit Utrecht, 1995), especially 176-90, 222-31.

[103] Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, 16-17.

[104] Irfan Shahid argues that "*The Prophet*, whatever its limitations, is a work of literary art in the strictest sense of the *belles-lettres,*" its religious character notwithstanding (op. ci., 325). Poet D. H. Melhem makes a similar point but calls for an invention of a category in the absence of one. As one possibility, she mentions "holistic poetry," as opposed to "Eastern religions," which is its category at Barnes & Noble bookstore. D.H. Melhem, "Gibran's 'The Prophet' Outside the Canon of American Literature," *Al Jadid* 8, no. 40 (Summer 2002). https://www.aljadid.com/content/gibran%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%98-prophet%E2%80%99-outside-canon-american-literature

[105] "[T]he aesthetic "function" is not just one of many possible elective uses of an object but something that is socially determined as the *condition* of an object's production or reception. It is thus no refutation

distinction because it is *as* a work of prose poetry – its function – that *The Prophet* could be put to different uses by multiple readers or reading communities. This is a not negation of its post-religious impulse. Rather, it is precisely as post-religious poetry that its use as a *popular* inspirational or spiritual guide exceeds its aesthetic function in the U.S., considering the role of the institution of criticism in forming a relative or imagined unanimity about what counts as high aesthetics in a specific literary field. And since *The Prophet* in the U.S. has come to be seen as a "pioneer of the New Age,"[106] it is essentially and readily regarded as a spiritual, not a literary, book. In other words, its perceived non-aesthetic use – again, from an institutional point of view – has undermined its aesthetic value, as popular use here is conflated with, overshadows and denigrates its function.

The aesthetic and literary value of the book, however, is still a site of a continuous and profound contestation.[107] Robin Waterfield, for instance, writes, "[T]hat *The Prophet* came into the world with a whimper, not a bang, must stand as one of the greatest ever underestimations by the literary community of the importance of a book to the reading public."[108] The peculiarity of Gibran's status in American literature is a reminder of the contested and disputed nature of value itself, and of the role of different valuing communities – imagined rather than real, whether we are speaking of an "interpretative community"[109] or a general reading community – in shaping literary and

---

of the specificity of the aesthetic that a work of art might be used in some nonaesthetic context; or that an object not produced as a work of art can be so regarded in a later social context than the context of its production. The relevant consideration is the specific social function of objects produced or received in a given context *as* works of art, since it is only as works so classified that they can have certain *other* social functions." John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 294-95. [emphasis in the original]

[106] Liesl Schillinger, "Pioneer of the New Age," *New York Times*, 13 Dec. 1999. https://www.nytimes.com/1998/12/13/books/pioneer-of-the-new-age.html

[107] Scholar Irfan Shahid and poet D. H. Melhem have called for the canonization of Gibran in American literature.

[108] Waterfield, *Prophet*, 261.

[109] Fish, *Is there a Text in This Class?*, 11. Edward Said argues, after invoking Fish's argument that "every act of interpretation is made possible and given force by an interpretative community," that "we must go a great deal further in showing what situation, what historical and social configuration, what political interests are concretely entailed by the very existence of interpretative communities." Said, *The World*, 26.

aesthetic value relationally. There is no pure value that transcends its social and cultural situatedness. Yet this does not mean that there is no aesthetic experience, nor does it suggest that aesthetic value is the same as economic value, that is, equally commensurable, nor, further, does it intimate that the aesthetic is only extrinsically imputed to a work of literature/art. Aesthetic experience, it must be emphasized, is *mixed rather than pure*,[110] and the aesthetic itself is experienced and valued differently across different cultural geographies and interpretative communities, as the last section of this chapter also demonstrates.

In this context, it would be illuminating to look at the appeal of Gibran in conjunction with the popular reception of Rumi in the U.S. Known in the West as Rumi, Jalal ad-Din Muhammad al-Rumi was a Persian poet, mystic and theologian who lived in the thirteenth century, deemed sometimes the foremost Islamic Sufi poet of all time. Rumi's poems in the U.S. have made quite a massive success over the last four or five decades. But this commercial success boils down, primarily, to the domesticating translations and adaptations of Rumi's poetry by Coleman Barks in the spirit of the New Age movement.[111] This appropriation of Rumi reveals the role of a certain modality of reception that refashions and reconfigures the value and cultural relevance of foreign literary works such that their perceived difference is assimilated in ways that de-contextualize their history and genealogy. Rumi's poetry is both Islamic and universal – that is, it articulates an Islamic universal vision – yet the New Age translations of his poems highlight the universal and forget the Islamic, assimilating and de-Islamizing Rumi in the process.[112] The Rumi phenomenon is underlined here because it sheds an

[110] Guillory, *Cultural Capital*, 336.
[111] These adaptations are mostly re-workings of the classical Orientalist translations of Rumi by Arthur John Arberry and Reynold Allen Nicholson. See Ziad Elmarsafy, "User-friendly Islams: Translating Rumi in France and the United States," in *Between the Middle East and the Americas: The Cultural Politics of Diaspora*, ed. Ella Shohat and Evelyn Alsultany (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 264-67.
[112] Ibid., 265, 272.

illuminating light on the Gibran phenomenon, in that the poetry of both has been *spiritually consumed* in the U.S. As the condition of a specific kind of reading, this spiritual consumption is the horizon of expectation that both Gibran and Rumi's poetry has served or, perhaps more accurately, has been used to fulfil.[113]Gibran, however, was not a Sufi poet whose Islamic background is obfuscated in favour of a "syncretic" one as is the case with Rumi. Yet both poets, because their universal visions bear an affinity with New Age thought, have been almost completely de-contextualized in the American cultural sphere. Gibran's bilingualism, his background as immigrant and the Arab and Sufi heritage in which he is steeped, not to mention his other English and Arabic works, have often gone unnoticed in the domestication of his work as essentially Eastern, spiritual and universalist in the U.S. For rather than being a mere emanation of an exotic cultural difference essentially consumed as re-enchanting spirituality, a "mystical" text such as *The Prophet* is one that *accommodates* difference, that is, different linguistic, cultural, religious and philosophical components. And this is conditioned, as discussed in Chapter One, by the specific worldly circumstances of immigration or exile,[114] the discursive (trans)formations of the Arab Nahḍa and the larger context of modernity and imperialism as a whole – the movement and (re)configurations of ideas and concepts over time and across different (real and imagined) cultural geographies.

This spiritual appropriation and specific mode of valuation should be understood, therefore, within the larger context of translation and travelling ideas. Gibran's is a travelling vision that has been subject to translational re-configurations,

---

[113] See also, Amira El-Zein, "Spiritual Consumption in the United States: The Rumi Phenomenon," *Islamic and Christian-Muslim Relations* 11, no, 1 (2000): 71-85.

[114] Almustafa, the principle character of the book, speaks before leaving the city of Orphalese in which he stayed for twelve years to return to his isle of birth. In other words, he speaks as an exile, a restless wanderer. The invented characters, the setting as well as the language of *The Prophet* could themselves be understood as essentially exilic, to the extent that they represent an imaginary world that does not "mimic" but stands "outside" the world as we know it, even outside, if on the surface, the linguistic world of Arabic. In other words, what we have here is a metamorphosis of an immigrant experience into an exilic literary and metaphysical expression, one that exile would even mark its "genre," as attested in the difficulty of dealing with *The Prophet* in terms of categorization.

which is to say that translation, in the sense of self-translation and cultural translation (overlapping but not identical), has structured and accompanied this bilingual movement from Arabic into English, altering in the process the translated and the manner in which it is read, interpreted, evaluated, valued and appropriated. For that which travels is necessarily subject(ed) to new regimes of value and socio-cultural conditions of reading and consumption. This travelling, moreover, is not necessarily from one location to another, but from one point in time to another within the same location or beyond, which is to say that regimes of value are obviously not static but historically contingent, albeit with some elements or forces being more potent, persistent and impactful than others, and with some regimes evidently more influential, due to their imperial nature, than others. Translation in the case of Gibran acts as both a hermeneutic and epistemic mediator. More specifically, cultural translation, that is, "the superimposition of dominant ways of seeing, speaking and thinking onto the marginalized peoples and the cultural artefacts they produce,"[115] has been the most influential force in the production of the value and meaning of Gibran's work in the U.S. The production of a literary work, it is crucial to remember, involves many "agents of legitimation" – writers/artists, publishers, reviewers, critics and institutions or, generally speaking, producers of meaning – who produce certain modes of reading and consumption entangled with certain practices of value-coding.[116] It would be erroneous, therefore, to project a specific history of reception onto the author-as-cause, since the author is the initial producer of meaning but by no means the determinant one. Following this logic, self-translation overlaps – because it takes place within a specific worldly context – with cultural translation, but is not identical with or reducible to it, simply because the text survives its author and is configured by practices of cultural

[115] Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, 24.
[116] Bourdieu, *The Field*, 37.

translation that go beyond the initial historical moment of the text's emergence. This perspective allows us to understand exoticization itself as a process that operates with varying degrees of intensity and influence at specific historical junctures and in *particular* geo-epistemic and cultural locations.[117] This also means that the text itself becomes a process rather than a given, subject to the reconstructive nature of open readings and appropriations, themselves socially mediated and culturally situated.

The issue, however, resides in the fact that the textuality of Gibran's English texts has been almost erased in the process, as his work becomes a phenomenon rather than a text. Of course, one does not negate the other, but in this case the former has eclipsed and flattened the latter, with *The Prophet as phenomenon* overshadowing not only *The Prophet as text* but other significant works of Gibran in English and in Arabic as well. Which is to say that an instance of "symbolic violence"[118]is at work here, functioning *implicitly but potently*, evidenced in the institutional inattention to which Gibran's English works have been subjected in the American academy. The symbolic nature of this violence, which has rendered invisible Gibran's texts, is precisely what renders *it* invisible. This should be understood as a *necessary* outcome, rather than an intentional act, of the dynamics of the American literary and cultural field. The conditions of canonicity and canon-formation within this field remain often ignored or unquestioned, and it is these historical, social and institutional conditions, rather than

---

[117] Another cultural geography to which Gibran's work has travelled in translation – without being "exoticized" – in the Chinese one. Ma Zheng notes that all of Gibran's writings have been translated into Chinese between 1920s and 1999s, and a burgeoning scholarly interest in his work from a cross-cultural perspective since the 1990s has been flourishing. For a detailed account of the study of Gibran in China see Ma Zheng, "The Study of Kahlil Gibran in Contemporary China: New Developments and Influences," in *The Enduring Legacy of Kahlil Gibran* (Papers delivered at the Second International Conference on Kahlil Gibran "Reading Gibran in the Age of Globalisation and Conflict" May 3-6, 2012), ed. Suheil Bushrui and James Malarkey (Maryland: University of Maryland, 2012), 227-34. Also see Gan Lijuan, "Dissemination of Kahlil Gibran's Poems in China," *Chinese Social Sciences Today*, 2 August 2013.
http://www.csstoday.com/Item/324.aspx

[118] Bourdieu, *The Field*, 20.

the canon itself and what it (unfairly) represents and should (therefore) represent or include, that must be the object of critique.[119] As Pierre Bourdieu reminds us,

> To denounce hierarchy does not get us anywhere. What must be changed are the conditions that make the hierarchy exist, both in reality and in minds. We must – I have never stopped repeating it – work *to universalize in reality the conditions of access* to what the present offers us that is most universal.[120]

In this context, contending that Gibran's universalist message precluded it from being admitted to the American "multicultural" canon of literature[121] is a questionable gesture, to the extent that it does not question its conditions of canonicity. This contention presupposes that an Arab writer can only speak an ethnic, particularist idiom in America, that the Arab writer cannot speak universally, and if s/he does so in the manner of Gibran, s/he would not be heard by the academic institution of criticism but would be instead assimilated by – or seen as assimilating to – Orientalist discourse. Put differently, a preference for a literary expression that foregrounds the ethnic particularity of immigrants or people of non-white ethnicities and their social experiences in America becomes the norm rather than an option or a strategy. If an Arab writer such as Gibran speaks universally *and* mystically in English, the judgement of self-Orientalizing is quickly summoned, and the complex texture of the text[122] itself and

---

[119] This is manifest in the absence of Gibran from anthologies and especially from syllabi of American literature. As Guillory points outs, "The canonicity of works is … another name for their institutional mode of reception and reproduction, but it is the name by which the concrete instrumentality of the syllabus in the formation of the transhistorical canon is typically misrecognized." Guillory, *Cultural Capital*, 269.

[120] Pierre Bourdieu and Loic J.D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 85. [emphasis in the original]

[121] Jacob Berman argues that "[b]ecause of its abstract representation of Oriental identity, Gibran's writings do not adequately comply with the paradigm of inclusion required for entrance into the pluralistic pantheon masquerading as American's multicultural canon. The sacrifice of vernacular specificity and ethnic consciousness in Gibran's writings has resulted in sacrificing a place in American literature's ethnic canon" (73). Berman does not tell us how the text exhibits or represents this "Oriental identity," but rather refers to Gibran's articulation of "abstract universals" and one review that "highlights Gibran's reception as an "Eastern" mystic who appealed to Bohemian artistic sensibilities" (72). Berman, moreover, does not quote anything from Gibran's English texts. Jacob Berman, "*Mahjar* Legacies: A Reinterpretation," in *Between the Middle East and the Americas*, 65-79.

[122] Compare with Naimy's ""A Strange Little Book,"" where he discusses the arduous personal labour and literary and intellectual trajectory of Gibran, which for him peaks with the writing of *The Prophet*. https://archive.aramcoworld.com/issue/196406/a.strange.little.book.htm

the history of its discursive production and reception are brushed aside by dint of its massive popular appeal. This reduction of mysticism to Orientalism in the case of Gibran, which finds its justification in the essentialist attribution of mysticism and irrationality to the Orient in classical Orientalist discourse, has obscured the complexity of his text in its specific lexicon and discursive context of enunciation. This specificity does not necessarily or solely elicit criticism whose main concern is the nexus of Orientalism, colonialism and capitalism, nor is it reducible to culturalist analyses of self-representation and identity politics. It rather demands a hermeneutical attention to the text that locates it, but does not subsume it, within a certain discursive context. Reducing the Gibranian English text to a cultural object that exhibits an Oriental(ist) spirit is a gesture that runs the risk of falling into an Orientalism-in-reverse in its reliance on systemic and culturalist analyses that do not pay attention to details and polysemia[123] – as attested by the generalized comments on his work without quoting it and the persistent invisibility of works other than *The Prophet*. This gesture is also implicitly inclined to now-canonical genres such as the novel or secular literary expressions of the non-Western self that can be readily categorizable and decipherable in Euro-America. To highlight a different worldly trajectory of Gibran's anglophone text that would bring to light what is (rendered) invisible in the American context, I now turn to the translation of this text into Arabic and its re-contextualization in the Arab discursive field. This is a crucial element that is completely forgotten in critical appraisals of Gibran in the Euro-American academy.

[123] Shu-Mei Shih has expressed her exasperation of what she calls "the return of the systemic" in theories of world literature (Moretti in particular) and the lack of close attention to which the Third-World text is condemned when it travels to the West and, more specifically, when its polysemic reality is filtered through Western systemic theories: "The gap between the ideal of polysemia and the practice of monosemia is, perhaps, an allegory of the relation between the First World theorist and the Third World text." Shih, "Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition," *PMLA* 119, no. 1 (Jan 2004): 22.

3. The Translational Movement of Gibran's English Work into Arabic, or its "Arabization"

Highlighting the role of the exotic as a symbolic system that mediates the assimilation of non-Western cultural artefacts in Euro-America is essential to the understanding of how exoticism confers value on the object exoticized. That was my concern with regard to *The Prophet* in the last section, in which I discussed how the book was subject(ed) to practices of valuation that are tied to specific forms of cultural translation and domestication (of the exotically different), which impeded its canonization. The phenomenon of *The Prophet*, as I have shown, has overshadowed both *The Prophet* as text as well as other works by Gibran in the U.S. In this section, I foreground the translational trajectory of Gibran's English work ("back") to the Arab world, where it is subject to re-appropriative forces, de-exoticized in the process and situated within the Arabic literary context and its philosophical and spiritual heritage. I take his double translational movement as an illustrative example of "world literature"[124] beyond English, in that Gibran's anglophone text moves back and forth between different worlds, that is, between different literary systems and regimes of value that are otherwise imperially and translationally related. This movement has produced different reading experiences that simultaneously veil and unveil its bilingualism, its situatedness, that is, in two linguistic and cultural worlds. Translation, in this respect, is not only constitutive of the work itself, but of how it is perceived, domesticated and valued, in short, of how it is experienced as a literary work in a certain language. Attending to the Arab literary and cultural world is not meant as a gesture that

[124] To look at Gibran's anglophone work in its Arabic translation as world literature is to activate, following Emily Apter and Ayman El-Desouky, the untranslatable as a hermeneutic tool that allows us to see what is rendered invisible by specific modes of cultural translation and appropriation to which Gibran's work have been subject(ed) in Euro-America.
For more on untranslatability as a theoretical and critical method in comparative and world literature, see Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso, 2013), especially the introduction; and, more pertinent to my concern here, see Ayman A. El-Desouky, "Theorizing the Local and Untranslatability as Comparative Critical Method," 59-86.

celebrates "the authentic" or the same; it is an ethical stance that derives from the necessity of de-privileging certain epistemic geographies and evaluative regimes without falling prey to privileging others. In other words, the Arab "world" to which Gibran's English work has travelled by way of translation is just *un*forgotten – and this gesture reveals difference within the Arab discursive and cultural universe itself. In so doing, I highlight the specificity of a different (e)valuation of Gibran's anglophone work from the vantage point of this "significant geography"[125] that has been, over the last two centuries, deeply affected by the West's imperial and cultural infringement and domination and, at the same time, in constant interaction with it. As world literature in Arabic, Gibran's anglophone work resists certain Euro-American modes of reading rooted in the hegemonic epistemic location within which they operate, that is, rooted in one particular imagining of the world.

Before discussing two creative engagements with Gibran in Arabic, it is crucial to remember that his English works, and particularly *The Prophet*, have been translated many times into Arabic, and this creative translational process is often described as "Arabization." The latter does not only designate the translation of his English books into Arabic; it also implies a process of domestication or, more accurately, of *re*-appropriation. If Gibran were not Arab in the first place, there would be no need to refer to this translational process as Arabization.[126] Even in interpretative engagements with Gibran in Arabic, this Arabization is taken for granted, as these engagements often underscore the determining role of immigration in his literary and intellectual enterprise *as an Arab writer*, but not the fact that he also wrote in English *as an Arab immigrant*.

---

[125] "By "significant geographies" we mean the *conceptual*, *imaginative*, and *real* geographies that texts, authors, and language communities inhabit, produce, and reach, which typically extend outwards without (ever?) having a truly global reach." This notion is "a way of ensuring sensitivity to the richness and plurality of spatial imaginings that animate texts, authors, and publics in the world." Karima Laachir, Sara Marzagora and Francesca Orsini, "Significant Geographies in Lieu of World Literature," *Journal of World Literature*, no. 3 (2018): 293-94 [emphasis in the original].

[126] This does not mean that non-Arabs or non-Arabic works cannot be Arabized. I use the term in relation to Gibran to designate a re-appropriative gesture.

In other words, the *Mahjari* element becomes important only insofar as Arabic literature is concerned, in Arabic or in English. This entrenched orientation has foreclosed the question of Gibran's status in the U.S. from an Arab scholarly and critical perspective. It has, however, produced a Gibran whose cultural and literary value is markedly different from the American one. Highlighting this side of the picture would help us illuminate what the other – the American – obfuscates, providing us with a more rounded picture of Gibran as a bilingual writer.

The multiple translations of *The Prophet* into Arabic were carried out by such acclaimed literary figures as Mikhail Naimy (1956), Lebanese-Syrian poet and translator Yusuf al-Khal (1968) and Iraqi poet and translator Sargon Boulus (2008), in addition to writer and former minister of culture in Egypt Tharwat Okasha (1959), the Orthodox priest, translator and writer Antony Bashir (1923), Lebanese writer and scholar Yuhanna Qomeir (1997) and Syrian translator Jamil al-Abed (2008).[127] Also, a new translation into Arabic of Gibran's English works by Nadeem Naimy was published in 2015.[128] This persistent translational interest bespeaks the enduring significance of Gibran for Arab poets, readers and critics. As such, it invalidates the misleading suggestion that his embrace of the role of the prophet as a literary trope is either offensive to Arab Muslim readers or would make little sense to them, found in

[127] A comparative study of *The Prophet*'s translations into Arabic and French has been recently published by Najwa Salim Nassir, under the title, *The Prophet, Arabic and French Translations: A Comparative and Linguistic Analysis* (Beirut: Librairie de Liban, 2018). French translations of Gibran's English and Arabic works are also numerous.
https://gibranchair.umd.edu/news/new-analysis-arabic-and-french-translations-prophet

[128] Jubrān Khalil Jubrān, *The Compete Collected Works Arabized* (in Arabic), trans. Nadim Naimy (Beirut: Nawfal, 2015).

"post-modernist"[129] and "post-colonialist"[130] appraisals of Gibran in Euro-American scholarship. The number of translations alone is proof enough that the book has never been perceived as "offensive" by Arab Muslim readers. On the contrary, it is an indication of the heterogeneity and difference within the modern space of Arab society and culture.

The several translations are also important because they suggest, beyond the implication of Arabization, that his English work is neither strictly American nor strictly Arab. As bilingual, *émigré* literature, it is *both* Arab *and* American. Hence its reception in these two literary worlds must be *at once* taken into account. Crucially, this Arab reception invites a different set of questions and concerns specific to that geography but ultimately central in any appraisal of Gibran's literary legacy: why, one wonders, is there a host of Arabizations of Gibran's English work? Is this insistence on differently, and presumably better, translating Gibran into Arabic a sign that he has not been properly translated, or is it an endeavour to capture something elusively Arab in his English writings? How does this reception bear on the status of Gibran from the perspective of world literature? While translation has constituted and (re)-configured Gibran's English writings in the U.S. in specific ways, as I discussed earlier, it has also transformed these writings insofar as they were subject to Arabization. The proliferation of these translations is emblematic of the symbolic and literary status of Gibran for the

---

[129] Geoffrey Nash makes the generalized claim that "Muslim Arabs might find the title of his most celebrated work [*The Prophet*] offensive from the beginning." Nash, *The Arab Writer in English: Arab Themes in a Metropolitan Language, 1908-1958* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1998), 13. Such assumptions, which betray unawareness of the reception of Gibran's English work in the Arab world, run the risk of essentializing the "Muslim Arabs" – a gesture that echoes old Orientalist clichés about Arabs and Muslims as static and intolerant – while engaging in a "postmodernist" critique of Gibran's English works by "applying" Western theories (Jameson and Eagleton) on them.

[130] Wail Hassan makes a similar contention: "A title such as *The Prophet* would have been offensive to Arab readers," he writes, going as far as contending that "even though the book was later translated into Arabic, it remains, together with his other books translated from English, far less known than his earlier, Arabic work." Hassan, "The Gibran Phenomenon," 70. There are at least four elements to which Hassan's account fails to attend: Gibran's Arab *Christian* origins, the *literary* and *fictional* nature of his embrace of the poet-prophetic trope, the Arabic scholarship on his work as well as the dynamics and heterogeneity of modern Arab culture and society. Generalized comments about Arab Muslim readers and the intimation of their intolerance towards the different may paradoxically reproduce the very Orientalist stereotypes that such critical engagements set out to unravel.

Arab interpretative community and Arab readers in general. This status has been consolidated by Gibran's huge influence on the course of modern Arabic literature on the one hand,[131] and by the world literary space he is seen to have successfully entered on the other, both of which have laid the ground for these translations to emerge and multiply. These conditions of reading and translation – that is, of interpretation in the broad sense of the term[132] – are rooted in a specific evaluative and normative framework that alters the translated text in that it produces a particular reading experience which, because translation here is Arabization, is steeped in Arabic literary and cultural memory, a prism through which the text itself is read, evaluated and ultimately valued. Thus, the Arabization of Gibran's English work is a *re*con*text*ualization in a double sense: an insertion of the translated text into the Arabic literary and philosophical context and a subsequent recuperation of the text in that specific context.

Neither the scope nor the focus of his chapter allows for an extended reflection on the translations of *The Prophet* into Arabic, yet the sheer number of them requires some attention. Suffice it to look at Naimy's and Okasha's translations to understand why a text such as *The Prophet* has been translated eight times into Arabic. Naimy's translation reads like a faithful rendition of the source text that often undermines its poetic character in Arabic, albeit the poet in him does sometimes surface in the text. This hyper-faithfulness, so to speak, comes at the cost of idiomatic domestication and poetic creativity, which any translation of *The Prophet*, as a book of prose poetry by an Arab writer, necessarily demands. It is Naimy's approach to translating Gibran, which does not permit flexibility,[133] that restricted the creative potential of translating the text

[131] See Adunis, *al-Thābit wa al-Mutaḥawwil*, 210.
[132] Gadamer points out that "[i]nterpretation is not an occasional, post facto supplement to understanding; rather, understanding is always interpretation, and hence interpretation is the explicit form of understanding," Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 306.
[133] Naimy states in the introduction to the book that "unless one is bound to, it is not appropriate to add or cut out anything when translating a writer such as Gibran." Jubrān, *al-Nabiyy*, trans. Mikhail Naimy (Beirut: Nawfal, 2013), 34-35.

poetically. In contrast, Okasha's remarkable translation, being unfaithful to the literalness of the English text, has created an Arabic version whose rhetorical force and poetic energy attest to a poetics of translation that not only carries the text from one language to another, but that gives it a new life in the target language. More specifically, Okasha's translation allows for the rich idiomaticity of the Arabic language to translate into itself the source text without sacrificing its meaning, as it were. What emerges is a translation that is faithful to the poetic heritage of the target language, without at the same time being unfaithful to the meaning of the source text, reminding us at times of the powerful and allusive terseness of classical Arabic poetry and prose.[134] The Arabic after-life of *The Prophet*, thus, attests to its bilingual status, to the fact that it simultaneously belongs to American and Arabic literatures. As such, it necessarily relativizes the American (e)valuation of it.

If the translations of *The Prophet* and Gibran's anglophone works into Arabic are numerous and different, so are the interpretative and creative engagements with it. The first example I wish to highlight here is Mansur Rahbani's play *Jubrān wa al-Nabiyy* [Gibran and the Prophet], initially performed as an operetta in 2005 and published in 2010. Mansur Rhabani was a well-known composer-dramatist and poet, who with his brother Assi Rahbani (famously known as the Rahbani Brothers) and the iconic singer Fairuz revolutionized the Arab musical scene in the second half of the twentieth century. The work of the Rahbani Brothers has been critically acclaimed, seen

[134] It is not possible to discuss the Arabic translations in English, as this would require an (impossible) double translational effort in which literalness is all that matters. But perhaps one example would evince the difference between these two translations. "A fragment of Life's heart" is translated by Naimy as "*baʿḍ min qalb al- ḥayāt*," which is a literal translation except for "*baʿḍ*," which means 'some' or 'a bit of' but could be used to translate 'fragment'. Okasha, in contrast, translates the phrase as "*fildha min qalb al-wujūd*." "*Fildha*," in my view, is a word that translates 'fragment' more poetically that "*baʿḍ*" (it also means fraction, shatter, a part broken off and so on). What is more, Okasha translates Life as existence or Being [*al-wujūd*], which is also, in my opinion, more appealing that the literal translation of Life, as the latter, especially when capitalized, was often synonymous with Being for Gibran (see my discussion in Chapter One).

as arguably the most influential in the Middle East in the twentieth century.[135] Rahbani's operettas, include, among others, *The Last Days of Socrates* (1998) and *The Last Day* (2004), an Arabic adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.[136] *Gibran and The Prophet* is the last of his operettas. It is based partly on Gibran's life and partly on *The Prophet*. It brings together, in an intriguing and imaginative manner, real characters including Gibran, Mary Haskell, Mikhail Naimy, Abdelmassih Haddad[137] and Gibran's publisher Alfred Knopf on the one hand, and *The Prophet*'s fictional characters like Almustafa, Almitra and the people of Orphalese on the other. All these characters are engaged in an intense dialogue that animates the main ideas and concerns of Gibran in *The Prophet*, at once revealing their insightfulness and limitations. In other words, Gibran's vision in the book meets its necessary worldly limitations as a human vision. What emerges is a theatrical rejuvenation of Gibran that mixes life and fiction, biography and oeuvre, idealism and realism, present and future, in a manner that shows or re-imagines the dialectical and arduous process of writing concealed by the text itself: "the struggle, at once theatrical and dialectical, between Gibran and Almustafa, between the real personality and the fictional one, between Orphalese the age and Orphalese the dream."[138] In other words, this is the afterlife of the text as experienced and imagined in the lifeworld of some of its *creative* readers.

In his preface to the written edition, Usama Rahbani states that by writing and performing this operetta, the aim was to infuse the Gibranian life with a new pulse, where Orphalese, Almustafa and Gibran are animated with the living spirit of the age, not losing sight, all the while, of the struggle that the *Mahjari* poet had undergone in

---

[135] Yvette K. Khoury, "*Akhir Yom* (The Last Day): A localized Arabic adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*," *Theatre Research International* 33, no. 1 (2008): 52-53.
[136] Yvette K. Khoury, "Mansour Rahbani: Dramatist and Writer of the Classic songs of a Lebanese Golden Age," *The Guardian*, 17 April 2009.
https://www.theguardian.com/music/2009/apr/17/obituary-mansour-rahbani

[137] Another *Mahjari* writer who was a member of Arrabitah.
[138] Rahbani, *Jubrān wa al-Nabiyy*, 13.

writing *The Prophet*, "until he submitted it to the publisher, in a moment that no one had guessed would be immortal in the history of Gibran and world literature."[139] There are specific conditions of reading that paved the way for this theatrical engagement. Already part of the modern Lebanese heritage, Gibran is inherited, *therefore available* (for Mansur Rahbani), as Lebanese cultural, literary and symbolic capital, which is its social function in Lebanon. One should also mention the broader Arabic literary heritage to which Gibran is seen as an influential and canonical modern contributor. Thanks to these conditions, the Arab-American Gibran returns from exile in Rahbani's operetta: he returns to speak Arabic, to perform and be performed in an Arabic tinged with a Lebanese dialect, thereby consolidating his identity as Arab Lebanese. This fictional return derives its discursive force from the exilic status of Gibran, for without his immigration to the U.S., which amounted to a territorial and metaphysical exile, a text such as *The Prophet* would have never seen the light of day. Gibran's exilic status, further testified by the numerous translations of *The Prophet* and some of his other works into many languages on a global scale, has cemented his symbolic and cultural significance *inside* Lebanon and the Arab world. That is, Gibran is seen to have made it to world literature, understood as a network of texts that circulate globally, *as* an Arab Lebanese writer. It is this exilic Arabness that serves as an implicit but essential mediator between his anglophone writings and a theatrical resuscitation of his life and *chef d'oeuvre* such as Rahbani's.

In this specific context, the fact that Gibran wrote in English remains something *marginal but important*, to the extent that it is a sign of his departure towards the foreign language/culture that necessarily entails – for the Arab interpretative community – a return to his native language. This innovative instance of receiving the anglophone Gibran in Arabic is unknown in the Euro-American world, where only by way of

[139] Ibid., 14.

translation into English can it draw attention and recognition.[140] But since it is an Arabic engagement with Gibran's English work, it is itself an instance of world literature that, however provincial, *eo ipso* provincializes his reception in the U.S. In other words, as an example of world literature in Arabic, it serves to disrupt the implicit correlation between "world" and "English" in the academic discourse of "world literature." Gibran's text moves from English into Arabic creatively, and this movement forces us to think beyond English, even as we do, paradoxically, write in it. Yet this is precisely the task: moving beyond English while writing in it, activating the plurality of the world in this imperial language in order to contain its cultural imperialism.

If Rahbani resuscitates Gibran's English text theatrically, Fethi Meskini rejuvenates it philosophically. This philosophical engagement is significant in that it attests, on the one hand, to the multiple readings that Gibran's work lends itself and, on the other, to its capacity to generate alternative perspectives on local and universal concerns from an Arab vantage point. Before delving into Meskini's essay, it would be helpful to contextualize my discussion of it by sketching out his philosophical enterprise. For the Tunisian philosopher and translator,[141] the horizon of contemporary Arab thought should be at once local *and* universal. It is local in that it derives from what he calls "the sources of our old selves": *al-Muʿallaqāt* (the famous suspended odes or the hanging poems of pre-Islamic Arabia), the Qur'an and the rich philosophical, Sufi, poetic, theological and jurisprudent repertoire of texts now referred to as "*turāth*" (heritage), which Meskini takes as an "*a priori* hermeneutical situation"[142] that belongs to the modern Arabs. And it is universal in that philosophy, however locally situated,

---

[140] Shu-Meh Shih reminds us of "an obvious and often displaced statement: what precedes recognition, and is more devastating than the politics of recognition, is *sheer ignorance or feigned negligence*. Negligence and ignorance are fundamental to the neo-colonial production of knowledge and the global division of intellectual labour." Shih, "Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition," 17 [emphasis added].

[141] Meskini has translated into Arabic German philosophical works such as Heidegger's *Being and Time*, Nietzsche's *The Genealogy of Morals* and Kant's *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*.

[142] Meskini, *al-Īmān al-Ḥurr*, 385.

should be concerned with the universal that finds its meaning in "the shared" – which is normative, therefore multiple – not in "the one" of science as the Greeks conceived of it.[143] This movement from the local to the universal begins with re-claiming, in a liberated and liberating manner,[144] those sources of the self from the inside in a way that reinvents them beyond *turāth*, a critical orientation that must be firmly distinguished from the so-called "return of the religious."[145]Such a re-inventive movement has the aim of simultaneously dislodging those sources from Islamist and *turāthist* monopoly on the one side, and from Euro-oriented dogmatic dismissal in the name of Western modernity on the other. Philosophizing this way, for Meskini, is the necessary trajectory that contemporary Arab thought should follow in order to go beyond local debates about modernity and tradition and offer a universal, de-colonized contribution to contemporary philosophy within its own post-secular and post-religious horizon. This crude summary of Meskini's philosophical enterprise is important to understand his hermeneutical movement from the local to the universal in his essay "The Veils of Reason, Or Gibran and the Mad I."[146]

Gibran's *The Madman* is seen by Meskini "to revolve around the liberation of the [Arab] Eastern self from its maladies,"[147] yet with no claims to Awakening (Nahḍa) *qua* Enlightenment. In so doing, Meskini implicitly and strategically "Arabizes" Gibran's English text by inserting it within a tradition of Arab self-critique, in the sense of exposing and attempting to transcend the normative structures governing *a priori* the Arab Eastern self. Meskini deploys the East as a discursively convenient category, not

[143] Meskini, *al-Hawiyya wa al-Ḥurriya*, 167-68.
[144] *Liberated*, on the one hand, from Islamist reclamations of "tradition" (or a certain version of it) and, on other hand, from the dismissal of this long and rich tradition in the name of a Eurocentric understanding of modernity, of which Orientalism was a potent epistemological force. In other words, this is an enaction of a *liberating* "epistemic de-linking," to invoke Walter Mignolo whom Meskini draws upon, in order to go beyond this bifurcated mode of thinking that shackles contemporary Arab thought. See Meskini, *al-Īmān al-Ḥurr*, 20-25.
[145] Ibid., 25.
[146] Meskini, *al-Kujīto al-Majrūḥ*, 191-96.
[147] Ibid., 191.

as an ontologically stable one. This (self)-critique, enacted in the Arab geo-epistemic and imaginary location, bespeaks an agential affirmation of the self that is aware of the capacity of its own hermeneutical situation to foster, *from the inside,* "a new ethics of belonging."[148] What is perplexing in Meskini's reclamation of the "I" as Arab Eastern, however, is that while he reminds us at the outset of the essay that *The Madman* is published in English, he pays no attention to the fact that it was initially addressed to an American or Anglo-Saxon audience in the aftermath of World War One. This strategy of Arabizing and re-contextualizing Gibran and his English work, however, is occasioned by a certain horizon of expectation that transforms the *reading experience* of the Arab anglophone text, as this horizon dictates certain "norms, questions, values, and problems"[149] pertinent to the Arab cultural geography. Thus, Gibran's English text in the Arab discursive universe remains Arab in essence; that it is originally written in English is an unimportant element for an Arab philosopher such as Meskini. But should this constitute a certain *blindness* vis-à-vis the text's initial context and linguistic choice, this blindness has nevertheless enabled the possibility of *insight*, to invoke Paul de Man, attested by the interpretative rigour and depth that Meskini's essay displays. Put differently, this re-contextualization has recuperated the text's visibility, which the Euro-American context, for reasons to do with its own conditions of reading and reception, has veiled. The "I" in Gibran's parable, furthermore, is not an *essentially* Eastern one; that was a discursive strategy of reclamation conditioned by local questions of Arab modernity and heritage. Meskini's reading, as I discuss below, becomes a phenomenological reflection on the human face as such as elicited by Gibran's parable, that is, a universal philosophical thinking that is nevertheless culturally situated in its application.

---

[148] Ibid.

[149] Petr Zima, "Problems of Reading-Response Criticism: From Hermeneutics to Phenomenology," in *The Philosophy of Contemporary Literary Theory* (London: Athlone Press, 1999), 59.

In this parable, the speaker tells us how he became a madman: waking up one day from a "deep sleep," he discovers that all his masks, "the seven masks [he] [has] fashioned and worn in seven lives," were stolen. Running masklessly and loudly cursing the thieves, a youth on the top of a house cries out, "he is a madman," whereupon he looks up and "the sun kiss[es] [his] own naked face for the first time," and "[his] soul is enflamed with love for the sun." He does not want his masks anymore; instead he blesses his thieves. In his madness, thus, he finds the "freedom of loneliness and the safety from being understood, for those who understand us enslave something in us."[150] The parable, however, ends with a sceptical note: "But let me not be proud of my safety. Even a thief in a jail is safe from another thief."[151] For Meskini, the stolen masks are the veils of reason, for to become a madman is to *be* and *think* outside "the dominant institution of reason."[152] But madness here is not the antithesis of reason, Meskini argues, but "the capacity of reason itself to be liberated by way of its own madness,"[153] that is, by doing away with its own "masks." The madman is a reasonable man narrating his own story of madness. Although the theft here is "an event" that has befallen him, it is "an outside" that nevertheless compels him to tell his own story from within, an outside that radically alters his mode of reason and being in the world: the mask-lessness, that is, the nakedness of the face entails breaking away with the past insofar as it designates "the seven masks I have fashioned and worn in seven lives."[154] It becomes clear at this point that what is at stake here is "Awakening" – and this is why Meskini reads the parable by initially situating it within the Arab Eastern context – a concept he considers, insofar as it entails the violent enlightening of the dark minds [*al-īqāẓ*], to be vertical and authoritarian,[155] because it presupposes a laziness – or, for that matter, a

---

[150] *CWs*, 5.
[151] Ibid.
[152] Meskini, *al-Kujīto al-Majrūḥ,* 194.
[153] Ibid., 192.
[154] *CWs*, 5; Meskini, *al-Kujīto al-Majrūḥ*, 193.
[155] Ibid., 193.

"decadence" – in the self, while Gibran's insight, for him, is that madness, that is, Awakening, occurs to the self as an event by virtue of which it embraces its own nakedness, its radical being outside pre-destined or pre-fashioned identitarian veils.[156] One might add that the theft becomes emblematic of an age – the modern times – from which we cannot run. Contemporaneity turns out to be a condition of resistance rather than a sign of defeat or deficiency: by blessing the thieves one reveals their incognizance of what their very theft has enabled, rather than disabled. This mask-less face is the mode of being that resists the interference and enslaving understanding of others, those who stole the masks included – since they mistook the masks for the face. "Madness becomes in effect a mode of adjoined 'freedom and safety'": the freedom of subjectification and the safety from being appropriated by the other.[157] Unlike the masks, therefore, the face cannot be stolen – "we do not owe our faces or faciality to any other"[158]; the theft is, so to speak, a blessing in disguise.

Meskini picks up on this element and transforms it philosophically; he writes,

> The other is, above all, visual. S/he appears, at face value, in the guise of a thief or an inquisitive, robbing our veils and stripping our masks. Otherness is a kind of anger induced by the initial theft of our boundaries and sanctities. Nevertheless, without this originary thievery of the other, the inquisitive, and without the abrupt theft of our old masks, we would never experience the sense of nakedness in front of some mirror, a mirror that – invisible to us – contains us; and there would be no "faces," that is, distinctive or personal modes of subjectification, which we often call our "selves," and to which we attribute vague but necessary names such as "I," "you," …etc., without any other specific demarcation.[159]

What is interesting in this reflective interpretation is that the Gibranian text becomes not only *a source* for an alternative outlook on Awakening in the Arab context, one that conceives of it as an inevitable event rather than a "violent enlightenment" seeking to reform the "decadent" minds. It also becomes *an occasion* for a phenomenological

---

156 Ibid., 192-93.
157 Ibid.
158 Ibid.
159 Ibid., 195.

reflection on faciality (*al-wajhiyya*) that posits the originary thievery of the other as a necessary double event: one that strips us of our self-fashioned sanctity, but that nevertheless awakens the face that lies beneath a history of masking, that is, beneath a history of a particular kind of reason that forms and narrates who we are. To reside outside these masking narratives of the institution of reason is therefore to become or, rather, to *be seen* by others as a madman. The latter becomes a condition of possibility for a subjectification that the other, as a thief or a veil, is not be able to comprehend.

This hermeneutical application of the Gibranian text should not be regarded as an over-interpretation. What we see here, to invoke Gadamer, is a "fusion of horizons,"[160] one that does not nevertheless aspire for an "aesthetic truth." This fusion has rather enabled a movement towards a horizon that lies beyond this re-contextualization. Meskini's engagement indicates the capacity of the Gibranian text to invite new ways of thinking in the Arab world and beyond. However problematic the notion of "the Eastern self," what matters most here is not "East" or "West" but the possibility of being and thinking around and beyond them:

> The face [*al-wajh*] is the space of being specific to each one of us, yet we do not owe our faces nor our faciality [*wajhiyya*] to any other. The being of the other itself is possible only insofar as it acquires a "face" or a faciality. And the other must look for a mirror in order to look at me. Yet what hangs over mirrors, their beauty notwithstanding, is to metamorphose into veils, that is, into visual hurdles that forestall our faces … But my face is not my doing. It is trace of a sun's kiss, a sun that "enflamed my soul with love," that is, with a truthful estrangement that consists in belonging to my own self without veils.[161]

The encounter with the face of the other, contra Levinas, can only take place by virtue of a mask-less faciality, but not without a mirror, an invisible mirror that contains the self and the other, where the other is seen by the self and the self is seen by the other – that is, no immediate encounter is possible without this *mutual representation*. It is the susceptibility of this mirror to turn into a fixed identitarian veil simultaneously masking

[160] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 306-07.
[161] Meskini, *al-Kujīto al-Majrūḥ*, 195-96.

one to oneself and to the other that Meskini's phenomenological hermeneutics of the face warns against. Only by virtue of a radical Outside or a wholly Other – the metaphor of the sun – can one recognize one's own naked face.

Gibran's mask-less madman is thus unmasked hermeneutically only by masking the original language of the text, and this is possible because the text itself was "born-translated."[162] This is an indication of the extent to which translation bears on how texts are constituted, imagined, categorized, configured, re-configured and open or limited in terms of the interpretative capacity they can generate. Translation can simultaneously mask and unmask. It can either exoticize or de-exoticize, depending on the normative, cultural and epistemic framework in which translation takes place, the language that enunciates the text and the language re-enunciates it, as it were, the conditions of reading and the horizons of expectations that shape the value and pertinence of what is read, as well as the identity of the enunciator. This identitarian element is inescapable, yet the way it is deployed in multiple discursive and (e)valuative practices across different but inter-related cultural geographies is something we should always expose, reflect upon, interrogate and learn from, and Gibran's case as a bilingual writer is an illustrative one in that regard.

As discussed in the two first sections of this chapter, Gibran's Oriental identity, understood monolithically, often precedes and pre-defines his texts and the way they are received, read and appropriated in the American cultural and literary field. That *The Prophet* is (still) popular in the U.S. is not an issue – it is also popular elsewhere. The issue, rather, resides in the conditions and mechanisms of value-coding and legitimation that assign a particular value and meaning to it – and to his other works – without paying close attention to its own textual difference. In an American literary field

---

[162] I borrow this elegant phrase from Rebecca L. Walkowitz's *Born-Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

dominated by the modernist poetics of T.S. Eliot and New Criticism, this difference was either unacknowledged as such or regarded as essentially Eastern, mystical and (therefore) exotic. Even after attempts to revise the canon in 1970s and 1980s, the continuous popularity of *The Prophet* since its publication and its appropriation as an essentially spiritual and Oriental book, especially in the New Age movement, has left Gibran uncanonized and *de*-con*text*ualized in the U.S. Yet the (Euro)-American conditions of reading and reception – in Bourdieu's sense – form one side of the bilingual picture. Because a new hermeneutic life is given to Gibran's anglophone text when translated into Arabic, this translational movement is equally significant in any appraisal of it, precisely because it renders visible what is veiled by its American reception. Highlighting the bilingual trajectory of this text, therefore, means that *another world* to which it culturally belongs is *un*forgotten. That Gibran's work is spiritually appropriated and institutionally neglected in one field, while creatively, philosophically and discursively[163] re-appropriated in another, is a paradox that reflects what is lost and gained in (cultural) translation in an irreducibly heterogeneous world. Remembering and re-activating that irreducible heterogeneity – while exposing and critiquing what mystifies it – is an ethical imperative in the age of "world literatures."

[163] See Meskini, "*Fikrat al-Nabiyy fī al-Fikr al-ʿArabī al-Muʿāṣir* [The Notion of the Prophet in Contemporary Arab Thought]," *Taʾwīliyyāt* [Hermeneutics], ed. Mohamed Mahjoub 1 (Winter 2018): 44-55. Here, Gibran's *The Prophet* and Naimy's *The Book of Mirdad* (1948) - both originally written in English – are re-contextualized as part of contemporary Arab thought that stretches back to the Nahḍa. They are seen, thus, as Arab Romantic restatements of the notion of the prophet – which, under the secularizing conditions of modernity, has become available as an icon for public use in the modern nation-state – in contrast to its re-deployment as a political, military and moral icon in some strands of Islamist thought in the twentieth century (Sayyid Qutb and al-Maududi). Both deployments – the Romantic and the Islamist – are "post-religious" for Meskini, in that "the prophet" would not be available as an icon/symbol of public use were it not for the profound normative transformation of this notion in modernity.

Conclusion

I began this thesis with Halim's Barkat's critical comments regarding a memorial of Gibran, set in an empty, isolated quarter of D.C., which is emblematic of the exilic alienation of the modern Arab writer. For me, the memorial is also suggestive of the static understanding that reduces the dynamics and manifoldness of the Gibranian text – as an Arab (anglophone) text – into a monolithic and monosemic notion of its writer as an Eastern, spiritual poet in the United States. My reading in this thesis has been precisely concerned with rendering visible the dynamics and manifoldness of this text. Fundamental to my reading was a concern with enacting its bilingual singularity or alterity, understood as that irreducible polysemic texture that makes this text different from, albeit inevitably echoing, other texts, due largely to its imperial, bicultural situatedness.

Gibran's specificity as a modern Arab writer lies not only in the fact that he wrote in two languages and across many genres – with the poetic as the stamp that essentially defines his literary enterprise. It also resides in the multi-dimensional nature of this enterprise, that is, in its national and universal dimensions, which are interdependent and at times complementary in ways that are not readily discernible, as I have shown throughout. This movement between different registers is one that marked the Gibranian text in its early Arabic emergence, as discussed in Chapter Two, with his prophetic imagination as the overarching motif that cuts across his writings in both languages. This prophetic imagination is best articulated by his post-religious poets – the madman, the forerunner, Almustafa and Āmina al-ʿAlawiyya, in particular – who simultaneously reclaim and reinvent, in post-Nietzschean and evolutionist terms, the Abrahamic force of religion in its pre-institutional sense of disruption, migration and event. This reinvention was at once occasioned by modernity – the travelling and

reconfigurations of different ideas, concepts and ideologies on a global scale in the nineteenth century – and posited against its identitarian and calculative reason. Hence the prophetic: that which announces *the* impossible – the unattainable but necessary Greater Self – as the condition of being and dwelling anew in the world.

Underscoring the religious that animates the Gibranian literary vision is meant as a gesture that appreciates the religious as such, being a particular *and* varied way of believing, imagining and sensing that has a claim to universality, without locating it, however, in a hermetic sphere of lofty ideas that transcends history. The religious, of course, has always been a universal, transcendental force. This particular mode of transcendence, in its Abrahamic version, is still with us today. And that space of transcendence, unknown to the Greeks, has mobilized the philosophical, literary and existential imagination of so many creative minds throughout history. In other words, it has manifested itself *in* history, *in* this world – where else? – and it is from this worldly perspective that the literary reinvention of the religious in Gibran's text was read in Chapter One. This approach allows us to disentangle the literary and creative aspect of Gibran's oeuvre from the subjectively embodied experience of the religious, which, even if it is available biographically, does not, and should not, concern us here. After all, the poetic is that which stages and hosts the religious in Gibran, and not the other way around.

It is Gibran's bilingual movement, however, that has eclipsed the singularity of his text in its journeying between the nation and the world. This is mainly because his English work – *The Prophet* in particular – has been mostly and monolithically understood, valued and categorized as "Oriental" in the American landscape that witnessed its *immigrant* birth and longevity as we saw in Chapter Two and, in particular, Chapter Four. Hence my critique of this mode of reception – and its discursive conditions and mechanisms of value-coding – which approach Gibran's text

from a culturalist, identitarian presupposition that simultaneously veils his text and pre-determines its (e)valuation, thereby obscuring its alterity and polyvocality. The travelling of this anglophone text to the Arab world, in which it is differently and creatively read, testifies to its enduring singularity, which is nevertheless fissured by the same bilingual movement that made it possible, hence the bilingual chasm discussed in Chapter Two.

This chasm has generated different and *seemingly* contradictory functions of Gibran: a poet of the universal in English on the one hand, and a critical essayist and playwright in Arabic, on the other. Yet this movement from one language to another bears and extends a universal orientation latent in his early Arabic work. His later adoption of English as language of writing poetry would therefore depend on the preservation and maintenance of the mother tongue, as his late critical essays attest. There is no movement towards the universal, in other words, that does not begin with and depend on the particular. Yet this movement is fissured in Gibran's case because he is adopted, in the discourse of the host(ile) culture, in essentialist terms. This chasm can be best addressed, I have therefore argued, by attending to the alterity of his text which resists and exceeds the identitarian and exoticist designations to which it has been reduced. It is this creative and problematic bilingual movement that makes Gibran's literary enterprise a particularly singular one in modern Arabic literature.

Gibran is also a staunch, albeit reluctant, nationalist. His national commitment to Syria and the Arab East, mostly articulated in the form of numerous essays and plays most of which were given their due attention here, testifies to an ethics of belonging that conceives of the Syrian *waṭan* or homeland (in Ottoman Greater Syria) as the sole unifier of its diverse inhabitants. The national in Gibran is essentially ethical in its emphasis, on the one hand, on the insightful and strenuous effort and dedication that love for the nation necessarily requires, and, on the other, on the preservation and

activation of the "moral independence" that both the formation of the nation and the actualization of the Nahḍa entail. Thus, this political and civilizational commitment, enabled by the Nahḍa while breaking from some of its intellectual and teleological premises – traditionalism and westernization –, can be cautiously described as de-colonial, in the sense that it radically questioned any unquestioned dependence on "the West" or the past in the quest for nation-building or civilizational ascendency. Yet, this critical stance could not do away with the social Darwinism, identitarianism and essentialism prevalent at the time, which were nonetheless embraced in strategic and non- or anti-imperialist terms – the aim was the foundation of an autonomous national state in Greater Syria and the enaction of an original Nahḍa in the Arab East.

Drawing attention to this facet of Gibran was essential to my argument for two reasons. The first has to do with laying bare the manifoldness of Gibran's literary enterprise, of which this national facet is an essential element. The second lies in the fact that Gibran, despite this national commitment, thought of himself as essentially a poet. This would not have any importance here were it not for the fact the poetic for the Gibran is synonymous with the universal – implied, unsurprisingly, in his short essay "Ilā al-Sharqiyyīn" [To the Easterners], which I analysed in Chapter Three, not to mention his explicit reference to this disposition elsewhere. Which is to say that it is *as a poet* that Gibran moves between the nation and the world, between Arabic and English, between the Arab East and the U.S. (and the rest of the world). That this universal vocation of the poet – what he calls "life-thinking" – is expressed in his early Arabic writings and reaches its zenith in his later English work means that the poetic – which bears the mark of the prophetic or the Abrahamic in Gibran – remains irreducible to readings that begin and end with the political. Not that the politics of writing or reception do not matter. On the contrary, the last chapter has exposed and interrogated the culturalist presuppositions that inform various modes of reading and domestication

in the U.S., which are enmeshed in practices of cultural (mis)translation according to which Gibran's literary texts – as texts written by an Oriental – are filtered through the discursive and evaluative prism of exoticism. My point is that *as* poetry, this text invites a hermeneutic of alterity whose concern is, first and foremost, the text itself, one that attempts to approach it hospitably but responsibly. As I have emphasized throughout, this hermeneutic movement locates this text in its context of enunciation and reception without reducing it to this context, especially because this text, in Gibran's case, is bilingual, one which is directly or indirectly constituted by self- and cultural translation.

This ethics of reading, therefore, is not averse to the politics of culture. It rather attempts to be more conscious of *the inter-relatedness of aesthetics and politics* without confusing one with the other, especially when we talk about literature or, in particular, Arabic literature (in the *Mahjar*). In Gibran's case, the fact that his anglophone text, particularly *The Prophet*, is read, cherished or even consumed as "spiritual" in the U.S., for instance, does not negate or undermine the spiritual or religious tenor of the book, because it is only *as poetry* that it can be spiritual or religious, nor is this phenomenon explainable by resorting to the author-as-cause. As a literary text, its value emerges in creative acts of reading that set out to pay close attention to its singular textuality. This is by taking into account the identity of its author not as a static and *a priori* element that informs the act of reading, but as a discursive *indicator* of the particular worldly conditions which made the emergence and longevity of the text possible, and to which its necessarily polysemic nature is not, I insist, reducible. This is why I delineated, in the introduction, two distinct but inter-related planes of analysis that oriented my discussion in this thesis; the first has to do what the text enunciates and how it does so as it intervenes in its general context of emergence and reception, and the second pertains to the location(s) of and the degree to which this context affects the way the text has been read and (e)valuated. While my reading, insofar as it attempted to enact

the alterity of Gibran's text, was logically located in the first plane of analysis, the second was important insofar as it showed how this alterity has been exhausted – or not – by specific modes of reception. My point is that the alterity/singularity of this text lies in its inexhaustibility, the tendency to exhaust it notwithstanding. This ethics of reading is one that I have tried to embody and perform consistently throughout the thesis, to what degree of success – or failure – it is not for me to tell.

As Arabic literature (in English), Gibran's work is not only important because of its singularity. In its travelling beyond the Arab trans-national scene, it carries the mark of Arabic literature even if it is articulated in English or translated into other languages. As world literature, in other words, it retains the indelible trace of Arabic as language, literature and culture. To appreciate such a text, therefore, is to be at once aware of its worldly genealogy and movement, of its bi- or multi-lingual making and re-making. Which is to say that this awareness is vital in approaching and evaluating *the different* in the trans-national literary scene in which world literatures are not evenly visible and equally influential in their appeal beyond the national. The power relations that underlie the circulation and (in)visibility of literature on a global scale cannot be overstated in this respect. That English is *the* imperial language that directly or tacitly bears on what kind of literature we read today and, mostly importantly, *how* we do so, is an indisputable fact that cannot be challenged by foregrounding intractable particularism(s). The very question of *difference* requires, instead, a critical negotiation that makes visible the particular in its irreducible multiplicity without falling prey to exoticism in its implicit but powerful forms – for to assume that the other is *culturally* intractable or impenetrable presupposes a radical, incommensurable difference that simultaneously absolves the other from criticism and exoticizes it. On the other hand, it entails a relentless ethical effort that lies in bracketing, to the extent that it is possible, the normative and imaginative sphere of the same in the encounter with the culturally

different other, *without* negating the same in its potential transformation by this encounter. This attitude is one that foregrounds *the shared* – always subject to change and critique – despite, or because of, the irreducible difference of the human. It is here where translation is both impossible and necessary,[1] precisely because the shared is both fragile and infinitely necessary.[2]

Gibran's enterprise – and its legacy – is one that illustrates this inevitable but creative tension between the particular and the universal, between the linguistic and cultural particularity of the Arabic language and its rich cultural memory on the one hand, and the universal horizon towards which this particularity in its Gibranian instantiation *aesthetically* and *translationally* orients itself. This thesis, in its emphasis on the ethics of reading that this bilingual movement requires, is a contribution, however small and limited, to contemporary debates about "world literature" in its inevitable inter-connection with Arabic literature and, more precisely, to debates about the way(s) we can better understand and approach the latter in our postcolonial world. How to read, appreciate and critique Arab literary works that emerged in historical situations different from our own – and particularly in or before the modern, colonial period – and lasted nevertheless, is of the utmost importance here. I hope that this contribution will elicit or inspire further debates around or related to this critical concern, which is ultimately and simultaneously about aesthetics, ethics and politics as inter-related realms that are nevertheless irreducible to one another.

[1] Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*, 57.
[2] The shared [*al-mushtarak*] is understood as that which is opposed, not to the private, but to the identitarian [*al-ḥawawī*]. See Meskini, *al-Hawiyya wa al-Ḥurriya*, 174.

Bibliography

Primary Sources in Arabic

Gibran, Kahlil. *Al-Majmūʿa al-Kāmila li Muʾallafāt Jubrān Khalīl Jubrān bilʿArabiyya* [The Collected Works in Arabic]. Lebanon: Kitābuna li al Nashr, 2014.

———. *Al-Majmūʿa al-Kāmila li Muʾallafāt Jubrān Khalīl Jubrān: Nuṣūs Khārij Majmūʿa* [The Collected Works of Jubrān Khalil Jubrān: Texts Outside the Main Collection]. Edited by Antoine al-Qawwal. Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1994.

———. *Al-Nabiyy* [The Prophet]. Translated by Mikhail Naimy. Beirut: Nawfal, 2013.

———. *Al-Nabiyy* [The Prophet]. Translated by Tharwat Okasha. Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2009

———. *Iqlib al-Ṣafḥa yā Fatā: Makhṭūṭāt lam Tunshar* [Turn the Page: Hitherto Unpublished Manuscripts]. Edited by Waheeb Keeruz and Antoine Khouri Tuq. Lebanon: Gibran's National Committee, 2010.

———. "Wathāʾiq [Manuscripts]," 225-429. In *ʿAqīdat Jubrān* [The Doctrine of Gibran]. Edited by John Daye. London: Dār Surāqia, 1988.

Primary Sources in English

Kahlil Gibran. *A Treasury of Kahlil Gibran*. Translated by Anthony Rizcallah Ferris. Edited by Martin L. Wolf. London: Heinemann, 1974.

———. *Prophet: The Love Letters of Kahlil Gibran and Mary Haskell*. Edited by Virginia Hilu. London: A. Knopf Inc., 1972.

———. *Kahlil Gibran: An Illustrated Anthology*. Edited by Ayman A. El-Desouky. London: Spruce, 2010.

———. *The Broken Wings*, Translated by A. R. Ferris. London: Heinemann, 1959.

———. *The Collected Works.* New York: Everyman's Library, 2007.

———. "The Future of the Arabic Language (Excerpt)." Translated by Adnan Haydar. In *Tablet & Pen: Literary Landscapes from the Modern# Middle East*, 6-11. Edited by Reza Aslan. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2011.

———. *The Storm*. Translated by John Wallbridge. Santa Cruz, CA: White Cloud Press, 1993.

Secondary Sources

ʿAbd al-Hayy, Muhammad. *Tradition and English and Romantic Influence in Arabic Romantic Poetry: A Study in Comparative Literature*. London: Ithaca, 1982.

Abu-Deeb, Kamel. "The Collapse of Totalizing Discourse and the Rise of Marginalized/Minority Discourses." In *Tradition, Modernity, and Postmodernity in Arabic Literature*, 335-66. Edited by Kamel Abdel-Malek and Wael Hallaq Leiden: Brill, 2000.

Aboul-Ela, Hosam. "Is There an Arab (Yet) in This Field?: Postcolonialism, Comparative Literature, and Middle Eastern Horizon of Said's Discourse Analysis," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 56, no. 4 (Winter 2010): 729-50.

Al-Azm, Sadiq Jalal. "Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse." In *Orientalism: A Reader*, 217-38. Edited by A. L. Macfie. New York: New York University Press, 2000.

Al-Azmeh, Aziz. *Islams and Modernities*. London; New York: Verso, 2009.

Al-Azmeh, Nadhir. *Jubrān Khalīl Jubrān fī Ḍawʾ al-Muʾathirāt al-Ajnabīyya: Dirāsa Muqārana* [Gibran in the Light of Foreign Influences: A Comparative Study]. Damascus: Dār Ṭalās, 1987.

Acocella, Joan. "The Prophet Motive: the Kahlil Gibran Phenomenon." *The New York Times,* Jan 7, 2008. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/01/07/prophet-motive.

Adunis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*. London: Saqi Books, 1990.

———. *Al-Thābit wa al-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ittibāʿ wa al-Ibdāʿ ʿinda al-ʿArab: Ṣadmat al-Ḥadātha* [*The Fixed and the Changing in Arabic Poetics*, vol. 3]. Beirut: Dār al-ʿAwda, 1978.

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. "There is no such Thing as Western Civilisation," *The Guardian*, 9 Nov 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/09/western-civilisation-appiah-reith-lecture

Apter, Emily. *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*. London: Verso, 2013.

Aravamudan, Srinivas. *South Asian Religion in a Cosmopolitan Language*. Princeton; Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2006.

Arberry, A.J. *Sufism, An Account of the Mystics of Islam*. London: Unwin Brothers, 1972.

Asad, Talal. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.

Ashour, Radwa, *Gibran and Blake: A Comparative Study*. Cairo: The Associated Institution for the Study and Presentation of Arab Cultural Values, 1978.

Attridge, Derek. *The Singularity of Literature*. London: Routledge, 2004.

———. "Innovation, Literature, Ethics: Relating to the Other." *PMLA* 114, no. 1 (January 1999): 20-31.

Bakhos, Carol. *The Family of Abraham: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Interpretations*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014.

Barakat, Halim. *Ghurbat al-Kātib al-ʿArabī* [The Exile of the Arab Writer]. London: Saqi books, 2011.

———. "Explorations in Exile and Creativity: The Case of Arab-American Writers." In *Tradition, Modernity, and Postmodernity in Arabic Literature*, 304-20. Edited by Kamel Abdel-Malek and Wael Hallaq. Leiden: Brill, 2000.

Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." In *Image, Music, Text*, 142-48. Translated by Stephan Heath. London: Fontana Press, 1977.

Bawardi, Hani J. *The Making of Arab Americans*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014.

Benhabib, Seyla. *The Rights of Others: Aliens, Residents and Citizens*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Benjamin, Walter. "The Task of the Translator." In *Illuminations*, 69-82. Translated by Harry Zohn. London: Collins/Fontana Books, 1973.

Berman, Jacob. "*Mahjar* Legacies: A Reinterpretation." In *Between the Middle East and the Americas: The Cultural Politics of Diaspora*, 65-79. Edited by Ella Shohat and Evelyn Alsultany. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012.

Beshara, Adel. "A Rebel Syrian: Gibran Kahlil Gibran." In *The Origins of Syrian Nationhood: Histories, Pioneers and Identity*, 143-62. Edited by Adel Beshara. London; New York: Routledge, 2011.

Blanchot, Maurice. "Prophetic Speech." In *The Book to Come*. Translated by Charlotte Mandell, 79-85. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Field of Cultural Production*. Translated and edited by Randal Johnson. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993.

Bourdieu Pierre, and Loic J.D. Wacquant. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Bragdon, Claude. *Merely Players*. New York: A. A. Knopf, 1929.

Braks, Ghazi Fouad. *Jubrān Khalil Jubrān fī Dirāsa Taḥlīliyya - Tarkībiyya li Adabihī wa Rasmihī wa Shakhṣiyyatihī* [Gibran Khalil Gibran: A Study of His Literature, Art and Personality]. Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Lubnāni, 2002.

Bushrui, Suheil and Joe Jenkins. *Kahlil Gibran, Man and Poet: A New Biography*. Oxford: Oneworld, 1998.

Callomb, Joseph. "An Arabian Poet in New York," *The Evening Post*, 29 March 1919.

Chaouki Zine, Mohammad. "Tafkīkiyyat Ibn ʿArabī: al-Taʾwīl, al-Ikhtilāf, al-Kitāba" [Ibn Arabi's Deconstruction: Hermeneutics, Difference, Writing]. *Kitābāt Muʿāṣira* [Contemporary Writings] 36, no. 9 (March 1999): 53-59.

———. "Al-Hijra, al-Maskūnia, al-Manzil al-Mafqūd: ʿAnāsir fī Hājis al-Gharāba," [Migration, Habitability and the Lost Home: Elements in the Apprehension of *unheimlich*]. *Majallat Yatafakkarūn* [Yatafakkarun Journal], no. 11 (2017): 14-31

Chittick, William. *Imaginal Worlds*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994.

———. *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989.

Corbin, Henry. *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi*. Translated by Ralph Manheim. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.

Dalton, Drew M. *Longing for the Other: Levinas and Metaphysical Desire*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2009.

Damrosch, David. *What is World Literature?* Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2003.

Dawn, C. Ernest. "The Origins of Arab Nationalism." In *The Origins of Arab Nationalism*, 3-30. Edited by Rachid Khalidi et al. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

Daye, John. *ʿAqīdat Jubrān* [The Doctrine of Gibran]. London: Dār Surāqia, 1988.

———. *Lakum Jubrānukum wa lia Jubrāni* [You Have Your Gibran and I Have Mine]. Beirut: Qub Elias Press, 2009.

De Man, Paul. *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976.

Derrida, Jacques. *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*. Translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michel Naas. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.

———. "Différance." In *The Margins of Philosophy*. Translated by Alan Bass. Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982.

———. *Dissemination*. Translated by Barbara Johnson. London: The Athlone Press: 1981.

———. *Giving Time: I. Counterfeit Money*. Translated by Peggy Kamuf. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992.

———. *Monolingualism of the Other, or the Prosthesis of Origin*. Translated by Patrick Mensah. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.

———. *The Gift of Death & Literature in Secret*. Translated by David Wills. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008.

Dufourmantelle, Anne and Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*. Translated by Rachal Bowlby. California: Stanford University Press, 2000.

El-Desouky, Ayman A. "Theorizing the Local and Untranslatability as Comparative Critical Method." In *Approaches to World Literature, Volume 1,*

WeltLiteraturen/World Literatures Series, edited by Joachim Küpper, 59-86. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2013.

Eliot, T.S. *Selected Essays.* London: Faber and Faber, 1932.

Elmarsafy, Ziad, "User-friendly Islams: Translating Rumi in France and the United States." In *Between the Middle East and the Americas: The Cultural Politics of Diaspora*, 264-81. Edited by Ella Shohat and Evelyn Alsultany. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013.

Elshakry, Marwa. *Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860-1950*. Chicago; Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2013.

El-Zein, Amira. "Spiritual Consumption in the United States: The Rumi Phenomenon," *Islamic and Christian-Muslim Relations* 11, no. 1 (2000): 71-85.

Fawaz, Leila Tarazi. *A Land of Aching Hearts: The Middle East in the Great War*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014.

Fish, Stanley. *Is there a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretative Communities.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1980.

Forster, Stephen Willian "The Exotic as a Symbolic System," *Dialectical Anthropology* 7, no. 1 (September 1982): 21-30.

Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Vintage, 1973.

———. "What is an Author?" In *The Foucault Reader*, 101-20. Edited by Paul Rabinow. London: Penguin, 1984.

Frazer, T.G. *The First World War and Its Aftermath: The Reshaping of the Middle East*. London: Gingo Library, 2015.

Freud, Sigmund. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*. Translated by Alix Strachey et al. New York: Norton, 1961.

Frow, John. *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *Truth and Method*. Translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. New York: Continuum, 2004.

Ghassan, Khaled. *Jubrān al-Faylasūf* [Gibran, the Philosopher]. Beirut: Nawfel, 1983.

Ghurayyib, Rose. *Jubrān fī Athārihi al-Kitābīya* [Gibran in his Writings]. Beirout: Dār al-Makshūf, 1969.

Gibran, Jean and Kahlil G. Gibran, *Khalil Gibran: His Life and World.* New York: Interlink Books, 1991.

———. *Kahlil Gibran: Beyond Borders*. New York: Interlink Books, 2016.

Guillory, John. *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Habib, Masʿud. *Jubrān Ḥayyan wa Mayyitan* [Gibran in his Life and Death]. Beirut: Dār a-Rihāni, 1966.

Hafez, Sabry. *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse: A study in the Sociology of Modern Arabic Literature*. London: Saqi Books, 1993.

Hallaq, Boutros. *Gibran et la refondation littéraire arabe: Bildungsroman, écriture prophétique, transgénérisme*. Arles: Sindibad: Actes sud, 2008.

Hallaq, Wael. *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.

———. *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics and Modernity's Moral Predicament*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.

Hamzah, Dyala, ed. *The Making of the Arab Intellectual (1880-1960): Empire, Public Sphere and the Colonial Coordinates of Selfhood*. London: Routledge, 2013.

Hanegraaff, Wouter J. *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esoterism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*. Utrecht: Universiteit Utrecht, 1995.

Hassan, Wail. "The Gibran Phenomenon." In *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature*, 59-77. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Hawi, Khalil. *Kahlil Gibran: His Background, Character and Works*. Beirut: The Arab Institute for Research and Publishing, 1972.

Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macqurrie and Edward Robinson. Oxford: Blackwell, 1962.

———. "Letter on Humanism." In *Basic Writings*, 189-242. Edited by D. F. Krell. London: Routledge: 1978.

———. "On the Essence of Truth." In *Pathmarks*, 136-45. Edited by William MacNeill. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

———. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Translated by Albert Hofstadter. New York: Harper and Row, 1971.

———. "The Question Concerning Technology." In *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, 3-35. Translated by William Lovitt. London; New York: Harper and Row, 1977.

Hishmeh, Richard E. "Strategic Genius, Disidentification, and the Burden of *The Prophet* in Arab-American Poetry." In *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature*, 93-119. Edited by Layla Al Maleh. Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2009.

Hourani, Albert. *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983.

Huggan, Graham. *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marking the Margins*. New York: Routledge, 2001.

Ibn Arabi, Muḥy al-Din. *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* [The Meccan Openings] vol 3. Edited by Ahmad Shams al-Din. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1999.

Jauss, Hans Robert. *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. Translated by Timothy Bahti. Introduction by Paul de Man. Brighton: Harvester, 1982.

Jayyusi, Salma Khadra, ed. *Modern Arabic Poetry: An Anthology*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1987.

———. "Modernist Poetry in Arabic." In *Modern Arabic Literature*, 132-79. Edited by M.M. Badawi. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1992.

———. *Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry*. Leiden: Brill, 1977.

Kalem, Galen. "Translations of *The Prophet*." In *Gibran in the 21st Century: Lebanon's Message to the World* (Papers of the 3rd Kahlil Gibran International Conference), 146-51. Beirut: Lebanese American University, 2018.

Kellman, Steven G. *The Translingual Imagination.* Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2000.

Khatibi, Abdelkebir. *Plural Maghreb*. Translated by P. Burcu Yalim. London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2019.

———. *Love in Two Languages*. Translated by Richard Howard. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990.

Khoury, Yvette K. "*Akhir Yom* (The Last Day): A localized Arabic adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*," *Theatre Research International* 33, no. 1 (2008):52-69.

———. "Mansour Rahbani: Dramatist and Writer of the Classic songs of a Lebanese Golden Age," *The Guardian*, 17 April 2009. https://www.theguardian.com/music/2009/apr/17/obituary-mansour-rahbani

Kierkegaard, Soren. *Fear and Trembling*. Translated by Sylvia Walsh. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Kilito, Abdelfattah. *Je parle toutes les langues, mais en arabe.* Arles: Sindbad-Actes Sud, 2013.

———. *The Author and His Doubles*. Translated by Michael Cooperson. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2001.

———. *The Tongue of Adam*. Translated by Robyn Creswell. New York: New Directions Paperwork: 2016.

———. *Thou Shalt Not Speak my Language*. Translated by Wail Hassan. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2017.

Kleinmgeld, Pauline. *Kant and Cosmopolitanism: The Philosophical Ideal of a World Citizenship.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Laachir, Karima, Sara Marzagora, and Francesca Orsini, "Significant Geographies in Lieu of World Literature," *Journal of World Literature* 3 (2018): 290-310.

Laroui, Abdallah. *The Crisis of Arab Intellectuals: Traditionalism or Historicism?* Translated by Diarmid Cammell. Berkley; London: University of California Press, 1976.

Lauter, Paul. *Canons and Contexts*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Levinas, Emmanuel. “Ethics as First Philosophy.” In *The Levinas Reader*, 75-85. Edited by Sean Hand. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

———. *Nine Talmudic Readings*. Translated by Annette Aronowicz. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

———. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingiss. The Hague; London: Nijhoff, 1979.

Lijuan, Gan. “Dissemination of Kahlil Gibran’s Poems in China,” *Chinese Social Sciences Today*, 2 August 2013.
http://www.csstoday.com/Item/324.aspx

Ludescher, Tanyss. “From Nostalgia to Critique: An Overview of Arab American Literature,” *MELUS* 31, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 93-114.

Maalouf Amin. Preface to Khalil Gibran. *Le Prophet*, 7-15. Translated by Janine Levy. Paris: Editions de la Loupe, 2003.

Massad A, Jospeh. *Desiring Arabs.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Medici, Francesco. “Racing Gibran’s Footsteps: Unpublished and Rare Material.” In *Gibran in the 21th Century: Lebanon's Message to the World*, 93-145. Edited by Henry Zoghaib and May Rihani. Beirut: Centre for Lebanese Heritage, LAU, 2018.

Melhem, D. H. “Gibran’s ‘The Prophet’ Outside the Canon of American Literature,” *Al -Jadid* 8, no. 40 (Summer 2002).
https://www.aljadid.com/content/gibran%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%98-prophet%E2%80%99-outside-canon-american-literature

Meskini, Fethi. *Al-Hawiyya wa al-Ḥurriya: Naḥwa Anwār Jadīda* [Identity and Freedom: Towards a New *Aufklärung*]. Beirut: Dār Jadāwil, 2011.

———. *Al-Huwiyya wa al-Zamān: Taʾwīlāt Fīnuminulujia li Masʾalat al-Naḥn* [Ipseity and Time: Phenomenological Interpretations of the “We” Question]. Beirut: Dār al-Ṭaliʿa, 2001.

———. *Al-Īmān al-Ḥurr aw Mā Baʿda al-Milla: Mabāḥith fī Falsafat al-Dīn* [Free Faith, or Post-*Milla*: Studies in the Philosophy of Religion]. Rabat: Mominoun Without Borders, 2018.

———. *Al-Kujīto al-Majrūḥ: Asʾilat al-Hawiyya fī al-Falsafa al-Muʿāsira* [The Wounded Cogito: Questions of Identity in Contemporary Philosophy]. Algiers: Editions el-ikhtilef; Riyadh, Beirut: Dhifāf Publishing, 2013.

———. *Falsafat al-Nawābit* [The Philosophy of *Nawābit*]. Beirut: Dār al-Ṭaliʿa, 1997.

———. "*Fikrat al-Nabiyy fī al-Fikr al-ʿArabī al-Muʿāṣir* [The Notion of the Prophet in Contemporary Arab Thought]," *Taʾwīliyyāt* [Hermeneutics] 1. Edited by Mohamed Mahjoub (Winter 2018): 44-55.

Mignolo, Walter. *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subalterns Knowledges, and Border Thinking*. Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press: 2012.

Mufti, Aamir. *Forget English! Orientalisms and the Institution of World Literatures*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016.

Naimy, Mikhail. *Kahlil Gibran: A Biography*. New York: Philosophical Library, 1988.

———. ""A Strange Little Book"." *Aramco World* 15, no. 6 (Nov/Dec 1964). https://archive.aramcoworld.com/issue/196406/a.strange.little.book.htm

Naimy, Nadeem, "Kahlil Gibran: His Poetry and Thought." In *Gibran of Lebanon: New Papers*, 31-57. Edited by Suheil Bushrui and Paul Gotch. Beirut: Librairie de Liban, 1975.

Nash, Geoffrey. *The Arab Writer in English: Arab Themes in a Metropolitan Language, 1908-1958.* Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1998.

Nassar, Eugene Paul, "Cultural Discontinuity in the Works of Kahlil Gibran," *MELUS* 7, no. 2 (Summer 1980): 21-36.

Nicholson, Reynold Alleyne. *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921.

Nietzsche, Fredrich. *The Will to Power*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Random House, 1967.

———. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Penguin, 1966.

Noorani, Yaseen. "'Hard and Soft Multilingualism," *Critical Multilingualism Studies* 1 no. 2 (2013): 7-28

Omro, Mohamed-Salah. "Notes in the Traffic between Theory and Arabic Literature," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43, no. 4 (November 2011): 731 33.

Phillip, Thomas "Jurji Zaydan's Role in the Syro-Arab Nahda." In *The Origins of Syrian Nationhood: Histories, Pioneers and Identity*, 79-99. Edited by Adel Beshara. London; New York: Routledge, 2011.

Qandil, Fatima. *Al-Rāwī al-Shabaḥ: Shiʿriyyat al-Kitāba fī Nuṣūs Jubrān Khalil Jubrān* [The Spectral Narrator: The Poetics of Writing in the Text of Kahlil Gibran]. Cairo: Dār al-ʿAyn li al-Nashr, 2015.

Rahbani, Mansur. *Jubrān wa al-Nabiyy.* Beirut: M al-Raḥbāni, 2010.

Rancière, Jacques. "The Politics of Literature," *SubStance* 103 vol. 33, no. 1 (2004): 10 24.

Ratner-Rosenhagen, Jennifer. *American Nietzsche: A History of an Icon and his Ideas*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2012.

"Recent Books in Brief Review," *The Bookman* (Feb 1924 Issue): 673-74. https://www.unz.com/print/Bookman-1924feb-00673a05/

Ricoeur, Paul. "Religion, Atheism, and Faith." In *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, 440-67. Translated by Charles Freilich. Edited by Don Ihde. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974.

Russell, George William. *The Living Torch*. New York: Macmillan, 1937.

Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Vintage, 1993.

———. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin, 2003.

———. *Reflections on Exile, and Other Literary and Cultural Essays.* London: Granta Books, 2012.

———. *The World, The Text and the Critic*. London: Vintage, 1982.

Sayigh, Tawfiq. *Aḍwāʾ Jadīda ʿalā Jubrān* [Gibran under New Spotlights]. London: Riad el Rayyes, 1990.

Schillinger, Liesl. "Pioneer of the New Age," *New York Times*, 13 Dec. 1999. https://www.nytimes.com/1998/12/13/books/pioneer-of-the-new-age.html

Schulze, Reinhard. "Mass Culture and Islamic Cultural Production in the Nineteenth Century Middle East." In *Mass Culture, Popular Culture and Social Life in the Middle East*, 189-222. Edited by George Stauth and Sami Zubaida. Frankfurt; Boulder: Westview Press, 1987.

Schwab, Raymond. *The Oriental Renaissance*. Translated by Gene Patterson-Black and Victor Reinking. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.

Seiffert, Marjorie Allen. "Foreign Food," *Poetry* 24, no. 4 (January 1924): 216-18.

Shahid, Irfan. "Gibran and the American Literary Canon: The Problem of *The Prophet*." In *Tradition, Modernity, and Postmodernity in Arabic Literature*, 321-34. Edited by Kamel Abdel-Malek and Wael Hallaq. Leiden: Brill, 2000.

Sharabi, Hisham. *Arab Intellectuals and the West*. Maryland: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1970.

Sheehi, Stephen. *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity*. Florida: University of Florida Press, 2003.

———. "Towards a Critical Theory of al-Nahdha: Epistemology, Ideology and Capital," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 43, no. 2/3 (2012): 269-98.

Shehadeh, Lamia Rustum. "The Name of Syria in Ancient and Modern Usage." In *The Origins of Syrian Nationhood: Histories, Pioneers and Identity*, 17-29. Edited by Adel Beshara. London; New York: Routledge, 2011.

Shih, Shu-Mei. "Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition," *PMLA* 119, no. 1 (Jan 2004): 16-30.

Siddiqui, Mona. *Hospitality and Islam: Welcoming in God's Name*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015

Smith, Anthony D. *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History*. Cambridge: Polity, 2010.

Spivak, Gayatri. *Death of a Discipline*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.

The Koran Interpreted. Translated by A. J. Arberry. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983.

Tihanov, Galin. "Narratives of Exile: Cosmopolitanism Beyond the Liberal Imagination." In *Whose Cosmopolitanism? Critical Perspectives, Relationalities and Discontents*, 141-59. Edited by N. Glick Schiller and A. Irving. New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2015.

Walbridge, John. "Gibran: His Aesthetic, and His Moral Universe," *Al-Hikmat* 21 (2001): 47-66.

Walkowitz, Rebecca L. *Born-Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015.

Waterfield, Robin. *Prophet: The Life and Times of Kahlil Gibran*. London: Allen Lane, 1998.

Welton, Donn, ed. *The Essential Husserl: Basic Writings in Transcendental Phenomenology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.

Wild, Stephan, "Nietzsche and Gibran." In *Gibran of Lebanon: New Papers*, 59-77. Edited by Suheil Bushrui and Paul Gotch. Beirut: Librairie de Liban, 1975.

Wilkinson, Marguerite, ed. *New Voices: An Introduction to Contemporary Poetry.* New York: Macmillan, 1919.

Williams, Raymond. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1983

Wilson, P.W. "Jesus Was the Supreme Poet: That Is the Conception Animating These Two Books About Him," *New York Times*, December 23, 1928.
https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/12/13/specials/gibran-jesus.html

Wrathall, Mark A. "Introduction: Metaphysics and Onto-theology." In *Religion after Metaphysics*, 1-6. Edited by Mark A. Wrathall. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Zheng, Ma. "The Study of Kahlil Gibran in Contemporary China: New Developments an Influences." In *The Enduring Legacy of Kahlil Gibran* (The Second International Conference on Kahlil Gibran: "Reading Gibran in the Age of Globalisation and Conflict" May 3-6, 2012), 227-34. Edited by Suheil Bushrui and James Malarkey. Maryland: University of Maryland, 2012.

Zima, Petr. *The Philosophy of Contemporary Literary Theory*. London: Athlone Press, 1999.