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GIBRAN IN THE DIARIES OF
JOSEPHINE PRESTON PEABODY*

by

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The earliest published reference to a relationship between the American poet and playwright, Josephine Preston Peabody (1874-1922), and the Arab poet and artist, Kahlil Gibran (1883-1931), was made in 1925 when Christina Hopkinson Baker edited posthumous selections of Josephine's diaries and letters.¹ It is true the reference in this book was minor and was related to Gibran's obscure early years in Boston at the turn of the century. But at the time of its publication, Gibran was at the highest point of his literary career having published *The Prophet*² in 1923 and other books in Arabic and English, and was quite well known as an artist. Yet no biographer of Gibran subsequent to that reference attempted to investigate it for purposes of historical research.

It was Kahlil Gibran (1922-), son of the poet's cousin N'oula Gibran, who together with his wife Jean Gibran came upon the relationship indirectly as a result of their research at the Norwood Historical Society while they were trying in 1972 to verify some correspondence from their illustrious relative to Fred Holland Day (1864-1933). Eventually they were led to the Josephine Preston Peabody papers at the Houghton Library, including her diaries and letters, deposited there in the 1940s by her husband Lionel S. Marks, professor of mechanical engineering at Harvard University. They have since then creatively used these papers as well as other published and unpublished materials to write what has come to be the most definitive biography of Gibran.³

When I read the Josephine Preston Peabody papers at the Houghton Library with special attention to her relationship with Gibran, I was struck by the wealth of this material contrasted with the three instances of reference to Gibran in Christina Hopkinson Baker's selections. The work of Jean Gibran and Kahlil Gibran has further convinced me of the necessity of publishing this material on its own, not only because it is important as a historical document, but because it is a beautiful testi-

mony of a sensitive human being who knew Gibran and was known by him in a poetically intimate manner which illuminates the personality of each of them.

Gibran met Josephine for the first time in March, 1898. It was a brief meeting at the Boston Camera Club where F.H. Day's photographic work was featured in an exhibition.⁴ Gibran, then a schoolboy of fifteen, had been a protégé of F.H. Day since December, 1896 and had posed for him as a model in several photographs, some of which were shown at the exhibition. Josephine, then a young lady of twenty-four whose lyrical poems had been published in a number of distinguished magazines, barely spoke to Gibran to comment on his pictures. This fleeting meeting, however, did not fail to impress the adolescent shy boy who was touched by Josephine's radiant personality and overwhelmed by her winsome beauty. When he left for Beirut in August, 1898 to continue his high school education there, he left her a pencil drawing with F.H. Day. "I must always love that little drawing," he was later to say. "Because it was the key: it was my key to everything."⁵ For Josephine, it was "a sweet little happening"⁶ and made her ask F.H. Day for more information about Gibran and eventually write him a letter which he answered from Beirut with evident delight.

When Gibran returned to U.S.A. in 1902, he pursued the friendly relationship with Josephine in the fall of that year. For a couple of years thereafter, they both enjoyed each other's company and their relationship was gradually becoming more intimate as each explored the spiritual depths of the other. "I say boldly that he knew my soul," wrote Josephine with natural insight, even before she had known him for a long time.⁷

Josephine's "line-a-day" diaries, now in the possession of her daughter Alison Peabody Marks, have a record of Gibran's visits to the Peabody home in Cambridge where he met members of her family as well as several of her friends. They also have a record of notes and letters received by Josephine from Gibran, gifts he gave her, concerts or plays they attended together, books they shared reading, persons they were in company with, and so on. Though they also contain occasional remarks on the developments of this relationship, it was in her more detailed diaries, now at Harvard's Houghton Library, that Josephine expressed herself more fully regarding the meaning of her relationship with Gibran and her reflections on life in general.

She had kept a diary from her sixteenth year to her death at the age of forty-eight. Honest and sincere with herself, she recorded her feelings and thoughts in it with clear introspection, always aspiring for spiritual and intellectual growth and not sparing herself any upbraiding if she felt she had gone wrong. When she was confused, she confessed it to herself on the pages of her diary, and thus paved the way for better self-understanding or for deeper comprehension of her circum-

stances.

To her, Gibran was clearly a gifted boy with great potential. She knew he needed the genuine sympathy that came with encouragement and attention, and she felt she was the "messenger of the Lord" who would foster his genius and nurture his development. The passing of days only confirmed her belief in his artistic talents, and it gladdened her to know her discernment was correct. "To give heart to a young thing for an uphill charge" was indeed the desire of her youth.⁸

In a sense, she saw in Gibran her own self striving for creativity and struggling for recognition. "How beautiful to know again," she wrote about him, "that all the things I desire to be have taken shape and gone about with a far-off foreign soul to comfort it likewise.... He reminds me of that old fresh assurance I used to have, like a boy David, that I was dear to God, and that He cared about my singing, if no one else did."⁹ Somehow, however, she conceived of her role in the relationship as one of catalysis. "I am a prism that catches the light a moment," she wrote. "It is the light that gladdens, not the prism."¹⁰

Coming from the slums of Boston's South End, Gibran basked in the sunshine of Josephine's interest and that of her refined, cultured society. His English was still painfully ungrammatical but its Arabic imagery and phraseology were expressive. In private conversations with Josephine, while he was drawing her or visiting her or sauntering with her along the Back Bay streets of Boston's aristocracy, he managed gradually to impress her with the depth of his spiritual perception. "If I see much of him, I shall become a Buddha," she said.¹¹ But he was sincere in his attempt to make her understand the extent of his feeling for her when he said to her that all he had drawn or written and all he should yet draw or write was hers and of her and belonged to her.¹²

Josephine's ready sympathy for the struggles of the young and poor artist she was trying to godmother was further deepened when Gibran told her that his half-brother and his mother were dying of incurable diseases, and explained to her that he had to step into his half-brother's little business rather than let him go dishonorably bankrupt. "Pegasus harnessed to an ash-wagon would suffer less," she wrote to a friend.¹³

Meanwhile, Josephine's financial conditions and those of her family were becoming more and more stringent as the Peabodys were descending gradually into genteel poverty. When Josephine resigned her teaching position at Wellesley College to give herself free time to write, she had rashly deprived herself of regular income which for two years (1901-1903) had kept her more or less solvent. Royalties from her books and from poems published in magazines were certainly welcome but hardly sufficient. The Peabodys moved to a less comfortable and less prestigious house in Cambridge in order to save on rent. Josephine had to dye some of her dresses to make them of further use. The pages of her diary

reflect her exasperation with poverty but also the fact that she took courage from Gibran's fortitude in adversity, as much perhaps as she inspired him with solace and cheer. She wrote, "If it were not for the continued and marvellous story that threads along within my pallid and alarming circumstance, I should cease to be, I think."¹⁴

However, she never forgot her role as almoner, as messenger of the Lord, as dispenser of joy and hope to those who needed them around her. Nor did she give up her resilience or her vision of the hill-top. She continued to write poetry and plays, having resolved to spend her colors generously, as she said. "If I am going under, I am going under with all flags flying," she wrote.¹⁵ "Level wings, level wings. Keep your wings level," she continued to remind herself.¹⁶ At the same time, she comforted Gibran in his bereavement and gave him happy moments in her company, lifting up his spirits by intimate talk, by intellectual and spiritual communion, and by her sheer physical presence radiating mirth and exuberance. She continued to watch and encourage his progress in art and, in May of 1903, gave him the opportunity of an official debut as an artist in an exhibition at Wellesley College which included some of his drawings. A year later, when F.H. Day sponsored Gibran's first major art show in Boston, she lent him several of Gibran's works in her possession, helped mount and hang the pictures, sent out many announcements to her friends and personally saw to it that some of them did come to the exhibit, including Mary E. Haskell who, unknown then to Gibran, was later to become his lifetime friend and mentor after Josephine's marriage.¹⁷

We have very little clues of how Gibran viewed his relationship with Josephine. He did not keep a diary, but she recorded in hers some of their conversations and common activities. In his first letter to her from Beirut which she transcribed with all its errors in her diary, Gibran said, "I will keep your friendship in midesst of my heart, and over that many many milles of land and sea I will allways have a sertane love for you and will keep the thought of you near my heart and will be no sepperation between you and my mind."¹⁸ All his subsequent deeds and words in his relationship with Josephine when he returned to U.S.A. four years later seem to substantiate this initial outpour of emotion towards her.

On various occasions, he gave her such small but exotic gifts as a Syrian shepherd's flute, a pair of Turkish slippers with upturned toes, a baptismal silver ring taken from a Madonna in Lebanon, three pomegranates, several of his own drawings, a hand-made birthday card, and other things symbolizing an intimate and special relationship with her. When there was opportunity, he expressed to her in subtle words his admiration for her¹⁹ and her books,²⁰ his appreciation of her as a person who gave meaning to his life²¹ and inspiration to his art,²² his constant thinking about her,²³ his gratitude to her for the comfort and the other spiritual gifts her company showered on him,²⁴ his fear for her when she was

away,²⁵ his sympathy for her in her financial troubles²⁶ — all of which were expressions of his "sertane love" for her, not to say anything of the holding of hands²⁷ which to him must have meant a great deal.

It is likely that by these acts and gestures Gibran was wooing Josephine in his own shy way but there is no evidence that she read his mind in this fashion. On October 10, 1903, when he was approaching his twenty-first birthday, he wrote her a letter which must have ruffled her. In her "line-a-day" diary she commented, "Infuriating suggestion more or less." She described his visit a couple of days later with the words, "Everyone depressed." On the next day she wrote, "Look over old letters and tear up."²⁸

There is no surviving evidence to support the belief that he proposed to her, but it is likely that he did and was rejected. Difference in age and social background as well as similarity in poverty and financial insecurity must have been decisive factors for her. However, Gibran continued to visit her, write to her, and give her gifts. In a draft of a note, probably to her, he wrote in his faulty English, "I loved you with confidant -- now I love you with fear -- I love more than I ever did but I am afraid of you. Love life."²⁹

For a couple of years more, the relationship between Josephine and Gibran continued. But he was losing the earlier warmth and was sometimes tense and, for Gibran, increasingly hopeless. By 1905 he had begun to publish his prose poems in Arabic, many of which were first read to her and were inspired by her.³⁰ Gibran was beginning to be recognized in the Arab immigrant community in U.S.A., though his literary stature had not reached that of Josephine who then had six books to her name, the latest of which, Pan, A Choric Idyl (1904), was set to music and produced in the fall of 1904 in Ottawa as a state farewell concert for Lord Minto, the retiring governor-general of Canada. Her poetic drama, Marlowe (1901), was produced in the spring of 1905 at Radcliffe College in honor of the opening of Agassiz House to commemorate the name of a founder and president of the college.

Hoping against hope, Gibran tried hard to compete for Josephine's attention with men of more established careers like the poet E.A. Robinson and the Harvard professor Lionel S. Marks. On her thirty-first birthday, May 30, 1905, he sent her an ink and watercolor greeting card which he had himself made. On it he wrote in illuminated Arabic calligraphy a story of a victorious king who preferred a poor man's simple kiss on his hand to the lavish gifts of potentates. Gibran ended the parable saying, "Accept, O one victorious over the years, a kiss from me on your strong hand."³¹ In spite of its beauty and its transparent message, the card did not improve the relationship between them.

On July 1, 1905 Gibran brought Josephine another gift in yet another attempt on his part to regain her favor. The gift was his first book

ever published, a small treatise in Arabic entitled Nubdha fī Fann al-Mūsīqā (A Tract on the Art of Music), published in New York by Al-Muhājir, an Arabic newspaper edited by Amīn Ghurayyib. Gibran supplied the special copy of the book with a parchment cover on which he inscribed al-Mūsīqā in red ink. Under the large letters of the title on the title page, he wrote in Arabic the intertwined initials of Josephine's name, JPP, on the right and his own JKhJ (=GKG), on the left. Underneath he added, "With love and respect and (best) wishes."³² Though interrupted twice by the arrival of other visitors, Gibran read the whole book to her in translation, kneeling on the floor beside her chair.³³

However, his efforts were in vain. In the next few months Gibran's visits and notes to Josephine became fewer and she became increasingly involved with Lionel S. Marks to whom she was eventually engaged on February 23, 1906 and married on June 21, 1906. Though invited to the wedding, Gibran neither answered his invitation nor sent any gift or congratulations.³⁴

When he saw Josephine again on January 30, 1908, he saw her in the company of her husband at a dinner for them given by Mary E. Haskell to which he was also invited. But the reunion was tense and it was "a rather dissatisfying time with him," as Josephine wrote in her diary.³⁵ He did not see her again for six years. But during that time many things had happened.

Gibran had gone to Paris to study art for two years (1908-1910) and was becoming a well known artist, especially in New York where he had come in 1911 and where he had a studio. He had a sense of literary achievement having now five Arabic books to his name, all published in New York.³⁶ His fame was spreading in the Arab world. He was even beginning to write in English with the encouragement of his mentor, Mary E. Haskell, whose loving friendship sustained and nourished his creativity. Some of his English writings of the time were to appear in The Seven Arts, a New York literary magazine, and were later to be published in his first English book, The Madman (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1918). Naturally, he had heard of some of Josephine's successes and had occasionally discussed her with Mary E. Haskell.³⁷

In the meantime, Josephine had become the proud mother of two children: Alison, born in 1908, and Lionel, born in 1910. Since her marriage, five more of her books had been published, one of which, The Piper, a four-act play in verse, had won the first prize in an international playwriting competition at Stratford-upon-Avon in which 315 writers took part. She had gone to England in the spring of 1910 for the production of this play at the inauguration of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford, and her play had been further produced in London in the summer of 1910 and in New York in the winter of 1911. Her fame as a poet and a playwright was well established, and her public support of the causes of women's rights and of equitable child labor laws

enhanced her fame in yet wider circles.

Josephine and Gibran saw each other on February 24, 1914 at the Hotel Astor in New York where Percy MacKaye's production, A Bird Masque, was given. They had tea together on the next day and she showed him pictures of her children. On February 27, 1914 she went to his studio and later dined with him and his friend, the poet Witter Bynner, at the home of Julia Ellsworth Ford, a patron of Gibran's art who had begun to invite him to her Friday night literary dinners as his fame grew. On the next day Josephine had a dinner party with him and the poet E.A. Robinson.³⁸ Gibran and Josephine were both content with their lives, each in his or her own way, and they enjoyed each other's brief company in New York. But they were never to see each other again. After they parted from each other, they knew that each had a separate path.

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NOTES

1. See Josephine Preston Peabody, Diary and Letters, ed. by Christina Hopkinson Baker (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1925), pp. 106, 122, 172.
2. Kahlil Gibran, The Prophet (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1923).
3. Jean Gibran and Kahlil Gibran, Kahlil Gibran: His Life and World (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1974), referred to hereafter as Kahlil Gibran.
4. Ibid., pp. 62-63.
5. See Josephine Preston Peabody's diary, December 23, 1902. Reference to the diaries at the Houghton Library of Harvard University will be hereafter made by using the initials JPP followed by the date. JPP followed by (D) and the date refer to her "line-a-day" diaries kept at the same library.
6. JPP, Sept. 15, 1898.
7. JPP, (D) Nov. 16, 1902.
8. See Christina H. Baker, ed., Diary and Letters, p. 294.

9. JPP, Nov. 17, 1902.
10. JPP, Nov. 26, 1902.
11. JPP, Dec. 13, 1902.
12. JPP, Dec. 23, 1902.
13. Letter to Mary Mason, March 9, 1903.
14. JPP, Aug. 9, 1903.
15. JPP, Jan. 12, 1903.
16. JPP, March 4, 1903.
17. See Kahlil Gibran, pp. 129-133.
18. JPP, March 24, 1899.
19. JPP, Nov. 17, 1902.
20. JPP, Nov. 17, 1902; Nov. 26, 1902.
21. JPP, Dec. 23, 1902.
22. JPP, Dec. 13, 1902: "He sent me a drawing for one line of the poem I had given him, saying that it was a breath of mine on the mirror of his imagination."
23. JPP, Jan. 26, 1903.
24. JPP, March 24, 1903.
25. JPP, Apr. 19, 1903.
26. JPP, Sept. 13, 1903.
27. JPP, March 24, 1903; May 9, 1903.
28. See Kahlil Gibran, p. 122.
29. Ibid., p. 124.
30. Ibid., pp. 145, 146.
31. See birthday card, Collection of Lionel Peabody Marks.
32. See title page of the book at the Houghton Library. Note the three

dots used as diacritical points to represent the PP in Josephine's initials, following Persian and Turkish practice rather than Arabic which has a B but not a P sound.

33. See Kahlil Gibran, p. 149.
34. Ibid., p. 151.
35. JPP, Jan. 30, 1908.
36. Nubdha fī Fann al-Mūsīqā (A Tract on the Art of Music), New York: Al-Muhājir, 1905; Arā'is al-Murūj (Nymphs of the Meadows), New York: Al-Muhājir, 1906; Al-Arwāh al-Mutamarrida (Spirits Rebellious), New York: Al-Muhājir, 1908; Al-Ajniha al-Mutakassira (The Broken Wings), New York: Mir'āt al-Gharb, 1912; Kitāb DamCa wa Ibtisāma (The Book of a Tear and a Smile), New York: Atlantic Press, 1914.
37. See Kahlil Gibran, p. 221.
38. Ibid., p. 266.