

The Prophet

KAHLIL GIBRAN

with an introduction by

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*and with
twelve illustrations by*

THE AUTHOR



RENARD PRESS

RENARD PRESS LTD

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020 8050 2928

www.renardpress.com

The Prophet first published in 1923

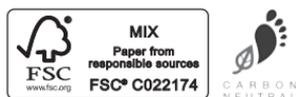
This edition first published by Renard Press Ltd in 2022

Edited text © Renard Press Ltd, 2022

Introduction © Daniele Nunziata, 2022

Cover design by Will Dady

Printed in the United Kingdom by Severn



ISBN: 978-1-913724-95-5

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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INTRODUCTION

Kahlil Gibran's The Prophet was first published almost exactly one hundred years ago. A century later, it remains one of the most thought-provoking and innovative investigations of the human psyche ever committed to print.

The Gibran Museum is located in Bsharri, a small village among the cedar-rich hilltops of Mount Lebanon where its most famous resident was born in 1883 and later buried in 1931. That the museum was once a monastery dedicated to Mar Sarkis (or Saint Sergius) is perhaps no coincidence: while the monastery offered safe sanctuary for travellers and refugees across centuries of colonial invasions, the current museum provides today's visitors with a place to quietly contemplate the writing of a poet whose oeuvre is replete with questions of belonging and exile.

While Gibran is buried in his Lebanese birth town, the decades he spent working and living in New York City also helped inform the transnational quality of his work. Comparable to his life spent across two continents, Gibran's unique literary and artistic choices cannot be neatly defined according to one simple category or another. Are we reading an entirely modern example of

free verse; an intricately woven piece of wisdom literature, a genre with its origins in the ancient Middle East; or something distinctively in-between? It is this writerly innovation – used to represent one person’s pending movement across the seas – that made Gibran’s *The Prophet* immensely successful when it was originally published in the US in 1923 and has enabled it to endure for a century. The early- to mid-twentieth century saw mass migration and the movement of refugees on a scale the world had previously never known. *The Prophet* became a landmark in depicting the multifaceted impact of these movements on the psychology – and the soul – of an individual. For this reason, it has been translated into a least one hundred languages and become one of the most read pieces of literature ever published.

Written without any formal structure in terms of rhyme scheme or stanza length, *The Prophet* is a long poem which strays from the contemporary poetic conventions of both Lebanon and the US and from the wider Arabic and English language traditions of poetry with which Gibran was deeply familiar. It tells the story of its eponymous prophet, Al Mustafa. While waiting for a ship to transport him to the island of his birth, having spent twelve years living in the fictional city of Orphalsee, he meditates on various philosophical and theological themes with a crowd of people that has gathered around the city gates – beginning with the subject of love. As the scholar Suheil B. Bushrui has shown, Gibran’s oeuvre covers the wide expanse of human experience, thereby expressing ‘the hope of future recompense for present wrongs, as well as being the process by which man is gradually perfected and

assimilated into the Universal Soul.¹ Travel and migration enable Gibran to understand most acutely the modern human condition.

The original publication included Gibran's own illustrations. The final image (as can be seen on p. 109) is a sketch of an outstretched hand with an eye in the middle, surrounded by concentric cloud circles made of human bodies and angelic wings. Combining the Hand of Fatima with a heavenly scene reminiscent of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, created in a style echoing that of the poet-artist William Blake, this image demonstrates the spiritual and cultural wealth of a work that crosses literary and artistic bounds in order to articulate what it means to be human. Growing up in a religiously diverse Mount Lebanon during the final years of the Ottoman Empire, Gibran's thinking was inspired by various branches of Christianity and Islam, as well as the Bahá'í Faith and a range of esoteric practices. Raised as a Maronite Catholic, Gibran looked to both his upbringing in Bsharri and to the plurality of human religious expression – in both the Levant and the ever-growing megalopolis of New York – to contemplate our place in the world. *The Prophet* is the apotheosis of such contemplation: the poem is rich in aphorisms which seek to explain and unravel the webs of human knowledge that intersect across the planet and create the network of universal lived experience. As Al Mustafa declares to both his immediate audience within the poem and to the readers of the work beyond the page:

1 *As the scholar... Universal Soul*: Suheil B. Bushrui, *Kahlil Gibran of Lebanon: A Re-evaluation of the Life and Works of the Author of The Prophet* (Smythe, 1987), p. 50.

People of Orphalese, of what can I speak save of that which is even now moving within your souls?

The poem has an outlook which is both internal and external, simultaneously gazing pensively at the local and the international. The twelve years that Al Mustafa spent in Orphalese corresponds with the number of years that Gibran spent living in New York before publishing *The Prophet*. Although he first moved to the US with his mother and siblings in 1894, living within the large Lebanese-American community of the South End of Boston, Gibran permanently relocated to Manhattan in spring 1911. After moving to the city, his literary and artistic output increased dramatically. The exchanges between Al Mustafa and the citizens of Orphalese, who ‘were crying out to him as with one voice’, has an autobiographic resonance: the poem’s speaker appears to articulate the knowledge Gibran had acquired and finessed during his time in the metropolis. But to which ‘one voice’ is the speaker referring? After moving to New York, Gibran’s literary language switched almost exclusively from Arabic to English, beginning with the publication of his first Anglophone work in 1918, *The Madman, His Parables and Poems*.

This linguistic transition draws attention to the position of the English language in the early twentieth century: it was, and remains, a global language understood and read by millions across the world, but its pervasive spread across every continent was a consequence of the rise of the British Empire and American cultural imperialism. Perhaps the choice to compose *The Prophet* in English

ALMUSTAFA, the chosen and the beloved, who was a dawn unto his own day, had waited twelve years in the city of Orphalese for his ship that was to return and bear him back to the isle of his birth.

And in the twelfth year, on the seventh day of Ielool, the month of reaping, he climbed the hill without the city walls and looked seaward; and he beheld his ship coming with the mist.

Then the gates of his heart were flung open, and his joy flew far over the sea. And he closed his eyes and prayed in the silences of his soul.

But as he descended the hill, a sadness came upon him, and he thought in his heart:

How shall I go in peace and without sorrow? Nay, not without a wound in the spirit shall I leave this city.

Long were the days of pain I have spent within its walls, and long were the nights of aloneness; and who can depart from his pain and his aloneness without regret?

Too many fragments of the spirit have I scattered in these streets, and too many are the children of my

longing that walk naked among these hills, and I cannot withdraw from them without a burden and an ache.

It is not a garment I cast off this day, but a skin that I tear with my own hands.

Nor is it a thought I leave behind me, but a heart made sweet with hunger and with thirst.

Yet I cannot tarry longer.

The sea that calls all things unto her calls me, and I must embark.

For to stay, though the hours burn in the night, is to freeze and crystallise and be bound in a mould.

Fain would I take with me all that is here. But how shall I?

A voice cannot carry the tongue and the lips that gave it wings. Alone must it seek the ether.

And alone and without his nest shall the eagle fly across the sun.

Now, when he reached the foot of the hill, he turned again towards the sea, and he saw his ship approaching the harbour, and upon her prow the mariners, the men of his own land.

And his soul cried out to them, and he said:

Sons of my ancient mother, you riders of the tides,

How often have you sailed in my dreams. And now you come in my awakening, which is my deeper dream.

Ready am I to go, and my eagerness with sails full set awaits the wind.

Only another breath will I breathe in this still air, only another loving look cast backwards,

And then I shall stand among you, a seafarer among seafarers.

And you, vast sea, sleepless mother,

Who alone are peace and freedom to the river and the stream,

Only another winding will this stream make, only another murmur in this glade,

And then shall I come to you, a boundless drop to a boundless ocean.

And as he walked he saw from afar men and women leaving their fields and their vineyards and hastening towards the city gates.

And he heard their voices calling his name and shouting from field to field, telling one another of the coming of his ship.

And he said to himself:

Shall the day of parting be the day of gathering?

And shall it be said that my eve was in truth my dawn?

And what shall I give unto him who has left his plough in mid-furrow, or to him who has stopped the wheel of his winepress?

Shall my heart become a tree, heavy-laden with fruit, that I may gather and give unto them?

And shall my desires flow like a fountain that I may fill their cups?

Am I a harp that the hand of the mighty may touch me, or a flute that his breath may pass through me?

A seeker of silences am I, and what treasure have I found in silences that I may dispense with confidence?

If this is my day of harvest, in what fields have I sowed the seed, and in what unremembered seasons?

If this indeed be the hour in which I lift up my lantern, it is not my flame that shall burn therein.

Empty and dark shall I raise my lantern,
And the guardian of the night shall fill it with oil, and he shall light it also.

These things he said in words. But much in his heart remained unsaid. For he himself could not speak his deeper secret.

And when he entered into the city all the people came to meet him, and they were crying out to him as with one voice.

And the elders of the city stood forth and said:

Go not yet away from us.

A noontide have you been in our twilight, and your youth has given us dreams to dream.

No stranger are you among us, nor a guest, but our son and our dearly beloved.

Suffer not yet our eyes to hunger for your face.

And the priests and the priestesses said unto him:

Let not the waves of the sea separate us now, and the years you have spent in our midst become a memory.

You have walked among us a spirit, and your shadow has been a light upon our faces.

Much have we loved you. But speechless was our love, and with veils has it been veiled.

Yet now it cries aloud unto you, and would stand revealed before you.



NOTE ON THE TEXT AND PICTURES

The Prophet was first published in 1923, and the text of this edition is based on that of the first publication. In some instances, spelling, punctuation and grammar have been silently corrected to make the text more appealing to the modern reader. The twelve pictures by the author included in this volume have also been replicated from the first edition.

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