

# Prophet Motive

## The Kahlil Gibran Phenomenon

by Joan Acocella

"While in the background there hovered a Greater Power—an angel, perhaps, or just a sort of milky miasma, suggestive of mystery and the soul."

Shakespeare, we are told, is the best-selling poet of all time. Second is Lao-tzu. Third is Kahlil Gibran, who owes his place on that list to one book, "The Prophet," a collection of twenty-six prose poems, delivered as sermons by a fictional wise man in a faraway time and place. Since its publication, in 1923, "The Prophet" has sold more than nine million copies in its American edition alone. There are public schools named for Gibran in Brooklyn and Yonkers. "The Prophet" has been recited at countless weddings and funerals. It is quoted in books and articles on training art teachers, determining criminal responsibility, and enduring ectopic pregnancy, sleep disorders, and the news that your son is gay. Its words turn up in advertisements for marriage counsellors, chiropractors, learning disabilities specialists, and face cream.

"The Prophet" started fast—it sold out its first printing in a month—and then it got faster, until, in the nineteen-sixties, its sales sometimes reached five thousand copies a week. It was the Bible of that decade. But the book's popularity should not be laid entirely at the door of the hippies. "The Prophet" was a hit long before the sixties (it made good money even during the Depression), and sales after that decade have never been less than healthy—a record all the more impressive in that it is due almost entirely to word of mouth. Apart from a brief effort during the twenties, "The Prophet" has never been advertised. Presumably in honor of this commercial feat, Everyman's Library has now brought out "Kahlil Gibran: The Collected Works" (\$27.50), with a pretty red binding and a gold ribbon for a bookmark. While most people know Gibran only as the author of "The Prophet," he wrote seventeen books, nine in Arabic and eight in English. The Everyman's volume contains twelve of them.

Part of the reason there were no real biographies is that little was known about Gibran's life, and the reason for that is that he didn't want it known. One point that seems firm is that he was born in Lebanon, in a village called Bsharri, in 1883. At that time, Lebanon was part of Syria, which in turn was part of the Ottoman Empire. Gibran, by his account, was a brooding, soulful child. From his earliest years, he said, he drew constantly—painting was his first art and, for a long time, as important to him as writing—and he communed with nature. When a storm came, he would rip off his clothes and run out into the torrent in ecstasy. His mother, Kamileh, got others to leave her strange boy alone. "Sometimes," Gibran later recalled, "she would smile at someone who came in . . . and lay her finger on her lip and say, 'Hush. He's not here.'"

Gibran's father was not a good provider. He owned a walnut grove, but he didn't like working it. He preferred drinking and gambling. He eventually got a job as a tax collector, but then he was arrested for embezzlement. Poor before, the family now became destitute. In 1895, Kamileh packed up her four children—Bhutros, Kahlil (then twelve), Marianna, and Sultana—and sailed to America. They settled in Boston, in the South End, a squalid ghetto filled with immigrants from various countries. (Today, it is Boston's Chinatown.) Kamileh, like many other Syrian immigrants, became a pack peddler; that is, she went door to door, selling lace and linens out of a basket she carried on her back. Within a year, she had put aside enough money to set Bhutros up in a drygoods store. The two girls were sent out to work as seamstresses; neither ever learned to read or write. Kahlil alone was excused from putting food on the table. He went to school, for the first time.





Gibran began publishing his writings as well: collections of stories and poems, parables and aphorisms. He had been heavily exposed to Lebanon's political problems: the warring among religious sects, the sufferings of the poor at the hands of a corrupt clergy and the distant Turkish overlords. Anger over this, and also pity—whether for Lebanese peasants or, quite often, for himself—were the main themes of his early writings. They were published in Arabic, and they won him great admiration in the Arab-American community. Not only was he standing up for his homeland; he was "making it" in America—and in art, not in dry goods.

He enjoyed this, but he wanted a larger audience, and soon he found the person who would make that possible. Mary Haskell, the headmistress of a girls' school in Boston, was a New Woman. She believed in long hikes, cold showers, and progressive politics. Her school disdained Latin and Greek; it taught anatomy and current events instead. Before Gibran became close to Haskell, in 1908, he had a history of befriending older women who could be useful to him. Haskell, too, was older, by nine years. (She was also taller. Gibran was five feet three, a source of grief to him all his life.) She was not rich, but by careful thrift—the school's cook, who also had some wealthy employers, sneaked dinners to her from their kitchens—she managed to put aside enough money to support a number of deserving causes: a Greek immigrant boy who needed boarding-school tuition, and another Greek boy, at Harvard. Then she met Gibran, who would be her most expensive project.

In the beginning, her major benefaction to him was simply financial—she gave him money, she paid his rent. In 1908, she sent him to Paris for a year, to study painting. Before he went abroad, they were "just friends," but once they were

He also enrolled in an art class at a nearby settlement house, and through his teacher he was sent to a man named Fred Holland Day. In European art, this was the period of the Decadents. Theosophy, espoused by Madame Blavatsky, became a craze. People went to séances, dabbled in drugs, and scorned the ugly-hearted West in favor of the more spiritual East. Above all, they made a religion of art. Day, thirty-two years old and financially independent, was a leader of the Boston outpost of this movement. He wore a turban, smoked a hookah, and read by candlelight. He did serious work, however. He and his friends founded two arts magazines, and he was a partner in a publishing house that produced exquisite books. By the eighteen-nineties, though, Day's main interest was photography. He particularly liked to photograph beautiful young boys of "exotic" origin, sometimes nude, sometimes in their native costumes, and he often recruited them from the streets of the South End. When the thirteen-year-old Gibran turned up at Day's door, in 1896, he became one of the models. Day was especially taken with Gibran. He made him his pupil and assistant, and he introduced him to the literature of the nineteenth century, the Romantic poets and their Symbolist inheritors. Robin Waterfield, in his biography, says that this syllabus, with its emphasis on suffering, Prophecy, and the religion of love, was the rock on which Gibran built his later style. According to Waterfield, Day also gave Gibran his "pretensions." Imagine what it was like for a child from the ghetto to walk into this world of comfort and beauty, a world, furthermore, where a person could make a life of art. Fortunately, Gibran already fitted into Day's milieu in a small way: he was "Oriental." Day made a fuss over Gibran's origins, treated him, Waterfield says, like a "Middle Eastern princeling." Gibran looked the part. He was very handsome, and

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apart the talk of friendship turned to letters of love, and when Gibran returned to Boston they became engaged. It was apparently agreed, though, that they would not marry until he felt he had established himself, and somehow this moment never came. Finally, Haskell offered to be his mistress. He wasn't interested. In a painful passage in her diary, Haskell records how, one night, he said that she was looking thin. On the pretext of showing him that she was actually well fleshed, she took off her clothes and stood before him naked. He kissed one of her breasts, and that was all. She got dressed again. She knew that he had had affairs with other women, but he claimed that he was not "sexually minded," and furthermore that what she missed in their relationship was actually there. When they were apart, he said, they were together. They didn't need to have "intercourse"; their whole friendship was "a continued intercourse." More than sex or marriage, it seems, what Haskell wanted from Gibran was simply to be acknowledged as the woman in his life. As she told her diary, she wanted people to "know he loved me because it was the greatest honor I had and I wanted credit for it—wanted the fame of his loving me." But he would not introduce her to his friends. "Poor Mary!" Waterfield says. Amen to that.

Later, Gibran told journalists many lies about his childhood, and, according to the Gibrans' biography, he seems to have tried these out first on Haskell. He was of noble birth, he said. His father's family had a palace in Bsharri, where they kept tigers for pets. His mother's family was the richest in Lebanon. They owned immense properties, "whole towns." He, as a young aristocrat, had been educated at home, by English, French, and German tutors. He was sure that a great destiny awaited him. She believed this even more than he, and in the beginning her



adulation was probably as important to him as her money. "Oh Glorious Kahlil!" she wrote in her diary. "Transcendent, timeless spirit!" When he read to her from an early book of his, she reported that "the invisible" gathered so thickly around her, "lights and sounds came from such far times and spaces, that from center to circumference I trembled with the excessive life-force"—a remarkable response, in view of the fact that the book was in Arabic, a language she did not then understand. She recorded the extraordinary experiences he told her he had had. For instance, he had intuited the theory of relativity before Einstein; he just hadn't written it down. Thousands of times, he said, he had been sucked up into the air as dew, and "risen into clouds, then fallen as rain. . . . I've been a rock too, but I'm more of an air person." We don't know how much of this Haskell believed. Furthermore, however godlike she found him, she was a schoolmistress, and she tried to educate him.

On the pretext of their having a nice literary evening together, she would get him to read to her from the classic authors, exactly as Fred Holland Day had done, and for the same reason—to improve his English. He profited from this, and of course resented it, as he resented the amount of money he had taken from her—by 1913, after five years of friendship, this came to \$7,440, equal to almost a hundred and fifty thousand dollars today—but he didn't tell her to stop writing the checks.

Soon after Gibran became "engaged" to Haskell, he told her that he was leaving town. Boston was a backwater. New York was where the action was. Clearly, he had another purpose as well: to get away from Haskell. He also needed to unload Marianna. If he was to become a major artist, how was he going to explain that he lived with this illiterate woman who followed him around the house with a dust rag? And so, in 1911, throwing off the two women who had supported him through his early period,

Gibran moved to New York, and to his middle period. He found a studio apartment in an artists' housing complex at 51 West Tenth Street. Haskell paid the rent, of course. After a few years in New York, during which he published two more books in Arabic, Gibran made a serious decision: he was going to begin writing in English. To do this, he needed Haskell's help, and she rushed to give it. When they were apart, he sent her his manuscripts, and she sent back corrections. When they were together—she visited him often (sleeping elsewhere)—he dictated his work to her. She wrote in her diary that if, during that process, "we come to a part that I question, we stop then and there." Who resolved the question? We don't know. She said that "he always gave every idea, and I simply found the phrases sometimes." But finding the phrases is a large part of writing.

For Gibran's first English-language publication, a brief poem, Haskell sent him seven pages of proposed corrections. She probably made substantial changes in his later work as well. Proud of this responsible role in his life, she gave up hoping for more. In 1926, with no objections from Gibran, she married a rich relative. But at night, after her husband went to bed, she would work on Gibran's manuscripts. Until he died, she edited all his English-language books. With the third of these, "The Prophet," he hit pay dirt.

What made "The Prophet" so fantastically successful? At the opening of the book, we are told that Almustafa, a holy man, has been living in exile, in a city called Orphalese, for twelve years. (When "The Prophet" was published, Gibran had been living in New York, in "exile" from Lebanon, for twelve years.) A ship is now coming to take him back to the island of his birth. Saddened by his departure, people gather around and ask him for his final words of wisdom—on love, on work, on joy and sorrow, and so forth.

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He obliges, and his lucubrations on these matters occupy most of the book. Almustafa's advice is not bad: love involves suffering; children should be given their independence. Who, these days, would say otherwise? More than the soundness of its advice, however, the mere fact that "The Prophet" was an advice book—or, more precisely, "inspirational literature"—probably insured a substantial readership at the start. Gibran's closest counterpart today is the Brazilian sage Paulo Coelho, and his books have sold nearly a hundred million copies.

Then, there is the pleasing ambiguity of Almustafa's counsels. In the manner of horoscopes, the statements are so widely applicable ("your creativity," "your family problems") that almost anyone could think that they were addressed to him. At times, Almustafa's vagueness is such that you can't figure out what he means. If you look closely, though, you will see that much of the time he is saying something specific; namely, that everything is everything else. Freedom is slavery; waking is dreaming; belief is doubt; joy is pain; death is life. So, whatever you're doing, you needn't worry, because you're also doing the opposite. Such paradoxes, which Gibran had used for years to keep Haskell out of his bed, now became his favorite literary device. They appeal not only by their seeming correction of conventional wisdom but also by their hypnotic power, their negation of rational processes. Also, the book sounds religious, which it is, in a way. Gibran was familiar with Buddhist and Muslim holy books, and above all with the Bible, in both its Arabic and King James translations. (Those paradoxes of his come partly from the Sermon on the Mount.) In "The Prophet" he Osterized all these into a warm, smooth, interconfessional soup that was perfect for twentieth-century readers, many of whom longed for the comforts of religion but

did not wish to pledge allegiance to any church, let alone to any deity who might have left a record of how he wanted them to behave. It is no surprise that when those two trends—anti-authoritarianism and a nostalgia for sanctity—came together and produced the sixties, "The Prophet"'s sales climaxed. Nor is the spirit of the sixties gone from our world. It survives in the New Age movement—of which Gibran was a midwife—and that market may be what Everyman's had in mind when it decided to issue the new collection.

Furthermore, "The Prophet" is comforting. Gibran told Haskell that the whole meaning of the book was "You are far far greater than you know—and All is well." To people in doubt or in trouble, that is good news. Reportedly, the book is popular in prisons. Finally, "The Prophet" is short—ninety-six pages in its original edition, with margins you could drive a truck through—a selling point not to be dismissed. And, since the text is in small, detachable sections, you can make it even shorter, by just dipping into it here and there, as some people do with the Bible. My guess is that plenty of its fans have not read it from cover to cover. There is a better book by Gibran, "Jesus, the Son of Man," which was published five years after "The Prophet." This is his second-most-popular work, but way second. That, no doubt, is because it lacks the something-for-everyone quality of its predecessor. "Jesus" is about Jesus. Also, it is not a book of advice or consolation. It is a novel of sorts, a collection of seventy-nine statements by people remembering Christ. Some of the speakers are known to us—Pontius Pilate, Mary Magdalene—but others are inventions: a Lebanese sheepherder, a Greek apothecary. They all speak as if they were being interviewed.



Though Gibran thought of himself as an admirer of all religions, he had an obsession with Jesus. He told Haskell that Jesus came to him in dreams. The two of them ate watercress together, and Jesus told him special things—for example, parables that didn't make it into the Gospels. On occasion, Gibran clearly saw himself as Jesus, and presumably it was this that inspired his unwise decision, in "Jesus, the Son of Man," to rewrite long sections of the Bible, for example, the Lord's Prayer: "Our Father in earth and heaven, sacred is Thy name. Thy will be done with us, even as in space." Much of the book transcends such follies, however. Gibran at one time had hoped to be a playwright, and "Jesus" shows a gift for characterization and "voice"—an insistence, for the moment, on one speaker's point of view—that saves the book from his habitual gassiness. Also, however much he imagined himself as Jesus, in this book alone he drops the oracular tone that is so oppressive in the rest of his work. A number of the speakers have complaints about Jesus. Judas is allowed to justify his crime: "I thought He had chosen me a captain of His chariots, and a chief man of His warriors." Judas's disgraced mother is given a dignified and moving speech: "I beg you to question me no further about my son. I loved him and I shall love him forevermore. If love were in the flesh I would burn it out with hot irons and be at peace. But it is in the soul, unreachable. And now I would speak no more.

Go question another woman more honored than the mother of Judas. Go to the mother of Jesus." Hard words. In contrast to "The Prophet," which received few and tepid reviews, "Jesus, the Son of Man" was praised by critics, but these were mostly newspaper critics. While the literary journals paid some attention to Gibran early on, they eventually dropped him. This is no surprise. His leading traits—idealism, vagueness, sentimentality—were exactly what the young writers of the twenties were running away from. Consequently, he did not make the scene with Manhattan's better class of artists. He seldom turns up in literary memoirs of the period. Edmund Wilson, in his journal of the twenties, says that "Gibran the Persian" was at a dinner party that a friend of his attended. That's

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the only mention he gets. But, if the artists of the time were throwing off idealism and sentiment, ordinary people were not. They wanted to hear about their souls, and Sinclair Lewis was not obliging them. Hence the popularity of "The Prophet" with the general public. After its publication, Gibran received bags of fan mail. He was also besieged by visitors, mostly female. Interestingly, in view of his hunger for fame, he did not enjoy these attentions. He took to spending months of the year in Boston, with Marianna, and, though he was now making money, he didn't change his way of living, or even his apartment. He remained in his one-room studio to the end of his life. Apparently, its monastic simplicity pleased him. He called it the Hermitage and lit it with candles. His reclusiveness increased as his productivity decreased. After "Jesus, the Son of Man," he was more or less played out. He produced two more books in English, but they were tired little things, and the reviewers said so. When Gibran was in Paris, he met Rodin, and he later claimed that the famous old sculptor had called him "the William Blake of the twentieth century." This tribute was probably of Gibran's manufacture, not Rodin's, but people at Knopf liked it, and so it was bannered on Gibran's publicity flyers. (Rodin couldn't protest; he was dead.) After "The Prophet," the critics, already annoyed by that book's popularity, threw the phrase back in Gibran's face. "Blake?" they asked. By his forties, Gibran was a sick man. He had long complained of a periodic illness, which he called the flu. Now he decided that the malady was not in his body but in his soul. There was a great book inside him—greater than "The Prophet"—but he couldn't get it out. He had another difficulty: alcoholism, a situation that may have developed soon after "The Prophet" was published, or while he was writing it.

Robin Waterfield thinks that Gibran's basic problem may have been a feeling of hypocrisy, in that his life so contradicted his pose as a holy man. In his last years, he stayed closed up in his apartment, occasionally receiving a worthy visitor but mostly drinking arak, a Syrian liquor that Marianna sent to him, apparently by the gallon. By the spring of 1931, he was bedridden, and one morning the woman who brought him his breakfast decided that his condition was dangerous. Gibran was taken to St. Vincent's Hospital, where he died later that day. The cause of death was recorded as "cirrhosis of the liver with incipient tuberculosis." Waterfield reports that Gibran's admirers have greatly stressed the tuberculosis over the cirrhosis. "Nothing incipient kills people," he objects. His speculation seems to be that Gibran drank himself to death out of a sense of fraudulence and failure.

A black comedy ensued. After mobbed memorial services in New York and Boston, Marianna took the body to Lebanon for burial, as Gibran had wished. In Beirut, the casket was opened, and the minister of education pinned a medal on Gibran's chest. Then began the eighty-mile trek to Bsharri, with an honor guard of three hundred. The road was lined with townspeople, Jean and Kahlil Gibran report in their biography: "Young men in native dress brandished swords and dancing women scattered perfume and flowers before the hearse." Gibran's will dictated that Marianna be given his money; Haskell his manuscripts and paintings; and the town of Bsharri all future American royalties on the books published during his lifetime. This last provision produced so many difficulties that it was cited in an American textbook on copyright law. Who, among the people in Bsharri, was going to decide how this money would be distributed?

"Age-old feuds gained new fury, and at least two deaths resulted." Meanwhile, the funds were disappearing. The situation became such a scandal that in 1967 Knopf started withholding the royalties, which at that point amounted to three hundred thousand dollars a year. Marianna eventually sued Bsharri to win control of the copyrights; the judgment went to the Bsharrians, though, in the process, their legacy was substantially reduced, because the fee that their Lebanese-American lawyer had negotiated with them was an astonishing twenty-five per cent of future royalties. The Bsharrians then sued the lawyer, and they lost. In the end, the Lebanese government intervened and, reportedly, put Gibran's estate to rights. His coffin rests in a deconsecrated monastery—Mar Sarkis, in Bsharri—that he chose for that purpose. Robin Waterfield has visited it. He says that he found a crack in the cover of the casket and that, when he looked into it, he saw straight through to the back—in other words, that the body had disappeared. This seems a fitting, if sad, conclusion. As Gibran's mother said, "Hush. He's not here."