

the
PROPHET

Kahlil Gibran



*A new annotated edition
introduced and edited by*

SUHEIL BUSHRUI



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INTRODUCTION

Biography

Gibran Khalil Gibran was born in Bisharri, Lebanon on 6 January 1883. At the age of twelve he emigrated with his mother, half-brother and two younger sisters to the United States, where his first name was dropped and the spelling of 'Khalil' was changed to 'Kahlil' to suit American pronunciation. Once the family had settled in Boston, he returned to Lebanon for two years to study, and for a brief visit four years later in 1902, but otherwise never saw his native land again. Of the four members of his family in Boston, three fell untimely victims to tuberculosis; only Mariana, his first sister, survived beyond 1903 and would eventually outlive Kahlil himself.

While at school, Gibran developed a keen interest in literature and showed a flair for painting and drawing. At the age of twenty-two, his artistic talents were recognized by Fred Holland Day, a well-known Boston photographer, who organized an exhibition of his paintings. Another exhibition followed at the Cambridge School, whose owner and headmistress, Mary Haskell, subsequently became Gibran's confidante, patron and benefactor.*

Up to this point Gibran's writings had been little more than sketches, some of which provided material for later works. As yet

* The relationship between Gibran and Mary Haskell is exceptionally well documented in two overlapping but by no means identical books (Hilu 1972 and Otto 1963). These two books are based on the correspondence between Kahlil Gibran and Mary Haskell, and Mary Haskell's memoirs as recorded in her journal.

not completely fluent in the English language, he began writing for an Arabic newspaper in Boston, and in 1905 his first book, *Al-Musiqaḥ* (*Music*), was published. This was followed by *Ara'is al-Muruḥ* (*Nymphs of the Valley*), in which he was fiercely critical of Church and State. He became known as something of a rebel, a reputation he confirmed with *Al-Arwah al-Mutamarridah* (*Spirits Rebellious*) in 1908.

The next two years were spent as a student at the Académie Julien and the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, thanks to the generous sponsorship of Mary Haskell. In Paris he met the sculptor Auguste Rodin, who is said to have compared Gibran's work to that of William Blake – Gibran's fellow visionary in mode of thought, views on Church and State, grace of spirit and artistic style. Gibran's subsequent paintings and drawings contain many echoes of both Blake and Rodin, and Blake's influence pervades his writings.

Whilst in Paris he sketched portraits of a number of eminent people, including Rodin himself, the composer Claude Debussy, the actress Sarah Bernhardt and the poet W.B. Yeats. A particularly indelible impression was left on Gibran by another who sat for him while visiting the United States: 'Abdu'l-Bahá, son of the founder of the Bahá'í Faith. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's message celebrated the power and efficacy of an all-embracing unity. He emphasized the need to reconcile opposites, create harmony, and recognize the complementary values of each entity. It was this vision of unity in diversity that captured Gibran's thinking and philosophy. The influence of 'Abdu'l-Bahá on Gibran has been estimated in Susan Reynolds' interesting paper in which she states:

Alongside the influence of the writers and philosophers from whom Gibran drew insight and inspiration, there was another and equally significant one without which neither *The Prophet* (1923) nor *Jesus, the Son of Man* (1928) could have been written – certainly not in the form in which we now have them. It proceeded from yet

another in the series of distinguished figures whom Gibran immortalized in a portrait, and perhaps the greatest of them all: 'Abdu'l-Bahá.*

Gibran said of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 'For the first time I saw form noble enough to be a receptacle for the Holy Spirit';† and years later Gibran stated that 'Abdu'l-Bahá had provided a model for his *Jesus, the Son of Man*.‡ On his return to Boston, Gibran proposed marriage to Mary Haskell, who was ten years his senior. She declined the offer, but remained his lifelong friend and collaborator.

In 1912, Gibran moved to New York on the advice of his friend and fellow Lebanese émigré writer Ameen Rihani, and rented a studio which he called 'The Hermitage'. The same year saw the publication of his *Al-Ajninal al-Mutakassirah* (*The Broken Wings*), a semi-autobiographical tale of unrequited passion. *Dam'ah wa'Ibtisamah* (*A Tear and a Smile*), a collection of prose poems, followed in 1914. Around this time Gibran began corresponding with May Ziadah, a young Lebanese writer living in Egypt, and over the next twenty years they formed a unique relationship, a love affair that took place entirely in their letters to one another, without their ever meeting.§

During the war years Gibran consolidated his knowledge of English, and by 1918 he was sufficiently fluent in the language of his adopted country to write and publish his first book in English. This was *The Madman*, a collection of Súfi-style parables. Two other Arabic works, *Al-Mawakib* (*The Procession*) and the powerful *Al-'Awatif* (*The Tempests*), as well as *Twenty Drawings*, a collection of his artwork with an introduction by Alice Raphael,

* Reynolds 2012. See also Bushrui and Jenkins 1998, pp. 9, 252–255.

† Honnol 1982, p. 158.

‡ Gail 1982, p. 228.

§ A number of Gibran's letters to May containing vivid and richly lyrical passages that rank alongside the best of his writing in Arabic have been published in a volume of English translations, *Gibran: Love Letters* (Bushrui and al-Kuzbari, 1995).

preceded the publication of his second book in English, *The Forerunner*, its form being similar to that of *The Madman*.

Soon afterwards Gibran and a group of fellow Arab émigré writers formed *Arrabitah* (the Pen Bond), a literary society that exerted a crucial shaping influence on the renaissance of Arabic literature in the United States. Among the founders was the distinguished Lebanese writer Mikhail Naimy, by now one of Gibran's closest friends.*

The yearning for *wahdat al-wudjud* (unity of being) – the Súfí concept with which *The Prophet* is infused – was encapsulated in Gibran's only play and last major Arabic work, *Iram Dhat al-'Imad* (*Iram, City of Lofty Pillars*). Published in 1921, it was a worthy precursor to *The Prophet* and incorporates many of the metaphors that Gibran was to use so successfully in the latter.† A smaller Arabic work, *Al-Badayi' wa'l-Tarayif* (*Beautiful and Rare Sayings*), followed in 1923, but this was completely overshadowed by the publication in the same year of his third book in English, *The Prophet*.

The success of *The Prophet* was unprecedented and won him universal recognition and acclaim; in America it outsold all other books in the twentieth century except the Bible, a major influence on its style and thought.

After the success of *The Prophet*, Gibran's health greatly deteriorated, but he managed to complete another four books in English: *Sand and Foam* (1926), *The Earth Gods* (1931), *The Wanderer* (published posthumously in 1932), and the finest of his late works, *Jesus, the Son of Man* (1928), a highly original collection of stories about Christ. Gibran died on 10 April 1931, at the age of just forty-eight, the cause of death being diagnosed

* Naimy was one of Gibran's earliest biographers in Arabic and subsequently made his own translation of the book into English (see Naimy 1967). Though not factually reliable, it represents a fascinating insight into the mind and Arabian character of Gibran.

† For further details of *Iram, City of Lofty Pillars*, its dealings with the Súfí concept of *wahdat al-wudjud* (unity of being) and its relationship to *The Prophet*, see Bushrui and Jenkins 1998, pp. 212–216.

as cirrhosis of the liver. His body was taken back to Lebanon and buried in a special tomb in Bisharri. An unfinished work called *The Garden of the Prophet*, which he intended as one of two sequels to *The Prophet*, was completed and published in 1933 by his companion and self-proclaimed disciple and publicist, Barbara Young.

Writing *The Prophet*

By calling his second book in English *The Forerunner*, Gibran appears consciously to have designated it as the precursor of his most important work, *The Prophet*,* which followed it into print. The earlier book, published in 1920, certainly appears to anticipate *The Prophet* in the penultimate line of its final parable, 'The Last Watch', which predicts that 'out of our ashes a mightier love shall rise'. And Gibran himself affirmed that 'there is a sort of promise of *The Prophet* in the farewell of *The Forerunner*'.†

Exactly when Gibran first thought of the idea of *The Prophet* and when he started writing it have long been subjects of conjecture. According to Mary Haskell, he claimed to have in his possession 'the Arabic original of it, in elementary form, that I did when I was sixteen years old',‡ though no such original has ever been traced. In a letter to May Ziadah dated 9 November 1919, he attempted to explain how it evolved:

As for *The Prophet* – this is a book which I thought of writing a thousand years ago, but I did not get any of its chapters down on paper until the end of last year. What can I tell you about this prophet? He is my rebirth and my first baptism, the only thought in me that will make me worthy to stand in the light of the sun. For this prophet had already 'written' me before I attempted to 'write' him,

* Mikhail Naimy, 'A Strange Little Book', in Bushrui and Munro 1970, p. 90.

† Hilu 1972, pp. 386–387.

‡ *Ibid.*, p. 322.

had created me before I created him, and had silently set me on a course to follow him for several thousand leagues before he appeared in front of me to dictate his wishes and inclinations.*

After its publication he wrote again to May:

This book is only a small part of what I have seen and of what I see every day, a small part only of the many things yearning for expression in the silent hearts of men and in their souls.†

There is no documentary evidence to show that Gibran worked on the book before June 1912, when, according to Mary Haskell, he ‘got the first motif for his Island God’ whose ‘Prometheus exile shall be an Island one’.‡ It therefore took at least eleven years to complete, during which time Gibran regularly broke off to write other works. All the while, however, he was rigorously refining and honing *The Prophet*, which was demonstrably closer to his heart than any of his other writings, and which he knew instinctively would be his finest work. He effectively completed it in 1922, but he was plagued with ill health and it was another year before it reached the printers.§

Gibran used Mary Haskell as a consultant on his English writings from the start, when he began writing *The Madman*. She tidied up the punctuation and grammar, and suggested alternative words for greater felicity of sound, on occasion. He looked upon her as a trusted and intelligent friend with a native command of his adopted language, and whose comments were therefore invaluable to him. Mary’s testimony indicates that the literary collaboration started in June 1914,¶ and thereafter he

* Bushrui and al-Kuzbari 1995, p. 23.

† *Ibid.*, p. 73.

‡ Hilu 1972, p. 90.

§ *Ibid.*, p. 401.

¶ *Ibid.*, pp. 193–195.

consulted her on the majority of the parables and poems in *The Madman* and *The Forerunner*, and on many of the sermons in *The Prophet*. The publication of the latter in 1923 marked the end of their collaboration.

Mary's journals contain several references to the 'Commonwealth'* and the 'Counsels'† as the Prophet was provisionally entitled in its early stages; earlier still, Gibran was also referring to it simply as 'My Book'.‡ There were originally to be twenty-one 'Counsels' or sermons, but this was eventually expanded to twenty-six. In March 1918 he read to Mary what she called 'Passage to Men and Women', part of which she wrote down in her journal, and which would later be expanded into Almustafa's sermon on marriage:

Love each other – and
Let your love be as a sea between
The shores of yourselves –
Fill each other's cup – but drink not from
One cup – Give bread to each other –
But share not from the same loaf –
Be each alone in your togetherness§

Gibran began sending Mary the 'Counsels' on which he was working, and she returned them annotated with helpful remarks,¶ as well as greatly encouraging him with her appreciative response. In his letter of 11 June 1918 he wrote to her:

In the 'Counsel' on houses the verb 'breed' was left out in copying. Of course it should read 'the holy spirit breed (or hide) in cells unvisited by sun and air'. And in that same 'Counsel' – how do you like 'and bees build not

* Hilu 1973, pp. 312–313.

† Hilu 1972, p. 303.

‡ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

§ Hilu 1973, p. 310.

¶ Hilu 1972, p. 309.

their hives on mountain peaks' in the place of 'butterflies flutter ... '?*

Gibran finally appears to have begun calling the book *The Prophet* in November 1919.[†] It was a crucial decision, as Mikhail Naimy observes:

The very name 'Prophet' impresses with dignity and inspires reverence. A word said by a man clothed in prophetic majesty carries much more weight and magnitude than when said by a common man. Thus with that one word 'prophet' Gibran the artist raised to the dignity and height of prophecy what Gibran the poet had to say, even before he said it.[‡]

By May 1920, Gibran had plotted an overall scenario for *The Prophet*:

In a city between the plains and the sea, where ships come in and where flocks graze in the fields behind the city, there wanders about the fields and somewhat among the people, a man – poet, seer, prophet – who loves them and whom they love – but there is an aloneness after all about him. They are glad to hear him talk, they feel in him a beauty and a sweetness; ... young women who are attracted by his gentleness do not quite venture to fall in love with him. And while the people count him as part of the city, and like it that he is there and that he talks with their children in the fields, there is a consciousness that this is all temporary – that someday he will go. And one day out of the blue horizon a ship comes towards the city and somehow everyone knows, though nothing is told,

* Otto 1963, p. 579.

† Hilu 1972, p. 322.

‡ Naimy 1967, p. 186.

that the ship is for the hermit poet. And now that they are going to lose him, the feeling of what he is in their life comes to them and they crowd down to the shore, and he stands and talks with them. And one says, 'Speak to us of Friendship' – and so on. And he speaks of these things. It is what he says about them that I have been writing. And when he has ended, he enters the ship and the ship sails into the mist.

And at the end one says to the poet, 'Tell us about God,' and he says, 'Of him have I been speaking in everything.' I am not trying to write poetry. I am trying to express thoughts. I want the rhythm and the words right so that they shan't be noticed but shall just sink in like water into cloth; and the thought be the thing that registers. But we must always remember too the man who is speaking. It is what that special personality says to the people he knows, and he has to speak in his own way.*

In September Gibran showed Mary the first draft of the prologue, and she wrote down as much as she could recall, some of which is very close to the final version:

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

Every day, upon the high hills without the city walls, he stood searching the distances for his ship. But the ship came not; and his heart grew heavy within him, for deep was the land of his memories and the dwelling-place of his greater desires. Then, in the twelfth year, on the seventh day of which is the month of awakening, came the ship of purple sails, and he descended the hills to go. But he could not go without pain, for all the self that he left in the city,

* Otto 1963, p. 567.

and for his heart made sweet there with hunger and thirst. 'Fain would I take with me all that is here.' Yet, 'A voice cannot carry with it the tongue and the life that gave it wings. Alone it must seek the — and alone and without his nest shall the eagle fly across the sun.'

Now when he had descended from the hill, he turned again towards the sea and saw his ship approaching the harbour. And he beheld her mariners, the men of his own land, upon her bow ... he hails them, riders of the tides, and says, 'How often have you sailed in my dreams, and now you are come at this awakening, which is my deeper dream. Ready am I to go, and my eagerness, with sails full set, awaits the time ... But another breath will I breathe in this air then shall I go with 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.'

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

That much, Kahlil has written, and planned the rest. How Almustafa when he comes down from the hill whence he saw the ship, will find all the city meeting him, for now they know, and they know they love him; and they follow him, and ask him to counsel them, one after another questioning him; and to all of them he delivers his counsel; and then they go with him to the ship; and he speaks his farewell; and it is ended.*

A week later there was more:

* Hilu 1972, pp. 343–344. In Gibran's final text the word left blank in this section (Mary's memory presumably failing her for once) is 'ether'.

He brought the third writing on the setting for *The Prophet*. How, as he walked on, he saw afar the men and women leaving their fields and vineyards and hastening towards the gates of the city. And he heard many voices calling his name, and men shouting one to another from field to field telling of the return 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, and to him who has stopped the wheel of his winepress. Shall my heart be as a fruit-laden tree, that I may — and shall my desires become a fountain, that I may fill their cups? Am I a harp that the hand of the Mighty may touch me, and a flute that His breath may blow through me? A seeker of silences am I. And what treasures have I found in silences that I may dispense with confidence? If this is the day of my harvest, in what unknown fields have I sowed the seed, and in what unremembered seasons? If this be indeed the hour in which I shall lift up my lantern, it is not my own flame that shall burn therein. Empty and cold shall I raise my lantern, and the guardian of the night shall fill it with oil, and he shall light it also.' This he said in words. But more remained in his heart unsaid. For he himself could not speak his innermost silence.

And when he entered into the city, all the people came together to meet him and they cried unto him as with one voice. Then the elders of the city stood forth and said unto him, '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 have you been among us, and not a guest, but our son and our beloved. Suffer not yet our hearts to hunger for your face.' And the priests and the priestesses said unto him, 'Let not the waves of the sea separate us now. You have walked among us, a spirit, and your shadow has been a light upon our faces. Let not the

days you have passed in our midst become a memory that feeds upon the heart. Much have we loved you. But speechless was our love, and with veils has it been veiled. Now does it cry aloud unto you, and would be revealed before you. And ever has it been that love knows not its own depth until the day of separation.’

And many others came also and entreated him; and he answered not, but bent his head. And those who stood near him beheld his tears falling upon his breast.

‘It was written down in a hurry,’ said Kahlil. As we got to the text, we began at once to condense the connecting phrases. We always have a fine time over a manuscript, because one can talk to Kahlil as to one’s self. There is no pride to guard, and no treasuring of phrases. He likes to work on and on and over and over until the thing is SAID. Sometimes we have to leave a thing to ripen in Kahlil. Never before has he written so systematically on an English book. So we are doing more than usual. Usually, he keeps things to show me, until he has completed them. But this Prophet prologue he brings in its first or second writing down. He says the final form comes quicker than when he prunes it alone. Our method is, first, Kahlil reads it through aloud to me. Then we look together at the text, and if we come to a bit that I question, we stop until the question is settled.

He knows more English than any of us, for he is conscious of the bony structure of the language, its solar system. And he creates English.

‘I have been teaching myself to prune and to try for consciousness of structure. And this consciousness of structure is fundamental.’*

At this stage, Gibran appeared confident that the book would be published the following month, October 1920.[†] However,

* Hilu 1973, pp. 347–349. The phrase left incomplete by Mary became ‘that I may gather and give unto them’.

† Hilu 1972, p. 250.

another year went by, and Almustafa's farewell was first heard by Mary in August 1921.* Still not satisfied that the book was complete, early in 1922 Gibran read her another sermon he had written, *On Pleasure*; together they 'changed a phrase or two for rhythm and closeness of fit'.† In May they worked on the 'final rhythmic forms' of *The Prophet* as well as the spacing,‡ and he thought of another sermon, part of which was incorporated into the one on children:

I think I'm going to write a 'Counsel' on receiving – everybody has something he wants to give – and so often no one will take. I may have a house and invite people to it. They will come and accept my house, my food, and my thoughts even, but not my love. And yet love is what most of us most want to give. People often say women want to be loved. But they really want much more. Many women want to bear children; and their very being wants to give children life. She often desires men just as a key to the child that is in her to give life to.§

After this, few changes or additions were made, and *The Prophet* finally went to press. Mary went over the galley proofs in April 1923, and of the corrections she made, Gibran wrote:

Your blessed touch makes every page dear to me. The punctuations, the added spaces, the change of expressions in some places, the changing of 'Buts' to 'Ands' – all these things are just right. The one thing which I thought a great deal about, and could not see, was the rearrangement of paragraphs in Love, Marriage, Children, Giving and Clothes. I tried to reread them in

* *Ibid.*, p. 362.

† *Ibid.*, p. 368.

‡ *Ibid.*, pp. 381–384.

§ *Ibid.*, p. 386.

the new way, and somehow they seemed rather strange to my ear.*

At the end of September *The Prophet* was published. On receiving a copy, Mary was the first to recognize that its appeal would be universal. She was also aware that their association had now reached its climax. Coloured by emotion as her words were, Mary's ecstatic letter of 2 October 1923 nevertheless forecasts quite accurately the feelings of many among those millions who have been touched by the book since its publication:

Beloved Kahlil, *The Prophet* came today, and it did more than realize my hopes. For it seemed in its compacted form to open further new doors of desire and imagination in me, and to create about itself the universe in nimbus, so that I read it as the centre of things. The format is excellent, and lets the ideas and the verse flow quite unhampered. The pictures make my heart jump when I see them. They are beautifully done. I like the book altogether in style.

And the text is more beautiful, nearer, more revealing, more marvellous in conveying Reality and in sweetening consciousness – than ever. The English, the style, the wording, the music – is exquisite, Kahlil – just sheerly beautiful ... This book will be held as one of 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.

It is the most loving book ever written. And it is because you are the greatest lover, who ever wrote.†

* Otto 1963, pp. 644–645.

† *Ibid.*, pp. 648–649.

THE PROPHEET

*The twelve illustrations in this volume are reproduced
from original drawings by the author*



The Coming of the Ship



Almustafa, the chosen and the beloved, who was a
dawn unto his own day, had waited twelve years in
the city of Orphalese for a 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 that 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 crystallize 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 it must 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 on 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 backward,

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 midfurrow, 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 like 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.

And ever has it been that love knows not its own depth
until the hour of separation.

And others came also and entreated him. But he
answered them not. He only bent his head; and
those who stood near saw tears falling upon his
breast.

And he and the people proceeded towards the great
square before the temple.

And there came out of the sanctuary a woman whose
name was Almitra. And she was a seeress.

And he looked upon her with exceeding tenderness,
for it was she who had first sought and believed in
him when he had been but a day in their city.

And she hailed him, saying:
Prophet of God, in quest of the uttermost, long have
 you searched the distances for your ship.
And now your ship has come, and you must needs go.
Deep is your longing for the land of your memories
 and the dwelling place of your greater desires;
 and our love would not bind you nor our needs
 hold you.
Yet we ask ere you leave us, that you speak to us and
 give us of your truth.
And we will give it unto our children, and they unto
 their children, and it shall not perish.
In your aloneness you have watched with our days,
 and in your wakefulness you have listened to the
 weeping and the laughter of our sleep.
Now therefore disclose us to ourselves, and tell us all
 that has been shown you of that which is between
 birth and death.

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



‘Almustafa’ heralds the central figure of *The Prophet* as a man of inner purity; in addition to its standard meaning of ‘the chosen one’, the word is derived from the Arabic *safa* which is regarded by some scholars as the basis for the term ‘Súfi’. The name Almustafa implies the possession of spiritual knowledge and divine characteristics and also represents the Western concept of the Universal Man as well as the concept of *al-Insan al-Kamil*/the Perfect Man.

Many of the symbols employed by Gibran throughout *The Prophet* (see p. li for an extended list) occur in this introductory passage, such as the mention of the sea – the Great Spirit or the Greater Self,

‘ether’ – freedom, ‘a boundless drop to a boundless ocean’ – the Self yearning to return to its source, ‘tree ... fountain’ – fertility and giving. The ‘lantern’ is the self that is full of awareness and therefore receptive to inspiration. One of the most universal of symbols, the lantern or lamp represents – among other things – life, immortality, the light of divinity, wisdom, the intellect, guidance, transitory individual existence, good works and remembrance.

The reference to dawn – the source of knowledge – in the second line is also crucial. In Christianity, the dawn symbolizes the resurrection and the advent of the Messiah bringing light into the world and thus introduces Almustafa as a comparable individual; indeed, he shares many characteristics with the figure of Christ that Gibran was later to portray in *Jesus, the Son of Man*. Although it is tempting to see Almustafa as a personification of Kahlil Gibran himself in his compassion for humanity and great wisdom, Gibran was keen to stress that he did not consider himself to be this pure being; as discussed in the biography *Kahlil Gibran: Man and Poet*, Gibran several times declared to Mary Haskell when working with her that ‘this is not I, but The Prophet’.* Furthermore, Naimy confirmed that Gibran never once intended to ‘parade before men in a prophetic mantle’.† Similarly, critics have commonly made rather too facile an equation of Orphalese with America. Almitra has likewise been taken as Mary Haskell and the ‘isle of his birth’ as Lebanon, but the latter rather signifies the unborn state, while Naimy suggests ‘the bosom of the All-Spirit, or the centre of Life Universal’.‡

‘Ielool’ is September, the month of mellowness, the beginning of autumn, which symbolizes maturity, ripeness, culmination, the end of one cycle and the beginning of another. It is interesting to note that if one compares the published edition with the images of the original manuscript as in William Shehadi’s *Kahlil Gibran: a Prophet in the Making*,§ Gibran substituted this for the original ‘Nissan’ – the month of April and beginning of spring. It seems thus that Gibran wished to emphasize the harvest of Almustafa’s wisdom and experience in the autumn of his life; similarly, it suggests a desire to place as much focus on reflecting on what we can learn from this life as on the dawning of our immortality and place with God.

* Bushrui and Jenkins 1998, p. 212.

† Naimy 1967, p. 193.

‡ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

§ Shehadi 1991, p. 159.