

# Kahlil Gibran: Poet of the Ecology of Life

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*All things in this creation exist within you, and all things in you exist in creation; there is no border between you and the closest things, and there is no distance between you and the farthest things, and all things, from the lowest to the loftiest, from the smallest to the greatest, are within you as equal things. In one atom are found all the elements of the earth; in one motion of the mind are found the motions of all the laws of existence; in one drop of water are found the secrets of all the endless oceans; in one aspect of you are found all the aspects of existence.*

- Kahlil Gibran \*

The Lebanese poet and philosopher Kahlil Gibran (1883-1931), best known as the author of *The Prophet*, is widely regarded as a man of the East who brought a much needed element of spirituality to the West. But he was far more than that. Brought up in a breathtakingly beautiful countryside and steeped in a tradition that synthesized the great legends of Adonis and Astarte – the gods that were an integral part of the natural world of the imagination – he became one of the most environmentally aware writers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. He saw the body of the world as an outward manifestation of the divine essence, not as an object to be manipulated, rearranged and remade according to material desires and whims. Writing as he was in an age when Darwinism was at its height, Gibran may in many ways be seen as offering a positive counterpoise to the Darwinian metaphor.

The most powerful imagery in Gibran's writings was borrowed from nature, and he continually contrasted the natural world with the human world. He recognized in nature a life that influences the kinship of all men, and its rich store of symbols provided both the emotional and intellectual apparatus of his poetry. He stressed the sanctity of nature and our duty to protect and ennoble it, sanctify it, celebrate it, learn from it and commune with it, not necessarily to explain it but to understand it and reveal it in action and thought, and above all in poetry and the arts. His work bears the influence not only of nature poets such as Wordsworth, Keats and Blake, but of the American Transcendentalists Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman.

Gibran's depiction of nature represented a new departure in Arabic literature. In classical Arabic poetry, influenced by the desert way of life, nature was viewed as a force to be reckoned with; and when the Arabs moved to the more fertile regions of the north and across North Africa to Arab Spain, nature was treated as an ornament that was descriptive. Gibran, however, saw nature as invested with a life of its own with spiritual, emotional and intellectual dimensions; for him it was the link that binds us one to another, within it flowing a divine energy which is the perfect expression of the internal rhythm of all being. To commune with it was for Gibran akin to a religious experience. He regarded human life and the life of nature as complementary, sustaining each other in perfect symbiosis, which is the message of Shakespeare in *The Tempest*.

A profound appreciation and love of nature is evident throughout Gibran's Arabic writings. The following examples are typical:

*Nature reaches out to us with welcoming arms, and bids us enjoy her beauty; but we dread her silence and rush into the crowded cities, there to huddle like sheep fleeing from a ferocious wolf.*

*Every thing [sic] in nature bespeaks the mother. The sun is the mother of the earth and gives it its nourishment of heat; it never leaves the universe at night until it has put the earth to sleep to the song of the sea and the hymn of the birds and brooks. And this earth is the mother of trees and flowers. It produces them, nurses them, and weans them. The trees and flowers become kind mothers of their great fruits and seeds. And the mother, the prototype of all existence, is the eternal spirit, full of beauty and love.*

The landscape of Gibran's childhood and youth and of his early poetry was the village of Bisharri, his birthplace, and the country immediately surrounding it, dominated by the Holy Cedar Grove. After his emigration to America at the age of 11, this part of Lebanon became the object of his yearning and a constant source of his inspiration:

*...And I remember, too, the beautiful spot in North Lebanon. Every time I close my eyes I see those valleys full of magic and dignity and those mountains covered with glory and greatness trying to reach the sky.*

The country around Bisharri fascinated Gibran's mind and stirred his imagination: the ancient Cedars, the magnificent valley of Qadisha; the myriad streams, rivulets and waterfalls; in the background, the awe-inspiring mountains of Sannin and Famm al-Mizab. These were the scenes that first fired the mind of the poet. Bisharri seemed to have been left untouched by the forces which were robbing America of her countryside:

*We who live amid the excitements of the city know nothing of the life of the mountain villagers. We are swept into the current of urban existence, until we forget the peaceful rhythms of simple country life, which smiles in the spring, toils in the summer, reaps in autumn, rests in winter, imitating nature in all her cycles. We are wealthier than the villagers in silver or gold, but they are richer in spirit. What we sow we reap not; they reap what they sow. We are slaves of gain, and they the children of contentment. Our draught from the cup of life is mixed with bitterness and despair, fear and weariness; but they drink the pure nectar of life's fulfillment.*

Reminiscences of Bisharri and the Lebanese countryside fill Gibran's letters and conversations with friends, and color all his work. Among the mountains, hills, streams, waterfalls and little coves, he rejoiced in "savoring the delights of freedom" that stimulated his boyish dreams and reveries. For him that was a period "when man's teacher is nature, and humanity is his book and life is his school." Everything revealed a message: "the distant caves echoed their songs of praise and victory"; mist, cloud, earth, snow, bird, beast, flower, tree and leaf "sent forth the Word of Life." He was thus invited to Life's splendid feast where "the villages reposing in peace and tranquillity upon the shoulders of the valley rise from their slumbers; church bells fill the air with their summons to morning prayer. And from the caverns echo the chimes as if all Nature joins in reverent prayer."

Trees, and particularly the cedars of Lebanon, had a special place in Gibran's heart. In his long Arabic poem *The Procession*, he uses the image of the tree to suggest the peaceful continuity of nature, contrasted with the noisy activity of urban living. "There is no confusion in the forest," he wrote, adding that if he were allowed the choice, all his days would be spent among the trees of his native land. Spring reminded him that "there is no death in Nature," and that though the month of April might vanish, "gifts of Joy do not depart."

In another of his Arabic pieces entitled, "Before the Throne of Beauty," the poet pictures himself as having "fled from the multitude" and taken refuge in a quiet valley, where he communes with himself. When at last his mind "flies from the prison of matter to the realm of imagining," he is rewarded with the vision of "a nymph of paradise," who announces that she is "daughter of the forests," a "symbol of Nature:"

*My God state is sustained by the beauty you behold wheresoever you lift your eyes; a beauty which is Nature in all her forms. A beauty which is the beginning of the shepherd's happiness as he stands among the hills; and the villager's in his fields; and of the wandering tribes between mountain and plain. A beauty which is a stepping-stone for the wise to the throne of the living Truth.*

Some of Gibran's Arabic works go as far as to anticipate the messages and themes of modern-day environmental groups such as the Friends of the Earth:

*I heard the brook lamenting like a widow mourning her dead child and I asked, "Why do you weep, my pure brook?" And the brook replied, "Because I am compelled to go to the city where Man contemns me and spurns me for stronger drinks and makes of me a scavenger for his offal, pollutes my purity, and turns my goodness to filth."*

*And I heard the birds grieving, and I asked, "Why do you cry, my beautiful birds?" And one of them flew near, and perched at the tip of a branch and said, "The sons of Adam will soon come into this field with their deadly weapons*

*and make war upon us as if we were their mortal enemies. We are now taking leave of one another, for we know not which of us will escape the wrath of Man. Death follows us wherever we go."*

*Now the sun rose from behind the mountain peaks and gilded the treetops with coronals. I look upon this beauty and asked myself, "Why must Man destroy what Nature has built?"*

Among Gibran's mature works, especially those in English, it is of course *The Prophet* that stands out. And here again, in the sermon on "Eating and Drinking," we find the voice of the ecologist and, indeed, the animal lover that was Kahlil Gibran:

*Would that you could live on the fragrance of the earth, and like an air plant be sustained by the light.*

*But since you must kill to eat, and rob the newly born of its mother's milk to quench your thirst, let it be an act of worship.*

*And let your board stand an altar on which the pure and the innocent of the forest and plain are sacrificed for that which is purer and still more innocent in man.*

...

*And when you crush an apple with your teeth, say to it in your heart,  
"Your seeds shall live in my body,  
And the buds of your tomorrow shall blossom in my heart,  
And your fragrance shall be my breath,  
And together we shall rejoice through all the seasons."*

To study Gibran and to observe the cumulative effect of his oeuvre is to recognize him as a powerful advocate of the unity of being and of universal love on the one hand, and as the child of nature and creation par excellence on the other. And in his posthumous works written in English, the environmental message of Gibran reaches its peak, notably in the gentle compassion of *The Wanderer*:

*Said a tree to a man, "My roots are in the deep red earth, and I shall give you of my fruit."*

*And the man said to the tree, "How alike we are. My roots are also deep in the red earth. And the red earth gives you power to bestow upon me of your fruit, and the red earth teaches me to receive from you with thanksgiving."*

And finally in his unfinished work, *The Garden of the Prophet*, which, had he completed it, might perhaps have been a jewel even to outshine *The Prophet*, to which it was intended as a sequel:

*And then Mannus, the inquisitive disciple, looked about him and he saw plants in flower cleaving unto the sycamore-tree.*

*And he said: "Behold the parasites, Master. What say you of them? They are thieves with weary eyelids who steal the light from the steadfast children of the sun, and make fair of the sap that runneth into their branches and their leaves."*

*And he answered him saying: "My friend, we are all parasites. We who labor to turn the sod into pulsing life are not above those who receive life directly from the sod without knowing the sod.*

*"Shall a mother say to her child: 'I give you back to the forest, which is your greater mother, for you weary me, heart and hand'?"*

*"Or shall the singer rebuke his own song, saying: 'Return now to the cave of echoes from whence you came, for your voice consumes my breath'?"*

*"And shall the shepherd say to his yearling: 'I have no pasture whereunto I may lead you; therefore be cut off and become a sacrifice for this cause'?"*

*"Nay, my friend, all these things are answered even before they are asked, and like your dreams, are fulfilled ere you sleep."*

*"We live upon one another according to the law, ancient and timeless. Let us live thus in loving-kindness. We seek one another in our aloneness, and we walk the road when we have no hearth to sit beside."*

*"My friends and brothers, the wider road is your fellow-man."*

*"These plants that live upon the tree draw the milk of the earth in the sweet stillness of night, and the earth in her tranquil dreaming sucks at the breast of the sun."*

*"And the sun, even as you and I and all there is, sits in equal honor at the banquet of the Prince whose door is always open and whose board is always spread."*

*"Mannus, my friend, all there is lives always upon all there is; and all there is lives in the faith, shoreless, upon the bounty of the Most High."*

Here, more than in any of his other works, Gibran establishes the true relationship between man and nature. With his view of heaven in a dewdrop and the phenomenon of the stars themselves speaking to him the prophet of Gibran's Garden is the ideal man in the ideal world: a world in which nature is both his mother and his sister. ❧

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