Modernity and Prophetic Speech: The Ethical as the Impossible in the Post-Religious Vision of Kahlil Gibran

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Abstract
This paper argues that an essential aspect of the bilingual oeuvre of Kahlil Gibran (1883-1931), the eminent Arab-American writer, lies in reinventing the religious in and against modernity by reclaiming its Abrahamic, prophetic mode of speech as a poetic form of enunciation. This literary and ethical enterprise is at once post-religious and post-Nietzschean in that it re-imagines the notion of God, in evolutionist terms, as a horizontal form of transcendence beyond the vertical metaphysics of creation, fatherhood and morality. This horizontalization of transcendence reclaims religion, with a particular focus on Islamic-Sufi concepts, beyond monotheism’s worldview and eschatology. Hence the post in post-religious. Gibran’s re-imagining, with and “after” Nietzsche, of God, the self and the world is much occasioned by modernity as it seeks to interrogate and disrupt its calculative and identitarian reason. Ultimately, this Gibranian prophetic vision is a poetic attempt to posit the impossible—not the non-possible, but the utmost horizon of the possible—as an ethical alternative both to traditional morality and to modernity’s calculative and rationalist reason.

Keywords
Kahlil Gibran, prophetic speech, the Abrahamic, modernity, the post-religious poet, Nietzsche, the ethical, the impossible
Everything still remains open after Nietzsche.
—Paul Ricoeur
“Religion, Atheism, and Faith”

The prophet is a normative device of an exceptional kind. It is the last of the Abrahamic inventions, after those of Adam, God the Creator, the Created World, the Sacred Books and the Thereafter . . . , etc. This is not merely a question of religion. Rather, it concerns a wide-ranging spiritual apparatus of legislation invented by peoples of the ancient Middle East who were, by virtue of it, transformed into nomadic and open spiritual groups. The descendants of Abraham insist that the normative validity of this apparatus is universalizable, because it is a form of life that remains habitable.

—Fethi Meskini
Al-Imân al-Hurr aw Mâ Ba’da al-Milla:
Mabâhîth fi Falsafat al-Dîn

“When speech becomes prophetic,” writes Maurice Blanchot, “it is not the future that is given, it is the present that is given away, and with it any possibility of a firm, stable, lasting presence” (79). This prophetic speech is essentially Abrahamic. The Abrahamic as a concept names the “unifying and divisive” (Bakhos 1) root of the three monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—without collapsing their marked differences into a monolithic notion of religion. Abraham is the spiritual and pioneering Father to whom each monotheism differently traces its origin, “the true Urmonotheismus” (Bakhos 1). What interests me here is not the Abrahamic perse, nor the communalities or differences between the three monotheistic religions, but the prophetic mode of speech as a modern literary trope, in Gibran, that bears the indelible stamp of the Abrahamic. “The word ‘prophet’—borrowed from the Greek to designate a condition foreign to Greek culture—would deceive us if it invited us to make the nabi the one who speaks the future” (Blanchot 79). This Abrahamic prophecy—which disrupts time and history rather than foresees the future, hence Blanchot’s contention that it “announces an impossible future”—reveals the word of God, the One, the wholly Other, the Infinite (79). The space of transcendence peculiar to monotheism in its different manifestations enables Abrahamic prophecy and is, in turn, enabled by it. That is to say, this is an Abrahamic mode of transcendence with its own narrative of creation, worldview and mode of articulation—albeit varied and variously interpreted—not a “pagan” or “Hellenic” one, in which prophecy is similarly present but differently operative as inspiration from the gods—Apollo, for

1 All translations from Arabic in this paper are mine unless otherwise noted.
instance, in the case of Epimenides of Crete and iatromantis figures (healer-prophets)—not as revelation. Gibran’s poetic attempt at reinventing the religious should be understood in the Abrahamic, not the Greek, context—convergences between both notwithstanding. The literary and philosophical reinvention of this space of transcendence in modernity, therefore, should not be confused with ideas of the persistence or degeneracy of “the sacred,” of desacralization and disenchantment, to which the Abrahamic “holy” is irreducible.

Why the prophetic, why the Abrahamic, in relation to Kahlil Gibran (1883-1931), or Jubrān Khalīl Jubrān, the name by which he is known in the Arab world? The Arab Mahjari (immigrant) writer and painter is well-known on a global scale for his chef d’oeuvre The Prophet (1923), a book of prose poetry in which Almustafa, the main character, imparts his prophetic wisdom, in the manner of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, on the people of the imaginary city of Orphalese before leaving it. The Prophet, however important it is to Gibran and his readers worldwide, remains one of his several books that articulate, in different ways, his prophetic imagination. This “prophetic register” in which Gibran speaks in most of his work can be discerned in his early Arabic writings. Which is to say that this is an essential element that straddles his Arabic and English writings, despite the stylistic and formal differences

2 See Kingsley 33, 40.
3 “In a letter to Mary Haskell in 1913, he [Gibran] expresses his idea of the difference between the Greeks and the ancient peoples of the Middle East as far as their artistic creations are concerned. For him, Greek art is visual, the other is visionary. The Greek artist lacked the ‘third eye,’ which the Chaldean or the Phoenician or the Egyptian artist possessed. Michelangelo’s David overpowers Dionysius and Apollo; and Astarte or Isis are certainly more powerful than Venus or Minerva” (‘Abd al- Hayy 146; emphasis added).
4 I am here drawing on Emmanuel Levinas’s distinction between the Abrahamic “holy” and the pagan, ancient or modern, “sacred.” The former, linked to “Revelation,” to the Absolute and the Infinite as such, cannot be reduced to the “sorcery” of the latter, to “[t]he ‘other side,’ the reverse or obverse of the Real, Nothingness condensed to Mystery, bubbles of Nothing in things” (Nine Talmudic Readings, 141), in short, to “the desacralization of the sacred,” the latter being merely an “image” of the Absolute (147). For him “a truly desacralized society would be . . . a society in which the impure stratagem of sorcery, spreading everywhere, bringing the sacred to life rather than alienating it, comes to an end. Real desacralization would attempt positively to separate the true from appearance, maybe even to separate the true from the appearance essentially mixed with the true” (141; emphasis in original).
5 I am speaking of prophecy as a modern literary form or trope, not of Abrahamic prophecy as revealed in the three monotheistic religions. It is precisely as a modern literary form or trope, however, that it retains this Abrahamic particularity, without which it cannot be reinvented in a modern context.
6 For an insightful reading of Gibran’s enterprise as a new beginning in the context of Arab literary modernity, see Adünis 159-214.
between the two. Produced in two languages—although the turn into English occurs later in his career—Gibran’s work has been differently received, valued and evaluated in the two discursive landscapes it inhabits—the Arab and the Euro-American. Because of the disparate horizons of expectations and conditions of readings to which his work has been subject(ed), Gibran is widely seen as a popular sage, for better or worse, in the American context in which he is uncanonized on the one hand, and as a rebellious and innovative writer in the Arab context in which he is deemed one of the most influential pioneers of literary modernity, on the other. This disparity of reception is not, of course, the subject of my paper, but I mention it here to accentuate that his English work, of which I conceive as Arabic literature in English, is not reducible to culturalist readings or appropriations that regard it as essentially “Oriental” and “spiritual” in the (Euro-)American epistemic location, which remains one particular variety, among others, of “one-world thinking.”

Thus, I foreground the prophetic as a modern literary trope that bears the mark of the Abrahamic, that is haunted, so to speak, by the specter of the Abrahamic, because it precedes and exceeds East-West reductive culturalism. Not that the historical, cultural and imaginative location in and against which it is articulated does not matter—of course it does. My point is that the prophetic in Gibran should not be reduced to the pervasive and divisive culturalist logic of symbolic geography.

By looking at Gibran’s literary enterprise as a post-religious attempt to re-invent the religious in a modern context, this paper demonstrates how the Gibranian poet speaks as a post-religious, post-Nietzschean prophet who reclaims and re-activates the Abrahamic, pre-institutional force of religion as disruption, migration, and event. In the historical and discursive context of modernity in which religion’s epistemological validity retreats, in which Nietzsche announces the death of the moral god of Christianity, Gibran’s poet takes it upon himself to reinvent the religious and repurpose it. This reinvention is explored, in the first section, by highlighting the

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7 For more on remembering and activating the “varieties of one-world thinking” as an ethical imperative in the context of World Literature today, see Mufti 5.

8 His English work, and especially The Prophet, has been celebrated and/or critiqued as an emanation of an “exotic” cultural difference essentially consumed, in Euro-America, as re-enchanting “spirituality.” Yet a mystical text such as The Prophet is one that accommodates difference—different linguistic, cultural, religious and philosophical components—in its reinvention and re-enactment of prophetic speech as an Abrahamic mode of enunciation. This accommodation—of Sufism, Nietzscheism, evolutionism and Romanticism—is conditioned by specific worldly circumstances (immigration and exile), crucial discursive (trans)formations (the Arab Nahda or Awakening in the nineteenth century) as well as the context of modernity and imperialism as a whole (the movement and (re)configuration of ideas and concepts over time and across different, real or imagined, cultural geographies).
idea of God as a horizontal form of transcendence, which enables the (im)possibility of radical subjectification. In the second section, the focus is placed on the post-religious as that which, by way of poetry, interrogates modernity’s calculative and instrumental reason. In the third section, the discussion turns to the ways in which Gibran conceives of the ethical beyond the moral realm of good and evil and the eschatological sphere of reward and punishment. The last section of this paper offers an interpretation of Gibran’s one-act play in Arabic, *Iram Dhāt al-‘Imād* (Iram, the City of Lofty Pillars), as an alternative possibility of belonging whereby the spiritual becomes synonymous with a worldly, spatial ethics of belonging beyond place—the city and the nation.

The figure of the Gibrarian poet is not simply a Romantic exile and outsider. Rather, this poet, to invoke Heidegger, is s/he who “attend[s], singing, to the trace of the fugitive gods” (*Poetry* 94), s/he who thinks in terms of what Fethi Meskini calls “al-mughāyara” or “altérance” (his term); that is to say, in the ethical horizon of an “alter-modernity” that consists in the radical possibility of an alternative experience of modernity—which is not necessarily a critique of it.⁹ Attending to the vision of Gibran’s post-religious poet, this prophet of the impossible—not the non-possible, but the utmost edge of the possible—is the concern of this paper.

Proceeding this way, Gibran’s text is explored anew as “the emergent” that “persistently and repeatedly undermine[s] and undo[es] the definitive tendency of the dominant to appropriate [it]” (Spivak 100). This ethical gesture, whose enactment lies in paying a close attention to Gibran’s writings without an *a priori* culturalist or identitarian approach that veils them, grounds and orients my reading of some of his texts in this paper. The corpus of texts upon which I focus include his prose poems “God,” “Night and the Madman,” and “‘The Perfect World’,”¹⁰ published in *The Madman* (1918), his short story “Haflār al-Qubūr” [*The Grave Digger*], published in *al-‘Awāṣif* [*The Tempests*] (1920), two passages in *The Prophet* in which Almustafa reflects on freedom and giving and a one-act play in Arabic, *Iram Dhāt al-‘Imād*, first published in 1921. Of course, this selective reading cannot be exhaustive, but it

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⁹ This is because *altérance*—which we might translate as alternativity—is, unlike alterity—which belongs to the philosophical history of the Same, “a positive mode of birth outside our old selves. Thus, the sole agenda for *altérance* is freedom, but in a very specific sense: *the freedom to be modern in our own way*. The freedom to enact the capacity for modernity as an open horizon for ourselves, or the freedom to be at variance with [*an nughāyir*] the moderns in the method of our undertaking of modernity. In short, *the freedom of modernity as an unprecedented form of virtue* (Meskini, *al-Huwiyya* 213; emphasis added).

¹⁰ The poem’s title was deliberately placed between quotation marks by Gibran.
Re-Inventing God as a Horizontal Form of Transcendence

How does Gibran re-imagine God, the self and the world poetically? What does it mean to speak prophetically as a poet in the context of modernity? And why is poetry that which articulates the prophetic? Let us begin with his prose poem “God,” in which Gibran speaks of God as neither Creator nor Father or Master. In the poem, the speaker tells us that he “ascended the holy mountain” three times to speak “unto God.” In the first instance, he said, “Master, I am thy slave. Thy hidden will is my law and I shall obey thee for ever more” (The Collected 6). In the second, he said, “Creator, I am thy creation. Out of clay thou fashioned me and to thee I owe mine all” (6). And, in the third, he said, “Father, I am thy son. In pity and love thou hast given me birth, and through love and worship I shall inherit thy kingdom” (6). In the three instances, “God made no answer,” but “like a mighty tempest,” “like a thousand swift wings,” and “like the mist that veils the distant hills,” respectively, he “passed away” (6). In other words, God as Master, Creator and Father has died, and this death is a rather quiet, silent death. A noiseless death: God simply made no answer. What dies, crucially, is a certain notion of God, not God as such. More precisely, what dies is the consciousness of God as Master, Creator and Father inside the speaker, in the mind of the speaker, in the history of the speaker as a human self—let us remember that this speaker is the madman, this post-religious poet who takes it upon himself to reinvent his own notion of God. What dies is the past of God, the history of God as Creator, Father, Master, Commander, the god of love, pity and worship, which means that the speaker is no longer the “slave,” the “creation.” and the “son” of God. What is more, the intimation here is that he has never been, for all this transpired “in the ancient days, when the quiver of speech came to [his] lips” (6). The poem, however, enunciated against the specific worldly and historical backdrop of modernity, is an

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11 This poem echoes his reflections on God, the self and the world in his prolific correspondence with Mary Haskell. Those epistolary reflections, however fragmented, bespeak an original attempt to rethink those three fundamental concepts. In a powerful passage, he writes, “God is not the creator of man. God is not the creator of the earth. God is not the ruler of man nor of the earth. God desires man and earth to be like him, and a part of Him. God is growing through His desire, and man and earth, and all there is upon the earth, rise towards God by the power of desire. And desire is the inherent power that changes all things. It is the law and matter of all life.” KG to MH, Jan. 30, 1916, in Beloved Prophet 266.
attempt to re-write a certain past from the standpoint of its emergence in a present where the fundamental notions of God, the self and the world were being radically questioned and transformed. In this context, the poet is re-inventing his own God, that is to say, his own values, by quietly destroying the master-slave, creator-created, father-son relational structure. What kind of structure does this relationship take then?

That a certain conception and history of God die in Gibran, and not the notion of God as such, means that he was not merely “influenced” by Nietzsche but was writing poetically in the horizon of thought that Nietzsche’s Zarathustra opened up: a radical rethinking of the religious by way of reclaiming its prophetic mode of speech. In other words, he was, as a poet, thinking with and after Nietzsche, not reacting to, appropriating or instrumentalizing him. Towards the end of the poem, the speaker tells us that he climbed the mountain again, this time saying, “My God, my aim and my fulfilment; I am thy yesterday and thou art my tomorrow. I am thy root in the earth and thou art my flower in the sky, and together we grow before the face of the sun” (The Collected 6; emphasis added). It is only then that “God leaned over [him], and in [his] ears whispered words of sweetness, and even as the sea that enfoldeth a brook that runneth down to her, he enfolds [him]” (6). Purged of absolute authority and of radical and vertical transcendence, God no longer signifies a divine Fatherhood nor is He, for Gibran, a divine Creator or a Master. Rather, God becomes one’s tomorrow insofar as one is God’s yesterday: this is the form that one’s relationship with God now takes. In other words, as one’s “aim and fulfilment,” as one’s Beyond, God names the future as a form of horizontal transcendence that is temporally (un)fulfillable, “a future never future enough” to borrow a phrase from

12 After Copernicus, Newton, Kant, Hegel, the Romantics, Nietzsche, Darwin and Freud—to name but a few “founders of discursivity” as Foucault would say—the premodern cosmological worldview in which these three fundamental notions were articulated and experienced no longer held sway. This does not mean, of course, that the religious was brushed aside in modernity. The religious, rather, has been reinvented, transformed and articulated anew and multifariously within a modern secular space that compels this reinvention, transformation and re-articulation, but with no complete rupture with the premodern past, now conceived as “mythic.” A compelling fact is that under the discursive relative autonomy of what the moderns call “literature,” the religious is experienced as at once religious and secular (Asad 8-9). More pertinent to my discussion of Gibran here is the role that evolutionism played in the transformation of the notions of “religion” and “belief” in the nineteenth century discourse of the Arab Nahda or Awakening (Elshakry 14-16).

13 Gibran’s encounter with Nietzsche and his Thus Spoke Zarathustra is well-known in the scholarship on Gibran. It is often discussed, however, in terms of “influence,” while my reading of this encounter rethinks it in terms of Gibran’s poetic thinking with and “after” Nietzsche, but from his own worldly and cultural situation.
Levinas (*Totality* 254). This God is not that of theology and metaphysics, that is, the Perfect, Necessary Being and the Prime Mover, but a God who grows and evolves—“together we grow before the face of the sun”—because Gibran conceived of perfection as a limitation.14 And since Life for him is all there is or Being, God’s transcendence is re-imagined as a Beyond within Being, so to speak.15 After Nietzsche and Darwin—or a certain interpretative horizon that Nietzsche and Darwin made possible16—Gibran re-conceives of God as an ever-evolving desiring force the mystical yearning for which has not died. Rather, this mystical yearning, finding its roots in the Sufi embodied concept of *al-shawq* (yearning or longing), is re-appropriated in post-religious, evolutionist terms. This God, furthermore, is not only horizontally transcendent, but spatially immanent as well: “And when I descended to the valleys and the plains,” the speaker tells us, “God was there *also*” (*The Collected* 6; emphasis added). This “also” means that God is *both* the tomorrow of the human self—God as a horizontal form of transcendence—and that which is “there,” that is, everywhere—God as immanence.17

The madman, who announces this new relationship with God, is one of many other figures in whose name Gibran’s prophetic imagination is articulated. The madman, the forerunner, Almustafa (the prophet) and Āmina (The principal Sufi character of his one-act play *Iram Dhāt al-ʿImād*) are Abrahamic post-religious figures who name and reclaim the radicality of religion in its fundamental and pre-

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14 After meeting Rabindranath Tagore in the New York, Gibran wrote to Mary Haskell, “Tagore speaks against nationalism while his work does not show or express a world-consciousness. He is an Indian with all the beauty and charms of India. And though he is sensitive to the blessedness of life, he does not see life as an ever-growing power. God is, for Tagore, a perfect Being. All sophists dwell on the perfection of God. To me, Mary, perfection is a limitation and I cannot conceive perfection anymore I can conceive the end of space and time.” KG to MH, Jan. 3, 1917 (*Beloved* 283; emphasis added).


16 For Gibran, evolution is a biological, historical and metaphorical law: “I am an advocate of the law of evolution and progress [sunnat al-nushūʿ wa al-irtiqāʾ], which, to me, applies to both immaterial and material (sensory) living entities, for it transforms religions and nations to the better as much as it transforms all creatures from the fitting to the fittest” (*The Collected Works in Arabic* I 248). Elsewhere, he writes, “Languages, like everything else, are subject to the law of the survival of the fittest” (320).

For more on the domestication of Darwin and Darwinism in the discourse of the Arab Nahda (Awakening), a discursive space from which Gibran cannot be dissociated, see Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860-1950*.

17 This notion of God as *both* transcendence and immanence, however, is sophisticatedly conceptualized in the Islamic Sufi-philosophy of, *inter alia*, Ibn Arabi (1165-1240) as He/not He (*Hua/ la Hua*). For more on this see Chittick 3-12.
institutional sense of rupture, migration and event. In reclaiming this Abrahamic heritage of prophecy in a modern context, these figures name the (im)possibility of repeating “religion without religion,”¹⁸ as it were, of religion without any theological foundation. As my discussion below demonstrates, religion here is restated as a disruptive force that seeks to demolish the new idols or masks of modernity. Speaking in the name of these prophetic figures, who name an Abrahamic ethical horizon whose universal validity has not been exhausted, Gibran rejuvenates the prophetic as a powerful poetic and aesthetic motif through which the religious and the ethical are radically re-thought in and against modernity.

The madman, residing “outside” the predominant modes of reason, morality, identity and value—for the prophetic speaks always from an Outside¹⁹—begins his discourse by relating how he became a madman: one day he wakes up to find that all his masks, the self-fashioned masks he wore in the past seven lives, were stolen. Walking around the crowded streets and looking for the thieves who stole his masks, he is identified by “a youth standing in a house-top” as a madman. As soon as he looks up, however, “the sun kiss[es] [his] own naked face for the first time” (The Collected 5). Thus, he discovers the nakedness of his face for the first time. Thus he becomes a madman, in that he discovers the capacity to belong to himself without any veiling masks, the capacity to reside and be “outside” the reigning social institutions of reason and identity: madness as event.²⁰ This event is tantamount to what the Sufis call kashf (disclosure), or “unconcealment” in the Heideggerian sense of truth as aletheia.²¹ This event of madness, the discovery of the face that exists beneath and beyond all identitarian and normative veils, epitomizes Gibran’s predominant concern in The Madman: belonging to oneself with no prior identifications or demarcations, belonging as an open horizon of radical subjectification. In this respect, the “Seventh Self” of the madman, reacting against his other six selves that wish to rebel against him with a pre-conceived intention and purpose, declares:

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¹⁸ That is to say, “a thought-provoking genealogy of the possibility and essence of the religious that doesn’t amount to an article of faith. . . . a non-dogmatic doublet of dogma . . .” (Derrida, The Gift 50).

¹⁹ See Blanchot 79-80.

²⁰ For an insightful reading of this parable from an Arab philosophical perspective, see Meskini, al-Kujito 191-96.

²¹ This is the ancient Greek word on whose etymology Heidegger draws in his re-thinking of the concept of “truth” as “unconcealment.” See Pathmarks 146.
How strange that you all would rebel against this man, because each and every one of you has a pre-ordained fate to fulfil. Ah! could I but be like one of you, a self with a determined lot! But I have none, I am the do-nothing self, the one who sits in the dumb, empty nowhere and nowhen, while you are busy re-creating life. Is it you or I, neighbors, who should rebel? *(The Collected* 14-15; emphasis added)

No wonder the second piece in *The Madman* is the one in which God is re-imagined beyond the vertical metaphysics of creation, fatherhood and morality. For only a madman, speaking “in the ancient days” and “before many gods were born” (6), could intervene from the “outside” of history, as it were, from below or behind the history of the gods of morality, authority and value, to announce the arrival of his own God. Retrieving and resuscitating the prophetic as a mode of poetic and ethical intervention, this madman is what Meskini would call an “impossible believer” (*al-Imān* 202), “the other believer who reinvents the notion of God from within and does not consume it from without, nor does s/he borrow it from anyone” (204; emphasis added), who, furthermore, “pursues the heritage of the [Abrahamic] prophets . . . but without founding it on this or that religion” (204).

The madman, furthermore, is one who laughingly buries his “dead selves” (27), and this grave-digging is a recurring metaphor in Gibran, attested, especially, in his powerful piece “Haffār al-Qubūr” [The Grave Digger] *(The Collected Works in Arabic I* 210-14). In it, the night becomes thought’s condition of possibility and the enabling nothingness where “the ghost of the mad god” is the sole thinking horizon of the poet. This mad god ultimately urges the poet to make his vocation the burying of “the piled corpses of the dead around [people’s] houses, courts and temples” (211). In other words, he is asking him to bury the dead values of the self, the law and the holy, which he cannot see because he looks with a “deluded eye” that “sees people shivering in the tempest of life, thinking that they are alive while dead they have been since birth” (211). Which is to say that life for them is still lived according to the dead and their values, not according to themselves, still shivering as they are in front of life’s tempest. It is crucial to point out that it is not the destruction of the self, the law and the holy that is called for here, but the burying of that which is dead “around” them, the burying of that which lost the ethical, normative and spiritual capacity to orient the living. A new life, therefore, must be re-invented and created. Crucially, the tempest is not merely a metaphor of destruction, rupture, radical change and transformation. The tempest is life itself in that it is, for the mad god, the antithesis of death: “the dead shiver in the tempest, while the living march with it running and
only halt when it does” (211). This is the thinking destiny of the poet then: to celebrate life as a relentless tempest, to create the possibility of life by digging graves for that which is dead around people’s houses, courts and temples, to be and think only as a tempest, which is the condition of being in the world insofar as it means thinking it anew and creating it again every time.

The powerful metaphor of grave-digging is usually coupled with that of the night, which becomes the madman’s unattainable self-image in “Night and the Madman.” “I am like three, O Night” (The Collected Works 33), declares the madman time and again. Yet the speaking Night denies him this resemblance and identification, pointing to that which he must yet become and/or overcome. For he, the Night reminds him, still looks backwards at his own large footsteps, shudders before pain and the terrifying song of the abyss, unable as he is to befriend his “monster-self” and become a law unto himself. Gibran’s celebration of and fascination with the night as a metaphor of overcoming, self-becoming and—as evinced in his Arabic prose poem “O Night” (The Collected Works in Arabic I 221-22)—mystical self-disclosure, should be located, hermeneutically, in the context of modernity. To be more precise, it is against a particular modern regime of reason and identity, where one’s personhood is rationalistically predetermined and plainly demarcated in the light of the modern day, so to speak, that the madman conjures up the night as the abyss whose terrifying song the moderns are unable to bear and listen to. In the “destitute time” of modernity, as Heidegger writes in relation to Hölderlin, 22 the abyss of the night—the night as a revealing abyss—consists in the unbearable ordeal of giving oneself one’s law and of building a throne “upon heaps of fallen Gods” (Gibran, The Collected Works 35). The madman, this post-religious poet, is the one who, building this throne, strives to think the “untamed thoughts” of the night and speak its “vast language” (35). This is the poet of destitute times who “attend[s], singing, to the trace of the fugitive gods” (Heidegger, Poetry 94). Only in the night of the modern day can one retrieve the vastness of language and the abyssal, transformative power of thought, which have been tamed, as Gibran’s powerful prose poem “‘The Perfect World’” suggests, by modernity’s calculative and instrumental reason. Against the flattening order of the modern day, the poet invokes the night’s immeasurable capacity to reveal space, that is to say, to reveal his irreducible and immeasurable

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22 “In the age of the world’s night, the abyss of the world must be experienced and endured” (Poetry 92).
soul\textsuperscript{23}: the soul that cannot be reduced to or measured by “recording” and “cataloguing” \textit{(The Collected 47)}.

\textbf{The Post-Religious Interrogation of Modernity’s Calculative Reason}

In ““The Perfect World”,” the madman laments and castigates the mathematical and rationalist order by which human life is preordained, regulated and experienced in modernity. What is initially intriguing here is that the madman’s discourse is addressed to “[the] God of lost souls . . . who [is] lost amongst the gods” (47). What are these gods? And why is God lost amongst these gods? “[H]ear me,” the madman says to this “Gentle Destiny that watchest over us, mad, wandering spirits” (47). “Hear me”: thus is God addressed in modern times, thus addresses the madman, who “dwell[s] in the midst of a perfect race, [he] the most imperfect” (47), his lost God. Amidst the proliferation of the gods, the new idols of modernity: order, perfection and calculative reason, God becomes the \textit{addressee} of the post-religious poet, the madman who speaks from the Outside, who is an outsider to this “perfect world,” the regulated world of the moderns. Yet God can still be addressed insofar as He, in these destitute times, \textit{can only be addressed}. Prophetic speech, as reclaimed by this post-religious poet, is addressed to God, not the other way around. To put it differently, prophetic speech no longer comes from the Outside, but speaks \textit{to the Outside} in that it is—and can be only—a summoning of the trace of this Outside. “Hear me,” says the madman to “[the] God of lost souls”:

I, a human chaos, a nebula of confused elements, I move amongst finished worlds—peoples of complete laws and pure order, whose thoughts are assorted, whose dreams are arranged, and whose visions are enrolled and registered. Their virtues, O God, are measured, their sins are weighed, and even the countless things that pass in the dim twilight of neither sin nor virtue are recorded and catalogued. Here days and nights are divided into seasons of conduct and governed by rules of blameless accuracy. . . . It is a perfect world, a world of consummate excellence, a world of supreme wonders, the ripest fruit in God’s garden, the master-thought of the universe. (47)

\textsuperscript{23} “Yea, we are twin brothers, O, Night; for thou revealest space and I reveal my soul” \textit{(The Collected 35)}. 
The madman’s speech betrays an acute disillusionment with what Heidegger calls *Gestell*, the (en)framing that structures modern technological Being. This calculative and technological regulation of modern life erases any empowering possibility of imperfection, being the essential condition for Life as a “never-finished building.”

For to be human, Gibran firmly believes, is to long insatiably for a greater self—at once desiring more of the self and striving to go beyond it. To long presupposes imperfection, an enabling imperfection, because perfection, according to him, is nothing but a limitation. This is not solely reflective of the primordial longing that defines the human as a potentiality that lies ahead—a longing for “the Greater Sea” (37-38), the absolute desiring and desired Other that always lies beyond the other attainable seas. It concerns the fundamental manner of dwelling in the world: one cannot dwell perfectly; one can truly dwell, to draw on Heidegger again, insofar as one dwells poetically, poetry here being that dwelling which lets dwelling itself be (215), an opening up of Being that *cannot frame or measure* (in calculative terms).

The madman, this outsider who, being an outsider, speaks to the Outside, ends his speech with a rhetorical question that announces the impossible character of being in the modern “perfect world”: “But why should I be here, O God, I a green seed of unfulfilled passion, a mad tempest that seeketh neither east nor west, a bewildered fragment from a burnt planet? Why am I here, O God of lost souls, thou who art lost amongst the gods?” (48). God becomes, in this “perfect world,” the addressee—and the sole addressee—of the post-religious poet. Albeit lost amongst the many new gods that emerged in the modern world, God is invoked as a trace of an Outside that could be reached by way of questioning. This questioning is much more than rhetorical. It points to the fundamental question of being itself: the mode of being that befits the human in this modern world where everything, as the madman poignantly points out, is pre-determined, arranged, demarcated, pigeonholed, catalogued, recorded and numbered. This God, who can only be addressed, is the trace of the Outside whose invocation aims to question and disrupt this modern mode of being. This interrogatory invocation beckons to that which lies outside these “finished worlds,” to the im(possibility) of a world where one can never be reduced to a calculative, rationalist order that eclipses the inaccessible essence of being.

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24 This is Mary Haskell’s phrase, in a reply to a letter of Gibran. MH journal. Feb. 2, 2015 (*Beloved* 230).

25 Note that the word “verse” in Arabic—in the sense of poetic verse—is *bayt*, a word that also means a house or a dwelling. One reads poetry—one experiences the poetic—by inhabiting it, so to speak.
human in the world. This essence, lost with the emergence of the new idols of modernity, is still recoverable and, therefore, must be recovered. It is the post-religious poet who attends to the retrieval of this essence, of that which remains ungraspable and unknowable as such—and in this sense transcendent—in the human being.\footnote{Invoking Derrida in this respect is illuminating: “tut autre est tout autre [every other is wholly or absolutely other],” (The Gift 78). That is, the other as such is irreducible to the Same and the appropriation of the Same. Its essence remains always inaccessible and transcendent: it transcends any thematization or conceptualization.} This poetic retrieval—for only poetry can retrieve the ungraspable and sing it—is possible by way of invoking the lost trace of God insofar as it allows for a mode of being and dwelling that is beyond or “greater” than calculation and “pure order” (47).

The qualifier “greater” is much more than a qualifier here; it represents the kernel of Gibran’s thought: conquering oneself constantly, slaying one’s “burdened selves” (86) in longing to attain larger and freer selves, themselves the premise of yet larger and freer selves. That which is greater is the fundamental concern of The Prophet’s Almustafa, whose name is the most prophetic amongst Gibran’s post-religious poets.\footnote{Almustafa, meaning “the chosen one,” is one of the names of prophet Muhammad. This reclamation of the name attests to a vision that does not merely break with the past but aims to reinvent it in the context of the present. In this respect, it is Jesus for Gibran who represents the epitome of the poet-prophet, “the Poet who is the sovereign of all poets” (The Collected 305) and “the Master Poet” (411).} Almustafa, in effect, represents a “prophetic preacher” of Life who, to draw on Paul Ricoeur, “would speak only of freedom but would never utter a word of prohibition or condemnation” (448). This freedom goes beyond the confines of an a priori belonging to a particular tradition, as implied in Ricoeur’s call for a “prophetic preacher . . . who would be able to make a radical return to the origins of Jewish and Christian faith and, at the same time, make of this return an event which speaks to our own time” (447-48). This is because Gibran, writing in English as an Arab writer, reinvents Islamic and Christian concepts by reclaiming them beyond their discursive and cultural contours. Speaking “with the power and the freedom of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra” (Ricoeur 447), Almustafa goes as far as announcing an impossible dwelling in the world. This impossibility has been readily interpreted as idealism. Yet an Abrahamic, post-religious prophet cannot be a realist. He must herald, he must preach the impossible as the ultimate possibility of freedom. Let us attend to his words:
At the city gate and by your fireside I have seen you prostrate yourself
and worship your own freedom, . . . And my heart bled within me; for
you can only be free when even the desire of seeking freedom becomes
a harness to you, and when you cease to speak of freedom as a goal and
a fulfilment. . . . And how shall you rise beyond your days and nights
unless you break the chains which you at the dawn of your
understanding have fastened around your noon hour? In truth that which
you call freedom is the strongest of these chains, though its links glitter
in the sun and dazzle your eyes. (The Collected 127)

Only a radical freedom that tirelessly questions itself as it enacts itself can combat its
modern fetishization and trivialization. Almustafa is drawing attention to the
conditions of freedom rather than freedom itself. For freedom not to turn into “a
yoke” and “a handcuff” worn by the “freest among you” (127), these conditions must
be radically and constantly interrogated and unchained, to use his metaphor. That is
to say, alertness to the conditions of freedom is the primary condition of freedom as
such, what he calls “greater freedom.” The latter remains a deferred possibility and
can never be an attained actuality; it is realized insofar as it is hopelessly yearned for,
a yearning whose hopelessness lies in relentless self-interrogation. Freedom is
experienced as a paradox, at once a chain and a breaking-free from the chain, an
impossible movement whose condition of possibility is the persistent awareness of
this very paradox. For it must never turn, Almustafa suggests, into a doctrine or an
idol that people worship, into something other than itself, in allusion to its idolization
and instrumentalization in modern politics. The passage ends by pointing out, in a
charming poetic style, that the dialectical relationship between freedom and greater
freedom is characteristic of “all things [which] move within your being in constant
half embrace, the desired and the dreaded, the repugnant and the cherished, the
pursued and that which you would escape” (128). This post-religious poet articulates
this dialectic by deploying the image of light/shadow:

These things move within you as lights and shadows in pairs that cling.
And when the shadow fades and is no more, the light that lingers
becomes a shadow to another light. And thus your freedom when it loses
its fetters becomes itself the fetter of a greater freedom. (128)
Thus spoke Almustafa, preaching the always already “not yet”\(^{28}\) of one’s freedom, its utmost potentiality that should not be confused with an “ideal freedom.” Prophetic speech does not preach ideals: it points to that horizontal space beyond the self that should be the condition of its being and dwelling in the world. Prophetic speech radically questions the present and its conditions of possibility, shaking it up by pronouncing and heralding an impossible future—and therein lies its ethical force. This is what the whole of *The Prophet* is essentially announcing.

The Ethical beyond Reward and Punishment: Giving as Being

The “positive ontology”\(^{29}\) of *The Prophet* resides in a vision that de-transcendentalizes ethics, that is to say, that divorces ethics from the sphere of morality and the horizon of reward and punishment. Almustafa, in this respect, could be described as what Nietzsche’s Zarathustra calls “an esteemer”\(^{59}\), one who gives himself his own good and evil and creates his own values. *The Prophet*, seen from this perspective, is a logical sequel to *The Madman* (1918), *al-‘Awāṣif* (1920), and *The Forerunner* (1920), whose parables and prose poems radically call into question so many old values by way of laying bare the inherent contradictions that inhabit them. In those works, one discerns a glimpse of the post-religious poet’s capacity to reclaim and reinvent the religious and create his own values. Yet it is in *The Prophet* that this poet fully assumes this prophetic role of value-creation, now that the destructive forces of grave-digging and the slaying of one’s burdened selves have been exhausted in the discourses of the poet’s mad god, the madman and the forerunner. In other words, there is no discontinuity here. To be thinking fruitfully as a poet in the horizon of thought that Nietzsche’s Zarathustra made possible, means that one not only annihilates but creates values. And Gibran does so with no (Nietzschean) vengeance or resentment against the god of morality or theology—who either goes mad or dies quietly without anyone reporting the news, so to speak—because the notion of God itself does not die but is reinvented as a horizontal form

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\(^{28}\) I borrow this phrase from Levinas, who uses it in a similar context to describe the insatiability of the primordial strive towards an unnameable Beyond. See Levinas, *Totality* 254, 256.

\(^{29}\) Ricoeur: “Our critique of metaphysics and its search for rational reconciliation must give way to a positive ontology, beyond resentment and accusation. Such a positive ontology consists in an entirely nonethical vision, or what Nietzsche described as ‘the innocence of becoming’ (*die Unschuld des Werdens*). The latter is merely another name for ‘beyond good and evil.’ Of course, this kind of ontology can never become dogmatic, or it will risk falling under its own criticisms” (457).
of transcendence whose name is the greater, larger and freer self. What further distinguishes The Prophet is that there is no antipathy towards the “last men” or “the herd” that Zarathustra loathes. For Almustafa is not Zarathustra, albeit thinking after him. Almustafa, rather, affirms Life insofar as it is a “longing for your giant self [wherein] lies your goodness: and that longing is in all of you” (140).

The de-transcendentalizing of ethics is most apparent in Almustafa’s discourse on giving. Preaching Life as giving, Almustafa dissociates giving from the authority of the giver, much the same way he dissociates God from the absolute authority of vertical transcendence. The ethical here is severed from any transcendental moral discourse. The ethical as such becomes, paradoxically, a non-ethical mode of being that consists of giving as being or being as giving. Almustafa, in response to a rich man who asked him to “speak to us of Giving,” begins by foregrounding self-giving as authentic giving: “[i]t is when you give of yourself that you truly give” (109). He then proceeds to declare that “those who have little and give it all” are “believers in life and the bounty of life” (109). Yet, most importantly, he asserts:

There are those who give and know not pain in giving, nor do they seek joy, nor give with mindfulness of virtue; / They give as in yonder valley the myrtle breathes its fragrance into space. / Through the hands of such as these God speaks, and from behind their eyes He smiles upon the earth. (109)

This is giving in its impossible embodiment, or the gift as the impossible, in that it is possible as a gift, paradoxically, only when the giver ceases to be a source of giving, when the giver is not recognized as giver and the given or the gift is not identified as gift: “See first that you yourself deserve to be a giver, and an instrument of giving. / For in truth it is life that gives unto life—while you, who deem yourself a giver, are but a witness” (110; emphasis added), writes Gibran. No giver means no authority—the authority of the subject who gives—and the centrality of this giving subject is de-centered here, as the giver becomes merely an instrument of giving, a

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30 Here, I am drawing on Derrida’s reflections on giving and the gift: “If there is gift, the given of the gift (that which one gives, that which is given, the gift as given thing or as act of donation) must not come back to the giving (let us not already say to the subject, to the donor). It must not circulate, it must not be exchanged, it must not in any case be exhausted, as a gift, by the process of exchange, by the movement of circulation of the circle in the form of return to the point of departure. . . . It is perhaps in this sense that the gift is the impossible” (Given Time 7; emphasis in original).
sort of Heideggerian “clearing” through which Life as bountiful Giving manifests itself. In other words, the ethical as such is conceived beyond any circuit of exchange, beyond any transcendental discourse of good and evil and reward and punishment. The ethical becomes ontological: to give is to be insofar as being is living. This prophetic speech is thereby announcing an impossible ethicality, one that can only enact itself by effacing itself: “They give as in yonder valley the myrtle breathes its fragrance into space.” In this configuration, God speaks through the hands of those who give unmindful of virtue. Which is to say that one does not ask God to be: God is the giving itself. God does not command but manifests Himself in and as impossible giving: God is giving as such. This view of giving is strikingly reminiscent of Ibn Arabi’s equation of giving with being: “‘an al-jūd ṣadr al-wujūd [in bountiful giving (al-jūd) lies the essence of Being (al-wujūd)]” (268-69), he famously wrote. Almustafa, echoing Ibn Arabi, affirms giving as the essence of Life/Being: “You often say, “I would give, but only to the deserving.” / The trees in your orchard say not so, nor the flocks in your pasture. / They give that they may live, for to withhold is to perish” (110; emphasis added).

Yet Almustafa goes as far as reversing the logic of giving and receiving, because “you are all receivers,” emphasizing the “courage and the confidence, nay the charity, of receiving.”31 Gibran shifts attention from the giver, from the possible hostility and oppression of the giver—his/her self-consciousness as a giver—to the impossible hospitality (openness) of the receiver—being a host—towards the incomprehensibly bountiful Other that is Life. “Assume no weight of gratitude, lest you lay a yoke upon yourself and upon him who gives” (110), says Almustafa, preaching the impersonality of Life as the source of all personal giving, preaching, that is, the self-effacement of the ethical subject if it is to be truly ethical. This impossible ethicality is the hallmark of Almustafa’s prophetic speech.

**Beyond “Spirituality”: The Spiritual as a Worldly Ethics of Belonging**

The impossibility of this prophetic vision lies also in the essential unhomelessness it preaches. This unhomelessness does not imply alienation, nor does it suggest what

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31 This resonates with Gibran’s early Arabic piece of poetic prose “How Bountiful Is Life [Mā Akrama al-Ḥayāt]” (The Collected Works in Arabic II 35-39), in which he poignantly sings and exalts the incomprehensible bounty of Life and laments his incapacity to be comprehensively receptive of and attentive to its magnitude.
Freud calls the *unheimlich* (the uncanny). Rather, it designates a necessary detachment from place, familiarity, repetition, habit, sameness and limitation, emphasizing the spiritual as the imaginative horizon that allows for a mode of dwelling that shakes any stable relationship with place. This unhomeliness, the condition of a dwelling that attends to space rather than place, is essentially prophetic: “Prophetic speech is a wandering speech that returns to the original demand of movement by opposing all stillness, all settling, any taking root that would be rest” (Blanchot 79). The spiritual is that which names this movement. As such, it should not be understood as the antithesis of the earthly or the bodily. The spiritual, for Gibran, names the unity of Being/Life, the unity of body and soul, the unity of sight (*al-bašar*) and insight (*al-bašira*). It names the disclosure of Being in this Life and in this world. The word “spiritual” does not occur in Gibran’s English works; it does, however, in his Arabic writings, and particularly in his one-act play *Iram Dhāt al-ʿImād* (Iram, City of Lofty Pillars), published in 1921. The title of the play is taken from the Qur’an, in which it is described as a city the like of which was never created, to signify a place or, rather, a space of spiritual disclosure. My reflections on the spiritual, which is reclaimed beyond any facile and lazy connotation of it, are primarily based on this play.

The main character of *Iram Dhāt al-ʿImād*, Āmina al-ʿAlawīyya, a name whose Islamic resonance is unmistakable, is a female spiritual figure whom Najeeb, the Lebanese writer, is searching for and seeking her knowledge. That this Sufi figure is a female should not go unnoticed. Āmina is a prophetic figure that has attained the knowledge—in the sense of gnosis—that her father, who “was the imam of his time

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32 “Spirit,” however, does occur. My point is that Gibran never expounds on the spiritual and never mentions the word “spirituality” in his English writings, the name under whose rubric these writings have been received in Euro-America. He rather speaks about the greater, larger and giant self, and does not separate body and soul (the unity of Life/Being).

33 “Hast thou not seen how thy Lord did with Ad, Iram of the pillars, the like of which was never created in the land” (*The Koran Interpreted*, 89:7-9). In a short prologue to the play, Gibran cites the aforementioned verse from the Qur’an, a Hadith (saying) believed to be Prophet Muhammad’s—“yadhkhuluhā baʿdu ummati [some of my people shall enter it],” and a long quote that describes the fabulous process of constructing the city of Iram, taken from *Siyaṣatnāma* [the Book of Government], also known in Arabic as *Siyar al-Mulūk* [The Lives of Kings], by the eleventh century Persian scholar Nizam al-Mulk. In the Qur’an, Iram, believed to have been located in the southern part of the Arab peninsula, is the magnificent city of the people of Ad and their prophet Hud. Gibran, however, makes of Iram a city or a space of Sufi disclosure or gnosis. In other words, he is reinventing the meaning of Iram in the light of Sufism, practicing a kind of free *taʿwil* (esoteric interpretation) upon which the play is aesthetically and religiously based.

34 Āmina is the name of Prophet Muhammad’s mother.
in spiritual and esoteric matters” (*The Collected Works in Arabic* I 330), did not. That is, her “gender” does not matter here, and the masculinist monopoly of knowledge production and attainment is tacitly destroyed and overcome—let us remember that the play was published in 1921 and is set in 1883. Zain al-ʿAbidīn of Nahavand, the Persian character who is known as the Sufi, tells Najeeb that when Āmina turned twenty-five, she set out with her father to Mecca to fulfill the duty of pilgrimage. On their way, however, her father caught a fever and passed away. Āmina buried him on the foot of a mountain and stayed by his grave for seven nights, “calling into his soul and seeking to discover the secrets of the unseen world and what lies beyond the veil” (330). On the seventh night, the soul of her father inspired her to head to the heart of the Arab peninsula, the Rubʿ al-Khāli desert. The desert, indeed: “not time, or space, but a space without place and a time without production . . . this outside, where one cannot remain, since to be there is to be always already outside, and prophetic speech is that speech in which the bare relation with the Outside could be expressed” (Blanchot 80). This relation is essentially one of disclosure or unveiling (*kashf*). Āmina confronts this bare Outside on her own and *reveals* it. Āmina is the prophetic figure of a post-religious *Iram Dhāt al-ʿImād*, where Being as such is disclosed to her—insofar as her vision reveals it—in the bare desert of Arabia. After five years of mysterious disappearance, Āmina was seen in Mosul. In the circles of Ulama (religious scholars), she spoke about divine matters and described what she saw in *Iram Dhāt al-ʿImād* with a unique eloquence hitherto unknown to the people of Mosul. Because her followers increased and her name became a threat to the city’s Ulama, the governor of Mosul summoned her, offered her a packet of gold and asked her to leave the city. She left without taking the gold. The same thing happened to her in Istanbul, Aleppo, Damascus, Homs and Tripoli, where her knowledge did not please the imams and religious jurists. As a result, she decided to lead a reclusive life in North-East Lebanon, where she is sought by Najeeb, a Lebanese writer, who is probably a mouthpiece of Gibran himself.

Āmina appears at some point and both Najeeb and Zain are enraptured by her arrival, “as though they were in the presence of one of God’s prophets” (332). The dialogue that unfolds between Āmina and Najeeb reveals most of Gibran’s central ideas as far as religion is concerned, which are basically drawn from Sufism: truth as *kashf* or disclosure, Longing (*al-shawq*) as the arduous bridge towards the witnessing (*mushāhada*) of the Self, understood as the microcosm of Being,35 the Unity of

35 Āmina asserts that “Man is able to *long* [yata'ashawwaq] and *long* until *longing* uncovers the veil of phenomena over his sight so he can contemplate or witness [yushāhid] his Self [dhātahu].
Being, imagination as a disclosing insight (baṣira) and the transcendent unity of religions. Āmina tells Najeeb that she “entered the veiled city with her body, which is [her] visible soul, and with [her] soul, which is her invisible body. And whoever tries to separate the particles of the body has been plainly led astray [kāna fi ẓalālin muḥīn]. For the flower and its fragrance are one” (333). This notion of the Unity of Being and its “imaginal” disclosure is one that finds its roots in Sufism. This Unity of Being, insofar as it is a Unity of Life, is nevertheless devoid of any reference to good and evil and reward and punishment or to any eschatological after-life. Āmina is not a moral preacher of the after-life; she affirms, rather, the infinitude of the human self insofar as it is a microcosm in this Life, for “every existent shall remain, and the being of the existent is proof of its eternal subsistence” (335).

What calls attention here is the Sufi idea of primordial displacement or estrangement (ghurba) as a necessary condition of being in the world. Before settling in a small forest in north Lebanon, both Āmina and Zain were nomadic and migrant wanderers. Zain tells Najeeb that he was born in Nahavand (modern-day Iran). After growing up in Shiraz and being educated in Nishapur, he went on to travel the world east and west, only to find out that he is everywhere a stranger (gharīb). When Najeeb responds by saying that “all of us are strangers to every place,” Zain demurs: “No! I have met and talked with thousands of people and I have only seen those who are content with their environs, finding warmth and familiarity in their limited corner of the world by turning their backs to the world” (329). This estrangement is not a negative one. It is not an estrangement vis-à-vis the nation as a sphere of belonging, but to the nation as a place—we should not forget that the play was set in the late nineteenth century where the nation-state was increasingly becoming the dominant

Whoever is able to see his Self sees the bare essence of Life” (333; emphasis added). Gibran deliberately employs the verb yushāhid here, which is reminiscent of the Sufi maqām or station of mushāhada, contemplation or witnessing of the Real. The idea that “everything that exists resides inside you and all that resides inside you exists in Being” (334) resonates with the notion of the “Perfect Man” in Islamic Sufism, “who is a miniature of Reality; he is the microcosm, in whom are reflected all the perfect attributes of the macrocosm” (Arberry 101).

36 See The Collected Works in Arabic I 337.
37 “Say there is no God but Allah and there is nothing but Allah and you may remain a Christian” (334).
38 The Imaginal is Henry Corbin’s translation of what Ibn Arabi calls al-barzakh or al-barzakhi, the realm in which the corporealization of the spirits (tajassud al-arwāh) and the “spiritualization of the corporeal bodies” (tarawḥūn al-ajsām) occur. The imaginal world is the world of both/and, hence the realm of the unveiling of Being. For more on this, see Chittick 15. Gibran’s emphasis on the unity of body and soul and the Unity of Being cannot be understood without reference to Sufism, and this play reveals like none of his other texts the powerful Sufi motifs that permeate his work.
horizon of belonging in the modern world. Nor is it an estrangement in the sense of being uprooted and not able to belong to the “mother country” after immigrating or being forced to exile. Rather, it is a primordial estrangement or exile entailed by the originary inability to be content with place, which is necessarily limited and demarcated as a territory in the world, and thereby the inability to feel a sense of belonging anywhere insofar as this where is a place. When Najeeb asserts that “people are naturally inclined to be attached to their place of birth,” Zain retorts: “Only those who are limited in vision are naturally inclined to be attached to that which is limited in life. The short-sighted can see no more than a cubit on the track upon which they tread and a cubit on the wall upon which they support their backs” (329). In other words, the limits of one’s vision (ru’ yā) are the limits of one’s world. The spiritual here is that which denotes the possibility of the body to go beyond itself and the regime of life into which it was thrown. It does not signify a transcendent realm beyond Being, but a disclosure of Being that allows for an expanded experience of the world in the here and the now. *Iram Dhāt al-‘Imād,* the “veiled city” which is “a spiritual state [ḥāla rūḥiyya]” (333), comes to designate a universal promise for the stranger (al-gharīb) to transcend place—the modern city or the nation—not to a transcendent realm, but to an internal space of vision that stretches the limits of the stranger’s world. In other words, the spiritual is not that which rises above the body, but the language of the body that widens the limits of its world. It is in this sense that we ought to understand Gibran’s reclamation of Sufism as a post-religious and supra-national mode of being in the world, whether in Arabic or in English. For Almustafa, like Āmina, also calls for a mode of living where space precedes and expands place:

But you, children of space, you restless in rest, you shall not be trapped nor tamed. / Your house shall be not an anchor but a mast. / It shall not be a glistening film that covers a wound, but an eyelid that guards the eye. . . . You shall not dwell in tombs made by the dead for the living. / And though of magnificence and splendor, your house shall not hold your secret nor shelter your longing. / For that which is boundless in you abides in the mansion of the sky, whose door is the morning mist, and whose windows are the songs and the silences of night. (*The Collected* 118)

Thus, the Gibranian post-religious and post-Nietzschean poet, by reinventing the Abrahamic God as a horizon of an open and radical form of subjectification in
this world, embodies a modern Abrahamic figure who insists upon the pre-institutional energy of religion to question and disrupt modernity’s calculative and identitarian reason. The prophetic, that which announces the impossible as the ethical horizon of dwelling anew in the world, is embraced by Gibran to re-direct the moderns’ attention towards an alternative possibility—and not a ready-made answer—of being in the world. This alternative possibility is one that reinvents the past—and does not “return to” it—in order to broaden the limits of one’s world that are imposed on us as identitarian “masks” since birth. Gibran’s, thus, is a genuine attempt to unveil and herald this alternative (im)possibility, this altérance to come (a la Derrida), which points towards the direction of a “greater freedom” that simultaneously conditions and sustains our yearning for it.

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**About the Author**

Ghazouane Arslane is a final-year PhD candidate in Comparative Literature at Queen Mary University of London. He holds a BA and an MA in English from the University of Badji-Mokhtar Annaba in Algeria. His PhD research project seeks to revisit the bilingual work of
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