

Daniela Rodica Firanescu
Dalhousie University, Canada
Rodica.Firanescu@Dal.Ca



Résumé : Parmi les « hommes de lettres en exil » (‘udabā’al-mahğar) qu’ont eus les Arabes, Gibran Khalil Gibran (Ġubrān Ḥalīl Ġubrān) fut l’un des plus renommés durant sa vie et exceptionnellement fameux post-mortem; il fut, au début du vingtième siècle, un promoteur du changement et du renouveau des situations politiques dans le monde arabe. Alors que son engagement politique effectif a été un sujet de débat, le caractère militant de son œuvre littéraire est incontestable. Cet article porte sur de telles idées novatrices exprimées dans la correspondance de Gibran, dans ses écrits littéraires, ainsi que dans certains essais comme « L’Ère Nouvelle » (Al-‘Ahd al-Ġadīd, inclu dans le dernier recueil de Gibran écrit en arabe, « Merveilles et curiosités » - Al-Badā’i’ wa-l-Ṭarā’if - publié en Égypte, en 1923). Ayant la perspective d’environ un siècle écoulé depuis la publication de ces réflexions, nous sommes surpris par le fait que les pensées de Gibran peuvent être lues comme si elles avaient été écrites...aujourd’hui, dans le contexte de la vague de renouveau qui inonde à présent les contrées arabes, avec la contribution cruciale de la jeunesse.

Mots-clés : Est/Ouest, universalisme, vue globalisante, La Terre comme patrie, « ancien » versus « nouveau », Printemps de l’Est, renouveau.

Abstract: One of the most renowned Arab “men of letters in exile” (‘udabā’al-mahğar) in his life time, and exceptionally famous post-mortem, Gibran Khalil Gibran (Ġubrān Ḥalīl Ġubrān) was a promoter of change and renewal of the socio-political situations in the Arab world at the beginning of the 20th century. While his effective political engagement has been subject to debate, the militant character of his literary writings is incontestable. This paper focuses on such renewing ideas expressed in Gibran’s correspondence, his literary works, and in some literary essays such as “The New Era” (Al-‘Ahd al-Ġadīd, included in Gibran’s last collection written in Arabic, “The New and the Marvellous” - Al-Badā’i’ wa-l-Ṭarā’if - published in Egypt, in 1923). As we have now the perspective of about a century past since the publication of these reflections, we are being surprised by how Gibran’s thoughts may be read as if they were put down... today, in the context of the renewal wave now flowing through the Arab lands, with the crucial contribution of their youth.

Key words: East/West, universalism, globalizing view, earthly homeland, ‘old’ versus ‘new’, East Spring, renewal.

Introductory word

Gibran Khalil Gibran - Ġubrān Ḥalīl Ġubrān, whose name is adopted here in its anglicised form - was a promoter of change and renewal of the socio-political situations in the Arab world at the beginning of the 20th century. While his effective political engagement has been subject to debate - leading some observers to the idea of Gibran's "apolitical" attitude - the militant character of his literary writings, especially those composed in Arabic, published until 1923, is incontestable. In the light of the recent events and developments, generically designed with the syntagma "the Arab Spring", we find Gibran's global message, launched to the world in the first three decades of the 20th century, of prominent - not-surprising to us - actuality.

1. Gibran's worldly message to the Arab world and its youth: rising above the confrontational complementarity East/West

When considering the cultural ties of the Arab writers to the West or Occident, Gibran's name is one of the most prominent that would spontaneously come to our mind. He spent more than the half of his life in the USA, deeply immersed into the intellectual and cultural renaissance (*nahḍa*) movement developed in exile (though rooted in the Arab lands starting from the 18th century) by the Syro-Lebanese immigrant writers who became active in the Pen League or the Pen Society (*al-Rābiḥa al-Qalamiyya*), in New York, a movement that had Gibran as his head and coordinator during its existence (1920-1931). Gibran is probably the most famous - due to his acclaimed and widely popularized literary compositions in English, especially "The Prophet" - literary figure of a range of Arab-born writers who lived and created exiled in America, in the first part of the 20th century, such as Miḥā'il Nu'ayma, Amīn al-Riḥānī, Amīn Ġurayyib, Elyia Abū Mādī (to mention only the most renowned), and others.

Consequently, in principle, one would expect to find a consistent presence of Gibran and his literature in works devoted to the image of America as reflected by Arab writers. However - for giving only one, but significant, example - in his book devoted to the Arab representations of the Occident, Rasheed El-Enani (2006: 153-184), only mentions Gibran's name three times (one time p. 158, two times, p. 160), in the fifth chapter entitled "The encounter with America", and this fugitively, when speaking about Gibran's life friend Miḥā'il Nu'ayma, to whom El-Enani devotes a sub-chapter. In our view, this aspect reinforces the idea - that we formed through our personal search through Gibran's texts - that Gibran's literary (published during his life) writings probably seem to be not sufficiently numerous and relevant for allowing his more substantive inclusion in such a chapter related to the image of America in the eyes of the Arab writers. El-Enani explains (2006: 153-154) the reasons for which he has chosen to separate the image of America from the image of Europe in Arabic fiction, but yet we see that Gibran's writings are not included in any other of the chapters devoted to the encounters of Arab writers and artists with the Occident, in general.

There is a series of questions arising: Was Gibran not interested in reflecting upon the image of America and Europe?; Was he - be it purposely or unconsciously

- keeping himself aside from the trend of opposing and confronting Orient to Occident, that was so spread among his Syro-Lebanese fellows?; Was he truly 'apolitical', i.e. was he transmitting a message with no political implications to the Arab public?; Was he indifferent to the reception of his message, sent from America, in the Arab lands?; and, finally: Did Gibran see the Arab Orient exclusively in its social-historical dimensions, or he did see as well its potential evolution towards modernization and renewal? The coming considerations are meant to suggest answers to these questions.

We should examine, more generally, Gibran's 'written reflections' rather than limit to examining uniquely the 'published (by him) literary works', in order to extend the domain of observation. Also, if we would search only for direct, expressly formulated reflections on the Occident/West - i.e. Europe and America - versus Orient/East in Gibran's literary works, or for a literarily illustrated 'confrontational complementarity' of the two cultures (as it appears in writings such as "The Book of Khalid" by Gibran's fellow Amīn al-Rīḥānī, a book which had the centennial anniversary celebrated at the Library of Congress, USA, in April 2011; see e.r.1) we would lose much of the global message that Gibran transmits regarding this important topic, because such reflections are, indeed, not programmatic in Gibran's literary works, and not as numerous and consistent as they are in some of his fellows' writings. What we propose is to extend the investigation area to: first, his correspondence (published by A. Ferris, in English translation; see Gibran, 1968) with friends, published post mortem, and second, to what his literary writings 'implicitly' transmit on this topic. If Gibran does not make from the trendy subject of the confrontation between Occident and Orient an issue or a recurrent topic of his literary work, this should be significant in itself.

We read in a paragraph excerpt of a letter, written by Gibran in 1908, that he was already aware, at that early time (he was 25 years old), of what we will call here 'the worldly vocation and breadth of his mind'; his views, as he says, were "echoes of the great majority of the people of the world":

"I feel that the fires that feed the affection within me would like to dress themselves with ink and paper, but I am not sure whether the Arab-speaking world would remain as friendly to me as it has been in the past three years. I say this because the apparition of enmity has already appeared. The people in Syria are calling me heretic, and the intelligentsia in Egypt vilifies me saying « He is the enemy of just laws, of family ties, and of old traditions ». Those writers are telling the truth, because I do not love man-made laws and I abhor the traditions that our ancestors left us. This hatred is the fruit of my love for the sacred and spiritual kindness which should be the source of every law upon the earth, for kindness is the shadow of God in man. I know that the principles upon which I base my writings are echoes of the great majority of the people of the world, because the tendency toward a spiritual independence is to our life as the heart is to the body..." (From a Letter to Nakhli Gibran, Boston, March 15, 1908. In Gibran: 1968; Book IV, A Self-Portrait: 27-28, translated by A. Ferris)

Gibran was therefore transmitting a 'worldly' message to the Arab world, and he was perfectly aware of this; he was promoting 'universal values' such

as “spiritual kindness” and “spiritual independence”, and he was doing this purposely. He was challenging, by his writings, the Arab traditions that had been non-questionable before, and, by doing so, was assuming the risk that the Arab-speaking world would not remain “friendly” to him. Moreover, he was aware of the new “teaching” that he was striving to spread in the Arab world:

“Will my teaching ever be received by the Arab world, or will it die away, and disappear like a shadow?” (This is a continuation of the previous quotation).

The “enmity” he mentions above was stirred up by the publication of his collection “Spirits Rebellious” (*al-'Arwāḥ al-Mutamarrida*) in the same year, 1908. He openly declares, in a letter, what he implicitly suggests through his literary works: his aversion towards the man-made laws and ancestral traditions of the Arab world. His vision embraces universality, the perennial humanity of the mankind, which he formulates as “the sacred and spiritual kindness which should be the source of every law upon the earth, for kindness is the shadow of God in man”. He is the promoter of the “spiritual independence” that “is is to our life as the heart is to the body”.

We limit ourselves to the previous example, but examples are numerous to support the idea that Gibran, who wrote so numerous prose pieces and literary articles in which he depicts the ossified state of the society, mentalities, and mind in the Arab world of his time - that he often prefers to name “Orient”, *his* Orient - did not launch himself into the common trend of writing on the ‘opposition’ between Orient and Occident rightly because he rose above this, to offer the coming Arab generations a much wider perspective of the humanity, not one restricted by cardinal points East/West or West/East or crushed between them. Gibran wanted to attract the Arab mind to universal values, and was questioning the effect of his “teaching”, through his writings, upon the Arab mind. He had risen above the confrontation between East and West, and was looking at the humanity, as a whole, a humanity including East and West in the most natural and necessary manner.

The collection “Spirits Rebellious” includes, besides the story of Warda al-Hani, other four pieces in prose, among them the novellas “The Bride’s Bed” (or “The Bridal Couch”, in H. M. Nahmad’s translation, *Maḍḡā’ al-'Arūs*) and “Khalil the Heretic” (*Ḥalīl al-Kāfir*) which are pieces of resistance within Gibran’s writings that criticize old, cruel (in Gibran’s view) traditions related to marriage, as well as the oppressive practices of the institution of the church and its clergy, back in his Lebanon. Together with the extended novella or micro-novel “The Broken Wings” (*Al-'Aḡniḥa al-Mutakassira*) and other pieces whose mention would take too much room here, these are turning points in the Arabic prose as critical writings, composed with a tremendous force outflowing from the revolt of a very young writer, of only 25 years of age.

It appears from the correspondence that Gibran was constantly interested to find out how was the social, cultural, and spiritual message of his literary work received in the Arab lands, as testified by the two coming excerpts:

“But tell me Ameen, did you mention my name when you met with the intelligentsia of Lebanon and Egypt? Did you speak of the third name in the Trinity who is still behind the ocean? I believe that my friend Saleem Sarkis had told you about the criticism I had received from Lutfi Al-Manfaluti concerning my story about Madame Rose Hanie. It was published in *Al-Muayad*. I was well pleased with the criticism because I feel that such persecution is a diet for new principles, especially when it comes from a learned man like Al-Manfaluti.” (From a Letter to Amīn Ġurayyib, Boston, March 28, 1908. In Gibran: 1968; Book IV, A Self-Portrait: 31-32).

Gibran seems rather delighted by the criticism of al-Manfaluti, Egyptian intellectual and writer considered of the elite of his time; al-Manfaluti was himself representing the young, modern generation of Arab intellectuals (he was 32 years old in 1908), but nevertheless Gibran implies that his principles were in need of renewal. The story of Rose Hanie (*Warda al-Hānī*) embeds Gibran’s critical views directed against the Oriental marriage traditions that had led to the precarious situation of women in the Arab society, a topic in which Gibran was a pioneering author, thus becoming a promoter of the women’s rights. Another similar, but more extended, novella or micro-novel, “The Broken Wings” (*Al-Aġniha al-Mutakassira*), criticizes in the most dramatic manner the tragedy-engendering social barriers - preserved by ancestral traditions in the Arab lands - that were staying (and almost still stay) in the way of young people seeking accomplishing relationships of love and marriage. Selma Karameh’s story, related in “The Broken Wings” shocked (by the author’s liberal views and critique of the traditional arranged marriage) even the mentality of the women writer May Ziadeh, who was herself a promoter of the woman’s freedom. Even May Ziadeh found it hard to accept Gibran’s liberalism and rejection of any kind of chains imposed to women in the Oriental tradition (see May Ziadeh’s Letter to Gibran, Cairo, May 12th, 1912. In Gibran: 1968; Book IV, A Self-Portrait: 38-39).

Gibran - as the paragraph below testifies - was attached to the Arab readers (from Syria, Lebanon and Egypt) and receivers of the message of his own literary work and that of his Arab-American fellows; he was interested in strengthening the ties with their souls. He wanted, somehow, to create bridges between the exiled writers and their people, back in their origin countries. He was dreaming of a recognized leadership of the exiled writers in the process of shaping a new Lebanon. He was directing his purposeful message towards the youth of Lebanon, to whom he was finding important that the exiled writers transmit the longing of their souls and the wishes of their hearts. He was seeing in the youth of their countries a fertile terrain for the new ideas forged by the exiled writers. He was convinced that the departed ones were “sowing seeds” in America so that they could one day “reap the harvest in Lebanon”; he was thus seeing a continuum line of kindred souls working towards the renewal of their homeland through their youth:

“Meet the admirers of *Almuhager* in Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon, and speak to them of the deeds of their immigrant brethren; unfold before them that which the long distance has folded between our hearts and their hearts; and strengthen the ties that connect our souls with their souls. (...)

Be kind enough to convey the longing of our souls and the wishes of our hearts to the youth of Lebanon. Tell the elderly men of Syria that our thoughts, affections,

and dreams never leave our hearts and souls except when they fly towards them. When your boat reaches Beirut, stand on its prow and look towards Mount Sunnin and Fam El-Mizab and greet our forefathers who are sleeping under the layers of the earth, and salute the fathers and brothers who are living above the earth. Mention our works and endeavours in public and private meetings. Tell them we are busy sowing seeds in America so that we may some day reap the harvest in Lebanon.” (From a Letter to Amīn Gurayyib, Boston, February 1913. In *Gibran*: 1968; Book IV, A Self-Portrait: 41-42).

To summarize, Gibran was looking attentively at the state of the Arab lands, was reflecting upon it, was writing about it with bitterness, was sending clear critical message through his literature, was interested in the echoes of his purposeful message, and was dreaming of a fruitful role that the writings of the exiled writers could play in preparing the tomorrow’s generation for renewal. If these endeavours may be not considered ‘political’ in the meaning of institutionalized activism or involvement into a specific political party, they are, nevertheless, implicitly and deeply ‘political’ at a superior level that transgresses party doctrines and temporary political determinations in order to serve people’s evolution and spiritual progress at the history’s scale.

2. Gibran’s Universalism: taking the World for one’s Homeland

We have anticipated above some aspects related to the answer to the question “was Gibran - purposely or unconsciously - keeping himself aside from the trend of opposing and confronting Orient to Occident that was so spread among his exiled Syro-Lebanese fellows?”; here are some additional insights.

While his exiled fellow writers Miḥā’il Nu‘ayma and Amīn al-Riḥānī were conceptualizing their vision of the East/Orient and the West/Occident - with their almost opposed sets of values built upon ‘spiritualism’ and, respectively, ‘materialism’ - and were writing fictional works devoted to the effective debate surrounding the two worlds (see, for illustration, the subchapters devoted by El-Enani, 2006: 154-165, to these two fellows of Gibran), Gibran was seeing The World, One World, in the world as a whole, and did simply not engage in the trend of putting it into pieces to analyze each of them separately in any possible note, be it that of the ‘confrontational’ or the ‘complementary’ character of the Eastern and Western cultures.

Amīn al-Riḥānī was writing with talent, in an earthly note, in 1911:

«Give me, ye mighty nations of the West, the material comforts of life; and thou, my East, let me partake of the spiritual heritage. Give me, America, thy hand; and thou, too, Asia. Thou land of origination, where Light and Spirit first arose, disdain not the gifts which the nations of the West bring thee; and thou land of organisation and power, where Science and Freedom reign supreme, disdain not the bounties of the sunrise.» (Excerpt from the *The Book of Khalid* as quoted by El-Enani, 2006:156).

Gibran was proclaiming - almost by the same time, in the famous literary essay “The Voice of the Poet” (*Ṣawt al-šā’ir*), first published probably in one of the magazines of the Arab community living in America and then published in

the volume “A Tear and a Smile” (*Dam‘a wa-lbtisāma*), in 1914 - his universal perception and concept of the world:

“Mankind is divided into sects and tribes, and belongs to countries and territories. I see myself a stranger in one land, and an alien among one people. Yet all earth is my homeland, and the human family is my tribe.” (Gibran, 2007: 875, “A Poet’s Voice”, I. Translated by H. M. Nahmad)

And only lines after this (p. 875), in the same essay:

“I love the place of my birth with some of the love for my land; I love my country with a little of my love for the world, my homeland; I love the world with my all, for it is the pastureland of Man, the spirit of divinity on earth. Sacred humanity is the spirit of divinity on earth.”

Gibran was The Poet among his fellows, by spirit and structure, and, also, by his capacity of ultimately being ‘universal’, reducing the discrepancies between East and West to universal human essences, which means contemplating the World, as one indivisible entity, from the altitude of his generous, all-encompassing spirit. He was - as most of the others were - longing of his Oriental Lebanon; he was - as the others were - critical regarding the cult of the American society for the “Almighty Dollar” (see Gibran, 1968:23, Letter to Amīn Ġurayyib, 1908); he was tempted at many times - as others were (but Miḥā’il Nu‘ayma took the step from temptation to action in 1932) - to leave America and return to Lebanon, but these feelings do not seem, to us, overwhelming or central in Gibran’s ‘creative’ life:

“I am already longing for the Orient in spite of what some friends write to me, which sometimes makes me feel discouraged and causes me to prefer expatriation and living among strangers to the exile of living among relatives. Nevertheless, I shall return to my ‘old home’ to see with my own eyes what has become of it.” (Letter to Emil Zaydan, in the late part of 1922. In Gibran: 1968: 75, Book IV: A Self-Portrait. Translated by Anthony R. Ferris)

Such nostalgic feelings are expressed almost in his correspondence with friends, and only sporadically converted literarily. In his literature, we find the message that he purposely left us as an artist, the fruits of his creative ‘meditation’ upon the Orient and the Occident, or East and West, as facets of the one earthly homeland of the “sacred humanity”.

To confer a clearer outline to a possible answer to the above launched question, we would say that Gibran was probably not ‘keeping’ himself aside from the trend of opposing and conceptualizing the traits of the Orient and the Occident, but he was naturally ‘finding’ himself ‘above’ the trend, by virtue of his all-encompassing spirit, soul, and artistic vision. He was a World-loving citizen of the World at a time when humanity was still unconsciously preparing for the two World Wars, the “Cold War”, and other further more sophisticated wars, some still in progress. From this elevated spiritual position, he was directing his universalist message to that humanity of his dreams, long before humanity

started being receptive to such a message. In the Preface - entitled “Khalil Gibran: l’Orient de l’Occident” - to his “Dictionnaire de l’oeuvre de Khalil Gibran”, Jean-Pierre Dahdah notes:

« Khalil Gibran est l’un des pères de l’Occident, l’homme de l’autre “mondialisation”, celle-là même qui prône l’unification du monde fondée sur l’équilibre dans les attentes du cœur et du mental, celles de la foi et de la logique, et enfin sur la concorde entre les valeurs spirituelles et les exigences technologiques modernes dans le respect de la nature. Cette autre “mondialisation” qui prêche une mystique raisonnée d’une bible ni religieuse ni laïque dont le temple est la Vie au quotidien et l’autel, l’Intelligence du Cœur.» (See e.r. 2)

Taking the World for one’s homeland is indeed ‘mondializing’ a vision that cannot emphasize differences, but only highlight similarities and shared values. Among them, those of peaceful co-existence, mutual respect, understanding, and love. The excerpt below, well-known, has already been indicated as echoing the famous “declaration of the great Sufi master Muhi l-Din ibn ‘Arabi” (Bushrui & Jenkins, 2008: 143 - “My heart is capable of every form/ A cloister for the monk, a fane for idols/ A pasture for gazelles, the votary’s Ka’ba/ The Tables of the Torah, the Qur’an/ Love is the creed I hold; wherever turn/ His camels, Love is still my creed and faith”):

“You are my brother and I love you. I love you when you prostrate yourself in your mosque, and kneel in your church, and pray in your synagogue. You and I are sons of one faith - the Spirit. And those who are set up as heads over its many branches are as fingers on the hand of divinity that points to the Spirit’s perfection. I love you for the love of your truth arising from the minds of all people. That truth I see not now because of my blindness, but I hold it sacred because it is of the things of the Spirit. The truth that shall meet with my truth in the hereafter and merge the one with the other like the fragrance of flowers, and become one all-embracing and immortal with the immortality of Love and Beauty.” (Gibran, 2007: 877-78, “A Poet’s Voice”, III. Translated by H. M. Nahmad)

Gibran’s approach to variety within humanity was eminently poetical, reaching out to an ideal «harmonious existence» - and global co-existence, we would say - as Imangulieva (2009: 54) notes: «It is true that for Gibran the poet remains primarily the high priest of beauty and truth (...), but it is the poet, in his view, who is chosen to give people a guiding thread in everyday life and to maintain the ideal of harmonious existence».

3. Some of Gibran’s reflections on the “East” and its renewal, as read today

The volume *Al-Badā’i’ wa-l-Ṭarā’if* - title commonly translated by “The New and the Marvellous” - is the author’s last volume gathering works written in Arabic, first published in a volume in 1923, in Egypt. The pieces included in the mentioned volume - “a number of narratives and essays in the style of *Al-‘Awāṣif* that were collected and named by a publisher in Egypt with the blessing of Gibran” (e.r.3) - have been much less mediated and translated than other writings included in previous collections of works by the same author, composed

in Arabic; they were probably written at the same time or possibly right after the ones included in the collection *Al-‘Awāṣif* (published in 1920) since a certain stylistic unity seems obvious. Gibran used to publish his essays ‘in volume’ years after publishing them in the press, either in newspapers and magazines issued by the Syro-Lebanese community in Boston and New York or in the Arab press, in both Lebanon and Egypt. In 1912, he had the story *The Poet from Baalbeck* already written and prepared to be sent to Sarkis Effandi in Lebanon, to be read on his behalf on the occasion of the celebration of the Lebanese poet Khalil Effandi Mutran (see Gibran, 1968: p. 40, Self-Portrait); this story is included in the volume *Al-‘Awāṣif*, published much later, in 1920.

While Gibran worked personally on the review of the collection of pieces published in the volume *Al-‘Awāṣif*, it seems that he did not have the chance to personally gather and review the ones included in his last Arabic collection or even to choose the title of this collection (see Naimy, n.d.: 28). As Bushrui (2010: 186) indicates as well, “in 1923, *al-Badā’i’ wa-l-Ṭarā’if*, a collection of Jubrān’s previously published material in Arabic, was edited and published by the owner of *Maktabat al-‘Arab* publishing house in Cairo. Jubrān was never given the opportunity to approve the title chosen for the book or the articles selected for inclusion”. This collection has not been entirely translated into English and published (though some pieces can be found - entirely or fragmentarily translated - on the internet, such as the good translation of the essay “The Future of the Arabic Language”, *Mustaqbal al-luġa al-‘arabiyyah*, by Adnan Haydar, 2010. See e.r.4). The works included in the mentioned collection often refer to the author’s Lebanese homeland, but in general, when referring to the Eastern Arab lands, Gibran uses as well the globalizing term “the East/Orient” (*al-Šarq*); his message is often globally directed to his Arab Orient. Due to the “limited” circulation and diffusion of the press (the only established, functional form of media at that time, yet holding much power and impact) during Gibran’s life time, it is discussable to what extent his renewing ideas, expressed in Arabic and published in the press, either in America or Arab lands such as Lebanon and Egypt, had an immediate mass-effect that contributed to shaping a new Arab conscience ... We can, however, imagine and assume an effect upon the Eastern Arab men of letters and intellectuals, those having access to press and books, who were the leading spiritual force and source of progress and modernization. The works of this volume have been given less attention within the exegesis devoted to Gibran’s literary production, with some exceptions represented by articles that drew the attention of the Arab literary circles in Lebanon and Egypt immediately after their publication in press (such as the essay “You have your Lebanon, and I have mine”, *La-kum Lubnānu-kum wa-lī Lubnānī*).

Particularly relevant is the essay *Al-‘Ahd al-Ġadīd*, a title translated by Joseph Sheban as “The New Frontier” (see Gibran, 1991: 52-57). We use here our ‘functional’ (i.e. close to the original, serving the purpose of this article) translation (based on the Arabic text included in Gibran, 1992, Tome I: 557-60) of some paragraphs, as well as Sheban’s translation (where indicated) to highlight the thoughtful, inspirational reflections that Gibran offers upon “The New Era” (a translation of the title that we consider more appropriate) that

Gibran was (for)seeing as coming imminently, and to point out to the signs of renewal of the Arabs' social and spiritual life, signs that Gibran suggests and interprets in this essay.

The text starts abruptly, yet demonstratively, with the declaration of the war existing, at the time he was writing the text (probably a few years before the World War I, while the Arab lands were still a part of the Ottoman Empire), between the 'old thought' and the 'new thought' in the Eastern lands, in his Arab Orient. Then a series of images - built on this antagonism, but disposed asymmetrically - expresses the opposition between 'slumber' and 'awakening', 'winter' and 'spring', 'death' and 'rebirth', 'immovability' and 'moving forward':

"In the East are now two thoughts that wrestle one with another: an old thought, and a new thought. The old thought will be defeated because its energies are consumed, and its determination is dissolved. There is, now, in the East, an awakening that defies the slumber; this awakening will triumph since the sun is its leader, and the dawn is its army.

In the East's fields - the East, that was, not long ago, a vast cemetery - stands today the youth of spring, calling the occupants of the graves to rise and start going with the days. And when the spring sings his songs, he who lay in the ground in winter time, is resuscitated, takes off his shroud, and goes on foot." (The translation is ours)

The syntagma translated 'the youth of spring' is literally formulated in Arabic 'the young man of the spring' (*fatā al-rabī'*); it evokes, in our perception, the mythical figure of Tammuz, the Babylonian and ancient Syrian god of rebirth after death, of hope and renewal that inspired, about two decades after Gibran's passing away, the "Tammuzi current" - that was in fact a mature extension of the Renaissance (*Nahḍa*) movement in the Arab poetry in the 50s - 60s - having the Iraqi poet Badr Shaker al-Sayyab as representative figure and his "Hymn of the Rain" (*'Unšūdat al-Maṭar*) as lyrical emblem. Spring, as a complex symbol, is recurrent in Gibran's imagery and associated with youth and renewal of nature and human spirit. The ongoing Arab Spring has been preponderantly the spring of the Arab youth and their thirst for renewal, rebirth, social progress, and the chance to build their lives "walking with the days". In this context, it is significant for Gibran's militant contribution towards a wider vision of humanity in the Arab lands, and for its sympathy for and trust in the Eastern youth, that the Gibran Khalil Gibran "Spirit of Humanity" award instituted by The Arab American Institute Foundation (AAIF), dedicated the 2011 Gala (on May 4th, at the Renaissance Hotel in Washington, DC) to celebrating the Youth of the Arab Spring movements. (See e.r.6)

Going deeper in the text, we come to notice that, about a century ago, Gibran's East - Arab East, 'Middle East' - as Sheban actually translates *al-Šarq* - is depicted as the confrontation arena of two opposite trends: one cultivated by the 'old masters' - representing, metaphorically, the ossified laws, rules and rulers imposing blind obedience to the people - the other inspired by those who are strong and confident in their rightness, which makes them "a strong giant aware about his strength" ... This complex phrase ("a strong giant aware about

his strength”) evokes to us, at the time being, the Arab peoples, and especially their youth, who, in the midst of the recent upheavals, were aware about their giant force consisting in their rightness and stillness or serenity (“*silmiyya, silmiyya*” - peacefully, peacefully - was the refrain of protesters in Meydan at-Tahrir, in Cairo, and elsewhere. We are tempted to say, reading this text with today’s understanding of events occurring in the Middle East a century after Gibran’s visionary grasp of the conflicting trends in the Arab lands, that Gibran uttered visionary, prophetic words... The image of the “dying old man”, the master of the past, is troubling, however, if we think of the longevity of the prohibiting ruling systems in that part of the world, the systems whose implosion was imagined by Gibran, long time ago, as being ‘imminent’; however, it lasted almost a century:

“The East, today, has two masters: one who orders and prohibits, being obeyed, but he is a dying old man; the other who is silent, who keeps the silence of the natural laws and systems, who is serene with the serenity of the rightness, but who is a strong giant aware about his strength, confident in his essence, faithful in his efficiency.”
(The translation is ours)

With his non-dissimulated didacticism allowed by his dignity of Poet - “In Gibran the theme of the poet is always accompanied by a disclosure of the author’s moral and ethical principles and his views of the world, humanity and society. To a large extent these views overlap with the views and convictions of the Romantics”, notes Imangulieva, 2009: 55 - Gibran questions the ‘Easterner man’ to which of the two trends he belongs. It is, again, a surprisingly up-to-date question that the Arab people have been asking themselves, and everybody around them, since December 2010, and will keep asking perhaps for a while:

“In the East, today, there are two men: the yesterday’s man, and the man of tomorrow. Which of them are you, Easterner man? Come close to me, to look at you attentively, to ponder you, to examine your traits and demeanor, to see whether you are one of those coming into light or one of the ones going into darkness! Come, tell me what you are, and who you are!” (The translation is ours)

It is also impressive to notice the urgency attached by Gibran to the idea that the ‘Easterner man’, arrived at a crucial point, has to make a decisive choice between old/past and new/future; moreover, the [Middle] ‘Easterners’ - as the Gibranian text puts it unequivocally - have to define and adopt a specific course of action that will determine the development of their nations. Here comes the famous quotation that we translate as following:

“Are you a politician secretly telling himself: “I want to make use of my nation, to my own profit” or a zealous, enthusiastic man whispering in his self: “I am eager to be of use to my nation”? If you are the former, then you are a parasite plant; if you are the latter, then you are an oasis in a desert.”

While J. Sheban translates:

“Are you a politician asking *what your country can do for you* or a zealous one asking *what you can do for your country*? If you are the first, then you are a parasite; if the second, then you are an oasis in a desert.”

Sheban's version of this paragraph would be acceptable as 'more than free' or 'adapted' to circumstances that he mentions (Sheban, 1991: 52): “On the walls of many American homes hangs a plaque commemorating the statement of the late President John F. Kennedy: Ask not what your country can do for you, / Ask what you can do for your country.” We shall never know, perhaps, whether the President paraphrased, indeed, Gibran's statement or the idea “was in the air”. Still, even without adapting the translation to circumstances (as in our translation for instance), it is obvious that the main idea expressed by Gibran and by the presidential statement is the same: the exhortation to place the service of the country above one's selfish interest. What an adapted translation may skip are the nuances: while the intention of using one's nation is, for 'bad' politicians an evil plan involving secrecy (“secretly telling himself”), the good intention of 'devoted' politicians to serve their nation is to be recognized after its modest, sober way of being uttered (“whispering in his self”). Once again, these allusions to the 'secret ways of the bad' versus the 'inner, discrete voice of the good' seem to relevantly suggest us - as far as a literary, metaphorical text may do it - the intricate character of the political involvement and activism (related to both persons and political factions) that nowadays events unfolding in the Middle East - as always in history, in such conditions - may engender; how difficult will be for people to make a net choice of attitude, and how difficult for the observers to discriminate between one attitude and another?

The same question is symbolically (and rhetorically) addressed in the text to various categories of people: trader, clergy man, journalist, governor, husband, writer, and poet. In each question and corresponding answer that Gibran provides the reader with, the main trope or style figure is the antithesis between 'bad' and 'good'. In subtext, one reads that the old age was full of defects, depicted by the bad behaviours and intentions of those who represented the 'bad', while the new era - at least in the author's hope - will cause the emergence of the 'good'. The author does not seem to suggest that there is a middle way or any possibly ambiguous position at the turning point that he depicts.

Approaching the two final paragraphs, one notices that, indeed, Gibran admits only two distinct possibilities existing in front of the people that form a society, a nation, in such confrontational, no-return, destiny-forging stages in history: to choose to be “children of yesteryears” (this, and the coming citations are excerpt from J. Sheban's translation) or “children of tomorrow”. Style, tone, cadence, directly conveyed or just implied meanings, beyond the impressive character of the Gibranian renowned “prophetic speech” (as in: “I came to be for all and in all. That which alone I do today shall be proclaimed before the people in days to come. And what I now say with one tongue, tomorrow will say with many.” Gibran, 2007: 880, “A Poet's Voice”. Translated by H. M. Nahmad), all become literally troubling to today's readers because of the vivid actuality and contiguity evoked by every word. The final paragraphs of this visionary, powerful, though almost one-century-old text, seem to be written today, to be

depicting the history now in the making of the Arab lands, to the extent that any commentary appears to be senseless:

“I tell you that the children of yesteryears are walking in the funeral of the era that they created for themselves. They are pulling a rotted rope that might break soon and cause them to drop into a forgotten abyss. I say that they are living in homes with weak foundations; as the storm blows -- and it is about to blow -- their homes will fall upon their heads and thus become their tombs. (...)

But the children of tomorrow are the ones called by life, and they follow it with steady steps and heads high, they are the dawn of new frontiers, no smoke will veil their eyes and no jingle of chains will drown out their voices. They are few in number, but the difference is as between a grain of wheat and a stack of hay. No one knows them but they know each other. They are like the summits, which can see or hear each other -- not like caves, which cannot hear or see. They are the seed dropped by the hand of God in the field, breaking through its pod and waving its sapling leaves before the face of the sun. It shall grow into a mighty tree, its root in the heart of the earth and its branches high in the sky.”

Selected Bibliography

- Bushrui, S., 2010. “Jubrān Khalīl Jubrān”. In Roger Allen (ed.): *Essays in Arabic Literary Biography, 1850-1950*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz GmbH & Co.KG
- Bushrui, S. and Jenkins, J., 2008 (first published 1998). *Kahlil Gibran: Man and Poet. A New Biography*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications.
- El-Enani, R., 2006. *Arab representations of the Occident. East-West Encounters in Arabic Fiction*, London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group
- Firanesco, D., 1989. *Aripile frante* (“The Broken Wings”) anthology of prose by Jubran Khalil Jubran. Translation from the original Arabic into Romanian of the author’s prose masterpieces (introductory study, notes, and chronological table). Bucharest: Minerva.
- Gibran, K., 2007. *The Collected Works*, New York, London, Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, Everyman’s Library.
- Gibran, K. G. (= Ğubrān Ḥalīl Ğubrān), 1992 edition. *Al-Mu’allafāt al-Kāmilah* (The Complete Works), Al-Muġallad al-’Awwal (Tome I), Al-Mu’allafāt al-’Arabiyya (The Arabic Works), Beirut: Mu’assasat Baḥsūn li-l-našr wa-l-tawzī’ (Bahsoun Publishers).
- Gibran, K., 1991 (1965). *A Third Treasury of Kahlil Gibran*. Edited by A.D. Sherfan. Citadel Press. Carol Publishing Group
- Gibran, K., 1968. *A Second Treasury of Kahlil Gibran*. Translated from Arabic by Anthony R. Ferris, New York: The Citadel Press
- Imangulieva, A., 2009 (English edition). *Gibran, Rihani & Naimy: East-West Interactions in Early Twentieth-Century*. Oxford: Anqa Publishing, Inner Farne Press.
- Naimy [Nu’aymeh], M., n.d. (no date). “Ğubrān fī ’āḡāri-hi al-’arabiyya” (introductory study). In *Al-Maġmū’a al-Kāmila li-Mu’allafāt Ğubrān Ḥalīl Ğubrān al-’Arabiyya* (The Complete Collection of Gibran Kahlil Gibran’s Works). Beirut: Dār Ṣādir.

Naimy [Nu‘aymeh], M., 1974. “The Mind and Thought of Kahlil Gibran. *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 5, 55-71.

Waterfield, R., 1998. *Prophet. The Life and Times of Kahlil Gibran*. New York: St Martin’s Press.

Young, B., 1981 (1945). *This Man of Lebanon: A Study of Kahlil Gibran*. New York: Alfred Knopf

Electronic references (= e.r.)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MioA9NQcCvI>. Consulted November 29th, 2011.

<http://www.libanvision.com/gibran.htm>. Consulted August 23rd, 2011

<http://www.arab2.com/gibran/> (Dalīl al-‘Arab: Gibran Khalil Gibran Virtual Library). Consulted: August 18th 2011.

<http://wordswithoutborders.org/article/from-the-future-of-the-arabic-language/> Haydar, Adnan, Copyright, 2010. Consulted November 30th, 2011.

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/8698147/Kahlil-Gibran-The-New-Frontier>. Consulted January 10th, 2012.

<http://www.wrmea.com/component/content/article/370-2011-july/10566-arab-american-activism-aaifs-kahlil-gibran-gala-celebrates-youths-of-arab-spring.html>. Consulted November 30th, 2011.