

A Study of Wordsworth's Romantic Conception of Nature in Gibrabn Khalil Gibran's poem *Munajat Arwah*

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Abstract

Gibran Khalil Gibran (1883-1931) is a genius Lebanese poet , who spent most of his life in the United States of America .While living there, he was exposed to the ideologies of English Romanticism , pioneered by some memorable Romantic poets like Wordsworth, Blake , Shelley and Keats .Together with his subsequent association with Arrabitah group of AL-Mahjer poets , he contributed to the birth of Arabic Romanticism , which came as a reaction against Arabic neo-classical poetry . Romanticism is described as the return to nature. Nature influences the mind of the poet which in its turn provides a returned response colored by the imagination .Thus, nature becomes a dominant theme in the poems of the literary legend and the founder of English Romanticism William Wordsworth. One of the essential manifestation of Wordsworth's fascination with nature is his insistence on shifting the interest from the city life to countryside, a shift that overwhelms Gibran with similar feelings of nostalgia and regret for the latter's distortion by the factory smokes . In his famous work *Munajat Arwah* (Communion of Spirits) published in 1914 , Gibran depicts nature in a typically **Wordsworthian** mannerism . Therefore, this poem is taken to be a case study for illustrating the English Romantic poet's impact in molding Gibran's aesthetic vision of nature's supremacy over the decadent and polluted existence in cities.

Keywords: English Romanticism, sublime feelings, restorative forces of nature, nature as a manifestation of God's grandeur, nature verses city.

Introduction

The publication of the Lyrical Ballads (1798) by William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge marked the beginning of the English Romanticism as a self-conscious movement and a revolt against the intellectual and social poetry of the common sense, that characterized the 18th century. It enhanced a new concept of poetry that emphasized the importance of the poet's personal feelings and subjective responses in the process of his poetic productivity .In his revolutionary Preface to Lyrical Ballads (1802), Wordsworth ascertains that " all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings ... modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings". (Enright and De Chickera 180). Wordsworth was against the neo-classical intellectual view of poetry as a mere act of imitation and the conception of the imagination as a simple faculty: Poetry according to him is neither the servile copy of the external world nor is the creation of something completely new or different from the natural objects. "The emotions, sensations and impressions that the poet receives from nature are simply shaped , modified and ordered by the power of his imagination. "(George 92).In Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey From Lyrical Ballads Wordsworth states:

From this green earth; of all the mighty world
Of eye, and ear, -- both what they half create,
And what perceive; well pleased to recognize
In nature and the language of the sense
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being. (106-112).

Wordsworth holds the view that the relationship between the mind and the external world is reciprocal. Nature influences the mind of the poet which in its turn provides a returned response colored by the imagination . In retrospect , nature becomes a pervasive theme in his poetry :In most of his nature poems ,he persists on the need for shifting human interest from the polluted city -life to the transcendental and ideal beauty of the countryside . In his above mentioned *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* , Wordsworth asserts that :

...in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings coexist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated; ...and, lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature .

Indeed, in his autobiographical poem ,*The Prelude*, Wordsworth relates his personal, unforgettable

and dreary impressions on his first entry into the city of London which appears to be barren of any stimulus of inspiration ,compared to the" labyrinth of suburban villages " :

. . Never shall I forget the hour
The moment rather says when having threaded.
The labyrinth of suburban villages,
At length I did unto myself first seem
To enter the great City. On the roof
Of an itinerant vehicle , I sat
With vulgar men about me, vulgar forms
Of houses, pavement, streets, of men and things
Mean shapes every side. (VIII, 11. 689-97)

However , the Lebanese poet and philosopher Gibran Khalil Gibran (1883-1931), was a devout lover of nature who wholeheartedly embraced almost all Wordsworth's philosophical outlooks related to it. For him , as for his pioneering romantic predecessor , the universal truth is verified through embracing the essence of nature and absorbing its sublimity and beauty . Nature is also the link that binds us one to another : Within it flowing a divine energy that is the perfect expression of the internal rhythm of all being. In a typically Wordsworthian manner , Gibran regarded human life and the life of nature as complementary, "sustaining each other in a perfect symbiosis ." (Suheil Bushrui " Kahlil Gibran: Poet of the Ecology of Life ") Most importantly, he recognized " in nature a rich store of symbols that provided both the emotional and intellectual apparatus of his poetry ." (See Al- Na'auri , Issa . Adab Al-Mahjar , 1967). In his above- mentioned article Suheil Bushrui states :

The most powerful imagery in Gibran's writings was borrowed from nature , and he continually contrasted the natural world with the human world. He stressed the sanctity of nature and our duty to protect and ennoble it, sanctify it, celebrate it, learn from it and commune with it, not necessarily to explain it but to understand it and reveal it in action and thought, and above all in poetry and the arts.

The landscape of Gibran's childhood , youth and his early poetry was the village of Bisharri in Lebanon . Like Wordsworth's native land , the Lake District , the village of Bisharri played a significant role in Gibran's romantic formation as a poet , painter and a worshiper of nature . The country around Bisharri fascinated Gibran's mind and the place became the object of his yearning and a constant source of inspiration for him , after his emigration to America at the age of eleven . He reiterates: " Every time I close my eyes I see those valleys full of magic and dignity and those mountains covered with glory and greatness trying to reach the sky." Suheil Bushrui . "Khalil Gibran of America "1-7) Reminiscences of the villages of Bisharri and the Lebanese mountains color all Gibran's works about nature. For him , that was a period "when man's teacher is nature, and humanity is his book , and life is his school." (Ibid) He was , thus ,invited to" I life's splendid feast where "the villages reposing in peace and tranquillity upon the shoulders of the valley rise from their slumbers ." (Ibid) . Gibran maintains that "the things which the child loves remain in the domain of his heart until old ages", because "our souls remain hovering over the places where we once enjoyed ourselves ." (Rasa'a l Jubran 10) These memories, as (Sarwat Okasha,13) observed "were themselves sowing seeds and bearing fruits in his subconscious . Gibran stored from the landscape of his birthplace what filled his memory. In this way, "the potential philosophical nature of the poet inside him is disclosed and a deep communication and revelation of meanings of life flame inside him ." (Ibid)It is important to note that Gibran's depiction of nature represents a new departure in Arabic literature. In classical Arabic poetry, influenced by the desert way of life, nature was viewed "as a force to be reckoned with". Gibran, however, saw "nature as invested with a life of its own with spiritual, emotional and intellectual dimensions ." (Suheil Bushrui ." Kahlil Gibran: Poet of the Ecology of Life ") To commune with it was for Gibran akin to a religious experience . Thus , in his nature poems, he reinforces the idea that those who live amid the excitements in the city know nothing of the life of the mountain villagers . In line with Wordsworth's assumptions in his *Preface* ,he states :

We are swept into the current of urban existence, until we forget the peaceful rhythms of simple country life, which smiles in the spring, toils in the summer, reaps in autumn, rests in winter, imitating nature in all her cycles. We are wealthier than the villagers in silver or gold, but they are richer in spirit. What we sow we reap not; they reap what they sow . We are slaves of gain, and they the children of contentment. Our draught from the cup of life is mixed with bitterness and despair, fear and weariness; but they drink the pure nectar of life's fulfillment. (Quoted in Suheil Bushrui . " Kahlil Gibran: Poet of the Ecology of Life ")

Thus , Gibran's Wordsworth- like perception of the sublimity and the elevating beauty of nature crystallizes in motivating modern man's interest in it .He believes that "there is no death in Nature" and that its "gifts of Joy do not depart." (Ibid)

The present paper focuses attention on Gibran's famous poem *Munajat Arwah* . The poem celebrates the supremacy of nature over city life in Wordsworth mannerism and style of thinking . The paper is divided into three section . The first section is the introduction that briefly examines the main features of the nineteenth

century English Romanticism . It highlights aspects of Wordsworth's philosophies of nature that influence Gibran's depiction of it . Section two focuses on Gibran's treatment of nature in his poem *Munajat Arwah* .The last section is the conclusion that summarizes the main findings of the paper.

The Elevation of Country life in Gibran's poem Munajat Arwah

Gibran's poem *Munajat Arwah* (Communion of Spirits) was published in the collection of *Dam'a wa Ibtisama* (*A Tear and Smile* ,1914; Translated into English by H.M. Mahmad) . The poem is an example of Gibran 's new method of writing prose poems , later known as the Gibranian style or Gibranianism. (Khouri and Algar 12) Besides its innovation in the style of composing prose poems in Arabic Literature , *Munajat Arwah* is an illustration of Gibran's devotion towards arousing modern man's interest in his natural world . He achieves his goal through the depiction of benumbing love story between two young lovers. The youth who lives in some unnamed city and his sweetheart who inhabits the paradise of nature is a village in the mountains of Lebanon. Despite of their geographical separation , their souls remain bound together. The two lovers commune with each other through a dialogue of spirits .Allegorically , the young man presents Gibran's "vision of the city life as the fallen world that is filled with corruption, and through the young girl, he compares the grandeur of life in the countryside with the Garden of Eden, where innocence, purity, peace, and love eternally prevail ." (Suheil Bushrui *Kahlil Gibran: Poet of the Ecology of Life*) . As such the poem can be regarded as a juxtaposition between two opposing ways of lives carried out in the form of a mental monologue between the two lovers.

The poem begins with the longing call of the young lover who is corrupted by the industrial revolution and the materialism of city life. In the night, when his longing prevents him from sleeping ,as Poe's hero in *The Raven* , his spirit hovers over the sea and calls eagerly his beloved .(John Walbridge . *Gibran, his Aesthetic, and his Moral Universe*) She awakes to his call and walks out into the fields, where the dew wets the hem of her robe moonlight brightens her valley, but smoke blackens the sky of his city. While ghosts of kings and prophets walk in the mountains of Lebanon, the air of the city contains only crime, vice, and the tormented sighs of the poor, the sick, and the oppressed:

Awake, my love, awake !
For my soul calls to you from beyond
the raging seas;
My spirit stretches forth her wings above
the angry foaming waves.

.....

And sleep enfolds the souls of men.
But I alone remain awake,
For longing holds me when slumber
Would engulf me,
And love draws me nigh to you
When visions would plant me far. (11,1 -3 ; 7-11)

The young girl ,who hears her lover's agonizing spiritual call from the distance that separates them , replies :

Behold me here, my love,
For I have heard your call across oceans
And felt the touch of your wings.
I have left my bed to walk upon the grass
And the night dew has wetted my feet
and my garment's hem .
Behold me standing before you, beneath
the flowered almond boughs
Harkening to your call . (11. 1 8-24)

When the lover overhears his beloved speaking of "the grass", "the night dew", and "flowered almond boughs", his yearning for their past together in the bosom of nature is accentuated. His heightened sense of nostalgia and pining hunger for the beauty , calmness and purity of nature, after many years of living in the dreary city prompt him to beg her to speak more to him about the valleys of Lebanon which he is traumatically feelings its loss and his alienation from it : "Speak then, my beloved, /And let your breath ride with the breeze that comes to me from the valleys of Lebanon ." (ll. 25-26) Hearing the suffocating pleas of her lover, the girl begins to speak about the beautiful and peaceful night in the countryside, where the breeze is pure and the sky is clear and lighted with the splendid moonlight: " The heavens have woven a veil from moon beams I And cast it o'er Lebanon's form. " (11.3 1-2)The next stage in Gibran's poem is foreshadowed in his heroine's Wordsworth- like invocation of nature's healing power . In response , her young sweetheart draws a deformed and grim pictures where heaven is polluted by the suffocating smoke of the factories and the ugly and filthy workshops which emit poisonous exhausts in the city . Under this cloak of the smoke, the city appears as a corpse covered with the shroud of

darkness :

The heaven, have fashioned a cloak from
the darkness of night
And lined it with the smoke of workshops
and the breath of death.
They have concealed within its folds
the city's bones . (11. 33-35)

The girl, then, tends to introduce a Rousseau's point of view about the natural man. Both Gibran and Rousseau share to some extent the same vision that man is innocent because he lives in the state of nature, which is beyond good and evil. The dividing line between them is that to Rousseau this innocence consists in the similarity of human impulses to animal appetites, while to Gibran, as to Wordsworth, these impulses are spiritual and pure, like those of the first man in Eden . (Hawi 166) Hence, the villagers, as the girl affirms, lead a simple life free of avarice and greed . Therefore, they sleep with clear conscience:

Those of the village are slumber in their huts
Midst the willow and the walnut tree;
And their spirits make haste towards the
lands of dreams, my love (11. 36-38) .

The young man's image of the city dwellers ,that is the image of the fallen world for Gibran , is aesthetically contrasted with the girl's powerful image of the inhabitants of nature. The lover claims that the men in the city lead the life of lust, greed and selfishness which tortures them by day and fills their night with dreadful nightmares:

Men are bowed down by the weight of gold
And greed makes weak their knees.
Their eyes are heavy with trouble and fret
And they are cast down upon their beds.
Tortured are their hearts, beloved, by
specters of misery and despair . (11. 39-44)

As she proceeds with her enchanting paradise- like vision of the countryside, the girl tells her lover that the beautiful valleys of Lebanon draw to their bosoms the spirits of the living and the dead. The valleys are haunted by the noble spirits of the prophets and kings. These spirits, which roam among the holy cedars of Lebanon, bring back to the mind the glory of Chaldea, the pride of Assyrians, and the nobility of the Arabs:

The phantoms of past ages walk in the valleys,
On the heights, the spirits of kings and prophets wander.
My thoughts have turned towards the place of remembrance.
And shown to me the might of Chaldea and the Assyrian's
pride and Arabia 's nobility . (11. 45-4)

Compared to the images of glory, might, pride, and nobility that the girl introduces, the young lover conveys to his beloved the image of evil that prevails in the city. He portrays the city as a den for "the ghosts of robbers", and "the vipers of lust" that dominate its alleys and its streets:

In the narrow ways walk the dark ghosts of robbers
And in the crevices of walls vipers of lust rear
their heads;
on street corners the breath of the sickly mingles
with pangs of Death
Memory has torn aside the curtains of forgetfulness
And revealed to me the abomination of Sodom
and Gomorrah. (II. 50-57)

It is worth mentioning here that whether Gibran talks of nature as an entity or of its particular elements and their relation to each other, his emphatic belief that nature is a living being is always evident. Therefore, it seems that in personifying it, he is not only making use of a convenient literary device, but rather expressing the way it is perceived by him . Thus , in following lines from the poem , he tries to present a religious image through the girl's meditation on nature. She asserts that the rustling of the leaves of the trees, that mingles with the murmur of the brook, forms a parallel meaning of Solomon's songs and the strains of David's psalms. Here, Gibran depicts nature as a physical Bible which reflects a parallel version of the written Bible:

The boughs are swaying, my love,
And the rustling of their leaves,
Merges with the murmur of the brook in the valley,
Bringing to our ears
Solomon's song and the strains of David's lyre. (11. 58- 62)

This point of view is also found in Wordsworth's writing. In the moments after the visitation of the imagination, when Wordsworth is still possessed by the full power of revelation, "nature appears to him as a holy writing, an apocalyptic alphabet, from which the divine and immortal may be read." (Sherry 47). Wordsworth's poem *The Excursionist* describes a herdsman 's whose meditation in nature reveals to him ,as in Gibran's poem *Munajat Arwah* ,the holy writing of God:

But in the mountains did he feel his faith.
All things, responsive to the writing, there
Breathed immortality, revolving life,
And greatness still revolving; infinite:
There littleness was not; the least of thing
Seemed infinite; (I, 11, 225-30)

Here, Wordsworth claims that what the herdsman reads in nature supplants what he has read in the Bible. What he reads in nature is the inscription of the immediate presence of the holy. The book of nature is equivalent with his soul's immensity, and with his visionary faculty, which he possesses or is possessed by while the language of *The Holy Scripture* stands between him and the presence of God. In the act of reading the presence of the holy in nature, the interaction between mind and nature is enacted. Yet it is not nature in itself that is read, but nature transfigured by the revelation of imagination, the visitation of the divine enlightenment . To enforce this holy image of nature in his poem *Munajat Arwah* , Gibran , in his turn , tries to reveal the antithetical hellish image of the city: The girl carries, through her description of Eden-like nature, her lover to the world of religious harmony which steeps in the charming melody of Solomon's songs and the taking chants of the David's Psalms. In contrast, the young lover emphasizes the state of disorder in the city, which is full of lamenting, sighing, weeping, and mourning of the poor children and the miserable mothers who are trapped in the tangle of the society:

The souls of the children in the quarter tremble
And hunger gnaws them
Their mothers lie in anguish on their beds of misery and care,
And dreams of want make the hearts
of idle men afraid.
I hear deep lament and bitter sighing
That fill the very bones with weeping
And mourning . (11. 63-70)

The young girl, then, begins to talk about love as another manifestation of nature. In Gibran's writing, love is the most distinctive feature of nature, "where the branches embraced and flowers inclined one to another and the birds dallied. Where nature in everything preached the gospel of the Spirit." (Gibran , " A Tale " , *A Tear and a Smile* , 7) Thus, the girl is employed as a mouthpiece to declare Gibran's cult of love as manifested in nature:

The fragrance of lily and narcissus
Rises, and kisses the jasmine's perfume,
And mingles with sweet breath of cedar
Riding on the breeze above hillocks and winding path;
Filling with love the spirit
And granting it longing
To take the air in flight . (11 . 71-77)

Yet, the emotional picture of love which is portrayed by Gibran has a terrible antithesis . The young lover of Gibran's poem introduces to the atmosphere of the poem a pestilent image of the city which abounds in plague, disease, and poison:

Foul odors from the narrow ways arise,
Mixing with sickness and disease,
And like hidden arrows sharpened, wound
The sense, and the good air fill with poison . (11. 78-81)

Time in the poem shifts smoothly from night to day. The natural order is also idealized by Gibran since he believes that the universal law which governs nature is a manifestation of the omnipotence and omnipresence of God . (Hawi 122) This is shown through the girl's description of the quiet, and peaceful scene during the shifting of night at the break of dawn:

The morning is come, beloved,
And fingers of wakefulness caress
The eyes of them that slumber.
The violet rays are rising from beyond the hills
To toss aside and covering of night
From off life's splendor and power.

The villages resting in stillness and peace upon the shoulder of the valley
Are awakened. (11. 82-89)

The image of the peace and tranquility that Gibran portrays is presented first through the quiet atmosphere of the natural scene, and, then, through the ringing of the “church bells” which fills the ether of nature with pleasant sounds. When the sound of the bells penetrates into the caves of the valleys, its echo is sent back in the air as if nature rises to pray and to declare the time of prayer. Here, Gibran, once again, presents the image of the religious and spiritual serenity of nature:

Church bells ring out their praises,
And fill the air with pleasing sounds
Telling that the hour of prayer is nigh.
The caves throw back their chimes in echo
As though all nature stood in prayer . (11. 90-94)

The girl goes on to emphasize the image of peace through her description of meadows, where calves, sheep, and goats pasture in the grassy field, and the shepherds blow their pipes with beautiful tunes. The tunes of the pipes symbolize the harmony and the state of joy and love that the scene inspires :

The calves have left their stalls
And the sheep and goats their pen;
They are gone to the meadows to pasture
And eat of the dew-laden glistening grass.
Before them shepherds walk, playing on their pipes,
And behind them the maidens, greeting with the birds morning’s coming . (11. 95-100)

In contrast with the girl’s image of nature, the young lover’s description of the coming of the morning in the city enhances the state of its disruption and desperation. The city is presented as a battlefield and an arena of strife, dispute, avarice, cunning, deception, and death, where people usurp the rights and gains of each other, and the victims are the poor and the weak:

The morning is come, beloved,
And upon the crowded, dwellings
Day’s heavy hand is laid.
Curtains are drawn back from windows
And doors are thrown open.
Tired eyes and troubled face are revealed
And despairing souls betake themselves to toil.
Within their bodies death side by side with life;
And the shadows of fear and misery stand astride their tightened features
As though they are driven to the shambles.
Behold the streets groaning with press of hurrying
covetous souls;
The air filled with clank of iron, the grinding
of wheels and whistle of steam.
The city is becoming a battlefield wherein the
strong contend with the weak,
And the wealthy harvest the labor of the poor . (11. 101-117)

The spiritual dialogue between the loves finalizes with the young girl’s praise of the blessed life in nature that she compares to the heart of the poet :

How beautiful is life, beloved-
This like the heart of a poet
Full of light and spirit. (11. 118-120)
In his turn, the young lover affirms his damnation by the city life, comparing it with the heart of the evildoer:
How harsh is life, beloved-
This like an evildoer’s heart
Full of guilt and fear. (11. 121-123)

The lovers ultimate spiritual communication endorses Gibran’s vision of the unrecoverable demonic status of the city life which threatens to demolish the grandeur and sanctity of country - side . The vision is realistic, grim but inevitable .For Gibran and Wordsworth as well the heart of the problem lies in modern man’s transgression and willful retreat from his natural world : To experience transcendentalism and spiritual liberation from the somber reality of living in cities , he has to reconcile himself with his original condition of innocence and integral merging of his soul with natural world .

Conclusion

Gibran Khalil Gibran was a man whose fame and influence spread beyond the near East .His poetry has been translated into more than twenty languages .(Suheil Bushrui ." Kahlil Gibran: Poet of the Ecology of Life ") Gibran believed that the genuine poet is the one who absorbs the foreign impact and turns the suitable in them into new forms. Accordingly ,he was open to the influence of the Western literature, particularly that of the English Romanticism , lead by the legend of the picaresque poetry, William Wordsworth . The above study shed the light particularly on the romantic content of Gibran's philosophies on nature that were born out of his knowledge of Wordsworth's ideologies . He was overwhelmed with Wordsworth's viewpoints about nature that he dedicated his prose poem *Munajat Arwah* to the exploration of its self – nurturing impact on those who spiritually intertwine with its being.

From this standpoint , we can conclude that Gibran's masterpiece , *Munajat Arwah* , records his nostalgia for such spiritual entry into wholeness with the natural world while living in the compounds of industrial cities in the States .Hence ,metaphorically speaking , the young girl of the countryside in the poem is his native homeland Bisharri and the youth is Gibran himself .He is in a state of nostalgia for the Bisharri of his past . He is ,thus, perusing a spiritual dialogue with it so that to highlight the missing beauty of his boyhood among the breath- taking grandeur of villages and mountains of Lebanon , compared to the dreariness of living in the gaint cities of the West .Gibran's reminiscence of his youth in Bisharri through his spiritual communion with it illustrates that he is not only a lover of nature , but he is also , like his distinguished romantic guide William Wordsworth, increasingly involved in urging modern man 's journey back to nature for self- resurrection.

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