

## Walt Whitman and Arabic Immigrant Poet Gibran Khalil Gibran

### WALT WHITMAN ET POET IMMIGRE ARABE GIBRAN KHALIL GIBRAN

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**Abstract:** Whitman influenced greatly on modern Arabic poetry in general and its prose poetry in particular through Gibran Khalil Gibran, the most famous and important Arabic immigrant poet that had ever lived in America for a long time. We can find in Gibran and Whitman's works that they shared strong similarity in their poetics and thoughts. Gibran's prose poetry, first of all, is of the same origin as Whitman's in his creative language. Both of them are adept at creating original images by ingenious combination of words. In the second place, just like Whitman's poetry, Gibran's works possess an awfully aesthetic sense of music. Like Whitman, Gibran uses graceful rhythm to manifest musical aesthetic feeling in his production. In the third place, both of Whitman and Gibran are good at using colors. Some of their poems are almost a collection of colors. Gibran and Whitman also express some similar thoughts in their works. Both of them did not advocate the tradition so much Gibran is as sharp as Whitman in his rebellious spirit. Also, it is very explicit that both of Whitman and Gibran are mystic. We'll focus our discussion on their characteristics of pantheism and natural occultism.

**Keywords:** Walt Whitman, Gibran Khalil Gibran, Arabic Immigrant Poem, prose poetry

**Résumé:** Gibran Khalil Gibran, comme d'autres poètes et écrivains arabes immigrés aux Etats-Unis, fut influencé par la littérature américaine, notamment par les proses poétiques de Walt Whitman. La création littéraire de ces deux grands écrivains fait preuve d'une grande affinité en innovation linguistique, musicalité textuelle, jeu de couleurs, esprit de révolte et recherche du mystique en constituant une parfaite illustration de la communication et les convergences entre la littérature orientale et la littérature occidentale, et surtout celle de l'acceptation de la dernière par la précédente.

**Mots-clés:** Walt Withman, Gibran Khalil Gibran, Littérature arabe immigrante aux Etats-Unis, Proses poétiques

Whitman's poetry has a great impact on world literatures. A Czechoslovakian critic once pointed out that "the new poetic realm opened up by Whitman means similarly to the poetry in Asia, America and Europe..." (Li Yeguang, 1988, p.381.)

In fact, Whitman influenced greatly on modern Arabic poetry in general and its prose poetry in particular. His influence on Arabic prose poetry came from some immigrant poets and writers who lived in America. The most famous and important Arabic immigrant poet is Gibran Khalil Gibran (1883-1931). We can find in Gibran and Whitman's works that they shared strong similarity in their poetics and thoughts.

#### 1

Gibran's prose poetry, first of all, is of the same origin as Whitman's in his creative language. Both of them are adept at creating original images by ingenious combination of words. Whitman often interweaves nonrepresentational things with familiar words, thus producing such powerful expressions as "I Sing the Body Electric", "To the Man-of-War-Bird", "Give me the splendid silent sun", "Over the carnage rose prophetic a voice", "Ethiopia saluting the colors", "Whispers of heavenly death", etc. (These are just some topics of his poems, and we can read more powerful expressions in the texts of his poems.) Gibran takes fresh gentle yet distinct popular words in his works to

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construct a new and refined linguistic style, which is abound in imagination and sensation with moral profundity and philosophical abstruseness. In his Arabic prose-poetry anthology *Tears and Smiles*, we can find such expressions as “the fair Azrael”, “the virtuous mermaid”, “the mysterious ghost”, “the fairy that gives directions”, “the kindly grandsire of era”, “the fragrant girl of the forest”, “God of sagaciousness”, “the queen of fantasy”, and “God of madness”, etc.

In the second place, just like Whitman’s poetry, Gibran’s works possess an awfully aesthetic sense of music. Whitman’s melodious poems have been highly appraised by many critics. To Whitman, poetry is a musical instrument, sending out dulcet tone with a grand main melody. His enthusiastic songs of praise with remote and euphemistically musical sound echo like a thunder in the summer sky or an organ melody with sublime rhythm. Taking its tonality as a whole, we will find that almost every page is thawed in a splendor low-pitched rhythm. Many of Whitman’s poems contain a kind of harmonious cadence, giving his poetry a music effect like that of an orchestra. In such poems as “Sea-drift”, “Drum-taps”, “Memories of President Lincoln”, internal music in them gives us a sense of esthetical joviality. And in some others, we can find normal meters that have been transformed.

Like Whitman, Gibran uses graceful rhythm to manifest musical aesthetic feeling in his production. He also claims to express writer’s thought and sensibility without restraint, including restraints of rules and forms of classical poetry. He says that “Khalil makes the rules and forms of classical poetry in perfect order, just like pulling pearls on necklaces. If he had ever wanted these rules and forms to become yardsticks and people to use them to scale one’s ability and wisdom; if he had ever thought of these rules and form to be cords and people to tie idealistic shells on them, he should tear the necklaces he pulled on, and let the pearls fall to the ground.”(Beirut, Dar Sadir, 1949, p286. All of the quotations from Gibran’s Arabic works in this paper are my translation.) It is Khalil, an ancient Arabic literary theorist, who summarized the sixteen forms of Arabic classical poems, and profoundly influenced younger generations in their poetic creation. There are some poets of younger generations, however, who excessively rigidified to follow these classical forms and rules that he had settled, thus restricting the expression of their thoughts and emotion.

Taking this into consideration, Gibran reviewed the traditional forms and rules of Arabic classical poetry, assimilated characteristics of liveliness and multiplex of western poetry, and finally created new forms of Arabic poems. He broke away from the limits of the traditional poetic form, often made the sentences longer or shorter according to the needs of the content, and also made his metrical feet abound in variety. He did not imitate traditional Arabic meters, but often divided a poem into

several stanzas, and wrote different stanzas with different meters so as to express a relatively integrated meaning in each stanza. When he imitated forms of western poetry, he never used it without change. For example, he used the rhyme scheme of abab/cdcd/efef/ghgh in “Song of Night” and that of ababcd/abcd/efcd/efcd/ghid/ghid in “The Sea”. Since the metrical variety in his poems, and irregular length of lines, we can sense the cadence and get the musical aesthetic feeling when we read his poems. It sounds so good! These poems sound violent like gale and rainstorm for a while, and are in a gentle and mild way for another while. His emotion breaks the bondage of the literalness, achieves a powerful inundate permanence chord, and chants a gracious affecting melody. His prose poetry that deeply affected by western poetry attracts many readers because of its appealing aesthetic feeling of music.

In the third place, both of Whitman and Gibran are good at using colors. Some of Whitman’s poems are almost a collection of colors. For example, he writes in *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d*:

Over the breast of the spring, the land, amid cities,  
Amid lanes and through old woods, where lately the  
violets peep’d from the ground, spotting the gray debris,  
Amid the grass in the fields each side of the lanes, passing  
the endless grass,  
Passing the yellow-spear’d wheat, every grain from its  
shroud in the dark-brown fields uprisen,  
Passing the apple-tree blows of White and pink in the  
orchards,  
Carrying a corpse to where it shall rest in the grave,  
Night and day journeys a coffin  
(Walt Whitman, 1982, p.460.)

Here Whitman shows us a lot of colors like gray, yellow, dark-brown, and white, pink and so on. He drew a beautiful voluptuous menu of the spring with violets, gray debris, grass in the fields, yellow-spear’d wheat, dark-brown fields, and white and pink flowers of the apple-tree.

Gibran is also good at using colors. He is not only a poet, but also a painter. He had been to both America and France to study painting. It is said that the famous French statuary artist Rodin had ever supervised him, and praised him, saying that “the world will clap eyes on many things of this Lebanese genius; he will become William Blake in the 20th century.”(Ra’uf S. Musa, 1983, p.24) His practice of painting definitely influenced his literary creation. And the most important influence is his use of colors and tonal emotion. In many of his works, Gibran creates lively and perceptual artistic figures with words rich in colors and imagination, which give the reader a sense of paint, make up tableaus through describing material scenery, reach the artistic conception of “paint in the poem”, thus representing nonfigurative purpose and emotion through sensual works with broad blithesome sentiment or shady sorrowful tonality. Michael Nu’aimah, who

became a good friend of Gibran afterward, exclaimed after reading Gibran's novel *The Broken Wings* that "its writer knows the secret of using colors and tones in his language, knows the secret of creation between colors and tones." (Michael Nu'aimah, 1972, p.160.)

## 2

Gibran and Whitman also express some similar thoughts in their works. Here I'd like to probe into their treachery spirit and thought of mysticism. Whitman was not convinced by any authority. In his poetic city, men and women care nothing for laws. His motto is to resist more and to obey less. He protests to face directly the life and reality, and lays down the tradition and doctrine aside:

Creeds and schools in abeyance,  
Ritiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never  
forgotten.....  
Nature without check with original energy.  
(Walt Whitman, 1982, p.188.)

We can say that Whitman did not advocate the tradition so much. A Chinese professor pointed out that "he did not advocate the tradition so much, it means definite treachery spirit." (Zhao Luorui, 1987.) The fullest representation of Whitman's treachery spirit may be his abandoning prejudice of the society, his appraisal of the body from the bottom of his heart, and his fearless description of sexual intercourse and propagating power.

Gibran is as sharp as Whitman in his treacherous spirit. And their attitudes to sex are more similar. Both of them disregarded the traditional notion of sex and love, boldly expressed their own opinions. We can see in Gibran's paintings many unacceptable naked bodies. In Gibran's paintings, the most important subject is the female. Like Whitman, he did not intensify the erotic things, but took it as an artifice of expression. For example, Whitman described the combination of body and soul as sexual intercourse. This illustrates that the purpose of his writing about sex is not for the sake of sexuality, but for a better expression of himself. And so did Gibran. We can understand that female figures in Gibran's works do not show the details of women's body, but stand as a symbol, a sign, or a silhouette. The figures of naked women in his paintings do not give impression of debauchery, bawdry or lust, but on the contrary, they look like living examples of sanctity and chastity because of the surpassing details. (Yi Hong, 1993, p120-123.)

The conception of love in Gibran's works also deviates from the traditional notion. He even considered passion between man and woman as something dirty in the body but not in the soul. The dirty body in his eyes is not serious, the most important thing is the chaste spirit,

hence he sympathized in one of his short story the heroine who was cheated and lost her virginity and at last lived in a miserable life: "You are wronged, It is he who spites you, he lives in a rich family, he has a lot of money but his heart is parochial.... Ah, Maltah, you are a flower, destroyed at the feet of animals that concealed in the bodies of human being, these feet trampled you cruelly." (Maltah Baniyeh, a short story collected in 'Arus al-Muruj' (The Bride of The Grassland)) In another short story, Gibran molds a figure of a young woman provided with treachery character, the heroine rushes out of the hedge of feudal ethical code, escaped from her old rich husband that she did not love, but reconciled to live with her young poor lover.

Perhaps Gibran goes further beyond Whitman in treating the tradition. Whitman is against some rigid dogmas, but at the same time he emphasizes that the human being can not completely abandon the tradition. While Gibran's traitorous spirit arrives at the degree of "madness". His madness peeps clue in his early short story, *John The madman*, and he becomes "a madman" in his later works such as *The Madman: His Parables and Poems*, *Rainstorm* and other prose poetry anthologies. He makes astonishing speeches shaking the society and the tradition in the dell of life shadow where is overspread death's-heads and remains, cracks himself up as "god of the madness", "god of self", dares to "blaspheme the sun", to "cuss the humankind", to "laugh at the nature". ("The Gravedigger", in *Rainstorm*.) The word of "madman" and "madness" and the other similar words repeatedly appear in his works. Some of them are directly put in the titles, such as "How I Became a Madman", "Night and The Madman", "John The madman", while others appear in the text, such as "The Gravedigger", "Rainstorm" and "Festival Night" in the prose poetry anthology *Rainstorm*, and "Dialogue of Madman and Night", "Seven Incarnations" in another prose poetry anthology *The madman: His Parables and Poems*.

In the prose poetry "How I Became a Madman", Gibran narrates: "My" seven masks were stolen, so "I" had to come to the street with "my" face naked, and people laughed at the man without mask, exclaimed that he was a crazy man, since then the "I" became a "madman". In fact, Gibran Himself was excluded as a "madman" by the conventional standpatters because he also did not use his mask to cover himself up, standing naked under the sun of the truth, daring to whoop, to revolt, boldly announcing his discovery of truths, speaking out the facts. He, therefore, was not only difficult to be accepted by his Arab compatriots, but also was interrogated by some persons in the relatively free western world. Mrs. Robinson, Theodore Roosevelt's sister, said, after reading "My Soul and I Went to the Great Sea to bathe", that "this is destructive and diabolical stuff. We must not encourage such a spirit in our literature. It is contrary to all our forms of morality and true beauty." (Virginia Hilu, Alfred A. Knopf, 1972, p.234.)

But Gibran was not frightened by attacks from many persons. On the contrary, he audaciously admitted his "madness": "The madness in the art is a kind of innovation and in the poetry is a kind of wisdom and sagacity, and the madness toward God is the most devout and reverent adoration." (Michael Nu'aimah, Vol.3, p.113.)

Gibran takes a version of "the madman" to survey the stagnancy and the ossification of the Eastern societies: People there prate more but do little, and act like slaves. "Each of their necks was pushed down by the albatross; each of their hands was corded by bonds." Gibran set eyes on the fact of the Eastern societies, faced it with courage of "the madman". At the same time, he was clear-minded to try to change it: "I let the intent of my construction tend to destroy. In my mind, there is abhorrence of what people regard it as divine, and there is also love of what they hate". ("Rainstorm", in *Rainstorm*.)

It is very explicit that both of Whitman and Gibran are mystic. We'll focus our discussion here on their characteristics of pantheism and natural occultism. Both of them affirm the godhood of human being. Whitman often surpasses idiographic appearance as an occultist, shows us that something can not be seen by ordinary people, as he says that he takes everything material and nonmaterial. He tries to express what we can not explain. Sometimes he gives prominence to "self", and shows the godhood of the self. Whitman regards himself as a man of mould, as a god-like person:

Come, I will make the continent indissoluble,  
I will make the most splendid race the sun ever shone  
upon,  
I will make divine magnetic lands,  
With the love of comrades,  
With the life-long of comrades.  
(The library of America, 1982, p.272.)

Just like the Creator, Whitman here presents himself to people. Like the Genesis of God, he wants to create or change the continent, lands and races. Whitman not only considers himself as a god, but also points out that everyone is sacred, and that godhood exists in everyone's life:

Why should I wish to see God better than this day?  
I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four, and  
each moment then,  
In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own  
face in the glass.....  
(The library of America, 1982, p.244-245.)

Gibran is the same as Whitman, he not only considers himself as "god of madness", but also takes the "godhood" for everyone. He probes into the slavishness, humanity and godhood that exist in the life of mankind. He says:

Like the ocean is your god-self;

It remains for ever undefiled.  
And like the ether it lifts but the winged.  
Even like the sun is your god-self;  
It knows not the ways of the mole nor seeks it the holes of  
the serpent.  
But your god-self dwells not alone in your being.  
Much in you is still man, and much in you is not yet man,  
But a shapeless pigmy that walks asleep in the mist  
searching for its own awakening.  
And of the man in you would I now speak.  
For it is he and not your god-self the pigmy in the mist,  
that knows crime and the  
Punishment of crime.  
(Khalil Gibran, 1974, p.36-37)

In fact, Gibran thought about the development of mankind's spirit. It develops forward along the track of "pigmy (slavishness) – man (humanity) - god (god-self)". Man will not move forward unless humanity is sublime. Human being will not perpetually exist unless he obtains the infinitude/god-self.

In *The Garden of The Prophet*, the companion volume of *The Prophet*, came back to the oriental wise man Almustafa, continued to answer questions of people, deeply talked about the relationship between man and nature, and expatiated more on the "god-self" of mankind. In the process of probing into the infinitude and the "god-self" of mankind, Gibran found the immutability of life and being.

He talks again in *The Garden of The Prophet* about life and being: "In this Garden my father and my mother lie buried by the hands of the living; and in this Garden lie buried the seeds of yesteryear, which had been brought hither upon the wings of wind. A thousand times shall my mother and my father be buried here, and a thousand times will the wind bury the seed; and a thousand years hence shall you and I and these flowers come together in this Garden even as now, and we shall be, loving life, and we shall be, dreaming of space, and we shall be, rising toward the sun." (William Heinemann Ltd., London, 1974, p.38) We can see here that in the versions of Whitman and Gibran, boundary of time and space has been broken. The mysterious power penetrates through the material time and space. Perhaps what Gibran wants to express is not completely the version of Buddhist transmigration, but we can consider it as a kind of spirit transmigration, or as the immutability of the truth. After one had got the truth, it did not mean that the truth will go away with him when he dies. The truth will recur on another person or next generation, hence we obtain one kind of infinitude, only that infinitude in eyes of Gibran is included in the infinitude of God. He says that "Think now, my comrades and beloved, of a heart that contains all your hearts, a love that encompasses all your loves, a spirit that envelops all your spirits, a voice enfolding all your voices, and a silence deeper than all your silences, and timeless." (Ibid., p.32)

Here, human being is no longer the vassal of God, and God is no longer the master of the world, the relationship between God and man is a kind of syncretism. You exit in me, and I exit in you. One can not live without the other even in a very short time. It is very similar to the oriental thoughts of "the syncretism of heaven and man".

Although Gibran provides us a method to acquaintance God, indicating the infinitude of God inside the bodies of human being, god exists in their bodies. But the infinitude of the human being is not the same as God's, and it is impossible for man to embrace the infinitude of God. To the common people, God is still intricate. Thus he advises people to talk little about the unreadable God, but to talk more about each other: "Let us speak no more now of God the Father. Let us speak rather of the gods, your neighbors, and of your brothers... Again I bid you to speak not so freely of God, who is your all, but speak rather and understand one another, neighbor unto neighbor, a god unto a god." "Yet I would have you know that we are the breath and the fragrance of God. We are God, in leaf, in flower, and oftentimes in fruit." (Ibid., pp.33-34)

Another similarity in the mysticism of Whitman and Gibran is the close association to the nature. Whitman can acquire the mysterious revelation in any instance, but we find that revelation especially give prominence to the nature. For example, in the poem *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*, his spirit riots unruly, he thinks of the body and the soul, life and death, takes cognizance of many things that ordinary people can not understand. And Gibran is also easy to discover something in nature when it is late at night, and easy to get perceptual knowledge and any mysterious apocalypse. A Chinese scholar points out that Gibran "clashes the bondage of the religion and material to the heart of human being, and runs to the untrammelled free world." (Li Cheng, 2000, p.73) For example, He writes in the prose poetry "Crying in the field":

It will be daybreak in the east, first sun rays appear in the morning, I sit at the field, fell for converse with the nature.

At the beautiful moment of turning over to the nature, I sit on the viridescent grass, with my head on the bending

humerus, favor to everything I set my eyes on to find out what is the true meaning of beauty, ask everything in front of me to tell me what is the true beauty.

When the imagination isolated me from the land of the living, when the hallucination took off the clout of material that shaded my subjective consciousness, I felt my soul subliming, bringing me to get closer to the nature, it explain for me the secrets of the nature, make understand the languages of everything in the nature.

Of course, Whitman's mysticism is different from Gibran's. The critic James E. Miller, Jr. points out that "certainly in his great and memorable poems, the mystical current is strong, and other themes seem to be carried along by its sheer power and vitality. Perhaps the critical task that lies ahead is not so much the identification of Whitman's mysticism as Eastern or Western, but rather the reconciliation of his mysticism with his strong materialism, his assertion of self, his restless vagabondage, and his celebrated sexuality." (James E. Miller, Jr., 1961, p.18. & William Coyle, 1962, p.296-297.) And Gibran's thought about mysticism completely belongs to oriental mysticism. He came from the Eastern world, and profoundly understood the mysticism of Arab-Islamic cultural system. When he was in the U. S., he lived in a Chinatown and was affected by the version of Chinese and Indian mysterious cultures.

## CONCLUSION

There are many other similar things between Whitman and Gibran, such as their pursue of love and beauty, their feeling of hobnobbing with death, their advocating of democracy and freedom and so on, but we can not entirely include all these things in a short paper. We can not allege that Gibran was only affected by Whitman, because he had also been affected by many other western poets, writers and ideologist, but on the artistic form of the prose poetry and some material thoughts, we can not deny Whitman's infection on Gibran.

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