

# Gibran's Orphalese, the Erotic City

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## **Abstract**

This paper investigates Gibran's erotic spirituality and his conception of space and body. God, space and body are but one entity, and space creates and defends (sexual) identity, and gender.

Images and symbols are tightly related to the spiritual life of Gibran (1883-1931) and his religious experience. Is it not a reason why he has always been in search for the terrestrial heaven through his travels and geographic migrations? Symbolism resides deep in the strata of his subconscious and manipulates him. As a result, the man lives in a symbolic world aiming at recreating either the primordial time or paradise where the perfect man, Adam, before his Fall used to live happily. There is certainly nostalgia for that remote time when man used to live in the bosom of his Mother Nature. We are, from a psychoanalytical perspective, in the midst of the Oedipus complex. Is that the essence of man's quest for heaven? Gibran Kahlil Gibran articulates transgression, liminality and a rite of passage to achieve spiritual Enlightenment in the erotic city of Orphalese. Is this the reason why he wants to recreate the lost paradise and re-enact the sacred past? It is certainly a plausible reason to which we can add the overwhelming influence of starting psychoanalysis, sciences, rationality, and other cultures. Let us not forget that in this 'fin de siècle' occultism; there was an eager need to revisit lost civilizations, unimagined lands and weird places for a better society, with primitive cults and beliefs, paganism, free love and an openness to homosexuality. Gibran's *The Prophet* (1923) leads us in his mystical Orphalese from the mountain to the temple to the body. The name of the city suggests both Orph(eus) + ales or Ur + phallus. Therefore, space equates temple and body.

**Key Words:** Gibran, religion, body, liminality, transgression, sun, mountain, landscape, sex, homosexuality.

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According to Bal, space is above all place and character's perception of this space. 'There are three senses which are especially involved in the perceptual representation of space: sight, hearing, and touch'.<sup>1</sup> Gibran's *The Prophet* (1923) uses space, a city, as a focal theme of sacredness. Space becomes what Bal calls 'an acting place'.<sup>2</sup>

The Prophet comes down from the hill and heads towards the city named Orphalese. Though the city has no real existence, the construction of its name is very significant. It consists of *Orph* + *alese*. One might straightforward think of

*Orpheus* and *ales* as a suffix. However, it also denotes another significance. Ur + Phallus. Orphalese is built upon the Arabic name of Jerusalem, itself borrowed from the Aramaic name *Orshalim*, or Urshalim, the City of Peace. It is the encounter of the historic city and the mythical one, a meeting point between the myth of Orpheus and the sacredness of the geographic city.

Whatever is beyond that space is the home of death and demons. The city sits in the primordial space when the latter was a garden with stars and mythical zodiacal beings. The prophet claims that this space belongs to a primordial time 'And that that which sings and contemplates in you is still dwelling within the bounds of that first moment which scattered the stars into space'.<sup>3</sup> These mythical cities are between the upper world and the inferior regions in the archaic or mythical mentality.

Mapping Orphalese, the following scheme appears. The hill/mountain is, geographically, located in the East. The sea overlaps the fields and vineyards, and then we have the city gates and the temple inside the city where the prophet goes. The isle of his birth is in the East too because the hill is also called the isle of his birth, where the sun rises. Therefore, both the mountain and the isle of birth, Orphalese, constitute only one place, and this place is located in the East.

The story offers several natural benchmarks to its narrative description. We have the sun, the mountain, the sea, and the temple as the meeting points of the sacred. The sun is the Self 'Even like the sun is your god-self'.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the body stays in the middle of Gibran's cosmogony and philosophy, and the transcendence departs from the touch.

The cosmic mountain and caves are a parallel symbolism that unites the Sky with the Earth. Sacred mountains play an important role in some myths and religions alike. The Greeks have held ambivalent conceptions of the caves. For Plato, for instance, the cave is the place of the 'unenlightened and uneducated, forced to live in the darkness of ignorance'<sup>5</sup>, but it is also a place that hides 'awe-inspiring secrets and treasures'.<sup>6</sup> It is the dwelling place of immortals as well as monsters and Cyclopes.

For Mircea Eliade, the cosmic mountain is not only the highest point, but also the navel of the earth and the point of creation. The cave was the place of burial but rebirth as well<sup>7</sup>, the symbol of the uterus<sup>8</sup>. In fact, the novella is a story of a (re)birth/delivery, and the nascent descending prophet carries a gender disorder right from the beginning because of the miraculous birth, He has no male chromosomes. He must be a female. The prophet(ess) also claims his/her birth at the end of the novella 'A little while, a moment of rest upon the wind, and another woman shall bear me.'<sup>9</sup>

Gibran's prophetism springs from the theosophical literature. A prophet thinks his mission is to save people, humanity, and civilization. His prophetic ideas teach that man created god, heaven and hell are but a creation of the human mind, and above all religion should reconnect man to the universe. Following a Western

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esoteric vein, Gibran uses an erotic spirituality, which aims at connecting organically man with the cosmos to obtain a godly identity.

However, the prophet, a parody of Jesus coming from the inferior world, also reminds us of the zombie, a dead living individual who staggers to life, coming from death. The choice of the monstrous goes hand in hand with Gibran's prophetism and Shildrick would also agree that 'the pertinence of the monstrous ... is determined not only by the contested terrain of a particular historical moment, but by the always already problematic ontology of human being'.<sup>10</sup>

It might be weird that the madman, a forerunner of the prophet and another parody of Jesus, behaves like a vampire too, requesting to drink his own blood for who would come from the realm of the dead if not a creature of the devil? His forerunner claims he is a child of the night. 'Night is over, and we children of night must die when dawn comes leaping upon the hills...'<sup>11</sup>

The vampire illustrates man's cultural anxieties, and the hunger 'is symbolically related to women's predatory sexuality and aggression'<sup>12</sup>. However, to carry on with vampires; 'vampires are overtly and aggressively sexual'.<sup>13</sup> This sexual appetite is going to be satisfied once he preys on his victim. The madman's victim is certainly a man! 'I thirsted—and I besought you to give me my blood to drink. For what is there can quench a madman's thirst but his own blood?'<sup>14</sup> The latent homosexual and androgenic aspect of his behaviour is very self-revealing. The vampire's body does not decay, but he is without soul, a living body. Yet, he is immortal.

Gibran's character is a madman in a previous life and a prophet for the glory of the flesh in a second one through his reincarnation law. It is the primitive part of the brain that is supposed to manifest because the legend of the vampire is related to the sexual desire and sexual transgression.

The prophet is the bridge between a sacred and a profane world. Like a ghost, he comes for some symbolic quest, perhaps not properly buried, or to reveal a secret, as in the case of Hamlet's father.<sup>15</sup> Both the vampire and the zombie are gothic creatures, dead yet undead; they are worried individuals, behaving through body rather than brain.

Almustafa is an erotic prophet. Outrageously, he is risen in the flesh. He comes to Orphalese to preach an occult religion. He expresses his desire through the sleeping-awakening process, gratification of senses, sickness and pain, hunger and thirst. The novella expresses a sexual intercourse. The temple is the sacred space for the sexual relation, where resurrection happens and the prophet acquires identity and a name: Almustafa. The city is the virgin woman that the male prophet 'deflowers'. In other places, it is the Empty Quarter, but it is certainly the veiled land. Veil is very often associated with virginity in Sufi literature.<sup>16</sup> Gibran's mystical and clearly erotic poem 'The Veiled Land' is revealing of the desired hidden sexual intercourse, so dear to the Western esoteric tradition. Thus, he chants his longings, desire, and the fire for the virgin.

The prophet, as an unnamed actor, seems to have no historical background. With the absence of a proper name, it is a total effacement of identity. However, how does genre identity relate to the novella? The sexual biological identity does not appear although the prophet claims manhood and the temple sexual intercourse is a hint. Nevertheless, he goes through gestation and expects a delivery.

Gibran's struggle is the struggle for creating a personal identity. The only woman of his novella does not exist and as such, the close erotic relationship is a latent homosexuality leading towards the male pregnancy.

Gibran, who was influenced by Havelock Ellis (1859-1939), was certainly sensitive to the political discourse of homosexuality and wanted to end the oppression under which this category of people were. Gibran does not use evident body inclinations towards male characters. In an ironic manner, and describing the "perfect world", he enlists, through his parable 'The Perfect World' in his *The Madman*, all its virtues:

Their virtues, O God, are measured, their sins are weighed, and even the countless things that pass in the dim twilight of neither sin nor virtue are recorded and catalogued<sup>17</sup>

The madman continues his irony while describing love in this perfect world as "to love according to an established order".<sup>18</sup> According to Gibran, it is hypocrisy of the socio-cultural and political order. People need to understand and listen to the consciousness of freedom, to love and practice love with freedom, and be either Jonas or the Whale, the butterfly or the rose, according to his mystical parables. So, homosexuality is perceived only through his spiritual path. It is thought of as being a rebellion against the socio-political and cultural order

All these things, O God, are conceived with forethought, born with determination, nursed with exactness, governed by rules, directed by reason, and then slain and buried after a prescribed method. And even their silent graves that lie within the human soul are marked and numbered<sup>19</sup>

Society, especially the oriental one, just like religion, is judgemental and does not accept marginal sexual orientations while Gibran looks for the equality of sexes, equality of genders, and equality of all marginal sexualities. Queer theory, according to Annamarie Jagose<sup>20</sup>, tries to set itself as a historical discourse for homosexuality and genre ambiguities. It is also closely associated to cross-dressing, and Gibran uses a mystical discourse to express sexualities and cross-dressing:

Upon a day Beauty and Ugliness met on the shore of a sea. And they said to one another, "Let us bathe in the sea."

Then they disrobed and swam in the waters. And after a while Ugliness came back to shore and garmented himself with the garments of Beauty and walked away.

And Beauty too came out of the sea, and found not her raiment, and she was too shy to be naked, therefore she dressed herself with the raiment of Ugliness. And Beauty walked her way.

And to this very day men and women mistake the one for the other<sup>21</sup>

The body is a social construct, just like sexualit(ies), and Gibran's use of the monstrous is a denunciation of not only women's persecution but the destruction of all that is suppressed and repressed. Shildrick thinks 'the body in question must be read primarily through its capacity to instantiate new norms of sexuality, production or reproduction'.<sup>22</sup> Gibran's spiritual quest starts with impotence, pregnancy to find fulfilment in sacred homosexuality. It starts with the construction of the body to accept the androgynous self. In fact, it is during the prophet's pregnancy that the body is reconfigured, built, reconstructed to achieve androgyny. This is an idea expressed by Shildrick who claims that bodies are 'constructed rather than given'.<sup>23</sup>

Therefore, the whole birth process is from cave/uterus to life/uterus. We have the impression that the whole story happens in the bosom of the mother's womb/uterus. It is the monstrous (ur)phallus-vagina city. However, in Gibran's *The Prophet*, space is right from the beginning holy and sacred, there is no territory to the sacred and another to the profane. Space is the matrix. The Prophet goes even farther synthesizing space with god, so that territory and sovereignty of space belong to god. He says

And if you would know God be not therefore a solver of riddles.  
Rather look about you and you shall see Him playing with your children.

And look into space; you shall see Him walking in the cloud,  
outstretching His arms in the lightning and descend<sup>24</sup>

However, space is body for Gibran because god is man and man is god. The fluidity of the body reflects man's vulnerability, and the monstrous 'liminal being'<sup>25</sup> is both sacred and profane,

Monsters, then, are deeply disturbing; neither good nor evil,  
inside nor outside, not self or other. On the contrary, they are

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always liminal, refusing to stay in place, transgressive and transformative. They disrupt both internal and external order, and overturn the distinctions that set out the limits of the human subject<sup>26</sup>

. The real world starts from the inner body, from self. The order is very important to understand sacredness. It is the vision of a prophet and not an ordinary man. The idea of nearness and distance is crucial too. Gibran's world belongs to an invisible world, and space belongs to an unreal or rather an eclipsing imaginary world that would fit the city of Orphalese. Space emerges from the deep structures of the mind. This provides a plausible reason why characters are foggy, invisible, and nameless. In fact, only Almitra, whose strange name drowns us, even deeper in the unknown, owns a name. Nothing seems real, not even words that describe the inner self, or the physical sacred reality unless they are sacred and uttered from God. Thus, the prophet says,

It is enough that you enter the temple invisible. I cannot teach you how to pray in words. God listens not to your words save when He Himself utters them through your lips<sup>27</sup>

With Orphalese, the author hints at heaven-like space. It is probably attributed to his Biblical influence and quest for the original home of humanity. Heaven is used metaphorically to express a state of mind rather than a metaphysical space where the good and the faithful would live eternally. It is rather strange that a sacred abode for the good is not profusely mentioned in the novella. Gibran uses it only twice. It is certain that the quarrel with Christianity makes him deny the existence of such a place. Heaven is more in this world than in the other. Instead of paradise, he goes to Orphalese.

This idealistic vision of the holy city is to be recollected along with the destruction of the temple. Although no such destruction is mentioned, the sanctuary provides different meanings in Gibran's story. For him, 'Your daily life is your temple and your religion'.<sup>28</sup> The temple was also often the ideal place for sacred prostitution. This was famous in Babylon, ancient Israel, and Egypt, and then such religions were exported to the West while remnants of it exist in Christianity. Sex in the temple was part of pagan fertility cults and was also supposed to be sacred and bring the blessings of the gods. It was either for male deities like Baal Peor, the religious variant of Priapus, 'in honour of whom women and virgins prostituted themselves'<sup>29</sup> or female deities like Ishtar or Astarte. The temple was always related to the sun, and we know that in Gibran's story, Orphalese is Eastward, therefore the temple, where 'Beauty shall rise with the dawn from the east'<sup>30</sup> is consequently in the East. So the temple is related to a fertility cult, dedicated to the goddess mother with priestesses. In Gibran's novella,

we do not have evidence about sex in the temple. All we know is that he was inside the temple as the story finishes with him going down the steps of the sanctuary. 'Then he descended the steps of the Temple and all the people followed him'.<sup>31</sup>

It is therefore important to conclude that space is resumed to the temple, the body. The socio-cultural construction is epistemologically structured on the conception of the body and how it organizes and reorganizes this vision within the Greco-Roman civilization and the Judeo-Christian tradition. The whole cultural process is about the geography of the body. It is the appropriation of the body-spirit dualism as one and inseparable. The duality is the product of a patriarchal and manly reason that needs to be overcome. For Gibran, the temple is the indivisible man according to his parable 'Philemon a Greek apothecary' in *Jesus the Son of Man*

He entered the temple of the soul, which is the body; and He beheld the evil spirits that conspire against our sinews, and also the good spirits that spin the threads thereof<sup>32</sup>

The erotic, androgynous, pregnant body should be monstrous. The city, an intra-uterine world, heaven and hell as well looks monstrous. The idea of monstrosity is to assess the vulnerable and to acknowledge its normativity; it is also, as put by Shildrick 'to contest the binary that opposes the monstrous to the normal'.<sup>33</sup> The monstrous birth, the use of the vampire/zombie/monster probably reflects the women's struggle (first feminist period) in America and their eternal suffering in the Orient and a will to 'a reinstatement of the feminine'.<sup>34</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Mieke Bal, *Narratology Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 133.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>3</sup> Gibran Kahlil Gibran, *The Collected Works* (New York: Everyman's Library, 2007), 138.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>5</sup> Ustinova, Yulia. *Caves and the Ancient Greek Mind, Descending Underground in the Search for Ultimate Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 01.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 01.

<sup>7</sup> Eliade, Mircea. *Cosmos and History* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959), 16.

<sup>8</sup> —. *Images et Symboles* (Saint - Amand: Gallimard, 1986), 54.

<sup>9</sup> Gibran Kahlil Gibran, *The Collected Works*, 160.

<sup>10</sup> Margrit Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster, Encounters with the Vulnerable Self*, (London: Sage Publications, 2002), 03.

<sup>11</sup> Gibran, *The Collected Works*, 91.

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- <sup>12</sup> Anna Krugovoy Silver, *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 117.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.
- <sup>14</sup> Gibran, *The Collected Works*, 39.
- <sup>15</sup> Colin Davis, *Haunted subjects: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, and the Return of the Dead* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 03.
- <sup>16</sup> Mahdi Tourage, *Rūmī and the Hermeneutics of Eroticism* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 71.
- <sup>17</sup> Gibran, *The Collected Works*, 47.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.
- <sup>20</sup> Annamarie R. Jagose, *Queer Theory, An Introduction* (NY: New York University Press, 1996), 06.
- <sup>21</sup> Gibran Kahlil Gibran, *The Collected Works*, 452.
- <sup>22</sup> Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster*, 02.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 04.
- <sup>24</sup> Gibran, *The Collected Works*, 141.
- <sup>25</sup> Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster*, 04.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 04.
- <sup>27</sup> Gibran, *The Collected Works*, 141.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.
- <sup>29</sup> Stephanie Lynn Budin, *The Myth of Sacred Prostitution in Antiquity*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 37.
- <sup>30</sup> Gibran, *The Collected Works*, 146.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.
- <sup>33</sup> Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster*, 03.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 02.

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