

KHALIL THE HERETIC ON LIBERTY

A new Translation from the Arabic

by Suheil Badi Bushrui



Suheil Badi Bushrui is Associate Professor of English at the American University of Beirut. He is a former student of this University and is a Ph.D. of Southampton University (England). He has taught at the Universities of Ibadan (Nigeria), Calgary and York (Canada). He has lectured in various African, American, English, and European Universities. In 1963 he was awarded the Una Ellis-Formor Prize in English Literature for his work on W.B. Yeats, on whom he has written and edited three important books. He has also published a book on Khalil Gibran and has written on English, Arabic and African Literatures as well as on Anglo-Irish Literature, his main interest. He edits *Al-Haziah* (the Arabic version of the celebrated French Literary Magazine *La Dé-lirante*) and is on the Steering Committee of the International Association for the Study of Anglo-Irish Literature (ISAIL). He is now, in his capacity as Festival Secretary, organizing the forthcoming International Gibran Festival due to take place between May and June, 1970.

From the depths of these depths
We call you, O Liberty — hear us!
From the corners of this darkness
We raise our hands, in supplication — turn your
gaze towards us!
On the expanse of these snows
We lay ourselves prostrate before you, have
compassion upon us!

We stand now before your terrible throne
Wearing the blood-smeared garments of our fathers;
Covering our heads with the dust of the tombs mingled
with their remains;
Drawing the swords which have been sheathed
in their entrails;
Raising the spears that have pierced their breasts;
Dragging the chains that have withered their feet;
Crying aloud cries that have wounded their throats,
And lamentations that have filled the darkness of their
prisons;
Praying prayers that have sprung out of the pain of
their hearts —
Listen, O Liberty, and hear us!

From the sources of the Nile to the estuary of
the Euphrates
The wailing of souls, surging with the scream of
the abyss, rises;
From the frontiers of the peninsula to the
mountains of Lebanon
Hands are outstretched to you, trembling in the
agony of death;
From the coast of the gulf to the ends of the desert
Eyes are uplifted to you with pining hearts —
Turn, O Liberty, and look upon us.



Khalil Gibran

KAHLIL GIBRAN is Lebanon's greatest poet. He was born on December 6th, 1883 and died on April 10th, 1931. He studied in his homeland but spent most of his life in America, where many of his countrymen had found refuge from the tyranny of foreign rule and foreign intervention. He wrote prolifically in Arabic and English, and distinguished himself in America and Europe as a painter and sculptor; his art has been likened to that of Rodin, the great French sculptor of the early twentieth century. Gibran is one of the most distinguished figures amongst the Arab writers and intellectuals of this century. He was one of the first writers to use "free verse" effectively in Arabic poetry; and in his use of imagery, rhythm and poetic forms, he broke new ground and greatly influenced successive generations of Arab poets and writers. "Khalil the Heretic on Liberty" comes from one of his earliest Arabic works entitled *Spirits Rebellious*, first published in 1908.

In the corners of huts standing in the shadow of
poverty and humiliation,
Breasts are being beaten before you;
In the emptiness of houses erected in the darkness
of ignorance and folly,
Hearts are cast before you;
And in the corners of houses buried in the clouds
of oppression and tyranny,
Spirits are longing for you —
Look upon us, O Liberty, and have compassion.

In schools and offices
Despairing youth calls upon you;
In the churches and mosques
The forsaken book invites you;
In the councils and courts
The neglected law implores you —
Have pity, O Liberty, and save us.

In our narrow streets
The merchant barter his days only to pay the
thieves from the west,*
And none is there to advise him!
In our barren fields
The peasant ploughs the earth with his finger-nails,
And sows the seeds of his heart and waters them
with his tears,
And nothing does he harvest save thorns and thistles,
And none is there to teach him!
In our empty plains

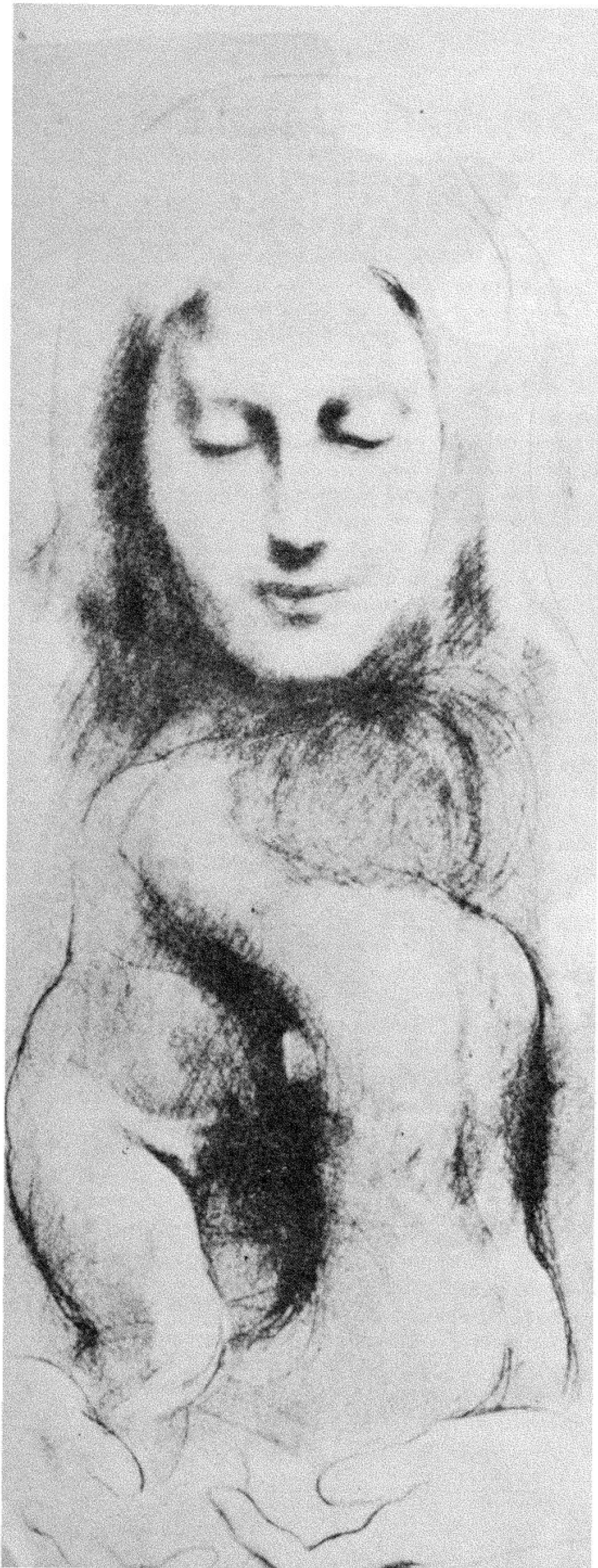
The Bedouin walks bare-foot, naked and hungry
And none is there to have mercy upon him —
Speak, O Liberty, and teach us.

From the very beginning the darkness of the
night has descended upon our souls —
How long until the dawn?
From prison to prison our bodies move, and the
Mocking ages pass us by—
How long are we to bear the mockery of the ages?
From yoke to heavier yoke our necks do pass
And the nations of the earth look at us and laugh—
How long shall we endure the mockery of nations?
From fetters to fetters our path leads us
And neither do the fetters disappear nor do we perish—
How long shall we remain alive?

From the grasp of Pharaoh
To the claws of Nebuchadnezzar;
To the nails of Alexander;
To the swords of Herod;
To the claws of Nero;
To the fangs of the devil;
Whose yoke is going to enslave us now?
And when shall we fall within the grasp of death
to find comfort away from the silence of nonexistence

With the strength of our arms they erected the pillars
of their temples and shrines to glorify their gods;
On our backs they brought clay and stones to build
castles to strengthen their strongholds;
And with the power of our bodies they built pyramids
to render their names immortal;
How long are we to build castles and palaces
And live but in huts and caves?

* The reference is to those European Powers which were trying to secure their interests in the Middle East between 1900-1914



How long are we to fill granaries and stores
And eat nothing but garlic and clover?
How long are we to weave silk and wool
And be clad in tattered cloth?

Through their cunning and treachery they have set
clan against clan;
Have separated group from group;
Have sown the seeds of hate twit tribe and tribe—
How long are we then to wither like ashes before this
cruel hurricane,
And fight like hungry young lions near this
stinking carcass?

In order to secure their power and to rest at heart's
ease they have armed the Durzi to fight the Arab;
Have instigated the Shi'i against the Sunni;
Have incited the Kurd to slaughter the Bedouin;
Have encouraged the Mohammadan to fight the
Christian —
How long is a brother to fight his brother on the breast
of the mother?
How long is a neighbour to threaten his neighbour
near the tomb of the beloved?
How long are the Cross and the Crescent to remain
apart before the eyes of God?

Listen, O Liberty, and harken unto us
Turn your gaze towards us, O mother of the
earth's inhabitants,
For we are not the offspring of your rival;
Speak with the tongue of any one of us
For from one spark the dry straw catches fire;
Awaken with the sound of your wings the spirit
of one of our men
For from one cloud one lightning flash illuminates
valley-lanes and mountain-tops.
Disperse with your resolve these dark clouds;
Descend as a thunderbolt,
Destroy like a catapult
The props of those thrones erected on bones
and skulls,
Plated with the gold of taxes and bribery
And soaked in blood and tears.

Listen to us, O Liberty,
Have compassion on us, O Daughter of Athens,
Rescue us, O Sister of Rome,
Save us, O Companion of Moses,
Come to our aid, O Beloved of Mohammad,
Teach us, O Bride of Jesus,
Strengthen our hearts that we may live.