

Thoughts of a Mystic

TEARS AND LAUGHTER. By Kahlil Gibran. Edited and with a Preface by Martin L. Wolf. Translated from the Arabic by Anthony Rizcallah Ferris. 128 pp. New York: Philosophical Library. \$2.75.

By ROBERT HILLYER

THESSE early poems and stories by Kahlil Gibran appear in a smooth translation by Anthony R. Ferris, with an eloquent foreword by Martin L. Wolf and some tall superlatives by the publisher. Gibran, whose book "The Prophet" has become a guest room classic, was born in the shadow of Mount Lebanon. In his young manhood he went into exile in France, became the friend of Rodin and subsequently settled in New York, where he spent the latter half of his life. Apart from his oriental heritage, the chief influence on his works, both literary and graphic, was that of Blake.

Many of the main ideas of both Blake and Gibran are the coinage of mysticism—from India to the neo-Platonists, the Renaissance occultists, Jakob Bohme and Swedenborg. The descent of man into the material universe is a cosmic mistake or punishment. "Why have you left the spiritual world and come to share with me the bitterness of earthly life?" asks Gibran's poverty-stricken woman of her newborn child. The body is a drag on the soul and death is the blessing that sets the soul free. "Come, oh beautiful Death," says the dying poet, "my soul is longing for you. Come close to me and unfasten the irons of life, for I am weary of dragging them." The quest for money or glory is destructive; the revelation of love or pity is divine.

*One hour devoted to the pursuit of Beauty
And Love is worth a full century of glory
Given by the frightened weak to the strong.*

To Gibran, redemption lies in the contemplative life, in the individual's pursuit of his own destiny. In this perfect life, love must not be trammelled by convention and orthodoxy must not impede union with God. And, because Gibran sees the poet as the final stage in the evolution of man, he believes the poet's work will remain, as a monument of suffering, to enlighten future generations.

THESSE "ideas" of Gibran might better be called instincts, for his generalized romantic method shatters logic. His preaching of individualism is nullified by his practice of presenting abstractions: Rich Men, Priests and Rulers are Evil, Poor People, Lovers and Poets are Good. It is Gibran's failure to apply the theory of individualism to art as well as to philosophy that weakens his performance. There may be logic of a kind—but one questions it. Since Injustice creates Poverty and all poor people are good, is not injustice, therefore, a beneficent instrument?

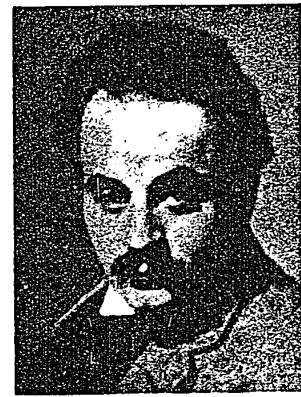
The opening poem in the present volume, "The Creation," states the eternal paradoxes: the moment of joy discernible only by the everlasting sorrow, and death the life-giver. Among the best selections in the book are "The

Creation," "Have Mercy Upon Me, My Soul!" "A Poet's Death Is His Life," "The City of the Dead." "Tears and Laughter," together with "The Prophet," represents the best of Gibran's achievement.

Gibran's writings have gained him a wide following among those sensitive, emotional readers who find their chief pleasure in moods, mysterious and indefinite, which bear them through a cosmic landscape beyond the frets of everyday. No Western writer dealing with such large abstractions would sound natural. But from an oriental source they seem as appropriate as they are exotic. It is an easy magic, too vague to be lasting, but not harmful.

GIBRAN himself I remember from the days before World War I, when I was occasionally taken to his studio by friends. I recall the shadowy studio, the folders of drawings, and a small but dignified Levantine with luminous dark eyes and exquisite hands. I see him making some Turkish coffee with ritualistic care. He told how the young girls on the slopes of Mount Lebanon strewed the spring freshets with flowers, and surmised that the custom was a survival from the ancient rites of Adonis. He spoke of the mysterious moon goddess who evolved from Ashtaroth through Astarte to Artemis. He was deeply interested in the history of the Church of Antioch in spite of his revolt against orthodoxy. He spoke of the sacredness of the poet; and as I was a very young poet, 19 to be exact, I squirmed and smiled with embarrassment, at which he fixed me with his profound gaze, and I felt too awkward and unholy for my high calling. At the insistence of someone present he recited two or three of his parables, which subsequently appeared in "The Prophet." I suppose I could remember more. My general memory is of a man who had devoted his life to Contemplation, to Peace, to Love, to the Life of the Soul and the myriad forms of Beauty. That these virtues too often remain mere capitalized abstractions in his writing diminishes the power but not the timelessness of their presentation.

Mr. Hillyer is the author of several volumes of verse and three novels.



Kahlil Gibran.