

The Troubled Consciences

It seems that there is something unsettled in the Egyptian conscience—something that demands the attention of all who care that this conscience should be calm, content, and at peace. For a troubled conscience is a source of many evils, the least of which is weakness of resolve, dullness of judgment, and hesitation between action and withdrawal—especially in times that require a clear choice between the two.

It is enough to observe a person of anxious conscience and restless spirit to know that such a one is unfit for anything until serenity returns to his heart and stability to his mind. How much worse, then, when this unrest becomes widespread, when the whole community feels unable to trust in anything, to rely on anyone, to act with conviction, or to refrain with deliberation—unable even to judge things or people by thoughtful reflection and sober reasoning.

I do not wish to linger over proposals or take a circuitous path to my purpose. I merely observe that doubt has seeped into everyone's soul. No word is spoken without people suspecting that it conceals a hidden meaning behind its surface, a distant aim behind its apparent one. No action is undertaken without being thought to serve one motive publicly and another secretly. Thus, people have lost the ability to believe one another or to feel secure with one another; trust has vanished, solidarity has become difficult, and society has been driven into a life steeped in suspicion, fear, and ill-will—almost to the point that mistrust itself has become one of the principles of life and a rule of human dealings.

When a nation reaches such a state of anxiety, it stands on the brink of grave peril. It becomes the duty of those who lead and guide it to seek every possible remedy. When I first intended to write about this, I had hoped to treat it with a touch of humour and lightness—but I soon found the matter too serious for jest. So I must speak in earnest, even if earnestness has grown wearisome to writers and readers alike in these times.

Hardly had I published the first of these reflections in *al-Balāgh* than I felt questions swirling around me—people asking one another what I meant, answering each other as best they could, then directing their inquiries toward me. At first, I ignored them, telling myself: *It is natural that people should speculate when one breaks silence after being absorbed in other serious work.* But when I published the second piece, the questions multiplied, the curiosity grew more insistent, and friends and acquaintances began to approach me with their interpretations—what they thought I meant, or what they imagined I had meant.

And so I continued writing while people continued speculating—not merely asking questions, but disagreeing passionately among themselves. Some wished me to act as arbiter, to decipher these “mysteries” and explain these “riddles.” Others wrote to me asking to be relieved of the confusion my words had caused them. A few went further still: they sent letters recounting what they knew of this or that public figure—their traits, their vices, what they showed to the world and what they concealed—and urging me to speak of these matters openly in my next column.

I soon realized that the phenomenon extended far beyond myself or my articles. It had spread to other writers and other journals—daily and weekly alike—and even into ordinary conversation. Someone writes a few lines in a newspaper, and people instantly wonder whom he was attacking or defending, which politician he hinted at, which administrator, which merchant or official. It has come to the point where everyone believes that no one speaks plainly anymore—that all conversation

is conducted in symbols, and that frankness, clarity, and openness have become so rare that they are almost forgotten virtues.

Nor are people's reactions to what is written or said any less cautious than their attitude toward the actions of politicians—their alliances and rivalries, their meetings and estrangements. Indeed, this anxiety extends beyond public life to private relations as well.

Colleagues in an office or a school distrust one another; each suspects the motives of the other and guards himself warily. Their interests have become entangled, their affairs confused. Some are brought close to superiors, others kept at a distance. The favoured mistrust the excluded, and the excluded fear the favoured, while the superior himself suspects them all. Their talk is laced with apprehension; their dealings hedged with caution. Their life together has become intolerable.

I do not know—or rather, I do know—and many others know too, the source of this unease and the root of this suspicion. In recent years we have been thrust into ways of life strange to us, unsettling to our nature. Chief among them are the martial laws imposed by the war, with their censorship of the press—laws that impressed upon the public mind that nothing proceeds any longer as it once did, before such restrictions were decreed.

True, martial law has not covered every aspect of our lives—perhaps only a small part of them—but people have imagined that it extends everywhere. And true, press censorship, though chiefly concerned with news, has not left writers entirely free even in purely literary work, still less when they touch on public affairs. It is natural that newspapers should chafe under such oversight, and that people should grow weary of it—especially after so many years of submission to it. Yet even that alone cannot explain the depth of anxiety and distrust that now pervades society.

For alongside martial law and censorship, the people have endured other influences no less powerful in spreading doubt—the very conditions of war itself. War breeds secrecy in politics and military affairs, floods the airwaves with contradictory reports, fills the press with ambiguous hints. People have become accustomed to hearing news they cannot believe, or to extracting from it meanings other than the literal—perhaps even the opposite. They have learned to *read between the lines*, and—if such a thing were possible—to *listen between the lines*.

The constant confusion of truth and falsehood, the endless contradictions, the dominance of falsehood over truth—all this naturally breeds suspicion in the soul. To this must be added the heavy burdens of public and private life alike: the terrors of war, economic hardship, political upheaval, and the misery and deprivation that in some classes have reached hunger and despair. These things have tangled people's interests beyond untangling, strengthened selfishness in individuals and groups, and compelled each to think first of his own safety, his own gain, his own future. Small wonder, then, that life has come to rest not on peace of conscience or mutual trust, but on anxiety and fear—on suspicion and precaution—and perhaps even on deceit, and on other moral habits not far removed from deceit.

Add to all this the particular harshness of our political life—the violence that provokes hypocrisy, the ill-will that breeds exaggeration and slander, the delight in spreading rumour and distorting truth, in beautifying what is ugly and disfiguring what is fair. Add too that the Egyptian intellectual, in most cases, is limited in culture and moderate in learning, and therefore easily swayed—quick to believe, quick to disbelieve, with little resistance either way. Combine all these things, and you will see the causes of the anxiety now gnawing at the Egyptian conscience, threatening to drive it toward grave peril.

The fact that so many readers wondered whether the “troubled conscience” of which I spoke referred to this man or that, reveals something painful: that people’s opinion of one another has grown poor indeed. No sooner does one mention a wavering conscience than many imagine themselves the object of the allusion—because each knows, deep down, some unease in his own heart. They ask one another: *Could he have meant so-and-so? Or perhaps such-and-such a person?* For they assume that those men must be among the troubled. And no sooner does one depict a man like a snake, or a fox, or whatever beast may dwell in the zoo, than many imagine themselves thus portrayed—because each feels within himself some trace of the serpent’s cunning or the fox’s guile.

It is difficult to convince readers that when a writer draws a certain figure, he does not mean a particular individual. Perhaps he has composed his picture from many people, borrowing a trait from each and weaving them together into a single type—one that may please or displease, but which carries a moral lesson nonetheless. Whoever finds within himself something of the snake’s character should reform it and keep it hidden, sparing others some measure of his harm—and saving himself, in turn, from some of theirs. The same applies to those who discover within themselves the slyness of the fox, or the sting of the scorpion, or the importunity of the fly.

For God created all things as sources of reflection and moral insight, as means to the discovery of truth, goodness, and beauty. And God, exalted be He, created man and taught him speech that he might reveal truth, goodness, and beauty—and discern falsehood, evil, and ugliness, and turn away from them.

Let writers write, let readers read, let questioners ask and respondents answer—there is no harm in any of this. The true harm that we must all strive to heal and uproot is this anxiety that has seized the Egyptian conscience, and that threatens to drive it beyond mere questioning and answering, into something far more dangerous.

Ṭāhā Ḥusayn

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