

To My Brother al-Zayyat: The Rational Imagination

Al-Risala, 30 March 1936

The greeting of a friend who shares in the grief, and hopes for consolation

Have you ever known a rational imagination, dear brother? As for me, I came to know one yesterday — and it cost me neither trouble nor effort to make its acquaintance, nor did I spend any strength or time in seeking it out; indeed I did not seek it at all, but rather it came to me, or let us say I was about to summon it when it answered me before the summons. But I had not called it to make its acquaintance, for my bond with it reaches far back — very far back, so far I can scarcely remember its beginning — and all I know is that it has been my companion since I first began to think, indeed since I first opened my eyes to life. How often has it adorned things for me until I grew enamoured of them and desired them; how often has it made things ugly in my eyes until I recoiled from them and grew weary of them; how swiftly has it invented things for me that I had neither known nor appreciated, and suddenly they fill my heart with hope and expectation and drive me toward work and activity — and suddenly they fill my heart with despair and dejection and drive me toward langour and torpor and withdrawal.

It had created for me a complete world of far-reaching horizons, of far-flung corners, of many-coloured variety, in which I spent the days of my childhood — and how often have I wished I could return to it. Then it created for me another world no less wide and varied and diverse than the first, but a compound of beauty and ugliness, of pleasure and pain, of despair and hope, in which I spent the days of my youth — and I still wish I could return to it. And now it accompanies me, adorning life for me a little, and making it ugly in my eyes a great deal, trying to create for me what will delight, and trying to create for me what will vex — and I obey it sometimes, and disobey it at others. But it has always been faithful to me whenever I wanted to enlist its help in writing and composition; and I confess, dear brother, that I have been most sparing — in the extreme degree of sparingness — in having recourse to it and seeking its assistance, because I know it to be bold, excessive in its boldness, vigorous, extravagant in its vigour, inventing of images and varieties of meaning what I cannot bring myself to place before our social milieu,

which is restrained in its willingness to trust the inspiration of the imagination.

I had known it faithful, vigorous, ever-ready to help whenever I called upon it or appealed to it, offering more of this help than I asked, and very much more than I proposed to it. I called upon it yesterday and it answered me quickly, without delay or reluctance; indeed I witness that it was all but bursting with vigour and high spirits, and I was preparing to rein it in from its impetuosity and draw back from its energy, and hold it to a very great deal of deliberateness and measure, as I have always been accustomed to do. But I had scarcely put before it what I wanted it to help me undertake when it drew back from its vigour, steadied itself in its impetuosity, and smiled the smile of the calm and composed, and spoke in the voice of one at peace and sedate, without any painful incapacity or discouraging shortcoming: "Leave me to myself, for I am not suited to what you want in any way."

For what I had wanted of it was that it should supply me with the means to portray a passage from the life of the noble Prophet, in these days when Muslims commemorate the greatest event in their history, and the most profound lesson among their lessons — in these days when Muslims travel back centuries upon centuries of time to witness that great day on which the Prophet and his companion, the Truthful One, went forth from Mecca, emigrating to God, bearing hopes that time itself will perish before they perish, and a faith that this world will pass away before weakness overtakes it or languor draws near to it, and a trust in God's victory on which have lived and thrived the countless generations of the past, and on which will live and thrive the countless generations to come, and from which Muslims will forever draw strength for earnestness and effort, and for embracing life with all its good and ill, its sweet and bitter, its tribulation and its blessing.

Yes, dear brother, I called upon it to inspire me with something of those images it has long been wont to suggest to me — and it declined, not in anger, and held back, not in miserliness, and persisted in its declining and holding back. When I pressed it, I perceived in it a sense of shame, a preference for leaving well alone, a jealousy for itself against what it does not do well, a wish to spare itself what it cannot bear. And then it spoke to me in the tone of the calm and composed:

"Call upon me for whatever you wish, for you know my power of invention and innovation, and you know how well I acquit myself in

clothing truth in embellishment until it becomes all ornament — but there is a truth that is loftier than my soaring, however strong my wing; and plainer than my power of illumination, however strong my light; and more radiant than my capacity to make bright, however far my reach and my aspiration; and more wholesome than my beautifying, however skilled I may be in the invention of ornament and the fashioning of beauty.”

And if I am to speak to you of this perfect man, I would speak to you in the discourse of reason — God forgive me, for reason itself cannot speak to you of him as it should, since he is too noble, too exalted, too sublime for reason to attain him — just as he is too noble, too exalted, too sublime for the imagination to attain him. Strive to picture what it has been granted to people to know of his life, and then look upon it and draw from it, for even so you will have no need of the help of reason or imagination. Look at the sorrowful side of his life, and recount to yourself portions of it; if they do not fill your heart with wonder, with greatness, with beauty, with love and with veneration, without any recourse to reason or imagination, then you are not a human being, and you have nothing in common with humanity.

Look at this man who tasted orphanhood as an embryo — if embryos can taste meanings and pains — and then had scarcely welcomed life and advanced into childhood before he tasted orphanhood again, losing his mother after having lost his father. Then he had scarcely taken a few more steps in childhood before he tasted orphanhood a third time, losing his grandfather after having lost both his parents. Then life pressed upon him with hardship and effort, with deprivation and poverty, with difficulty and constraint; all these pains united against his young and noble soul, and yet could not reach it or touch it — because God had severed every connection between this purified soul and misery and wretchedness.

Then go with him as he leaves childhood behind and enters upon youth and advances through it: life is as it was, stern and arduous, heavy and straitened, and yet he is the smiling young man as he was the smiling child, tranquil of soul as a man as he was tranquil of soul as a boy. He works hard, he labours; life smiles upon him sometimes; the people around him love him and honour him and hold him in high regard and place their trust in him, and find peace and safety through him, and bring before him whatever dispute has arisen between them — and none of this exposes him to arrogance or vainglory, because God had severed every connection between his purified soul and the arrogance and vainglory and conceit that mar the lives of men.

Then look upon him when God chose him for the greatest favour He bestows upon any of His servants, and laid upon him the heaviest trust He had ever laid upon any of His creation: and behold him receiving this heavy burden with fortitude, bearing it with patience, rising to it and pressing on with it, knowing neither weariness nor tedium nor languor — because God had severed every connection between his purified soul and the weariness and tedium and languor that blemish the lives of men.

Then look upon him as he tastes bereavement of children after having tasted the orphan's grief; as he is tried in his own person and his reputation; tried in his companions and those who first gave him their support; tried in his sons; then tried in his wife whom God had made a mercy for him to rest in and take strength from; then tried in his faith; then tried in all things; then tried in every human being. And behold him as he is: smiling in his middle age as he smiled in his youth and as he smiled in his childhood, knowing no weakness, no despair, no way for that barren dejection to reach him — because God had severed every connection between his purified soul and weakness and despair and barren dejection.

Then look upon him when his own people rejected him and he rejected his own people, when Mecca became too narrow for him and all that lay around Mecca became too narrow for him, when he met with unbearable trials and intolerable afflictions — and no flinching overtook him, no surrender; instead the doors of hope were opened to him, and God's support of him relieved what had grown narrow in his affairs, and so he emigrated to Yathrib. Do you imagine he settled there in ease and took comfort there in softness and repose? Not at all. What are these wars without end, in which God puts him to the test with victory sometimes and with something other than victory at other times? What is this toil without end? What is this hardship that sometimes compels him to go hungry? What are these betrayals coming from the hypocrites? What are these betrayals coming from his Jewish allies? What is this death that snatches away his dearest and most precious companions? Do you imagine he despaired of all this, or grew too weak to bear it, or that any of it forced him to swerve from his straight path by so much as a hair's breadth? Not at all! For God had made his noble soul all resolution, all pride, all patience, all trust in God.

Then look upon him when age had advanced upon him, and of all his sons and daughters none remained to him but Fatima, may God have mercy on her; and now the days smile upon him, and hope shines before

him, and a messenger brings him the glad tidings that God has blessed him with a son, whom he names after his father Ibrahim; and his heart is gladdened and delighted, and he shares the Muslims in his gladness and delight and brings them the good news he has received. And the Muslims find that his eye has been consoled and their eyes are consoled; that his soul has been gladdened and their souls are gladdened; that his noble heart opens to hope and their hearts open to hopes. But God wills that he should be tried as an old man just as He tried him as a child, a youth, and a mature man — and Ibrahim is taken from him before the weaning is complete. Do you imagine he was overcome with grief, or that the infirmity and weakness that overtake old men overtook him? Not at all; God had severed every connection between his purified soul and infirmity and weakness: Ibrahim had not completed his weaning in this world — he would complete it in Paradise.

And look at his father, walking in his funeral procession in grief — but the grief of the noble, not the grief of the despairing, not the grief of those who have lost all hope; and standing at his grave, attending to the settling and watering of the grave and the pouring of water upon it; and counselling the Muslims that when they undertake a task they should complete it, even if there be no visible gain in doing so, for it is part of the perfection of the mind that a man should do well what he does. Then look at him as he declares to his Lord that he accepts His decree, submits to His command, and believes in His wisdom; and declares to his son that he grieves for the loss of him. And then look at him: his noble eyes are full of tears — and what should prevent him from weeping, when weeping sometimes completes a man's nobility? But look at him still: do you see anything in his life that has changed? Do you see anything in his view of life that has changed? Not at all. No events in this world could change a soul that is greater than the world itself!

I said to this imagination:

"I have never until today known an imagination so rational and so sound. There is a lesson in what you have said for anyone who wished to take heed."

It said:

"And is it any wonder that the imagination should become rational and sound when it speaks of Muhammad, though its very nature is to aspire and to be unbridled?"

I said:

“I shall convey this conversation of yours to a friend who is sorrowing and distressed.”

It said:

“Convey it in sincerity to your friend, and to every person who sorrows and is distressed; for I do not believe that a Muslim who pictures the life of Muhammad from this aspect of its aspects will then find any path for despair or distress to reach his heart.”