

The Climate of Love and Hate

al-Balagh, 25 March 1945

Has your anger not yet run its course? Can people go on hating forever, and go on punishing forever?

A question the great French poet Racine put, in the seventeenth century, into the mouth of Pyrrhus, son of Achilles, addressed to Andromache — she who had filled his own heart with love, after he had filled hers with anguish and grief. For Achilles, this hero's father, had killed Hector, this heroine's husband, and the hero himself had destroyed Troy, pouring death and ruin upon her people, bereavement and orphanhood, widowhood and desolation. Ancient Greek legend depicted this in the most magnificent fashion, and the French poet chose one thread of it, depicting it brilliantly in his immortal tragedy, *Andromaque*.

Racine tells us that Andromache and her young son were captives held by this King Pyrrhus, and that the Greeks feared this boy might, once he reached manhood, seek vengeance for his father, reclaim his throne, raise his people from their downfall, and rebuild Troy upon her own ruins. So they sent their envoys to Pyrrhus, demanding he kill the boy, or hand him over to be killed — and the King would very likely have done so, had he not loved his captive, and wished to take her as his wife, breaking off his own betrothal to the daughter of Helen, she for whose sake the Trojan War itself had been fought.

The story is, then, a struggle between the King's love for his captive, and the captive's hatred for this King who had poured such calamity and ruin upon her people and her homeland.

I have no wish to make this magnificent, immortal story itself the subject of this piece — only to take the question I drew from it, at the head of this piece, as an introduction to a whole set of questions no thinking person, possessed of some culture and some capacity for reflection and contemplation, can help but ask himself, whenever he reads or hears the news that has, for years now, been broadcast to us daily, of defeat and victory in every corner of the world.

Troy was a small city, and the Greek nation that destroyed her was itself a small nation — yet that destruction became the source of immortal literary works, across most of the world's great languages and

literatures, in every age; humanity has lived on them ever since, and it seems it will go on living on them until the end of time.

There is no doubt that modern wars destroy cities of far greater importance than Troy, of far greater consequence, and of far deeper influence upon civilization. But among these great cities, dozens of which are destroyed in a single week, is there even one capable of inspiring poets and writers with even a fraction of what Troy once inspired in the poets of Greece, Rome, and modern Europe?

This very week alone, we learned that five million French people have no shelter, and that some three million French people are tasting the torment of degradation in Germany — prisoners of war among them, those forcibly conscripted for labour in Germany, and those exiled from their own homeland for having engaged in politics not to the victors' liking. We learned that the French killed by the war itself, by reprisal, and by both enemy and friendly raids, are not counted in the tens of thousands, but in the hundreds of thousands; and that the cities destroyed, the infrastructure ruined, and the factories wiped out are valued not in the hundreds of millions, but in the thousands of billions of francs.

This same week, we also learned that the Poles have lost nearly a third of their own population — close to ten million people carried off by the war itself, by reprisal, by hunger, misery, sickness, and deprivation. We learned something similar of the other European nations the Germans once conquered, and were then driven from; we learned that Greeks were dying by the hundreds every day of misery and hunger, collapsing from sheer exhaustion in the streets of Athens and other cities; and we learned what the English, the Americans, and the Russians have offered up, as victims and sacrifices, to the god of war, in lives, in wealth, in cities, and in infrastructure.

And now, here we are, watching the wheel turn on those who were once victorious yesterday, only to find themselves defeated today: a misery beyond all description now presses down on Germany — not merely day by day, not merely hour by hour, but moment by moment. German cities are being wiped from the earth entirely; tens, even hundreds of thousands of Germans have death poured down upon them from the sky, springing up from the earth beneath them, and seizing them from every direction at once.

The same could be said of Italy, and the same could be said of Japan. The natural result of all this is that this horror, which the human mind is powerless either to fully imagine or to fully grasp, has encompassed the whole earth, and encompassed every generation of humankind, in varying degrees according to how close or how distant each stood from the war, and how much each took part in it, or managed to avoid it.

There is not, then, a single heart among all humankind's hearts left untouched by some trace of this war, great or small. And none of these traces are of a kind to stir up love or affection in the heart, nor to spread through it tenderness or compassion — they stir up, instead, hatred, and resentment upon resentment, enmity upon enmity.

We heard on the radio yesterday that the English apologized to the Dutch, offering them the regret of their government, their people, and their army, for English aircraft having missed their military targets and poured painful suffering and great horror down upon their Dutch friends instead. We also heard on the radio that Mr. Churchill, with his own well-known pessimism, is warning the world that Europe, after the war, faces famines feared to be utterly crushing. It seems most likely these famines will not be confined to Europe alone, but may well occur, too, in the other theatres of war in the Far East, where the fires of war have been burning for more than eight years now.

News has then reached us that the victors themselves, the English and the Americans, are enduring, or have begun to endure, the misery and deprivation this long, violent war demands. As for what the Russians endure of this, the matter is too plain, too well known, to need any description or detail.

Conferences will convene to settle and organize the peace, and to mend whatever the war has corrupted in political and economic affairs; tremendous efforts will be made to rebuild what was ruined, to raise up what was destroyed, and to revive what was left barren — and humanity will achieve, of all this, whatever it achieves, or fails to achieve. But the one thing no conference will ever convene to address, and could never achieve even if it did, is the cure for this hatred now settled in every heart, the erasure of this enmity now spread through every soul, and the removal of this rancour now flowing through the veins alongside the very blood.

It is enough to listen to whatever any warring nation broadcasts on the radio, and to read whatever its newspapers print, to become entirely

certain that the world today does not live on love, but on hatred; that it acts not out of sympathy and compassion, but out of estrangement and mutual hostility, out of envy and a shared, deadly fear. Even those cooperating with one another to secure a resounding victory, or to avoid a crushing defeat, do not build that cooperation on genuine friendship or sincere affection, but on immediate interests, on caution for the future, on lessons drawn from the past, and on whatever experience and instruction now counsel wariness and caution — and on tongues declaring one thing, while hearts conceal another.

There is no doubt Germany was never once genuinely loyal to her own allies; no doubt that today's victors regard one another with real wariness, each taking careful stock of the others; no doubt that love and security are not what govern the world's affairs in these days, but that hatred and fear are what dominate everything the powers arrange among themselves.

Nor is this confined to relations between states and peoples; it extends beyond that to relations between the various communities within a single nation, and between individuals within a single community. Victorious nations and defeated nations alike will, one day, find themselves free to mend their own affairs, and rebuild whatever has collapsed of their own structure.

Parties will disagree, and communities will contend with one another, over how to raise this collapsed structure and organize these tangled affairs. As for the scheming of some individuals against others, their plotting against one another, each one's preference for his own good, each one's determination to secure for himself the greatest possible share of comfort, ease, and well-being — this is something we witness every single day, and observe in every single place. The black market may well be the clearest evidence of it.

These dark, gloomy images leave, in people's own hearts, effects just as dark and gloomy when they present them, depicting present life and future life alike as ugly and repugnant, so that hearts grow constricted by them, and souls recoil from them; and those who witness them say that whoever puts such images before us is a pessimist, one who loves pessimism and indulges in it excessively — why should he not simply spare himself such wretched views of life and the living? Why should he burden us with this hateful pessimism, instead of easing our burden by helping us forget some of this pain, and distracting us from some of these

misfortunes? Are the pains and burdens of life we already carry not enough for our own wretchedness, our own distress, that writers must go and present us more of them in the very pieces they broadcast to us? And this is exactly what I wanted to arrive at, in presenting all these dark images and these repugnant reflections. I wanted to arrive at this question: what might this life people are living now — and will go on living tomorrow, and the day after — actually produce, in the way of literary effects, in whatever writers go on to compose in poetry and prose? Will it produce a dark, gloomy literature, like the literature of Abu al-'Ala' [al-Ma'arri]? Or a bright, smiling literature, like the literature we read from most of the eras most blessed with calm and stability? Or a dissolute, decadent literature, like the literature of Abu Nuwas and poets of his kind? Or will it produce all these literatures at once, and lay them all before people, so that each may choose whichever suits his own nature, his own temperament, and his own need for amusement or for gravity?

In a word: what might be the effect of this bleak life upon tomorrow's literature? Are we heading toward a literature of optimism and ease, or toward a literature of pessimism and constriction?

The logic of reason suggests we are heading toward a temperament of literature containing a great deal of pessimism, drawn from this horror we have been subjected to, and these repugnant traces it has left among us — and containing, too, a great deal of real effort, drawn from the fact that people's lives are never entirely without hope, and that their existence would be unbearably narrow, were their hope not as vast as the ancient poet says.

People will, then, resume their new lives grieving over what has been, yet neither despairing of reform, nor hopeless of the ability to make up for what has been lost; and tomorrow's literature will be a reflection of tomorrow's life, containing both a bleak pessimism and a resolute seriousness. So, at least, does the logic of reason suggest to us.

But the logic of the world — as our friend Ahmad Amin puts it — presents us with other images, sharply contradicting these, images that may well find, in reason itself, room and justification. It is natural, of course, that we should grieve, and despair, and turn pessimistic, in the face of all this horror. But human memory is short, and human longing outlasts it; and human self-interest holds far greater sway over human life than reason does. People will grieve, but will need to be diverted from

that grief; people will turn pessimistic, but will need to free themselves of that pessimism; their appetites will prove stronger than their reason, their hopes will reach further than their actions, their passions will run wilder than their capacity to contain them — and they will ask of peace that it make them forget the war and its horrors, through whatever pleasures it offers them, pleasures that compensate them for some part of what they lost in days of misery and deprivation, that divert them from whatever misery and wretchedness they still witness around them, and that help sustain them in whatever reform and renewal they undertake.

France was never as frivolous as she was in the days of the Revolution, driven to it by despair, and by the exhaustion, in certain circles, of every pleasure life could offer; and driven to it, too, by hope, and by the desire to be diverted from whatever calamities and horrors sap resolve and weaken spirit. Nor was Europe ever as frivolous as she was after the last war, driven to it by exactly what drove France to frivolity in the days of her own Revolution.

It was among the strangest things, on the surface of it, and yet among the things most in keeping with human nature underneath, that we knew, after the last war, of the catastrophes that had befallen Europe, and yet witnessed in her, at the very same time, such displays of frivolity and dissipation, such scenes of licentiousness and dazzling excess.

Europe did produce, after the last war, a literature of pessimism and grief — but it is scarcely worth mentioning, measured against the smiling, frivolous literature Europe produced between the two wars.

And those who witnessed the aftermath of the last war in Egypt, who witnessed the rise of our own national revolution and the great deal of evil it revealed, may well recall that Egyptians never laughed as much as they laughed in those grim days, and that serious, earnest literature never enjoyed the popularity and demand enjoyed by comic and humorous literature — in the theatre of Kishkish Bey, in popular songs, and in the weekly satirical papers — and that Egypt did not resume serious literature until the revolution itself had somewhat calmed.

It seems most likely things will proceed, after this war, exactly as they proceeded after the last: people will turn to amusement, and indulge in it to excess — indeed, they have already begun doing so, even before the war has laid down its burdens — and writers will produce for them a literature suited to their own need for amusement, and for rest from seriousness. But how much time will people actually need for this rest,

and for whatever amusement and diversion it demands? And when will they resume a life of seriousness and resolve, so that literature might produce, for them, a serious, resolute literature once more?

As for what happened after the last war, this rest went on so long, and was indulged in so excessively, that it very nearly became a fixed feature of European nature — long enough, indeed, for Germany to prepare herself, ready herself, and rise up for vengeance, catching the victors entirely by surprise with this second war. Europe, then, rested and amused herself for twenty years after the last war. As for what will happen after this war, no one can predict whether the world's own need for rest, and for whatever amusement and diversion it demands, will prove short or long — but a writer can at least predict that the literature the world's life will produce in these next few years will be a literature of amusement and diversion, richer in superficial brightness and passing smiles than in patience, reflection, or the depth that makes genuine renewal and rebuilding possible.

I do not imagine matters in the Arab countries will differ greatly from those in Europe and America: our own generations of middle-aged and older people are tired and worn out, and our own younger generations are bewildered and confused, still searching for themselves, their own goals not yet clear to them — and they will need time before these goals become clear. If I am not mistaken, the world will spend ten years, more or less, savouring a hesitant, wavering literature, caught between a past it has grown weary of and a future whose signposts remain unclear, written for readers whose nerves have already been worn thin by the horrors and burdens of war — readers who want nothing but to be diverted, to forget, and to find, in whatever they read, something that lets them forget themselves, and affords them some small consolation. And the literature produced under such circumstances is never the literature capable of enduring, of standing firm against events, or of helping build the new world.

I wonder — what literary works, of everything produced between the two wars, truly deserve to endure? And I wonder, too — what stood between the last peace settlement and the achievement of the very purposes for which it was made? Could the source of this not be that the last peace settlement was laid down by old men, upon the flimsy foundation of a literature whose own age had already begun to pass away?

The coming peace, then, will be laid down on just such a foundation; old men will lay it down upon the flimsy foundation of this same literature people have lived on, troubled, confused, and divided, right up until this war broke out.

Has it truly been decreed that this generation of humankind shall never know peace of mind, nor security, nor stability?