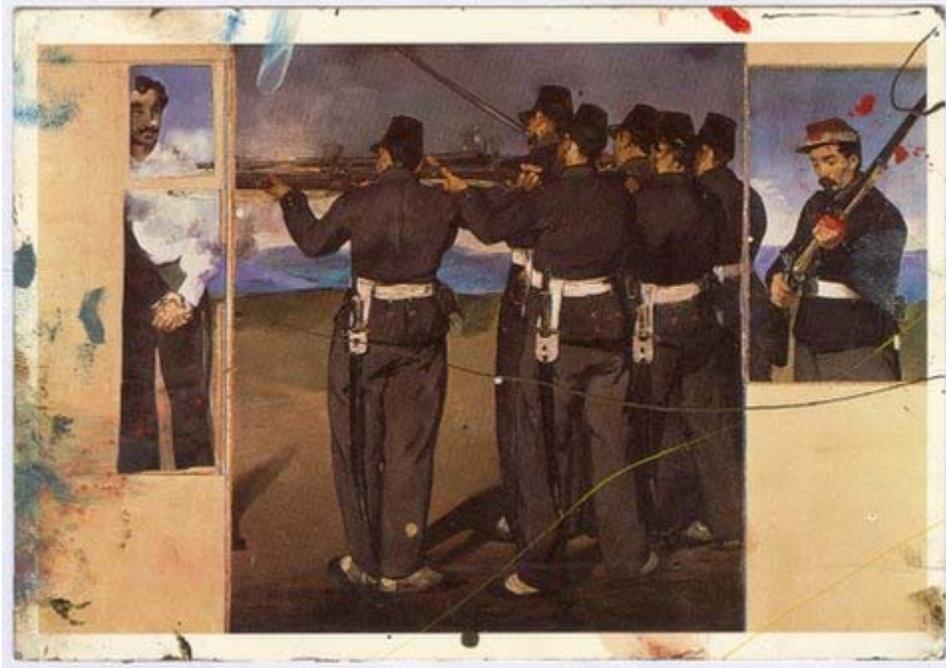


NOble Savage or the Contempt for Contemporary



If interpreted imaginatively, the victim in this painting 'The Execution of Maximilian' by Edouard Manet, can be described as the artist – and the people aiming their weapons or inspecting their rifles may be defined as art critics, who usually have a negative response – to the point of destroying the professional reputation, academic value and market worth of an artist.

But if the structure of art world is examined clearly, closely, cleverly and carefully, then we have to find the appropriate roles for the characters in the painting. So perhaps the man trying to evade the onslaught of bullets is an art critic and the soldiers with their arms are artists – really.

This side of the picture – actually pictures have only one side – may seem disturbing and disagreeable, because traditionally art critic is believed to be a nasty individual, whereas artists are known as humble, harmless and happy human beings. Normally it is thought that artists work with their instinct, imagination and intuition, and whatever they produce reflect their inner self and private world. And in relation to that, critic's job is derivative, dependant and devoid of originality. This aspect is also well illustrated by George Steiner, the eminent literary critic. As he says: **"The critic lives at the second hand. He writes *about*. The poem, the novel or the play (you can include painting too) must be given to him; criticism exists by the grace of other man's genius."** This obvious fact – but facts need to be stated sometime – is the core issue in terms of determining the relationship between art criticism and art making in Pakistan.

But besides the order of chronology – of who comes first – and here we are not talking about egg and chicken – there are a number of other factors that are crucial in connection with the producer and the commentator of art. Because the fact that criticism comes after a creative output, it is conveniently seen a profession for parasites – normally taken up by failed artists, frustrated fiction writers and incompetent cultural theorists. In general, if you do not know what to do with your life, but posses a command of grammatically correct English you might as well pick pen – rather a computer and start writing on art for a daily paper, weekly journal or a monthly magazine. Whatever is transcribed will be appreciated by a small public who bothers to buy publications in English, and a very few amongst them who occasionally and actually read on art.

So in more than one ways, and due to thin number of recipients, writing on art is the safest activity in our journalistic careers and literary circles. That position may appear fortunate, but it propounds a pessimistic possibility. It transforms the critic into savage entity as well as a noble personage. Savage in the sense that critic starts with the presumption that not many people are going to read what he or she is transcribing. So this lack of audience results in an absence of ethical responsibility and disappearance of professional excellence. Often the art critics report – or retort, instead of making an intelligent contribution to the world of aesthetics. Usually they reject – if not neglect, the intention of the artist and like a judge – even though this status is also going through difficult phases at the moment – crucify an artist and his works in merciless manner.

This kind of attitude invites a hostile response from the makers too, who in any case do not consider art criticism to be an intellectual activity. For them this is a superfluous endeavour – rather a nuisance, which sometimes hampers their sales, tarnishes their fame and delays their recognition. Artists are well aware that their art practice and business can be conducted without the existence – and interference of an art critic – often, in a much better, pleasant, productive and lucrative way, so the efforts or existence of art critic is merely a burden for an artist, because in most cases it destroys his reputation and disillusion his clientele.

Within this context, one must ponder on the profession of an art critic. Although most of us present here are actively pursuing this – I must say passion, but an occasion like this also provides the opportunity and forum to delve upon the relevance and function of writing on art. **For whom do we write?** This is the primary question one needs to ask from oneself and from others as well. If one believes that being a critic, our job is to interpret a creative work, yet the problem still persists – **for whom do we interpret?** Do we address our intellectual profundities to artists, collectors, general viewers – or merely for other writers? I don't know about myself, but majority of writers I am familiar with do not read anything except their own piece in a publication – a text they have already read – and wrote. In addition to it, this habit shows how detached and distanced an art

writer is from other discourses – not only in the fields of art but in politics, literature and economics as well.

This fate and situation of an art critic – of an alien human being is the mark of our time. In his book, *The Story of Art*, British art historian E. H Gombrich, pointed out the gap between producers, public and pen pushers. According to him, the severe response of critics to Impressionism was the first time in history, when the art criticism was not in tune with the art makers or in accord with the public. Writers ridiculed the painters, to the extent that the name, with which that movement is recognized today, was coined as a condescending term. However this conflict between painters and critics, resulted in the triumph of artists, and soon their paintings enjoyed a great popularity among the ordinary viewers; so consequently the criticism, especially the art criticism had to face its defeat and deal with it disgrace.

Probably the deep set memory of this defeat and disgrace is the reason for critics usually not being effective, or their works not taken seriously. Presumably the pressure of market has transformed the creative individuals into powerful professionals, rolling in money, commanding high prices for their art works, travelling across the globe – so in comparison to this jet set high flying life style, the humble critic with his or her feeble occupation hardly draws a considerable income or even a minimum level of respect.

Both the disbelief in his activity as a critic and the cold shoulder from the corporate creative individuals, are enough to convert the critic into a savage being. His role, of understanding the work, interpreting it and sharing it with the general public has been reduced to mere judgment of art piece and of the artist. He presumes to possess the power to make or break an artist, or to determine the course of an art movement. But all these assumptions are no more than illusions and self delusions. In reality the critic chooses a vindictive position and as often happens – just to convey his existence relevant and effective – he adapts a hard line and harsh language. In most cases this vocabulary is employed as a shield in order to get away from the responsibility of deciphering the art work and tracking a better understanding in terms of its content and context.

Due to this, today's critic comes across as a failure. For the model critic of our age, writing on art is a means to condemn the contemporary. It is observed that in some instances our art critics fail to recognize the current of the Time. New forms, new mediums, new techniques, new methods – and new metaphors in our present art making are always suspected by him as superficial and are denounced as alien elements – mainly derived from the West. It is interestingly that majority of writers, who accuse the artists of rejecting their roots, neglecting their tradition and negating their heritage – do this in a language which originated in a small island in Europe and was transported

here – along with other elements of culture – and civilization, through a handful of soldiers, merchants, educationists and officials some two hundreds years ago.

Actually the condescending tone of criticism towards new art, or what I call the contempt for contemporary has nothing to do with the national identity or personal preferences. The failure of majority of our critics to appreciate, comprehend and place the contemporary art in today's discourse, is due to a reason that lies beyond the realm of art. It is generally noticed that critics, even if they reject the art of their age by accusing it to be a manifestation of senseless experiments, unnecessary influences and imported techniques – are usually content by accepting art of the past, which – in its own age was a accumulative body of experiments, assimilated influences and alien forms – incorporated with the passage of years. One can present a few examples from a list of many that also include landscape painting from the nineteenth century Europe, or the technique of oil painting that was brought by the British, and all of which have become so much part of our cultural fabric that no one pauses or ponders about the foreign origin of these forms/materials – which we always project as the symbols of our national identity.

As promised in the abstracts, this paper does not claim to find truth or offers a convincing reason for our critics' contempt for contemporary. A behaviour that stems from a general attitude to worship past, suspect present and forget (I wish I can use another word starting with the same letter, f) future. Presumably, we as a nation are inclined to reject the present, and idealize the past. May be it has something to do with following a religion that flourished almost fifteen hundred years ago. But regardless of whether it is Islam or any other faith, religion in its essence is a matter of moving back to past, hence a fundamentalist frame of mind requires us to copy, imitate and repeat a medieval model. I am not sure, but I suspect that this embedded feature of our society may have a cause for our love of past and hatred for present – and the fear of future. A condition that is well described by Toni Morrison as such: “Is the far and misty past really helpful – or just a way to escape and transcend the awful reality of this day”.