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# The absurd and absurdity

WHEN IN LOVE, EVERY YOUTH can write a poem. I never wrote one, not that I never fell in love — there were innumerable occasions — but because the moment passed. It lasted an evening, spanned a week but no more than that. If a lad is not a *dil phaink* what is the point of being young. The ability to bowl a tight line and length comes later. Racehorses are not easily reined. They would not win races if they were. Constancy in love at that time of life is like a *tattoo* harnessed to a *tonga*.

The *tonga* horses are tame and *shareef*. They spasmodically expel an odious wind as they lazily trot on to their unknown destinations. The green odour is a source of startling consternation as it invades the front seat but no harm is intended. Sniffing the backside of a rickshaw as described in one of late Taufiq Rafat's poem can be a positive hazard to health. Writing poetry after striding across adolescence is another matter. Horticulturists inform me that when *tonga* plied the roads horse-wind served as fertiliser for the roadside trees — see how big and tall the peepal trees are on The Mall. Now the diesel fumes are killing them.

When a flower bud opens its eye and spreads its petals to stare at the world it is impelled by a natural impulse but to tolerably translate it into feelings and ideas a person needs vision. It requires a vision enriched by personal trials that can arrest a moment and encompass eternity, solder disparate images and meanings, and reflect on a flower after it has withered away.

Painting can be a profession or a matter of technical facility, but for some it is a passion. In order to paint an artist must have something to commit. All poets, writers and painters, with a degree of substance, rest their expressions on pediment of their aesthetic and social experience. It goes without saying that artists who wish to communicate their concerns often do possess the means to have their purpose known. There are artists who don't care to share their life. They have the right to their '*chadar* and *chardiwari*'. No one should pry into their privacy if they are tickled by an inner life or criticise them if they fancy wrapping their expressions in obscurity. It is claimed that their art is for themselves and not for others. I wonder why they disclose their works in exhibitions and expose themselves to avoidable public glare?

I am suspicious of absolute truths claimed by ideologues but making a virtue of ambiguity, too, is extreme. Obscurity in art, it seems, is being cultivated to enable artists to evade moral and social issues. What is merely ambiguous and obscure and amorphous is claimed to be transcendently complex. The physical and intelligible is shooed off like a rabid dog. It is not considered

## THE WAY IT WAS



### MIAN IJAZ UL HASSAN

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kosher for the viewer to freely understand art. An intermediary, who can play with language, is required to illuminate him on art. The intermediary often succeeds in baffling the viewer further. Most gallery artists in the world today manufacture products that the Critic transforms into works of art. Whose role is pivotal then in the transformation from commodity to art? Who is the artist? Of course the critic!

There is another, related, matter that can perhaps be settled by asking another question. If an artwork is resurrected by language, should it be called art or literature? It is ironic that art that rejected description and narration — because they were the spheres of literature — should itself become a slave to words depending on them to explain itself, its meaning and content. In the process, the world has not become richer but art has lost the will and the tools to perceive man and nature, and interpret and express the profound ideas and events of its time.

Some artists today remind me of Orator in *The Chairs*, a one-act play by a French playwright Eugene Ionesco, first performed in Paris in 1952. In the play an elderly couple sets up chairs and greets invisible guests who have come to hear the old man's message to the world. Subsequently the couple commit suicide and leave the message in the hands of the Orator. The audience anxiously awaits the Message but at the end of the play when the Orator rises to deliver the Message they discover that he is a deaf mute.

In the catalogue of the original production, Ionesco had this reminder: "As the world is incomprehensible to me, I am waiting for someone to explain it." The *Chairs* highlights loneliness and futility of human existence that was acutely felt in the European metropolis after the Great Wars. Ionesco was lauded for his unique stagecraft and his profound sense of humour. In contrast a large section of contemporary painters can demonstrate unusual skill in employing new materials and mediums. They are innovative and have ability to tease, stimulate and engage the viewer but cannot penetrate his skin. Ionesco presents the messenger as deaf and mute and thereby makes a profound statement about the predicament of modern European man. In the case of a contemporary painter it is perturbing to realise that he is becoming mute and deaf himself. Ionesco's Orator is deaf and mute but Ionesco is not deaf and mute himself. The *Chairs* is a seminal example of a genre that evolved into what is called the theatre of the absurd. But even while highlighting the futility of human existence, it never yields to unintelligibility and absurdity.

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