THE 'GOOD' AND THE 'BAD' IN ART

E. V. Borg

'DIDN'T we say that a good man who loses his son, or anything else dear to him, will bear the misfortune more equably than other people?'[1] In this question Plato uses 'good' as synonymous with rational. He continues to draw a distinction between the use of reason and the irrational in man and arrives at the conclusion that in the human mind there is a rational and an irrational part. The former is 'good', the latter 'bad'. 'So the part of the mind which contradicts the measurements cannot be the same as the part which agrees with them . . . But the part that relies on measurement and calculation must be the best part of us, and the part which contradicts them an inferior one.'[2]

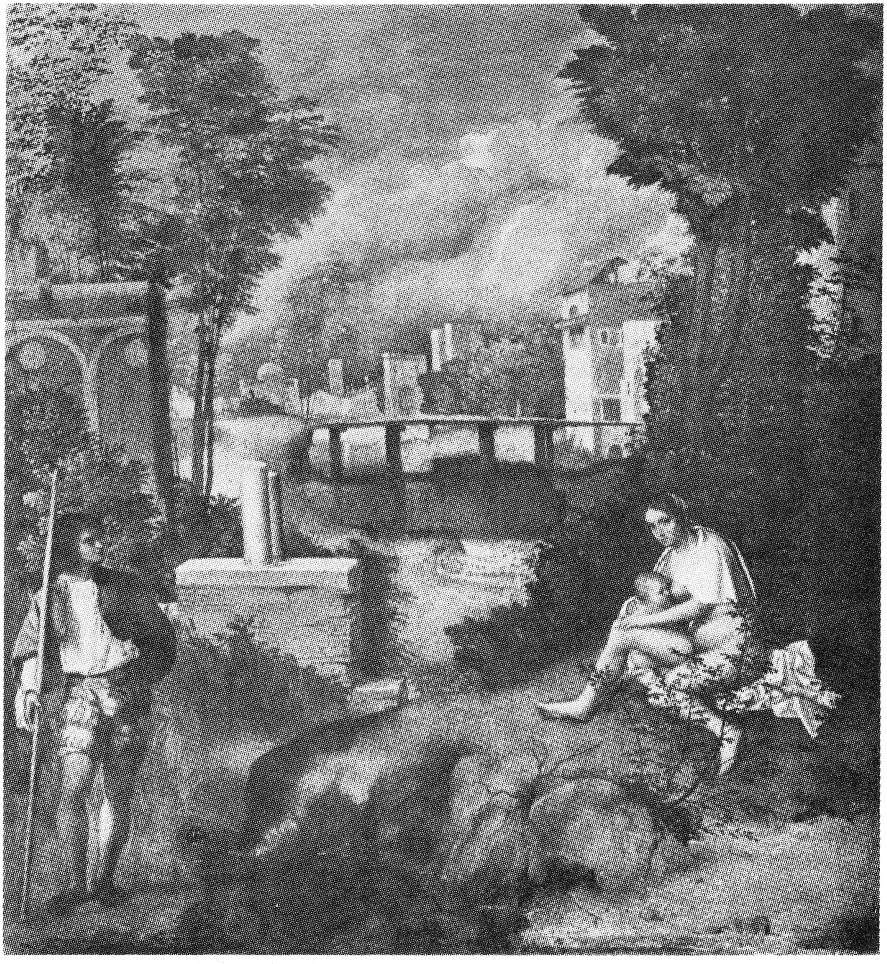
When man is confronted with the complexities of nature and life around him he usually tries to use reason, his intellect, or logic to break it down into human dimensions, to analyse, enumerate, categorize, generalize, and simplify to understand better, to create a certain order in this 'chaos'. What man does not realize, is his inability to understand life completely and that this apparent chaos is governed by an absolute or perfect balance hardly tangible for us mortals. Often enough this search for an understanding of this perfect balance, which he consciously feels, results in over-simplification with attendant bewilderment, utter confusion, and total incomprehension.

This is better understood if one takes into consideration Crossman's and Popper's views whose apparently contradictory opinions on Plato's Republic are a fairly good example of life's variety and inexplicability.[3] I used the word 'apparent' since their opinions are poles apart – yet the truth must lie somewhere in between.

So man, unable to find this perfect balance around him, tries to create or invent one. He aches for a divine good, for an ideal and absolute truth outside himself. Usually his religious sentiments impel him to associate this ideal with the supernatural. But, since man can only do this with the help of his imagination and fantasy, his interpretation of divine good or truth – the ideal or the dream – is always expressed on the human level.

What was, however, the Classical ideal? By a rational process of selection and combination of nature's most 'perfect' parts, the Classical Greeks achieved an ideal realism. Cicero writes how Zeuxis painted Helen by integrating the best

1. Plato, *The Republic*, translated and introduced by H. D. Lee (Harmondsworth, 1965). Bk. 10/603, 381.
2. Ibid., Bk. 10/603, 380.
3. Ibid., Introduction, 46.



Giorgione: 'The Tempest', Accademia Museum, Venice. This enigmatic painting probably painted in the first decade of the 16th century (1500–09) depicts a flash of lightning in the background and warm languorous afternoon sunlight in the foreground. This Renaissance work is imbued with classical balance and proportion but is not devoid of Giorgione's romantic fervour as a poet and a philosopher. Giorgione was a pioneer in painting profane easel paintings with a sensual atmosphere for private patrons as a departure from religious paintings for the Church.

features out of five different models. Raphael, himself following on the Classical notion of truth, beauty, perfection, or the 'good' in art, is known to have kept several models to execute his Galatea fresco for the Farnesina – Chigi's summer residence. There is also the golden section or the golden mean – a set of canonical, mathematical, and geometric theories to attain unity, balance, and harmony based on Vitruvian, Platonic, and Pythagorean principles adopted by Renaissance artists in Tuscany and Italy. This 'ideal realism' was neither realistic nor ideal. The subjective interpretation of what are the 'perfect' parts allows no possibility for any scientific objectivity.

A direct result of this measuring and calculating to arrive at acceptable 'parts' had rather an obvious weakness: underlying this art there was a common possibility or denominator – a cold and lifeless feeling. Whether this was produced by the law of ratios and averages or by an attempt to transform men into gods or vice-versa is hard to determine. What is quite true is the fact that man in order to arrive at this 'ideal perfection' used both his reason and imagination. Could, therefore, Plato's theory that the rational and the irrational in man are distinct parts be accepted? Or has Plato himself succumbed to enumeration and analysis for his and our better understanding of the complex natural entity which is man? Personally I doubt whether one could distinctly separate man into body and soul, mind and senses, reason and emotion, good and bad.

This tendency to analyse is as old as man. At times we speak of the iron laws of this or that society, of canons or precepts, but we also know through history that these laws, whether of beauty or truth, change with the time, from period to period, with each generation. Hardly can we speak of a law or rule which has no exceptions. E. H. Carr in his book *What is History?* observes that 'The so-called laws of sciences which affect our ordinary life are in fact statements of tendency, statements of what will happen other things being equal or in laboratory conditions. . . The law of gravity does not prove that that particular apple will fall to the ground: somebody may catch it in a basket.'[4] This observation shows how futile it is, even in the most 'objective' of studies, to reduce nature to rules, to airtight compartments, to a rational order. This underlines life's complexity and hence our reaction to attain simplicity.

Plato himself wished to simplify matters and to bring up his ideal politician only on good art. 'We shall thus prevent our guardians being brought up among representations of what is evil, and so, day by day, little by little, by feeding as if it were in an unhealthy pasture, insensibly doing themselves grave

4. E. H. Carr, *What Is History* (Harmondsworth, 1968), 68 '. . . no lessons, it is said, can be learned from history, because history, unlike science cannot predict the future.'

psychological damage.'[5] Aristotle, on the other hand, accepts the portrayal of 'badness' or 'ugliness' in art as he argues that the imitation of ugly things is capable of possessing beauty. It is also true that in chapter 4 of his treatise, *On the Art of Poetry*, he speaks pejoratively of those poets who wrote invectives – while the more trivial wrote about the meaner sort of people.[6] Yet in chapter 5, 'The Rise of Comedy', he maintains that 'comedy represents the worst types of men; worse, however, not in the sense that it embraces any and every kind of badness, but in the sense that the ridiculous is a species of ugliness or badness.' He also mentions the comic mask which although so 'distorted and ugly' that is grotesque yet it 'causes no pain.'[7]

Therefore man has a tendency to avoid what is bad and ugly in art to create an ideal beauty or perfection while, on the other hand, he has a style that accepts life in its entirety – the good and the bad, in all its complexity. A good example is Roman portrait sculpture which for its realism or verismo has no equal: Man was portrayed with all his defects and virtues, physical and spiritual. We have also the Romantic which embraces both Expressionism and the Baroque which imbued with the ideas of Aristotle and the Counter-Reformation appeal to the emotions. A good example is Grunewald's *Crucifixion* or the *Flayed Carcass of an Ox* by Rembrandt. Extreme cases such as those mentioned by Horace which overflow the boundaries of reality and enter the realm of dreams are paintings by Piero di Cosimo (a Florentine artist contemporary to Lorenzo il Magnifico), Hieronymus Bosch, or Salvador Dali. 'Yet another, wishing to vary the monotony of his subject with something out of the ordinary, introduces a dolphin into his woods, or puts a bone among the waves. If art is lacking, a petty fault may lead to a serious imperfection.'[8]

The acceptance of life in its entirety, a realistic truth to life and nature, is further underlined by Horace:' I would lay down that the experienced poet, as an imitative artist, should look to human life and character for his models, and from them derive a language that is true to life.'[9] This naturalistic or realistic truth is not always preferred by society.

Man is basically superficial and frivolous in his tastes. This is quite natural in his earnestness to escape the hard, cruel, and often torturing everyday realities.

5. Plato, Bk. 3/401, 142.
6. Aristotle, Horace, Longinus, *Classical Literary Criticism*, translated and introduced by T. S. Dorsch (Harmondsworth, 1970), Aristotle, *On The Art of Poetry*, Ch. 4, 35.
7. Ibid., Aristotle, Ch. 5, 37.
8. Ibid., Horace, *On the Art of Poetry*, 80.
9. Ibid., 90.

Usually man finds himself unstable, insecure, haunted by an inexplicable fear of self, of others, and of the unknown. This fear and insecurity coerces man into seeking their opposite: security, peace, and rest. Therefore, when he turns to 'light' and often 'cheap' entertainment to relax and amuse himself, he is being sensible and practical for a tired mind is hardly able to concentrate, think, ponder, or reflect on serious and deep study. He naturally wants to evade problems or any allusion to them in literature, music, and the arts in general.

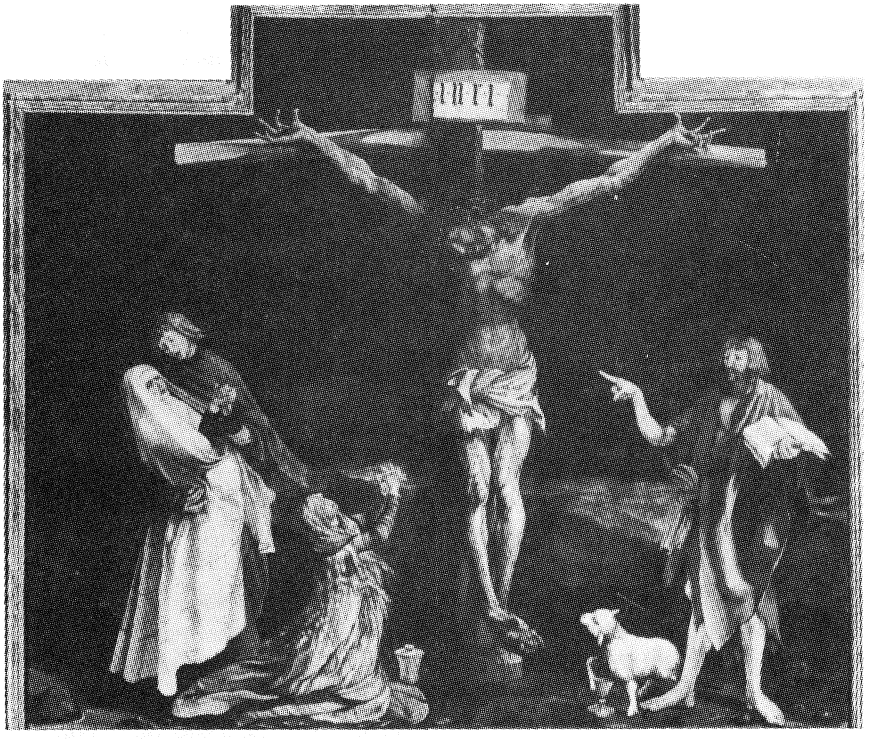
This sense of escapism is so great as to make man associate with what is natural (and not 'bad') such as night, old age, stormy weather, and death, unfavourable connotations that bring sensations of fear, corruption, and ugliness.

In the visual arts man had to wait for Giorgione (1475–1510) to depict the first storm; nature in an angry mood in *The Tempest*. He had to wait for Caravaggio (1569–1609) to depict night and its sombre connotations. In fact Caravaggio's followers were labelled *tenebristi* with all the nuances of meaning this word suggests. Should we assume that man preferred light to shade, fine weather to bad, sensual colours (all decoration, especially Venetian) to sombre? Or that he was found ripe in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries to find the 'bad' in art acceptable? Another possibility could be a reaction that set in man during the Medieval period after being exposed to such violent and fearful visual and mental images, that is he took hundreds of years to recover from this hell on earth. Had Horace these inhibitions that enslave man in mind when he wrote, 'It is not enough that poems should have beauty, if they are to carry the audience with them, they must have charm as well?'[10] Was this escapism in man that made 'Poets aim at giving either profit or delight, or at combining the giving of pleasure with some useful precepts for life?'[11]

This apparent dichotomy in life of good and bad, movement/repose, life/death, day/night, love/hate is reflected in the parallel paradox in works of art which Richard Wollheim prefers to call physical objects. 'It can be argued that the work of art has properties which are incompatible with certain properties that the physical object has. . .' and Wollheim continues to quote Vasari on the *St George* by Donatello, 'We say of the *St George* that it moves with life. Yet the block of marble is inanimate.'[12] This brings us to the question: Is there one absolute truth in life? Are we real? Because, if we are not and life is an illusion, than our disillusion stems from it.

On Ensor, a Belgian painter, I ended a lecture I gave at the British Council,

10. Ibid., 82.
11. Ibid., 90.
12. Richard Wollheim, *Art and its Objects* (Harmondsworth, 1970), 27.



Grunewald: 'The Crucifixion' from the Isenheim Altar, Unterlinden Museum, Colmar, c. 1512–15. A mystic and a visionary, Grunewald in his expressionism achieves a harsh dramatic tension inspired by religion. His 'disconsolate realism and sublime transcendentalism' is the result of a form of 'badness' or 'ugliness' in art.

Valletta, by asking two questions: Does Ensor consider reality a threat? Or does he accept reality and waits patiently for death in his loneliness?[13] But, if one argues that death is not in itself bad, if death like the night is natural, and it is only our association of death with fear of the unknown that troubles us, then death has its positive facet just like night. During the night we sleep and rest our eyes, our mind, our being. It soothes our nerves and it is lack of light. Without night we cannot comprehend or realize day and light. Without death, there will be no life. Without the 'bad' there will be no realization of the 'good' in art.

Wölfflin realized that in Michelangelo violent movement and intense drama on one hand, comtemplative stillness and deep melancholy on the other as expressed in different works, are brought together in unison in the *Madonna and Child* at the Medici Chapel in Florence. Complete variety is combined with a prevalent appearance of unity.[14] It seems that underlying this physical consideration – movement in repose, as in Donatello's *St George* – was the intellectual and more elevating ideal namely that the force of Man's permanent struggle for peace and rest, for stability and security is temporarily achieved in momentary glimpses of that perfect balance that exists in nature.

It seems that Plato himself decided at the end of his life to become a man of action.[15] He stopped living a contemplative life and by his life and actions, started giving the good example by actually living his search for truth. And maybe this is the balance in man of good and bad, of action and repose. It is useless merely to act, to live impatiently rushing through life's span, always escaping hurriedly the 'problem'. It is also as useless only to contemplate the 'problem'. One has to live life fully; searching for the truth as one goes along, stopping to take breath, to reflect, and to consolidate what one has learnt from past mistakes, from life's experience, because one's education only ends with death.

Man is the sum total of his experiences. His education begins at birth, and his efforts are naturally aimed at comprehending himself, understanding others and his environment. (The instinct for imitation is inherent in man from his earliest

13. E. V. Borg, 'Illustrated Lecture on Flemish Artist James Sidney Ensor (1860–1949) – Vision '74', *Sunday Times of Malta*, 19.01.75.
14. H. Wölfflin, *Classic Art: An Introduction to the Italian Renaissance* (London, 1968), 193–4.
15. C. M. Bowra, *Ancient Greek Literature* (Oxford, 1967), 92 '. . . The account of the philosophic life in the Theaetetus irrelevant as it is, is a moving account of the motives and emotions which stirred Plato to foresake contemplation for action.'

days.[16] Such an understanding will enable him to appreciate his own faults and those of others, he will learn to feel, to accept, have compassion, sympathy, and respect for himself, for others and for his environment. In the process he has to consider 'badness' – for this is part of life's problem. One cannot ache for perfection if one does not realize imperfection!

All this and more is the basis of Horace's advice to artists. 'The foundation and fountain-head of good composition is a sound understanding. . . The man who has learnt his duty towards his country and his friends, the kind of love he should feel for a parent, a brother, and a guest, the obligations of a senator and of a judge, and the qualities required in a general sent out to lead his armies in the field, such a man will certainly know the qualities that are appropriate to any of his characters.'[17] Seen in this light art could be synonymous to a philosophy of living.

'This is the sort of man who is not conspicuous for virtue and justice, and whose fall into misery is not due to vice and depravity but rather to some error.'[18] In this vein Aristotle established the choice of a character suitable for tragic action. King Lear can serve as the archetype of this example: his error was the pride that overcomes a man in his dotage. An error is a form of 'badness'. Yet Shakespeare uses the wheel of fortune to cleanse Lear. Cordelia is the embodiment of infinite goodness.

The wheel has come full circle. The argument is qualified. This polarity in life with its tension of attraction and repulsion, its sympathy and antipathy as reflected in good and bad, in right and wrong, in solitude and loneliness, in the rational and irrational in man and nature is unified in its totality. This polarity or divine struggle is only apparent. There is an absolute or perfect balance in this chaos and beneath this paradox we catch a glimpse of the stupendous miracle which is life, a perfect harmony of balanced forces, simple in its complexity, complex in its simplicity – the life-giving force that bubbles like an eternal spring, a murmur of running water that is music to our ear.

Man aches to unravel this mystery of creation using his related perceptual and conceptual faculties, gropes in the dark to catch a glimpse of this invisible beauty, this blinding light of the elusive and inaccessible virtues of justice, liberty, truth,

16. Aristotle; Ch. 4, 35. Aristotle continues 'he differs from other animals in that he is the most imitative of creatures, and he learns his earliest lessons by imitation. Also inborn in all of us is the instinct to enjoy works of imitation.'
17. Horace, 90. The artists Horace is advising are dramatists.
18. Aristotle; Ch. 13, 47–48.

and love. This perpetual search for ultimate perfection brings momentary insights of such glorious splendours that we speak of a vision or dream. Perhaps Paul Klee (1879–1940) is right when he says: 'Art does not reproduce what can be seen: it makes things visible'.[19]

19. H. L. C. Jaffé, *The Contact History of Art, Twentieth-Century Painting*, translated by Margaret Shenfield, edited by André Held and D. W. Bloemena (London, 1963), Vol. XII, 4.

E. V. BORG, B.A., teaches 'Artistic Aims and Achievements' in the Systems of Knowledge course at the New Lyceum, Msida and is an art critic in local newspapers and journals.