

BRIEF NOTES ON THE POETRY OF GIORGIO DE CHIRICO

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The poems and prose poetry that Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico presents here for the first time to the public represents the Master's entire poetic *corpus*. It represents an unrepeatable occasion to sound the visual thought and therefore *forma mentis* of Giorgio de Chirico.¹

In this capillary work of (even philological) reconstruction which constitutes a first step and solid base for further study and in-depth examination, an attempt has been made to give a sense of completeness to this evolutionary journey by integrating published lyrical poetry with new unedited works: a poetic voyage that has long been neglected by dechirican scholarship.

If we owe the first important attempt to order the artist's theoretical, critical and lyrical works to Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco, which were brought together in 1985 in *Il meccanismo del pensiero* (The Mechanism of Thought)², today an indispensable instrument of study has been provided by the publication of the first volume of the Master's writings, his *opera omnia* (curated by Andrea Cortellessa for Bompiani publishing house).

The unpublished poems can be placed in a precise spatial-temporal arch. It is most likely that they were written in France during the years 1925-1929, and therefore parallel the birth and elaboration of *Hebdomeros*³, *Piccolo trattato di tecnica pittorica* (Short Treaty on Pictorial Technique)⁴, and the first draft of the novel *Monsieur Dusdron*⁵, and afterwards *Il signor Dudron*⁶.

"One could say that all the work of assimilation and study, technical exercises and philosophical meditation that de Chirico undertook between 1919 and 1924 exploded upon contact with France again."⁷

They are therefore particularly important years, years of turning point, change, and new, original elaborations. From time to time, the artist changed the 'sources' of inspiration from which he

¹ The following collections of poems have already been published: G. de Chirico, *Poesie – Poèmes, Segni e (Di) Segni*, edited by Carmine Siniscalco, Studio S / Arte Contemporanea, Rome 1980; G. de Chirico, *Poèmes Poesie*, presented by Jean-Charles Vegliante, Solin, Paris 1981; G. de Chirico, *Poesie – Poèmes II, Segni e (Di) Segni*, edited by Carmine Siniscalco, Studio S / Arte Contemporanea, Rome 1985.

² M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, *Il meccanismo del pensiero*, Einaudi, Milan 1985.

³ G. de Chirico, *Hebdomeros*, Collection Bifur, Editions du Carrefour, Paris 1929. First Italian edition, Bompiani, Milan 1942. Published in English, with an introduction by J. A. Hodkinson, The Four Seasons Book Society, New York 1966. "The cover, with the title *Le peintre et son génie chez l'écrivain*, presents the author's name twice: in block letters and the artist's signature beside the figure of Hebdomeros, who is also double and is portrayed on a background of classical ruins." P. Picozza, publication notes, in G. de Chirico, *Ebdòmero*, Abscondita, Milan 2003, p. 129. Republished in Giorgio de Chirico, *Scritti/1 (1911-1945). Romanzi e scritti critici e teorici*, edited by A. Cortellessa, Bompiani, Milan 2008, pp. 45-157.

⁴ G. de Chirico, *Piccolo trattato di tecnica pittorica*, 1928, Scheiwiller, Milan. Republished in G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1...*, cit., pp. 1-43.

⁵ *Metafisica*. Quaderni della Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico, n. 1-2, Milan, 2002, p. 237.

⁶ *Metafisica*. Quaderni della Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico, n. 5-6, Rome, 2006, p. 561, republished in G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1...*, cit., p. 159.

⁷ P. Baldacci *Giorgio de Chirico, l'estetica del Classicismo e la tradizione antica*, in *Giorgio de Chirico, Parigi 1924 – 1929, dalla nascita del Surrealismo al crollo di Wall Street*, edited by M. Fagiolo dell'Arco and P. Baldacci, Edizioni P. Daverio, Milan 1982, p. 73.

drew (books, artists, museums, places etc.). Variables and momentary contingences change, but after all, he always remained true to himself: the 'method' is the same. In fact, during his long output, the profound reasons which had always moved him do not vary.

From 1924 (the year of his first brief re-entry into Paris) and the year afterwards (with de Chirico's definitive move during which he wrote *Vale Lutetia*⁸, a very important ode to this city as it largely clarifies the genesis of his new painting and poems), he prepared that particularly fertile *humus* for the creation and birth of both *Hebdomeros*, published in 1929, and *Piccolo trattato di tecnica pittorica* of 1928, as well as the first version of *Monsieur Dusdron*.

At the time, these works represented the foundations, the 'steps', for the novel which would see the light posthumously and which represents a genial portrait of the artist: *Il Signor Dudron*.

"[...] the *Commedia dell'arte moderna* (The Comedy of Modern Art), the *Piccolo trattato di tecnica pittorica*, the *Memoirs of My Life*, *Hebdomeros* and *Il signor Dudron* (Mr Dudron) [...] can be read as chapters of a single book, in which de Chirico always returns to the same problems"⁹. Following the completion of transcription, comprehension and chronological positioning of the poems, it is to these fundamental works that we therefore turn to, even if not considered exhaustive.

An overview of the present nucleus of poems presents a clear image of a spontaneously written collection of poetic notes. Over the years, the author would return to his works in order to stress, clarify, file and correct them with the aim of reaching an ideal form. And this is what happens in both his pictorial as well as his literary production: indeed, the repetition of themes and subject matter of his paintings are numerous, as are the undertones of his poetical works.

It is therefore not surprising that in many of the poems published today that we find many common themes with *Hebdomeros*, and references to in *Dudron*. Indeed, the similarities present in the poems cross-reference his novels. In some cases, one even comes across, quite literary, the same quote. These elements confirm de Chirico's constancy of 'method': his *eternal return* to himself, and the wise use of self-quotation.

In fact, a characteristic typical of the artist is that he constantly drew "images of memory" from his vast and limitless memory. A quantity of information, numerous requests, experiences from the past, even recent ones, were used again, reunited and 'mixed up' like a 'collage'.

This happens in both his painting and poetry, and does so at a constant rate, hand-in-hand with one another. It is like a kind of cord that is never cut off, and in fact, its nostalgic spirit is linked to a past that is far and yet near at the same time. This allows him to leave with a piece of 'luggage' that is indispensable for the journey. And as the trip slowly progresses, from time to time that 'baggage' is enriched by experiences, sensations and reflections which consent him to remain faithful to himself, even during moments of change.

A natural predisposition pushed him to in-depth examination, to search for the 'truth', the mystery of things. His romantic and starry-eyed nature led him to discover, with the nostalgic sweet-

⁸ G. de Chirico, *Vale Lutetia*, in G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1...*, cit., p. 806. Published in this Periodical, n. 107, pp. 494-497.

⁹ V. Trione *Atlanti Metafisici. Giorgio de Chirico. Arte, architettura, critica*, Skira, Milan 2005, p. 21.

ness of memory, themes, locations, situations and places that had been lived, seen, absorbed and re-elaborated. In de Chirico, “a man with a vivid imagination and a head stuffed with ideas acquired from reading”¹⁰, thought, fantasized recollection and intuitive vision are overborne.

There are common themes shared between the Master’s unpublished poems and *Hebdomeros*, as well as with allusions to *Dudron*. It is therefore not by chance that many of the poems published here also make reference to contemporary pictorial works: in particular, I refer to all those components which evoke landscapes of a mythical and archaic Greece with horses, ancient shores, waves, divinities, gladiators or *souvenirs*. All bring to mind life ‘memories’. A life – his life –, lived with profound sensibility and care, photographs, appropriates and conserves. And at the right moment, everything returns, reappears and comes to life again! Just like an eternal present.

“*Hebdomeros* is de Chirico’s autobiography and his self-portrait. The painter and writer [...]”¹¹. Reading and re-reading the metaphysical adventures of *Ebdòmero* parallel to his poems, one sees appear, as if by magic, de Chirico’s meticulous and subtly ironic work. The artist clearly had fun disseminating the entire novel of his poetic quotations, scattering here and there small clues that point to a wider, more complex project. It is worth, therefore, citing some of these cross-references.

Right from the novel’s start¹², de Chirico describes the mysterious, almost “underwater” silence which surrounds *Hebdomeros* and his companions on this adventure, a silence which directly alludes to the absence of noise evoked in the poem *Sur le silence*.

“*Hebdomeros*, turning to his compagnons [...] all three of them, holding hands as though in the face of danger, looked silently and intently at the astonishing scene; they imagined they were passengers in a highly advanced submarine [...]. For that matter, the scene before them really did have an underwater quality to it. It reminded one of large aquaria, if only on account of the diffused light [...]. A strange, inexplicable silence lay over the whole scene: that pianist [...] playing *without making a sound*.”¹³

Moreover, some subjects which occur both in the poems and the novel, such as fish, which are big and black, appear menacingly: “Let my arms be your oars and my tresses your ropes / For the great black fishes might swallow you up”¹⁴. Alternatively in *Dudron*, de Chirico associates fish with the wonder of an unexpected discovery: “Happiness, he thought, would have been of another quality, mixed with a type of undefined awe, mixed even with surprise, as one finds fish in an underground river [...]”¹⁵

Furthermore, trees, and pines in particular, which are essential figures in the poem *Antibes* and *Nascita di un manicchino*¹⁶, are implied by unusual lines which transfigure them: “seen far in the

¹⁰ G. de Chirico, *Hebdomeros*, cit., p. 54.

¹¹ J. de Sanna, postface in G. de Chirico, *Ebdòmero*, Ed. Abscondita, cit., p. 121.

¹² The novel’s English translation (The Four Season’s Book Society, 1966) was unsigned. See publisher’s note in *Hebdomeros*, with an introduction by John Ashbury, Exact Change, Cambridge 1992.

¹³ *Hebdomeros*, p. 26.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 30. One finds several other references to big fish in the novel.

¹⁵ *Il signor Dudron*, pp. 233-234.

¹⁶ *Metafisica*. Quaderni della Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico, n. 1-2, Milan, 2002, p. 277.

distance [was] a part of that long mountain whose other side sloped down toward the gulf; nearer at hand you could see trees, especially pine-trees. The fierce winds [found several times in the artist's poems] which often blew from the sea had twisted them into the would-be aesthetic poses of exotic dancers; this made a rather curious contrast at that moment with the absolute stillness which lay over everything. In the bright light of that fine October day it was as though the hapless trees were racked by the torture of a never-ending storm"¹⁷.

A few pages on, pine trees (as extremely suggestive figures) return once again: "Hebdomeros shunned it in favor of the park where the pine-trees grew. They were martyred trees, for a strange epidemic was raging among them, these attractive, friendly trees, so healthy and tonic. Each one bore a stairway made of white wood, twined round its trunk like a giant snake"¹⁸. But perhaps the novel's most powerful scene with regard to trees is when they manifest all their strength as living beings: "Now the trees which had invaded the rooms and corridors of his house moved off slowly toward the south; they emigrated in groups, in families and tribes; they were already far off, and with them died away the thousand voices of the mysterious forest and its disturbing odor"¹⁹.

Other elements in the novel, such as the lyre, scorching heat and semi-gods, are also strewn within his poetic work. Constant cross-references to the South and North are also present in the poems are alluded to in the similarly named *Dudron*.²⁰

We read in *Hebdomeros* how "Its front faced south and so toward the sea; its stern was to the north, and the children came to lean over it, those children who loved to day-dream, for the north attracted them more than the other points of the compass"²¹. The dreamer-youths or the people who rested upon the balustrades closely recall extracts from *Dudron* and a poem whilst the *geni apteri* in the poem *Fragment* watch over the tomb. In *Hebdomeros* we find them laid down "clouds, amid which, in poses of sublime majesty"²².

An expression which we find jotted on the reverse of our 'block' of poems is *acquae calidae* [hot springs]. In the novel, a healing-like example of this appears: "He should have liked to nurse it, this faith, swollen every day by fresh examples; he should have liked to nurse it as a hepatic patient nurses his liver at the hot cholagogic springs; *acquae calidae*"²³.

Even Hebdomeros' declaration "I am not the king"²⁴ is literally taken from the first lines of *Poème*.

Other subtle parallelisms are traced within similar atmospheres: "at the hour the sun disappears slowly in the clear air behind the rocky summits"²⁵ is also found in the numerous lyrics as well as innumerable paintings. In *Hebdomeros*, Africa, which is the protagonist of *Poème*, is

¹⁷ *Hebdomeros*, p. 31.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

²⁰ Originally Monsieur Dusdron (in Italian, an anagram of Sud-nord, or South-north), the name later became Dudron.

²¹ *Hebdomeros*, p. 35.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 40.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

²⁴ G. de Chirico, *Poème* (published in this Periodical, n. 43, p. 452).

²⁵ *Hebdomeros*, p. 94.

described with analogous images: “Hebdomeros and his friends [...] looking toward the south; they knew that over there whence came the gale, beyond the stormy sea [...] lay Africa; yes, towns whitened by the intense heat of the sun, thirst and dysentery, but also cool oases where you wish for nothing more, and a kind of strange, gentle wisdom that falls from the palm trees along with the ripe dates”.²⁶

As seen, therefore, the references from the novels to the poems and vice versa are numerous. They make the *opera omnia* of dechirican writings one unique, very rich material: various but homogenous, rhythmically woven from the continuous movement of their internal cross-referencing.

The reader who comes across the poetical work of the Metaphysical Master will be surprised by how, in just a few lines, he catches sight of an entire world which sometimes leaves a bitter-sweet taste of melancholic nostalgia upon the lips. Like a spell, it ‘appears’ in the poem: it gives it life and allows us to visualise the poem as if it were a picture, a painting.

These poems, like *Hebdomeros*, are the result of a long and rich journey which is personally and intellectually evolutionary. It is the mature fruit of years and years of study, original re-workings, revelations.

From the mid 1920s, with *Hebdomeros*, the artist decided to mount the ancient wave which was born within him and let it guide him to explore unfamiliar lands, to be the pioneer of unknown territories. Without fear and youthful worries, he started to embark upon his long and winding journey, perhaps turned towards the most profound discovery of himself. And this trip continually led to new approaches because his eternal repetitions are never repetitions.

And like a modern Ulysses, he was ready to fulfil his *destin errant*²⁷ and turn towards new and more arduous destinations. Like Ulysses, de Chirico focuses his attention on himself, without ever losing sight of his past memories, after roaming around various places for a long time. The journey will lead him to pass from primordial instincts to the seraphic tranquillity of maturity.

Ulysses is the symbol of travel *par excellence* and of the ingenuity which triumphs, like Zarathustra: he is the ‘superior’ individual of a curious and inspired spirit, thrown towards the future. And de Chirico, armed by memory and *techne* (technique) felt closer to his emblematic character, proof of which is also seen in the poem *Odyseüs*, published in 1929, together with other poems in the publication “Selection”²⁸.

During his long and complex earthly existence, Giorgio de Chirico ‘underwent’ many such bidings that his ‘nominated’ spirit was unable to do anything but express, in various forms, these genial re-workings. Unforeseeable and multifaceted, he knew how to be faithful to himself and his thoughts even if both were in continuous evolution: perpetually *in fieri*.

His existence destabilised and disorientated the majority of people. Few could understand his

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

²⁷ G. de Chirico *Salve Lutetia*, in “Bulletin de l’Effort moderne”, n. 33, marzo 1927, in G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1...*, cit., p. 819.

²⁸ The poem is published in this Periodical, n. 82, p. 469.

work. There were very few who were able to see and recognise the meaning and greatness of what he did.

With this as his starting point, the artist from Volos sometimes had the courage to follow new, winding and labyrinthine paths, upon which he intentionally left no tracks to follow. Only superior spirits would have been able to 'see' and discover the demon in every thing.

Translated by Victoria Noel-Johnson