

“YOU WILL BE SOMEBODY”¹

Giorgio de Chirico

Would you care to follow me as far as the Sargasso Sea? The Sargasso Sea! He said it ironically, I am sure, because one couldn't so much call “the Sargasso Sea” that part of the port that the jetty's concrete blocks secured from the winds of the open sea and from those nearest. It was the right part of the jetty, if you turned your back to the city; from the left side the sea frothed at midday, in a very inoffensive way however, and so between the calm and the agitation between these two expanses of water that were like the symbol of human life, the jetty extended, artificial promontory *constructed by the hand of man*, as with rhetorical emphasis Professor Alfano would say, refuge there for many long years because, even though he was very strong in mathematics and played the cello with gusto and emotion he remained always under-recognized in his native city. But he persisted in not believing it. The Sargasso Sea! This vision (he called it a vision though the residents of the coast, all poor devils burnt by the sun, insisted instead that it wasn't a vision but a reality), this vision tormented him for many days at the same hour: a few seconds before midday, when the surface of the sea lost the icy look of a brilliant mirror it had in the first lights of day. One townsman in particular insisted on contradicting him, an old fisherman, the most elderly: “To be sure, sir,” he would repeat in a loud voice, “*it is a reality*”; a metaphysical reality, if you wish, but a reality. *Dura lex sed lex*.” It was nevertheless a fact: this surgeon, already elderly, but still with muscles of steel (and he'd prove it when he clasped your hand), this surgeon who had the boldness to add, pompously, on his calling cards, below his name, the appellative *mycologist*, as though it was supposed to be a virtue, this surgeon was ultimately the only one in the whole village capable of standing up to the cross-eyed mariner, a sort of dreadful pirate who never joked; and you could see it clearly because he avoided any argument with him; though sometimes, nevertheless, to keep up appearances and satisfy his self-respect, he would insist on turning his back on the consumers of this polluted tavern and gaze at the rough sea through the sole window from which hung mournfully a pair of curtains spotted with flies. “A reality,” he would repeat mechanically, because after all, he was thinking of something else entirely, a reality, the sublime scene of the pelican! A scene that Homer would never have been able to imagine and describe! This miraculous pelican, with the sinister look of a drunk, liberally ripping at its chest with strong stabs of its beak on the slippery deck of the shipwrecked

¹ G. de Chirico, *Le survivant de Navarin* published in W. George's monograph, *Chirico – avec des fragments littéraires de l'artiste*, Éditions Chroniques du Jour, Paris 1928. Published in Italian translation by the artist, “*Tu sarai qualcuno*”, in “Poligono”, n. 4, Milan, February 1930, pp. 204-210, from which the present English translation has been achieved.

craft; and to nourish whom, for heaven's sake, I ask myself? "Its children," you'll say, but he never had, the poor wretch, he never had any. Yes, one can, after all, admit it, but then all of these sublime and idiotic resolutions of a return to the land, of popular art, of the sincerity of self-denial, of honesty, of probity, of simplicity, of humility before nature, of the cult of the beautiful, of health in art, of good work accomplished in the morning when one rises early, of the Latin tradition, of the Mediterranean spirit, of victory over oneself? All of this is nothing? Jokes and utopias? Utopias of a hysterical monk, dreamed ideal platonic republics in which clergymen, under the aegis of the law, can couple regularly and hygienically every night with women beautiful like statues? Pure utopias! And of all of this, now, nothing remains; nothing more than a fistful of ash, not even smolderings and some small scrap of white paper, negative response to the enthralled lover, ripped up and tossed to the wind, remote flight of tropical butterflies hovering over the centenarian elephant. And it was here that he would resume from the top the eternal revenge of a Jules Verne, children's book author, and prophet, in his books, of modern inventions. As if the whole world didn't know that the experiments of submarine navigation were done long before the appearance of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, and that in general the works of Jules Verne were not for children but for grown ups, for the *very grown up*.

Here still the old error of believing that all of these sublime navigators who sacrificed their lives for an ideal of adventure were possessed by the demon of the voyages as with the Anglo Saxons with iron stomachs hurdling over the globe with persistence worthy of a better cause. And he affirmed it. But it was in bad faith, of course, because he knew that after the most recent discoveries already heralded in the last issue of *Monatliche Zeitschrift der Metaphysischen Weltanschauung*,² one needed only the longitude of the floor and ceiling, and the famous Cape Matapan would be there, in this unsettling corner of his room, strewn with debris that the yellow wave of the Alfeios wet. The ghost of Pausanias wandered in the next room, his traveler's stick in hand, while the other ghost, that of the brother killed in war manning his machine guns, was left defeated in the large pink armchair like an English Prime Minister who passes away at the age of ninety-two. Speak to me of debris strewn across the floor and of sofas placed before the permanent spectacle of the Thermopylae! The doors half-closed against the corridor's night are a danger, you say? That may be, but all this is nothing now but a pale memory. In every case if the door is missing a lock or if you have lost the key all you have to do is push against your door a bulky piece of furniture whose drawers you will have taken care to fill with books and irons; you will see that the ghosts won't be able to slip in to your room in that sly way and with that awkward tone peculiar to them and, smiling at your questions, to gaze at you with a distant expression. Like that man who once responded to me in a quasi-brotherly manner, notwithstanding the great difference in age that separated us: "But why do you suppose that we know more than all of you? Than you all! That nice way of expressing himself. And a few moments later he added

² Monthly periodical on the metaphysical conception of the world.

in a low voice, even though we were alone in the room: "And also why do you believe that there is *something to know*?"

But if he insisted on believing it was not for him, far from it, because if it had been for him he would certainly have had to renounce you some time ago, accustomed as he was to seeing the coastal residents battle the mountain dwellers who often limited themselves to the defense of their villages apart from the moments of great emigrations from the North because then, pressed by this irresistible mass, they would descend toward the sea and the massacre would become inevitable. But they weren't to blame; they pushed because they were pushed—that's it, simply.

To avoid for their passengers a spectacle more painful than grand, the ship captains would raise their anchors and escape these sites of destruction and of death. The crafts would row, once the cape had been rounded, along the bright and peaceful coasts. From above the rocks yellowed with sulphurous emanations cascades of boiling water fell into the sea in such a way that, from some angles, the base of the cliffs disappeared in the mist. Sometimes at night some fires glowed on the coast and some mournful songs, some unsettling melopoeiae would reach all the way to the decks of the ships, where the passengers napped below the stars after their evening meal. It was the youthful crowds who were not yet invited into the fray, who sang in this way a despairing farewell to life.

"Poor epebes," the women would say with emotion, "at their age, to already be asking leave of life on such a beautiful summer night!" But the husbands, chilled by these reflections, would attempt to divert the conversation.

Entirely a stranger to these happenings, trusting only his zebra to which he spoke as if to a man and indicating with an ample gesture this great stretch of land whose monotony was uninterrupted except by some rises in the soil, covered by shrubs on the sides exposed to the sun and which could be found toward the north-west, he said with his grave and modulated voice: "The desired landscape, colonel."

Too late, he didn't answer anything this time; his thoughts were far away, too far away; a memory among a thousand others rose slowly from the twilight of his past: he saw a boarding school for young orphans erected amongst the eucalyptus trees at the foot of the acropolis and his friend with the face like a Michelangelo who, taking him by the shoulders and looking into the whites of his eyes, said in that memorable afternoon of his long-ago childhood: "ONE DAY YOU WILL BE SOMEBODY."

Translated by Stefania Heim