

GIORGIO DE CHIRICO AND "CONTINUOUS METAPHYSICS"

Maurizio Calvesi

The year 1910 can be considered the birth date of a kind of pictorial research which would prove to be the greatest Italian art movement during the first half of the century: the Metaphysical art of Giorgio de Chirico and later on, also included Carlo Carrà. Through Metaphysical art, de Chirico felt the need to restore a "subject" to painting, something it had been completely deprived of since the Fauve and Cubist revolution, which was an exclusively formalist revolution and the precursor of abstract art. Therefore, de Chirico's Metaphysical art, which is not made up of symbols (Freud or Jung can be used to shed light on de Chirico's "deep" psychology but not to decode his images) is an announcement, an oracle. And announcements or oracles are made up of signs not symbols. The word "Metaphysics" has to be brought back to its philosophical-transcendental meaning. In fact, with de Chirico, the term had this connotation from the beginning: Metaphysics as transcendence, even if associated with parapsychology. Carrà was the first to talk about "Metaphysics" in 1918, but Giorgio de Chirico had already made use of this adjective several times in his early writings, declaring, for example, that dreaming of someone is "proof of their metaphysical existence" or that attributing a "metaphysical reality" to "certain fortuitous events which we sometimes live" can provoke in us "the image of a work of art".

In this way, the artist carried out a true revolution of the subject; of the explicit, narrative subject which painting is called upon to illustrate. Indeed, de Chirico replaced this subject with one that was unreachable and enigmatic, as if suspended above the painting, or rather, he identified the subject within the enigma itself. Nevertheless, it is not an enigma – a problem that is subject to a solution –, but an enigma-spirit state which is irreducible to a determined state. Even though the pictorial image is not abstract and purely formalist (and thus an end in itself), but is, in fact, "representative" of something and does bear a "subject", it does so without putting forward a definable sense. In the final analysis, what it expresses is a "non-sense" and as such raises the doubt whether "non-sense" is the foundation of reality. Instead of a subject which "explains" the painting or a subject that is absent and insignificant – which is the case of the Cubists –, the subject makes painting become a mirror of mystery, one that hangs a question over painting itself, folding it into incongruent spatial solutions, alarming combinations of colour, voids and shadows of silent resonance. The universal non-sense is the great suspicion which dwells within the young de Chirico; it hides a deep sense which is unreachable or nothingness. From being a good Nietzschean, or through Nietzschean awareness, de Chirico verges on a gratuitous nihilism but he redeems it with a taste of great poetry.

What brought about the substantial change which arose in de Chirico's art in the 1920's and following decades, a change open to various expressive possibilities, different directions of research and unexpected turns of events? I believe that with the identification of the subject or of reality, along with the enigma, de Chirico then replaced the identification of reality – and therefore the subject – with poetry, art itself, myth, fairy tale, history and the significance of the past. The void of Metaphysics is filled with fantasies, apparitions, figures, and evocations from the past such as *The Gladiators*. But, at times, painting becomes an evocation of its very self, or rather, of the "Museum" as it re-lives the fairy-tale of the Renaissance and the Baroque. The nihilistic de Chirico matures a positive faith which is the same as that found in art and poetry but, with spirits, it also draws close to a form of confidence in religious feeling. The painter's spirit, free of youthful anguish, opens itself up to a pyrotechnical vision, animated by the spirit of poetry but also by serenity and good humour as seen in his "New Metaphysical art" of the 1960-70s. This very interesting period is at times a re-visitation. More often than not, it is a fantastic variation on original themes which can now take on the colourations of a witty irony as well.

It has often been the mistake of critics, from Breton to the fools who parroted him, to judge the profound change in the artist's relationship with myth and fairy-tale as decadence. Such error has not been made by critics such as Fabio Benzi, Claudio Crescentini and Jole de Sanna (and the undersigned), nor by Paolo Picozza, whose continuous and praiseworthy cultural programming acts against such prejudice and narrow-sighted historiography. Indeed, one of the things which I find the most "unjustifiable" in much of the historiography surrounding de Chirico, is the continuous containing and keeping de Chirico firmly stuck at 1919 in homage to the opinion of André Breton (who was, in reality, humanly questionable and domineering). It was he who said and wrote that de Chirico "had died" in 1919 when he had, according to him, returned to "classicism" and had therefore back-tracked and abandoned Metaphysical art. The on-going common ground broadcast by the Surrealists' leader continues to find reception in some areas of critique, even if practically no-one considers it possible to circumscribe de Chirico's creative activity to 1919 anymore. I would say that the term has been moved forward by one or two decades but without an explicit admission of Breton's mistake and with an undercurrent belief that a certain date must exist after which the artist's work ceases to be valid and his word credible. However striking the evidence of Breton's blunder is, it has not prevented the typology of his discriminatory and ideological judgement from being considered acceptable. This is due to the authority granted to him, (an authority perhaps attributed above a correct limit). This judgement was issued in the 1920's and reaffirmed in 1928 (ie. at the height of a very happy period for de Chirico, and recognized by everyone), would have been a kind of prophecy applicable to periods later on. It is worth re-reading Breton's words from the work *Surrealism and Painting* dated 1928. De Chirico had civilly protested over a title the Surrealists had attributed to a painting of his, concluding without any particular acrimony: "I wonder to what purpose they de-christen pictures which are only up to me to entitle." Breton fiercely commented: "from under the stones which cover him (which cover de Chirico) and which we continue to throw on top of him, this catty person's voice sadly rises, regardless of what the other dead who surround him have suggested to him, de Chirico knows well that (...)" etc. But who were these "other dead" who, according to Breton, surrounded the Master? Let us read the rest: "de Chirico, who for the last ten years has

continued to paint, has done nothing but abuse a supernatural power, it amazes him that today no-one wants to follow his narrow-minded conclusions. The least that one can say about these works is that the spirit is totally absent and that they are dominated by an impudent cynicism. The complete amorality of this figure has done the rest. We consider certain ugly works such as his Return of the Prodigal Son, his ridiculous copies of Raphael, his tragic works of Aeschylus and many portraits with a receding chin and vain Latin motto can be nothing other than the product of a 'bad spirit'."

As one sees, Breton cited works which today are considered amongst de Chirico's absolute masterpieces, amongst which, the splendid self-portraits with the writing *Et quid amabo nisi quod aenigma est?* or *Nulla sine tragoedia gloria*. But in order to understand the motivation which pushed Breton to his wicked attack, which provoked in de Chirico the successive and excessive reaction to Surrealism, and also to every type of avant-garde, it is enough to search for those other dead which Breton talked about and had surrounded the Great Metaphysician. We discover this easily enough by reading the second Manifesto of Surrealism of 1930, where Robert Desnos, Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, Georges Limbour, Jacques Baron and Roger Vitrac are cited and the words "a corpse" feature beside each of these names. It deals with all of those who removed themselves from Breton's leadership and who had subjected him to criticism. They were those ex-Surrealists, as Breton himself clarified, who wanted to take back their liberty in order to compromise themselves here, there and everywhere. Breton activated a true and real terroristic tragedy in order to avert other defections from the movement which he claimed to dominate. With regard to Desnos, whom he had called enigmatic, Breton writes "one expects absolutely nothing more from him, as his activity is denounced as muddle-headed to the utmost degree and that the performance he gives is pathetic." There are also [similar comments] for Duchamp and Picabia, even if they carry less violent tones: "Duchamp did not have the right to abandon the match in which he was involved during the War years for a never-ending match of chess, which seriously suffers from scepticism. Finally, the thought that Picabia can be on the point of renouncing [in favour of] an attitude of provocation and anger worries me." Breton attacked all those who showed signs of breaking loose from Surrealism and, as such, there are still more words for the ex-Surrealist George Bataille. With Bataille (regarding nothing that one does not know by heart), we witness an offensive return of the old anti-dialectic materialism. And, amongst the ex-Surrealists to censure, we also find Masson. Therefore, it appears as clear as sunlight that the condemnations delivered by Breton against de Chirico did not even depend on an error of valuation but on the evident intention to persecute all those who refused to observe the hierarchal ideology of the Surrealist movement and took their freedom to follow different roads to the one marked out by its leader.

The idea that de Chirico was finished-off in 1919 was also embraced in Italy and sustained for a long time until the end, by even an illustrious figure such as Giuliano Briganti. In particular, Briganti put forth this theory again on the occasion of the donation of a series of very important de Chirico paintings (amongst which, *Mother* of 1910 whilst the others were of the 1920's, 1930's and 1940's) to the Galleria d'Arte Moderna. It is understandable that donations can annoy antique-dealers as they replace sales. However, Briganti's case did not deal with this but rather a heredity which derived from his maestro Roberto Longhi who had always been against de Chirico in every way. Therefore, after the greatness of Metaphysical Art had been recognised, there was nothing for him to do but say: ok, yes,

Metaphysical Art, but only up until 1919 – just like Breton –, after which time de Chirico collapsed. Undoubtedly, this is a thing which needs to be obstinately disputed, something that the Giorgio e Isa de Chirico Foundation has done for years, pursuing a totally straightforward truth: de Chirico's Metaphysical Art is one period only, from 1910 to 1978, the year of his death; whilst the keys to its interpretation are instead numerous: with regard to the artist's freedom and the scholar's liberty.

But let us return to 1910 and therefore to Florence as the first stop of Metaphysical Art with the first "enigmatic" visions and then move on to Turin straight afterwards. De Chirico's encounter with Turin occurred for the first time in the summer of 1911 during his transfer from Florence to Paris. The painter arrived in the city on the evening of July 11th, a Tuesday, and left in the late morning of Thursday the 13th – practically a stop-over of about thirty hours –. De Chirico remembers it in his Memoirs: "We settled up on the house in Florence and took the train to Turin. I felt very bad; it was a scorching summer of the year 1911, it was July. We stopped in Turin for a few days to see the exhibition which had opened then. We left Turin as I was very ill and had strong intestinal pains. I felt worse in the train and when the train arrived at Dijon, I begged my mother to stop there for a night. As the morning approached, the pains lessened and I fell deeply asleep. When I awoke in the late afternoon, I felt better and so we decided to continue with the journey. There was a train which left for Paris in the evening and we took that train. We arrived in Paris at the Gare de Lyon in the middle of the night - it was the night of 14 July and Paris was celebrating." Once in Paris, de Chirico wrote a letter to his mother dated August 1911 in which he recalls the journey, speaking about the Piedmontese capital: "(...) departed from the square city, the victorious kings, the great towers and big sunny piazza squares, the train hurried along, burnt from the scorching heat."

His second trip to Turin was the most important. It was linked to a military related event which has only recently come to light through Roos's studies and has been subsequently contextualised by Crescentini. Upon moving to Paris, de Chirico left his military obligations and was denounced for desertion at the Military Tribunal in Florence on 23 November 1911. He was identified by the Italian Consulate in the French capital sometime around February of the following year and forced to go to Turin, the site of his assignment to the 23rd infantry regiment where he arrived on 2 March 1912. Nevertheless, he could neither bear military discipline, nor resist the pull of Paris. He abandoned the barracks and took a train for France. He was denounced for this latest and more serious desertion at the Military Tribunal in Florence on 12 March.

De Chirico's second trip to Turin was therefore about ten days longer than his first, and it is thought that this is the trip that the painter refers to in a text of 1935 written in French in which he says: "it was Turin that inspired all of the paintings in the series I painted from 1912 to 1915. I truthfully confess that they also owe much to Friedrich Nietzsche of whom I was a passionate reader at the time. His *Ecce homo*, written in Turin shortly before falling into madness, greatly helped me understand the particular beauty of this city. The real season for Turin, during which her metaphysical grace reveals itself best, is Autumn; an autumn which has nothing in common with the romantic autumn, with the sky littered with clouds, with dead leaves and the departure of swallows. The autumn which Turin revealed to me is cheerful, even if it is certainly not a striking and multicoloured cheerfulness. It is something immense, of a time near and far, of a great serenity and a great purity. It is very close

to the joy which a convalescent experiences when he comes through a long and painful disease. It is the season of philosophers, poets and artists inclined to philosophise. In the afternoon, the shadows are long and a sweet immobility reigns everywhere. One could believe that violent passions and bad feelings have left the heart of men. In my opinion, this harmony, so exquisite that it could become almost unsustainable, is not unrelated to Nietzsche's madness, whose already tried spirit could not receive similar jolts with impunity. Luckily, within proportionate measure, I too, was going through a crisis of melancholy and pessimism when this revelation suddenly came to me. Without doubt, men will one day be able to train themselves to receive the knocks of metaphysical discoveries just as one dedicates oneself to physical exercise today. Turin's autumnal charm makes the geometric, straight-lined construction of its streets and piazzas even more penetrating" and he continued singing the praises of the Turin autumn for another piece.

But, as we have seen, de Chirico was in Turin for the first time in July and the second, in March. Thus, had he invented Turin's autumn season? In this regard, Baldacci comments on the "power of literature" and concludes along the lines of a "mystification" enacted by de Chirico. However, it is evident that the painter must have returned a third time to Turin, during the autumn. And this new visit to the city which had interested him so much could not have occurred during his definitive return trip from Paris to Ferrara upon Italy's entrance into the War (a trip which took place in June 1915), but rather, during the course of a previous trip, a brief re-entry into Italy documented in a testimony of Bino Binazzi: "in the autumn of 1914 (writes Binazzi) during one of those Florentine afternoons in which the beauty of the city is at its most classic, I got to know the two Siamese brothers, so to speak, Giorgio de Chirico and Alberto Savinio. They had arrived a few days earlier from Paris which was already stricken from the War; they had felt the need to see their original native land at the time of that first terrible turmoil. If Italy had entered the war, they would have been soldiers." A few years ago when I re-evoked this testimony, Baldacci replied that it must be treated as an oversight or a typographical error by Binazzi who must have had met the two brothers in 1915 and not in 1914. But the reference to events is absolutely unequivocal: the world conflict had already broken out but Italy still had not yet entered into war – it can not but deal with the autumn of 1914 –. It is very likely, therefore, although not certain, that de Chirico visited Turin for a third time, even if quickly between one train and another during the autumn of 1914. And it is clear that his memory of an autumnal Turin refers to a third visit and not to the second one.

The reason why he felt the need to stop in Turin again – but during autumnal months – can be explained by the prompting he received from Nietzsche's letters. An Italian edition of Nietzsche's Selected Letters dates precisely to 1914, even if de Chirico could have already read them before in French in Paris or in the German edition of 1908. "Wonderful clearness – writes Nietzsche – autumn colours, an exquisite well-being diffused on everything, five steps away from me, the very large piazza-square. I went for my usual walk on the outskirts of Turin; there was very pure October light everywhere, the splendid tree-lined avenue was barely touched by autumn. Today I am full of autumnal feelings in all the best meanings of this word. This is the time of my great harvest, everything becomes light for me." More generally, the Nietzschean theme of autumn and its mornings and afternoons was already known by the painter from reading *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* or *Ecce homo*.

After Florence and the first two Metaphysical paintings of 1910 – *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon* and *The Enigma of the Oracle* –, the works of the years that followed (thus posterior to his vision of Turin), introduce motifs taken from the Roman world and, in its aberrant perspective, from the archaic perspective models of primitive Tuscans. But de Chirico was also influenced by the porticoes of Turin and squares such as Piazza San Carlo where the equestrian monument of Carlo Felice lines up with the porticoes. The arched porticoes with an equestrian monument rising in the background are seen in the painting entitled *The Red Tower*. The horse with its muzzle pushed towards its chest, its right leg lifted from the parallelepiped of the base, is taken from another Turin monument, that featuring Carlo Alberto. This statue is situated under the window of the apartment Nietzsche occupied in Turin – an apartment de Chirico recalls in *Hebdomeros* –. From the window, he could see one of the sides of the statue “of his father” installed upon a low plinth in the centre of the piazza. In fact, Nietzsche, gone mad, had said that he was the son of Carlo Alberto. The painting is therefore homage to Turin and the philosopher’s visionary madness. In another painting entitled *Still-life. Turin in Spring* of 1914, the horse of the Carlo Alberto monument appears again. On the base, one reads “Emanuele II” (cut by a vertical band); an excerpt of the commemoration regarding Vittorio Emanuele II’s birth inscribed on the facade of Palazzo Carignano, where Nietzsche believed he had been born. Savinio, who certainly influenced the Metaphysical painting of his brother but not in the radical way critics would want, declared that Nietzsche’s identification with Vittorio Emanuele II was prompted by the daily vision of this inscription located right in front of the philosopher’s apartment balcony. Certainly, de Chirico thought the same thing as his brother Savinio who, speaking about the autobiographical Nivasio Dolcemare, saw in him (that is in himself), the reincarnated spirit of the great philosopher. Savinio writes: “one remembers at a certain point that Nietzsche had died in 1900 but that his spirit, which is also reason, had abandoned him twelve years earlier, in 1888, which consented that adventurous spirit to go wandering for three entire years before finding warm refuge in Nivasio Dolcemare’s body.” Savinio was, in fact, born in 1891 but de Chirico was born precisely in 1888, all the more reason, therefore, for him to consider a similar reincarnation of the spirit-reason lost by Nietzsche that year, in himself.

Even if de Chirico was dominated by his imagination to a point that he could, at times, distort the truth of memories, there is no doubt that the habit of doubting every assertion of his, of wanting to consider him as a mystifier or a dishonest person, is reprehensible – particularly as, in reality, such behaviour was due to his almost youthful, excessive candour –, nevertheless, this is a habit which has lasted for decades, even, at times, up until today.

Translated by Victoria Noel-Johnson