

I HAVE BEEN TO NEW YORK

*Giorgio de Chirico*¹

On the vast Atlantic Ocean, between Europe and what is called the new continent, there is a liquid frontier; over there waves bubble, the water is lukewarm and soapy; a moist and humid warmth envelops the big vessels which roll and dance among the ghosts of caravels and half-fish emerge from the water, with their mouth open, in pursuit of an imaginary prey; it is the *Gulf Stream*. Up to this point a passenger, regardless of what corner of Europe he comes from, is still breathing in the *atmosphere of home*, if one may say so. Once this frontier is crossed, one is *on the other side*; whether it is better or worse, I do not know; what I know is that one is *in a different world*; in an imperceptible manner *everything has changed*; one feels a little bit *as if one had died*; clearly one keeps moving, eating, smoking, strolling, chatting, reading, doing absolutely everything just as before, but in all of this, there is a trace of the movement of a ghost...

Upon arriving in New York everything that appears to you – the skyscrapers of Wall Street, the mist, the tugboats, the elongated, white, cubist architecture, properly lined-up, and reminiscent of the historical reconstructions of Babylon and of Imperial Rome, executed in plaster after the plans and drawings of meticulous archaeologists - all of this is suffused with an otherworldly light.

America has existed already for a few centuries as America; big cities have been built; a deliberate and laborious people have expanded there, and expanded ceaselessly. It seems to me therefore rather excessive to still call it *the new world*. America is no longer a new world but is, and always will be, *another world*. It is not simply a question of whether the civilization, mentality, standards, social, economic, or technical progress are more or less advanced than in Europe; it is rather a question of molecules, of climate, of different atmosphere, of the special quality of the sun's rays. The light and temperatures there are different. There is something of the humid torpor of a greenhouse, even in the middle of the winter; there is also the light of a greenhouse. In America human beings and objects *lose their shadow*. There is also a strange softness: everything is suppler as if it were made of the same substance; human and animal bones, stones and metals appear less hard than in Europe: everything is less hard and dry than in Europe. This explains the strange brightness of flowers, fruits, vegetables, and women's skin in America. This soft weariness, which weighs on everything, is also *an otherworldly* weariness.

¹ G. de Chirico, *J'ai été à New York*, originally published in "XX Siècle", March 1938. Republished in "Omnibus", October 8, 1938. Also in *Il Meccanismo del pensiero. Critica, polemica, autobiografia, 1911-1943*, edited by M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, Einaudi, Turin 1985, pp. 349-356; English translation *I have been to New York* in *De Chirico and America*, exhibition catalogue edited by Emily Braun, The Bertha and Karl Art Gallery di Hunter College of the City University of New York, September 10 - October 26, 1996, Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico, Rome, Umberto Allemandi & C., Turin 1996, pp. 136-138. Now in Giorgio de Chirico, *Scritti/1 (1911-1945). Romanzi e scritti critici e teorici*, a cura di A. Cortellesa, Bompiani, Milano 2008, pp. 853-855.

European from old Europe, go and visit New York if you can. Go and visit that feverish and dreamy city: there you will discover strange beauties; you will see apparitions which have nothing in common with what cinema and literature has shown of that country up till now.

Behind the barrier of the ocean, behind the customs houses and the Irishmen with polished black guns, behind the ghosts in white gloves who unload the waste of seven sins in the pale light of dawn, you will find, again and again, in New York the magnificent, New York the eternally New, forgotten memories, memories which emerge over there as they do during the hours of half sleep, during those mysterious hours when soul and spirit, disengaged from logic and reality, solve a multitude of enigmas and problems otherwise insoluble – forgotten, alas, as soon as they are unravelled.

Luxury and wealth, in an apotheosis of fireworks, create strange paradises in mysterious New York, in the very centre of this immense and ancient, mechanical and polymorphic city. These paradises carry us at a soft and imperceptible speed, without jolts and without hurdles, in padded sledges pulled silently by multicoloured ducks and by the good storks of yesteryear... Splendid city of dream in a dream, city of Windows, Window-city, Storefront-City, before its storefronts parade day and night, like the characters of a very old clock, all the things of an enigmatic humanity, from the distant origins drowned in the mist of paleontology, of forests and caves, up to the spectacular and electrifying aspects of its future darkness.

New York, the eternally New, draws us on its eternal parallels into the unlikely kaleidoscope of its storefronts, of its transparent towers, its magnificent bazaars, its windows lit throughout the long winter nights, where ineffable Dioscuri sleep, leaning against the harnesses of their exhausted horses; where the characters in a drama by Meyerling consult the sundials, bending over without seeing the long vistas and the rusty sabers that the one-eyed buccaneers, long since vanished, used to grasp in their clenched fists.

In this forest of glass, of steel and concrete, in this extraordinary New York, difficult to define: traveller, you will find the gigantic masks of ancient gods, you will find the eternal sadness of plaster Antinous and the immense loneliness of the Parthenon on summer nights, under the immense sky glittering with stars.²

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² Translation from the exhibition catalogue *De Chirico and America*, curated by E. Braun, The Bertha and Karl Leubsdorf Art Gallery, New York 10 September - 26 October 1996, Umberto Allemandi & C., Turin 1996, pp. 136-138 (Isabella Bertolotti).