

GIORGIO DE CHIRICO¹

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Giorgio de Chirico's life is anti-provincial: his journey through the great cities of Europe and New York is as if etched by the analysis of an observer which is rarely found in contemporary artists. In order to find a similar critic in an Italian traveller, we would have to look to the European travels of Foscolo, Alfieri, Cellini and Leonardo.

De Chirico was born to Italian parents in Volos, Thessaly: after his Mediterranean childhood, he moved northwards: to Munich and Paris. Then Rome, Florence and Paris again. His tendency to deform the cultural landscapes of these cities would have an immediate value, namely judgement, if it did not take place in the mind of one of the greatest painters of the century and in times that were key for the revolution of modern art: it was the beginning of the Twentieth Century.

Munich, a cathedral of breweries, was for de Chirico the place where his perversions in the field of aesthetics would ferment, before reaching their climax in Paris between the two World Wars. For him, the Bavarian city was not only the commercial centre of Southern Germany but the seed of Nazi Pan-Germanism, the defect of every future madness within Europe.

Yet it was in Munich that Giorgio de Chirico sharpened a quality of his perception which would prove invaluable for his art, not only during his metaphysical period but throughout his *oeuvre*. De Chirico is master of himself and it would be unjust and superficial to divide his creative season into descendent and ascendant periods, in early and later styles: the metaphysical bridge has not crumbled with his more "real" figurative art of today.

It was in fact in Munich, where he studied at the Academy of Fine Arts, that he became passionately attracted to Nietzschean literature: "A strange and profound poetry, infinitely mysterious and solitary, which is based on *Stimmung* (I use this very efficient German word which can be translated in Italian with the word: atmosphere in the moral sense), as I was saying, it is based on the *Stimmung* of an autumn afternoon, when the sky is clear and the shadows are longer than in the summer because the sun starts to become lower. This extraordinary sensation can be felt (but of course you need to have the fortune of possessing the exceptional faculties that I possess), it can be felt, as I was saying, in Italian cities and in some Mediterranean cities like Genoa and Nice; but the Italian city *par excellence* where this extraordinary phenomenon appears is Turin." Thus wrote Giorgio de Chirico in his *Memorie* (Memoirs): an ideal place to find the exact visual of his cities' surfaces.

Nothing, therefore (no reflections of nightmare-twilight, portents of static inclement weather

¹ Typewritten text with some hand-written grammatical corrections, dated Milan July 1966, located in Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico Archives, Rome. Published for the first time in *Giorgio de Chirico*, ed. Alberto Marotta, Naples, 1968.

around arches and towers) but Nietzsche's *Stimmung*. The German philosopher's limitless sadness for a life of pain is clear to the painter. The pain, the blind willingness for ruin which agitates creation, is certainly not the racial hierarchy that the Nazis heard in the voice of Zarathustra.

Melancholy is an intelligence which is compelled to cohabit the earth with vulgarity: this is how de Chirico understands the meaning of the Superman, namely in its unique value. The talented artist is the solitary dialectic amongst assaults organised by the aesthetic spoilers; he lives within the struggle to overcome the intentional obstacles of his mediocre companions who seek to interrupt and ruin his every monad-initiative with schools and trends.

If we were to suddenly ask ourselves the name of a contemporary painter, if we had to think of one of the greats of decorative virtue amongst the living, our answer would most probably be Giorgio de Chirico. Why? Sentimental echoes? Or controversy, a journalistic habit? Aside from reasons of his primacy, he has succeeded in taking hold of our memory with the literary and emotional breadth of artists from the past.

His name conjures up coloured chessboards and mannequins, feathered hats, the white fringe over his forehead, the watery smile of his woman-divinity. He is a person evoked by thought that has already passed through layers of time like a reserve that is not only cultural but also sentimental, acting almost as a support of our knowledge of the history of the spirit, like Leopardi and Petrarch are for high school students.

By this, my words do not intend to dogmatise an essay or make judgement on the painter that would hurl anathema at him or exalt him in glory. We are here to get closer to a selection of works that he wanted for our present meeting under the constellation of his art.

Bodies, lines and spaces will fall voluntarily upon the pyramid of our youth and they will be focussed upon for the spontaneous "quality" of de Chirico's work. And we will not get caught up in dissecting the subject matter of his gallery, according to orthographical apparitions, regarding nude women or self-portraits, if not in a way that they can convey a higher "quality" (and de Chirico also insists on this term) of his works.

De Chirico, the man, is resolute in his moral armour against the spikes of controversial sieges, between attacks from schools, against the critics' crossbows; and if his strategy is somewhat placed on the edge of a battle fought with conventional arms in the age of atomic chivalry, we feel that it is the only defence that the artist is granted. The shield has Cellinian fineries and thus his "life" has impulses that are reminiscent of the goldsmith, rendered vulnerable and unable to be hurt by the sensuality and innocence of the luminous Orlando who grasps an enchanted sword, an adversary of silent extermination of scientific progress.

Volos, the platform for the Argonauts' voyage, the shore of the painter's days begun alongside the imperceptible essence of the buried walls of Mediterranean civilisation. From Volos, in de Chirico's imagination, the rhythm of the heroes' shoes upon the beating of mythological wings, the messages of the gods under the marble temples rooted in the rock. Horses on beaches and broken columns are not the symbol of a tormented dream but the reuniting in him of the Big Dipper of adult existence with the guiding star of early age. The skies were pure on the Aegean and the hours raced

by, sketched by a Socratic algebra revealed and hidden by family traditions where betrayals were rare and interior fragility not confessable.

Strolls in Volos with his father, the lightest and most extraordinary kites, the envy of other boys who felt he was different, the crystal balls of common witches (the old women who used to watch him pass by with his mother) are the rooms of a world which wants to keep anxiety faraway, a world regulated by religious piety for brotherly and simple ghosts of the golden age: childhood. Perhaps de Chirico's metaphysics are the journey of a hero who must succeed at tests of courage, a descent into the springtime Hades, as takes place in Hesoid's poetry, a dock for the reality-as-dream sailing ship to the island of the Beyond.

In this, light, human figures, animals, and voices are a presence which is death but is also the only eternity granted to the soul and body; we have now reached the de Chirico of the intellectual conclusion, the de Chirico of his latest works. But the metaphysician's Pythagorean "mummies" were the larvae of paradise lost and not yet found, which Hesiod conceded to the heroes, and de Chirico to aesthetic and universal truths. They were embryos still shrouded by Nature's mysterious defence, ready for the death of Time and prepared for an endless life on the happy islands.

Neither psychological trauma, therefore, nor sunsets or surreal-rayed dawns but rather reverberations of a full and motionless atmosphere which brings about the future of man in the present, after the storm of errors. Should de Chirico's classicism be considered as neoclassicism? It is precisely for the aforementioned reasons that we must first eschew the suspicions of empty columns and hollow rhythms of marble. His classicism is the necessity of halting the Heraclitean mutation of space, of stopping the frenetic action of time and an answer to humanity's need of the absolute. He has a poetic, creative finality, the enemy of death because he does not have a cowardly fear of it: it is a victory over the red-hot isotherms of the infernal skeletons of mystics.

Thus for de Chirico (and despite de Chirico), Greece is a point of detachment, the historical course of which coincides with the painter's inner ideals. It is the theme of paganism which is felt as Beauty, or rather as the search for that which is perfect, as a message of a mystery which is not homicide, which does not crush the law of man's dependency on the faculties of harmony in the present and in the afterlife in the cogs of the [Year] 2000-machine.

From this concept of art comes Giorgio de Chirico's dispute against forms –whatever level they have reached – of the contemporary thesis of truth. His battle appears to us in a Hellenic square of crusades, a battle conducted with intelligence, even if it is with a certain unusual "emperorship", in defence of linguistic values. [This battle], in the case of figurative art, is technique, the ability to apply colour, to prepare canvas, to reproduce objects following the rules of draughtsmanship which the Ancients were masters of.

The language that is at the foundation of any art, of painting and of poetry, of narrative and of music, was played with by the schools of our century, by the avant-gardes which give us the greatest deceit by wanting us to believe in a casual arrangement of objects on a table without the help of expressive experience. Every master creates a new language: we expect this from new generations.

From the aesthetic rebellions that were legitimate for Caravaggio, Raphael or Picasso, Renoir or

Tintoretto, we [have reached the point of] current non-“eminent things”. There is no longer anything authentic, original or non-imitative in them because the language has become a repetition of coloured symbols which are already conventional like a code in numbers. Let us leave it up to the Anglo-Saxons with the series of plastic fragments which come to us from informal bazaars as nonsensical pretensions of the mind: masters are difficult and rare [to find] in these collections of instant careers. Namely those authors who, despite the abstract nature of their works, manage to communicate the incommunicable to us, using a concrete and particular language that is clear.

Of course we know that reality is not solely made up of bodies [consisting] of pure lines and content of a romantic nature abandoned to the imagination of tree tops and the depths of waters. We are familiar with the deformed and the horrific, the opaque and the dirty, the dusty garden of industrial machines and the workers’ oily overalls. The Ancients were also familiar with these, even if in a lesser measure and the monstrous subjects represented were fewer. Who could forget the paintings by Bosch and other Flemish [artists]?

The ambiguity lies in believing that a generic language is valid to express (even the most absurd) sensations of our psyche or the earth’s passage.

De Chirico began his fight against non-art at a young age and it can be said that he has continued it without a break.

A lone master, enemy of anyone who would generalise the *homo contemporaneous*, according to a presumption-caricature, placing within history an international stooge made, for example, of cardboard or of tractor wheel belts. De Chirico is the watershed between two aesthetic generations, that of the past and that of the present, he is between two political currents, between two opposing “social” tastes, between the inversion of the right-wing and the aesthetic amnesia of the left-wing.

The intestines of the massacred clocks on the walls do not speak to us, in fact they die out without an echo. Art is not dead, despite the diplomatic attempts of the contemporary civil studios. It does not worry us that the avant-garde manifesto declares painting the enemy of academies whilst the taking of a “Bohemian” position is more a slave to the collective laws and commandments than the private studios where one once learnt how to use colours and brushes.

Nor does it upset us that contemporaries have touched an eclecticism of styles, where gothic, baroque, and primitive art play with linearity and plasticism in a sterile rebound of inspirations. We are struck by the lack of human pain, by the soul’s essence with its moral problems. For many followers of the new muse, man has become a Lilliputian complainer, ridiculous, his weeping, the buzzing of a fly.

The folklore of the Anglo-Saxon race has distanced us from man with the excuse of dealing with his secret feelings and his ungraspable anxieties.

De Chirico on the contrary, despite having started with the absence of the human body in his metaphysical works (although there were almost always distant figures: a girl chasing a hoop, two small men with short shadows), has been a lesson of humanity.

The eye displaced from the eye socket and the parietal mouths [depicted] by Picasso, which had been made immobile and irregular, blocking off the fluctuation of expressions initiated by the Macchiaioli and the Divisionists through their geometry, return to their natural arrangement.

But Renoir's dynamic and Picasso's static ruins are (and were) truths won by de Chirico who re-proposes the noble fighting of monsters and the woman who holds the world and fate of species in her hand (the entire portrait series of his wife, Isabella Far, are of her in costume and in the nude). De Chirico, before and after the catastrophe: trying to free himself from that which he believes to be an accusation, namely the surreal giving in: which is the artistic vision that is always "desired" (like the artists who voluntarily chose surrealism) that invents relationships between objects and characters that are always a strained portrayal of reality.

Or perhaps it is a successful attempt in stopping the truth which, in our day-to-day gestures, in our words, in our loves and in hate, yields to continuous reprisals, to a usury that brings death. For living with what is false, whether it be our will or that of our neighbour, and with the horrible mirages of nature, forces us to split, dissect, veil and therefore destroy the truth.

We never imagine that this masking of oneself is another lateral system of the tangible world to impose a perpetual fragmentary and dispersive motion on our desire of the absolute.

As we were saying, de Chirico fixes a character, a group of objects or a city on his canvas. They are real because they win existence's negative game of Leopardian deceit, and it is only inasmuch as his art is extraneous to the atmospheric actions of our hours as men, that it is surreal. A discourse which is valid for several great artists of the past, perhaps Giovanni Bellini or Carlo Crivelli who prepared easels as if for a performance (and as he says in his autobiography, de Chirico also "feels" like this) and nature itself for pretence as if on a stage, where trees, fruit and faces had the coordinates of an unchangeable reality for an unchangeable drama.

De Chirico's planet is a fairytale land where knights in Greek armour meet the water and forest nymphs. Yet [it is of] a classicism which is consumed by pastoral legends of the Seventeenth century, almost a sweet drowning in the musk of Italic forests, in that transparent-thickness of Tasso's poetry.

The magical depth of waters, a path of perspectives to represent the "countryside" under Nietzsche's famous light, make the still lives sparkle before our eyes (which de Chirico called 'vita silenti' [silent lives]) and feathered knights, the irises of his lady in turquoise brocade, the goddess' hair, the feathers of Seventeenth-century headdresses, silver daggers, and cupid's wings on the centaur's croup.

A building and a forest carried away in the light of Giorgione (the almost meteorological anti-gravity of the *Tempest* comes to mind) made up of precious shades, of pinks and blues, greens and reds, as for a Delacroix or certain romantics of Eighteenth-century English painting. This is the real de Chirico in whom, despite the studied form and the *chansons de gestes* of baroque poems, there is an incredible modernity which allows us to overcome the obstacle of his avowedly metaphysical period.

The *Disquieting Muses* and *Italian Piazzas* were a preparation of surfaces and material, as well as an emotion, and that silence which seemed to be made for the blind man whose perfect hearing hears a harmony of invisible forms from within, proved indeed to be for those who only have sight. This is precisely why we see horses, clouds as manes, temples, the fair hair of his beautiful woman even if we close our eyes, as if they were images floating in our internal space.

His feeling like a prisoner, in the land of the Argonauts, of personal games, in the big house where his sister had died, absorbed by his first experiments in drawing, will if anything push him to be generous during his initial contact with artists and young people of “Middle” Europe, in Munich and above all in Paris where he spent time with Apollinaire and Breton.

Then the delusions, the hostility of the art-dealers, will make him as unreachable up until the controversy of the fakes, until the trials, in which he displays a sort of aversion to intellectual confrontations. Like he who, used to being misunderstood, tries to eliminate any encounter of spiritual values. The waves of the Aegean have almost settled the instinct for purity in his soul, making it an aesthetic shelter exaggerated by fairytales from that remote birth of century; thus he creates gardens of fairies and heroes. Because love for beauty is more spontaneous than the horridness [found] in the nature of Man.

Here, therefore, is a patient parade of invented yet not impossible meetings, according to an imagination [that resembles that of] the Ancients: previously there had been the geometry of dream and the rigour of mystery, now there is the complicating power of suggestion that brings on that which is sensual, full of “lust”. But he says, “In my mind *lust and lustful* cause a Rubenesque vision of great Seventeenth-century style salons with walls covered with beautiful paintings, placed in magnificent fine gold frames and then precious tapestries, stuccoes, stupendous furniture and gentlemen and ladies, dressed in satin and silk and showy, gaudy jewellery, who wander about these surroundings talking to one another, with gestures and expressions of quiet euphoria.”

The desire to dress up is unleashed and after having hidden himself behind the bare outline of towers and porticoes, the Actor presents himself to us in the costume of a Seventeenth-century gentleman and with him is his court, his wife-queen and the harnessed horses. He even admires us [from the canvas] in the nude with the obstinate arrogance of a sovereign of a territory where those who deny painting as reality and fantasy do not have free entry.

De Chirico's love for the Nineteenth-century with all that it represented in terms of moralism and education toward beauty is a lyrical sentiment that strives to find philosophical backing. A love which derived from his puritanical family where all references to sex or nature could have upset brothers Giorgio and Alberto's innocence were censured. And, grown-up, he would be a boy in the midst of our century, to which, whilst the inclemency of the Twentieth-century escalated, he contributed in the creation of its legend.

Until 1906, de Chirico studied in Greece, first privately and then at Athens Polytechnic, where he continued to practise copying from real life and copying in black and white. In 1906, after the death of his father, he left with his mother and brother Alberto for Munich, which they reached via Italy.

As we have already said, he remained a stranger to that which he defines as the correct environment for artists in the German city, to those trends which would give rise to what Giorgio de Chirico calls “the great orgy of modern painting”. But it was in fact in Germany where, despite his theories, a revolutionary de Chirico was formed. Every talented man cannot repeat nor destroy, he can only add.

In Munich, his admiration for the painter Böcklin was born; Böcklin who would teach him a taste for dreamlands. His memory of the canvases by the Basel painter would never fade; Böcklin who

had followed a parallel ideal path: love for classicism, the Renaissance and painting which we would describe as [containing] dark emotions as exemplified in Arnold Böcklin's *Isle of the Dead*.

The period from 1911 to 1918, [spent] between Paris and Ferrara, is the metaphysical arch in which all the elements and intimate vibrations within de Chirico are summed up. [They were] also seven years of his youth [spent on] his *oeuvre* which would serve as a polemical and sad exile for his whole life. But what artist has not known exile?

For him, Ferrara is a strange city, almost the material realization of [his] metaphysical piazzas, immersed in a tropical light which unnerve the senses by stirring them up, and extend spaces and perspectives according to a drugged-like reality, thought to be reproducible only in paintings.

From 1918 to 1925, he was in Rome where he began to analyse the techniques of the Great Masters and copy masterpieces in the Villa Borghese Museum. It was the season of still lives and self-portraits, but also of *seated mannequins* and scenographical studies. Then [he spent] five more years in Paris. In 1931 [he was] in Florence and in 1933 [he went to] Paris once again [where] he followed the development of pictorial techniques and paintings in the French city's libraries and he painted a series of nudes.

In 1935, he travelled to New York where he stayed for several months.² He spent the Second World War in Italy, Florence and Rome, continuing to work between the dynamics of realism and fantasy. And this type of art has taken him from the post-war period to today. His early excitement for Böcklin, Previati and Segantini have not been completely forgotten in his creative material. But more as an instinct of recognition than as effective guides. Rather, it is through Nietzschean morality that the Mediterranean perpendicular enlightenment is fused with the obscure uncertainties of the Northern sun within de Chirico.

Given this particular feeling towards life, between dream and substance of which *The Return of the Knight* is a symbol, Giorgio de Chirico does not want to be chosen as one of the Masters of contemporary Surrealism. He almost feels a terror [towards having] any contamination with *Art Nouveau* which, after [their] symbolist and decadent message, reached the depths of *Dada*.

He wants to be part of an avant-garde which is made up of men of genius: extraneous to the processions of the *Beat generation*, in him anyone can find himself. Following his logic, which only seems based on paradoxes, we feel a soul insist, a soul that does not tire of being young, and an intelligence that must invent in order to live.

Within his circle of friends, de Chirico's myths collapse. His story is restricted to names from the past and just a few from the present; Apollinaire's "calligrammes" crumble, Jean Cocteau's perverse ingenuities shatter. We must not be surprised if this Italian from the Medicean court's faith in other famous painters fades away.

Let us say that [artists such as] Matisse, Cézanne, Gauguin, Modigliani and others who we nevertheless know of [have produced] achievements of forced passage for the present woes of figurative art.

² In reality, de Chirico lived in New York from September, 1936 to the beginning of January, 1938.

And so: "I am an exceptional man, who feels and understands everything one hundred times more strongly than other men do," declares Giorgio de Chirico, not as a presumptuous deviation but as a blood tie to well-known biographies.

According to Leonardo, classicism is Humanism. It is predominantly historical and ends up by becoming a landscape, interrupting the fixedness of a philosophical concept. For the Humanists, their insistence on the classical theme was a technique that we now call "Jacobin", a dialectic for untold language. The contents were rather already present at the time, namely in the 15th, 16th and also 17th centuries. In no way could they make the passions of gods and pagan poetesses re-emerge if not as universal and eternal feelings of Man.

Thus de Chirico is inserted within the tradition of masters, not to draw upon their contents but to learn [from their] techniques and to arrive at a personal communicable language as a work of art. Poetics cannot nor should ever distance itself from Beauty, which is understood not as a mould but as a way of expressing a logic of images: [a logic that] can never be upturned without an overturning taking place of the species' biological structure. Humanism is genetics, the centrality of Man in the future science of space and chemistry proves this.

Critics who have praised de Chirico solely for his Metaphysical period via a contamination of trends, have suggested a Freudian base as a support-element to his art, founded on his complex regarding his father's lengthy illnesses, his mother's authority, the island of his childhood entertainment. They have placed a barrier around the boy from Volos which is made up of his engineer father's professional objects: set squares, rulers, compasses.

We do not deny the weight of adolescence that bears upon one's individual fate but we also want to measure the grade of "importance" that early memories attain in the adult. One cannot reduce de Chirico to a sort of psychiatric clip-board case as some would like to.

If anything, his unconscious resides in a century which is *in* our century but which is not our century. It is different and runs parallel to our hours and days [spent] in the metropolises, and to politicians, epidemics, floods and stellar races: [all in all], it is essentially a different century. Contemporarily and perhaps more real, is [de Chirico's] century of possible and unfulfilled warnings, infinite hypotheses produced by the tree of human time which still remains in the secret lymph of internal mystery. The century of dormant wars [still] not broken out, revolutions programmed by books, sought-after dictatorships, artists neither born nor unmasked.

That is where we find de Chirico: but his painting of yesterday and today is still not an invisible part of that invisible flow of events. It is actual reality, the concrete presence and materialisation of an absolute antithesis that has come out of a hidden century in order to be seen and loved by us and perhaps hated by you.

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Translated by Rosamund King