

THE COMEDY OF MODERN ART

Giorgio de Chirico
Part I

WE METAPHYSICIANS¹

It is not something invented yesterday. Nevertheless the event of its conscious undertaking is recent, extremely recent in fact; it is the latest news, indeed so recent that there was no time to send it through the typesetter's forge, to fling it at the last minute into metal jaws oiled with black grease dripping with indelible ink. Hence all the newspapers, gazettes, periodicals and bulletins – be they supporter, critic or scorner of new art –, remained innocently silent regarding an event of capital importance: the consciousness of Metaphysical Art.

First and foremost, I feel an impelling need to pull the lever and consequent gears to backtrack and return to a time, not of sentimental primitives or primitive sentiments (whatever you wish to call them), nor to get myself caught up like any Salamone Reinach in the idiotic, doubly despicable pathoses of bearded Laocoons or hysteric Niobes, even less to become a fakir evoking buried Olympic-like golden ages and unsavoury times in which Jupiter, protector of youth, descended into fragrant mists to visit his chryselephantine double; I want to go backwards, I say, along the tracks of centuries-old art and after having passed in front of remote stations of “Xoanon” (primitive statues), *pendants* of negro statues, the latest infatuation of the modernists, and stop like an explorer in the troglodyte's cave and gaze upon the skinny outlines of his bison, reindeer and hydrocephalus gods carved into the walls of this cave.

Psychologically speaking, troglodyte art must be an art of impression, therefore the troglodyte would be an impressionist artificer. It derives as a result that the art of our predecessors of yesterday, of those spreaders of layers of cobalt and orange, is linked to that age-old cave inhabitant and has no greater weight on the scale of spiritual values.

It is a fact however that a troglodyte drawing holds more interest for us than a landscape by Pissarro, just as a xoanon sculpture representing Hera painstakingly carved by some obscure island dweller of prehistoric times is more interesting than a calligraphic essay by Mr. Bistolfi. But in this case it is we who raise the quota of the troglodyte or island dweller, as these four artificers essentially hold the same value and weigh the same weight, and if mixed together and randomly placed on the far ends of a balance beam would create a perfect horizon. Nevertheless, our *plus doux sourirs* are still for the troglodyte and island dweller. Why?

This is due to the fact that certain areas of our extremely complicated psyche resembles their overly simple one. “Human logic” dreams of a boundary, of a belt encircling the belly of the world. Primitive man finds himself on this side of the belt, the metaphysician on the other. All art of logic, taken in block including the classical ages, eras of decadence, primitivisms colouring the belt with restful intervals and short-winded renaissances with their idiotic pretentions, are found on the belt itself.

The troglodyte does not know how to draw; capped with dense layers of terrifying darkness, his mind

¹ G. de Chirico, *Noi metafisici*, in “Cronache d'attualità”, 15 February 1919; republished in G. de Chirico, I. Far, *Commedia dell'arte moderna*, Traguardi-Nuove Edizioni Italiane, Rome 1945, pp. 7-12. English translation by K. Robinson. Published in *Giorgio de Chirico: The Enigma of the World*, exhibition catalogue edited by F. Benzi, Pera Museum, Suna and Inan Kiraç Foundation, Istanbul 2016, pp. 135-140.

sees the world in the gloomy twilight of nightmare. The principal motive driving his soul full of disquieting *whys* is fear itself. The new metaphysical painter knows too much. On his cranium and in his heart, similar to soft discs of malleable wax, too many things have left marks and signals, memories and prophecies; too many writings have unbuckled the belt, too many divinities have died and been reborn to die again a death without resurrection. He has returned to look at the ceiling and walls of his room, the objects surrounding him and men passing below in the street, and sees that these no longer abide to the logic of yesterday, today and tomorrow. He no longer receives impressions, but rather, discovers, continuously discovers new aspects and new spectral elements. If the whole of this intricate psychic process is seen in light of the unsmiling seriousness of the animal, the barbarian and the primitive, even his heart is carefree and serene. Fears have gone. Terrestrial Paradise has arisen once more.

– Art has reached its highest meaning today. The path has been long and laborious; scattered with lacunae and periods of fertile misunderstandings.

Plato, generanlissimo of philosophic pomp, relegated art among the lowest sensual sensations. For him art signified vulgar pleasure and the poor devil did not realise that philosophically speaking every human manifestation has pleasure or happiness as its goal, however you want to look at it. To art, he counterposed reflection and virtue, but these too are sensuality as they also aim for the achievement of happiness.

Glück, glück! Du die schönste Beute...

...At the start of the Middle Ages another (no less idiotic) misunderstanding was born, fostered by Plotinus and his cohort of masturbators: art confounded with mysticism and considered as a kind of stairway, funicular or trampoline raising consciousness to the highest good.

Art was liberated by modern philosophers and poets.

Schopenhauer and Nietzsche were the first to teach of the profound non-sense of life and how such non-sense can be transmuted into art, in fact, how such non-sense should form the intimate skeleton of an art that is truly new, free and profound. The new able artificers are philosophers who have surpassed philosophy. They have returned here; they stand in front of the rectangles of their canvases and their walls because they have overcome the contemplation of the infinite. The terrible emptiness discovered is the same senseless and tranquil beauty of matter. Let us rejoice first and foremost at the delightfulness of this discovery. This new art is delightful *par excellence*. It is certain that no other artificer could have more right than we to be light-hearted, as our cheerfulness results from having surpassed an obstacle, having overcome a barrier, produced by the flow of an inexplicable wave coming from the placid sea of human pains and joys swollen over centuries with all the deceitfulness, the rarities and the unnoticed sublime, swollen, I say, with all the joyfulness as well as the most terrible seriousness that ever wrinkled a human forehead.

It has something of an astronomical observatory, a financial revenue office and a harbourmaster's cabin. All things without a use have been abolished; dominating instead, are certain objects that universal imbecility relegated among the useless. Few things. The squares and fine sticks that suffice the expert artisan to build a perfect work of art.

The nautical reference suggested by the word "harbourmaster" has deep meaning for those who want to penetrate the complicated psyche of this new pathos (it is indeed a question of pathos, although this time it is an entirely different matter). The packet-boats are the invention of we metaphysicians (I say "we" *par délicatesse*). From our windows open upon Homeric dawns and sunsets pregnant with tomorrows we have the encouraging spectacle of ports, factories and of all the geometrized districts of certain avant-cities that bring to

mind the nearby sea. At set hours, the wailing beckoning of mermaids reminds us of our splendid wayfaring destiny. Birds of faraway regions fall exhausted in our rooms after long flights on seas. Africa and America reinvigorate us with fresh airs that fill the sails waiting in ambush within our souls. We are above all difficult, prudent and exceedingly demanding and insatiable. It is thus that we discard without pity any specimen of contrada, epoch or country that comes to us with an established reputation of something exploited or exploitable.

The suspension of logical sense in art is not an invention of us painters. Fair recognition for this discovery goes to Nietzsche, the Pole, even if in poetry it was first used by the Frenchman Rimbaud; in painting this achievement can be ascribed to the undersigned.

At first glance this observation may seem to herald something confusing and foggy and can give rise to images of division and phantasmagorical cataclysms in the minds of certain semi-intelligent people. But it has nothing to do with this if one realises that cubism and futurism produce images of this kind (some of better quality than others depending on the painter's ability), which, even if they transform, break up and stretch the visual aspect of people and things so as to offer new sensations and a breath of new lyricism, they still maintain an element of meaning and are unsuccessful in transmuting the things represented, which therefore remain closed within the circle of common sense.

– We metaphysicians have sanctified reality.

Infinity, which Babylonian astronomers kept watch on during silent summer nights among armillary spheres and perfect compasses on rooftop terraces of cities in which the very foundations could no longer be seen, mixed as they were with the mud of overflowing rivers and the sand pushed by fire-bearing winds like the breath of a divine imposer of justice, that infinity, I say, reduced to substratum, listed, catalogued, pigeonholed, marks its parabola today on the ceiling of our rooms and on the bare walls of our holy ateliers. Have we become inactive because of this? Is this any reason to resort to the complicated armchair of the horrible philosopher of Ferney (the original with bookstand)? Anything but, in being stronger and more cheerful, we are ready for new departures. But today each of us is like that fateful Spanish navigator who, at the end of a sweltering summer day, saw the vast Pacific Ocean appear before him and understood that the world discovered was truly “a new world”.

It is no easy task to explain the background of this Metaphysical Art, which in spiritual power and painterly construction surpasses anything as yet attempted in the human arts, to confused pseudo-intellectuals or the young boys of Rome or elsewhere, whose cerebral apparatus is no more complicated than that of an acephalous mollusc. With this I do not mean that one must resort to abstruse explanations and apologetic theories like the cubists in France and the futurists in Italy do.

Genius can only be judged by genius.

This is a truth that harks back to Baudelaire the opium addict.

The word “metaphysical”, with which I had already christened my painting during the subtle and fruitful years before the war in Paris aroused anger, bad moods and misunderstandings that were not insignificant even among the pseudo-intellectuals of the banks of the Seine. The usual snide remark that became commonplace was: *c'est de la littérature*. This phrase became *pendant* to the one launched by the cubists and the avant-garde whilst taking arms against their traditionalist enemies: *c'est pompier*. It is clear that the two accusations are equivalent and in the majority of cases serve those who pronounce them as a safeguard to seemingly avoid appearing foolish.

To make up for this, however, there was no lack of defenders, the first and foremost of whom was my poor friend Apollinaire who had said in my regard: “he is the most surprising painter of the young generation”.

The word ‘metaphysic’ caused a great deal of misunderstandings, especially in unproductive minds which, lacking healthy creative exertion, live by means of plagiarism and cliché and spray their chronic resentment each time they come upon anything that surpasses the reach of their intellectual capacity. To the minds of many of these representatives of the anthropoid wildlife of Africa and America (cercopithecus, semnopithecus and miopithecus) the term ‘metaphysic’ gives rise to foggy visions of cloudy drabness, chaotic entanglements and tenebrous masses. In France the misunderstanding extended to the point of attributing the invention of metaphysical art to the Germans, and I remember the fight I had in order to make this terrible word accepted, a term that raised suspicion in even the most right-minded people.

I do not see anything disturbing in the word “metaphysic”; it is the very tranquillity and nonsensical beauty of ‘matter’ that appears ‘metaphysical’ to me and even more metaphysical are certain objects which for their clarity of colour and the exactness of their measurements appear to me as the antipode of all confusion and indistinctness.

An analysis of the word ‘metaphysic’ can result in another colossal misunderstanding: ‘metaphysic’ from the Greek *metà ta fisiká* (after the physical) may lead one to think that things located after that which is physical constitute a kind of nirvanic-like void. This is complete non-sense if one considers that distance does not exist in space and that an inexplicable state of X can be located as much beyond a painted, described or imagined object as it can on this side and especially (and this is precisely what occurs in my art), within the object itself.

No one before me has ever tried to accomplish in art what I have attempted. My work marks an extraordinary stage in the progressive elaboration and the complicated inner-workings of the human arts.

It is from beyond unexplored horizons that a most incredible ploy returns to define in external metaphysics and in the terrific solitude of an inexplicable lyricism: a biscuit, the angle formed by two walls, a drawing evoking something natural from the idiotic and senseless world that accompanies us in this disturbing life.

It is the spectral evocation of those objects that universal imbecility has relegated among the useless. Prior to these lyricisms, I constructed others in France. I was the first to demonstrate the metaphysics of architecture and of Italian cities. Paintings of this period are found in galleries and private collections in Paris and London, my works are spread out in Germany, America and Russia; not yet in Italy, a fact that may be a good sign for both myself and for my brothers of the peninsula.

Veniet felicior aetas, friend; with this wish of San Boccadoro, I end my reprimand and return to my endeavours.