

A DISCOURSE ON SERIOUSNESS²⁸

Life has lost the true essence of seriousness, which is now mistaken for sadness and tedium. There is even a false seriousness that comes from a form of rigid and absolute stupidity.

Seriousness in life is not the expression of wisdom or goodness, neither is it a manifestation of reason or prudence. Then just what is seriousness in life? It is simply a non-sense, for seriousness in life does not exist.

Seriousness is above all stable, whereas life is fleeting. Nothing can express better the true meaning of seriousness than those phrases in common use pronounced daily by thousands of men and that show what it really means. These phrases are not dictated by human reason but by intuition, which is our innate consciousness of the true meaning of things.

What are these phrases that we have all heard and have ourselves so often used? First of all, the phrase that fills us with joy especially when spoken by a doctor: "Do not worry, it is nothing serious. It will soon pass". Other classical phrases we often hear are the following: "You can trust it, it is something serious". What is effectively expressed here by the word serious is an essence of stability and duration. Another phrase: "You need not worry, that person is serious", meaning that the person in question is responsible for his actions and that he will not run off and disappear, as he is positively and immovably present and stable in his honesty. One who is deeply in love always swears that his love will never end because it is serious, or will say: "I want to get married, it is serious this time". Even in this case, seriousness is tied to the idea of matrimony solely because of its stability, as we traditionally consider marriage should be something that lasts a lifetime. Although deriving from a true sense of seriousness, these phrases are inspired by a concept of relative seriousness, that is, of seriousness applied to the length of our life. In all these cases, what is being said proves that real seriousness is stable and not at all transitory. This concept, which relates to an immovable and positive phenomenon, must be placed in the domain of the infinite and is something that men intuitively feel as true.

Of all the phenomena in our life, death alone places us face to face with seriousness, for it is the only phenomenon that is eternal in life. Mankind does not want to think this way; it yearns above all for eternity and is afraid of death; it wants to hold on to the concept of eternity or rather to a particle of eternity and transplant it into life, for mankind does not consent to consider death as the only concrete manifestation of eternity on earth. This is why men have invented surrogates of positive concepts united to eternity; one of these surrogates is relative seriousness. But listen, men: I will tell you that you can find true seriousness not only in death, which frightens you, but (and oh, what consolation), also in art which in another terrestrial residence of true seriousness.

Seriousness in art gives us satisfaction, which is respite from our desires. This is a seriousness that gives us profound and calm enjoyment, so different from the clamorous joy provoked by human pleasures. Seriousness in art, a seriousness that is an element of things eternal, arouses our amazement by its simplicity and loyalty, thus liberating us from the fear our intellect feels when faced with mystery.

Now I ask myself if seriousness in art reveals itself to our understanding by the severe beauty inherent in great works of art, by that pure beauty belonging to ideas alone and which only art can fulfil to a degree that renders it visible, or whether it is genius that draws us nearer to true seriousness and whether beauty exists only to affirm that genius exists and that its presence is immovable in time and space. I find no answer to such

28 G. de Chirico, *Discorso sulla serietà*, signed "Isabella Far" in *Commedia...*, cit., pp. 185-188. Published in English here for the first time.

questions, but I do know that it is art alone that allows us to enter fearlessly into the domain of seriousness, for facing death, that other citadel of seriousness, we are so troubled that we lose our capacity for intuition.

Today the word seriousness is used in regards to painting, but happily not too often. One speaks of “serious painting” about a work which otherwise one would not know how to define. The kinds of paintings my contemporaries consider serious are tiresome and stupid. That is a rule. Such paintings are either sad or cold or desperately banal. In this case the adjective serious is not only synonymous to mediocre but can be replaced by the word stupidity.

I ask myself, when hearing these senseless opinions expressed by my contemporaries, whether man has not lost all intuition and whether his mind is only capable now of fallacious reasoning. This may be the reason men of today see everything in art in a grotesque way, an attitude which, as a matter of fact, they would be maliciously predisposed to by nature, for as we know it is only the brain that can put things in their proper place.

Now I shall speak of seriousness in painting and also of serious painting. Analysing the presence of seriousness in art and particularly in painting, we are entering the domain of metaphysics. The monumentality of things eternal, the serene and immovable stability of phenomena such as genius and talent, the source of which is outside us, the insurmountable barrier separating our human world from perfection, all of this is revealed to us by the seriousness contained in a work of art. Beauty, tranquillity, perpetual and infinite joy, genius, superior intelligence and the true essence of seriousness, all this otherworldly magnificence is contained in art and from art it is reflected upon us. This is why we should have immense respect for art and a reverence for serious painting.

Seriousness in painting is achieved only through great and profound maturity; it is then that the artist, half-magician and half-artisan, correctly calibrates matter, which is the philosopher stone of all of his effort, of all of his thoughts; that robust matter, fluid and flexible, that can take on incredible and miraculous inclinations, like the rope of the thief of Bagdad.

Having reached a state of painterly seriousness, the painter has in his hands a sort of mysterious mass, an emplastastic body, which when skilfully tinted with colour allows him, with joy and amazement, to give form on canvas to men and animals, plants, rocks and mountains, earth, fabrics, skies and the sea. A small amount of colour is sufficient to tint this miraculous paste that gives painting its body and strength. It gives it something supremely smooth that descends slowly and surely, like warm lava reproducing the metaphysical and eternal expression of all forms. This admirable impasto is something like bread dough prior to baking and is composed of natural substances having a pleasant smell: oils, balms, resins, incense, myrrh and benzoin. These, and some others, are systems and elements that produce serious painting.

Serious painting requires these rich and perfected means, thanks to which the painter will not encounter technical difficulty in expressing ideas, which are, in themselves, the metaphysical and eternal form of beings and things. The technical incapacity of the primitives and moderns (the first excusable, the second unpardonable) has nothing to do with this.

Compared to the joyous and immense work of serious painters such as Rubens, Tintoretto, Velasquez, Rembrandt and Titian who lived in epochs of great artistic maturity, the paintings of the primitives look like clay huts or cardboard toys made by children. The primitives painted frescoes in tempera, hence using a water-based paint, a kind of painting that did not demand continuous effort or invention. Not only the primitive painter, but also primitive man considered (as would a child) water as the most natural substance with which to dilute colours. In the magic impasto of serious painting, water is also used at times but in other ways and

with other functions. Hence the painting of primitives, like that of children, not being preceded by a long and progressive effort, but finding itself at a point of preliminary effort, is lacking in artistic seriousness, which painters achieved much later on.

Serious painting is an art about which not much is said today, for it has no need for literature or empty discourses. However, painting which is not serious (that of the primitives and of the moderns) needs to be enriched with attributions of purity, spirituality, sincerity, etc.

The incredible lack of artistic seriousness nowadays compels painters or those who occupy themselves with painting and art towards the cult of the primitives. Today, painters and intellectuals think they must pay attention to the primitives in whom they instinctively feel an air of non-seriousness in order to explain their pseudo-spiritual activity. But they are ignorant of the fact that the lack of seriousness in the art of the primitives is like the lack of seriousness in children, it is not a sin, it not something they can be reproached for and should be considered as innocence. The lack of seriousness in modern painters and intellectuals is not only a sin, it is shameful; it comes from the decadence of their spirit, from a profound atrophy of their creative faculties which is equivalent to saying that it results from a great dose of stupidity and powerlessness.