

ON PHILOSOPHY AND PAINTING GIORGIO DE CHIRICO AND “DESECRATED REALITY”*

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The artistic production of Giorgio de Chirico, the *Pictor Optimus*, is undoubtedly inseparable from his philosophical talent. Although this can be said of all great artists, it is particularly true for de Chirico: Metaphysics in painting would not have existed had it not been for his philosophical talent. One might say that a natural disposition for philosophy and for asking fundamental questions about existence can be found in everyone, yet this disposition remains undeveloped without a personal inclination to cultivate it. Certain natural conditions are also required for such cultivation to occur. In de Chirico's case the necessary conditions were in place. These included a personal disposition, indeed, a true talent, and his profound interest nurtured since childhood in the natural setting of Greece where he was born and raised, in which mythology, the origin of western culture and Greek language playing an important role, as did Italy and the Italian literary tradition. He then went to Germany, where he studied for three years at Monaco's Fine Arts Academy and perfected his German whilst gaining knowledge of the work of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. The extent of de Chirico's knowledge at that time is borne out in his first Parisian manuscripts, such as *Méditations d'un peintre* (Meditations of a Painter) and other writings of 1912-1913¹, as in successive essays in which he expressly called to cause Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Heraclitus, Plato, Plotinus and Kant.² These writings are proof that the required conditions were in place for the advancement of de Chirico's philosophical talent, a talent he enacted in metaphysical painting with works on the theme of Time and its meaning, which heralded the work of Bergson and Heidegger, and on the theme of Space, in parallel to the discussion on non-Euclidean geometry taking place at the time. The tight connection between the two as shown in physics with Einstein's Theory of Relativity, could not have escaped

* Giorgio de Chirico's essay, *La realtà profanata*, or “Desecrated Reality”, treated in the present essay is published in English translation for the first time in these Journals, pp. 258-261.

¹ These manuscripts have been newly published under the direction of Achille Bonito Oliva. See G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1 (1911-1945). Romanzi e scritti critici e teorici*, edited by A. Cortellessa, Bompiani, Milan 2008.

² De Chirico dedicated a poem to Kant in French in his Parisian manuscripts (Paulhan manuscripts), see *Ibidem*, p. 658. In an introduction he writes of how on the day Kant died a light vapour appeared at the zenith of the blue sky and a soldier looked at it and said “you see, that is Kant's soul flying in the sky”. The poem can be translated thus: “I looked toward you in the blue sky/ In the blue sky where your flight vanishes/ I remain alone now in the whirlwind./ I have your word to console me, I have your book to console me./ Through you, I try to animate my solitude./ Through your words that are so full and that resound in my soul/ Because all those who surround me are strangers to me./ The world is a desert to me and life is long.” The poem shows that de Chirico knew the passage at the end of *Critique of Pure Reason* where Kant says that the two things that awe him the most are “the starry sky above me and the moral law within me”.

de Chirico. Whilst Schopenhauer and Nietzsche's profound critique of Metaphysics was something he focused on and later surpassed in his painting and written work. In a number of previously published essays we have seen how the expression of philosophy in painting is closely related not only to its original cultural condition and the spirit of the time, but to the specific spiritual atmosphere that dominated Europe during the first half of the 20th century. This period, marked by the work of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, as well as Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West* and Karl Kraus' *The Last days of Mankind*, was one of melancholy, disquiet and dismay. Other factors contributing to this state include the freedom to travel, the diffusion of mass communication, the questioning of traditional certainties (a tendency brought to light in the realm of art by the avant-garde) and the political situation that led to the devastating conflict of the Great War. A war that did not end in 1919, as conflicts remained unsettled and the spiritual atmosphere unchanged, a condition that brought further worldwide conflict with the disastrous material and spiritual tragedy that changed the face of Europe forever. As many historians have acknowledged, it was indeed a new Thirty Years' War that took place. At the peak of the World War I, between 1941 and 1943, de Chirico wrote an important essay, *La realtà profanata* (Desecrated Reality), which was published at the end of the war with a group of essays in *Commedia dell'arte moderna* (The Comedy of Modern Art)³. Prior to this he had written *Metafisica della danza* (The Metaphysics of Dance), and afterwards another very important piece, *Discorso sulla mentalità* (Discourse on Mentality). It can be said that these three written works form a genuine trilogy in which the greatness of de Chirico's philosophical talent unfolds and acts as a precursor to Heidegger's metaphysical analysis and critique, as well as Hans Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics.

The Metaphysics of Dance

Let us begin with an analysis of the first essay, *The Metaphysics of Dance*, as it gives an idea of what de Chirico originally meant by "metaphysics". It begins thus:

The day when man first began to dance was the first day of revolt, the revolt of humanity against its destiny of being mortal. It was a revolt against time, which passes rapidly, slowly, but always implacably. Revolts are always made for ephemeral aims and this revolt also only served to give man the illusion of dominating time. [...] Later, dance went to his head and man thought that while dancing he belonged not only to the earth but to the entire universe, for the revelation came to him that he could exist barely touching the ground with the tips of his toes and finally, oh joy! he could detach himself from the earth, if only for a fraction of a second. In this way man got to know the cosmic sentiment of dancing. This is the reason why religious cult had its origin in dance and among many primitive peoples it consisted in religious dances executed by the priest and the faithful.⁴

³ G. de Chirico, I. Far, *Commedia dell'arte moderna*, Traguardi-Nuove Edizioni Italiane, Rome 1945.

⁴ G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1*, cit., p. 544.

As an art form, dance is the manifestation of Man's desire to distance himself from the earth and loose his terrestrial condition in order to reach the Divine and dictate the law of rhythm to time, and in doing so, become a demigod. One could be tempted to think this means achieving true, metaphysical reality that is not only revealed to us but is actually created from and through dance. But this is not quite what de Chirico is telling us. Instead, he is telling us that man came to know the cosmic sentiment of dance. In doing so, he became less terrestrial than those who do not dance, make art or enjoy religion. However, this did not elevate man above terrestrial reality, rather, it made him one with it, as the sentiment he felt while dancing was one of cosmic unity. The power he exercised on terrestrial reality and his physical being through exercise and fatigue made him feel like a demigod "a demigod who dominated time and controlled his body to an extent that made it appear almost unreal to the observer"⁵. Is this unreality a metaphysical reality, reality in itself, or simply the reality of cosmic sentiment, unreal for those who do not know how to elevate themselves through art, in this case, through dance? Certainly, as far as Aristotle is concerned, reality in itself is the object of the first science that would then be called 'metaphysics'. As de Chirico is speaking of the metaphysics of dance, we may be prone to think that the 'unreality' represented through dance is not a terrestrial reality but reality in itself. This may be how it is thought of by a philosopher of metaphysics, who knows or claims to know what reality actually is. However, this is not so for a metaphysical artist for whom art is a reality that surpasses terrestrial reality, a reality he does not contemplate, but rather, enacts. The artist not only feels cosmic sentiment but enacts it in art, thus producing the reality of art which, with respect to terrestrial reality, is 'unreal'. What then would reality in itself be? Could it be what is called transcendental reality or divine reality?

This, of course, is not the reality produced through art and not even the reality it achieves. In fact, as de Chirico observes, after the effort the dancer puts into achieving full control over his body and freedom of movement, in the very moment he overcomes the law of gravity, he feels the pull back to earth. His pleasure is not material or spiritual, but something more, the sensation of being united with the universe. And yet, it is not a question of a simple union with the earth, nor union with the sky. Let us read de Chirico once again:

For a dancer whose weight of body is in-existent while he is dancing, there is no effective barrier between earth and paradise; there is only the cosmic consciousness of the universe which frees him from the sensation of being mortal. The music guides the dancer; he delights in it and understands it absolutely and completely with every fibre of his body for the music is he himself. He becomes one with music for it is he who expresses it, renders it visible and plastic. [...] But what he has forgotten are human sentiments, that is, the instincts, sensations and thoughts of his human nature. [...] The movements imposed by choreography unite and merge with the music and become spontaneous; the source of dancing is in music and for the dancer memory is no longer necessary.⁶

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 546.

The 'cosmic voluptuousness' the dancer enjoys through his identification with music and that he translates into the plastic form of body movement, produces the 'unreality' of art, which then affirms itself as its own reality, which we may call the 'hyper-reality' of art. The artist's consciousness and cosmic voluptuousness in action transcend terrestrial reality. On earth, as Heidegger would later state, this transcendence produces a world, which is the world of art, but if we were to ask ourselves what this world of reality, or of hyper-reality, actually is, and what its relationship is to reality in general – the question metaphysics has been asking since Aristotle – we would seem to be putting de Chirico on the spot. In fact, the reality of artistic consciousness intended as cosmic consciousness seems to have neither the essence of divine reality nor the finiteness of terrestrial reality. So, what kind of metaphysics and what kind of transcendence can we speak of in dance?

Behind all that de Chirico was developing, we find a clear note of 19th century metaphysics (of which Hegel and Schopenhauer were the chief representatives, even if the two were very often in contrast with one another) and which is founded on Platonic metaphysics of Ideas. According to this conception, true reality, reality or the entity as such, as Aristotle later called it, is the reality of ideas, or simply of the Idea. Hegel essentially held to this affirmation. For Schopenhauer, reality in itself is Will, which in the final analysis is necessarily based on ideas. In opposition to reality as Idea, we have the truth of the sensitive, terrestrial being, which is phenomenal or apparently finite reality and is actually a changeable and precarious manifestation of Idea. Accordingly, it is only awareness of the Idea that gives us consciousness of true reality; the rest is merely apparent, phenomenal consciousness of a reality that is changing and precarious. According to Hegel, one obtains consciousness of the Idea or of ideas through thought and, at a higher spiritual level, through art, which is the apparition of the Idea. Instead, for Schopenhauer true reality, the thing-in-itself, is Will. Here, one can only arrive at idea by means of its representation through the language of Will itself, which is indeed the language of music. For Schopenhauer, the aim of art and music (which is its highest form), is to free oneself from Will. Yet, this is an unattainable aim as only a quietening of Will can be achieved this way, and in order to free oneself, one must proceed rather through the superior form of religion or ascension. For Hegel, art as intuition of the Idea is fundamentally the same thing as religion, which is the representation of the Idea. In both cases it is a question of the manifestation of the truth of Being or of the Idea. Thus, I hold that de Chirico is closer to Hegel than to Schopenhauer, as I will now demonstrate. In his introduction to *Science of Logic*, Hegel affirms that divine thoughts or ideas occur prior to the creation of the world. This is also what de Chirico believes: "in its essence, music represents the ideas of Creation, ideas that are not materialized"⁷. However, we do not know whether or not he was acquainted with Hegel's passage. Even if music carries us to this cosmic sentiment, it is in fact dance that manages to translate it into plastic form. De Chirico adds to this line of thinking with a characteristically Hegelian thought:

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 547.

The ideas conceived by the Spirit of the world on the first day of time were destined to be announced by sound and fill the universe. [...] Following this, a capital decision was taken. The Idea of Creation creates other ideas; it is thus that all ideas are born: the idea of plants, rocks, mountains, rivers, lakes, seas, instincts, animals and even man. [...] This is how ideas, which are things among other things, the most sublime and pure, took hold of the dancer by way of sound and music.

Even though de Chirico does not draw directly from Hegel's neo-platonic thought, but rather, from Schopenhauer, the similarity to Hegel is astonishing. Why? Because in its direct rapport with music, dance is linked to the creation of ideas before these ideas pass into the reality of the world in a terrestrial material form. Understood in this way, Hegel and de Chirico are in accord. In fact, in Hegel's neo-platonic way of thinking we gain access to the metaphysical reality of ideas through pure thought, our *Logos*, which is at one with divine *Logos*. As such, the *Science of Logic*, or science of pure thought, is capable of grasping divine Idea (or the structure of reality in itself) before the idea passes into natural form and returns to its spiritual reality.⁸ Whilst music has the capacity to transport us to cosmic feeling, it is dance that translates this feeling into plastic form, making the ideas of creation visible and manifest. This is of prime importance for de Chirico as we see from an essay written in Paris in 1912: "music can not express the *non plus ultra* of sensation"⁹. It is for this reason that he abandoned music, having previously practiced it with his brother Andrea (in art Alberto Savinio). Authentic metaphysical reality, or the becoming of art, cannot be obtained through music or through sentiment only, but rather, by means of vision and therefore through dance and painting.

It must be noted that this thought is partially found in traditional metaphysics, which Nietzsche, in his appeal to sensitivity in contrast to intellect, wanted to destroy. We also know and can bear witness to how de Chirico subscribed to Nietzsche's refusal of logic in its common meaning (which however is not that of Hegel). The logic de Chirico speaks of here is a logic that connects terrestrial realities, the logic of thought that organises experience and not Hegel's Logic that deals with ideas prior to the creation of the world (that in itself is a form of metaphysics). Both de Chirico and Hegel refused common logic and made way for a metaphysical understanding of reality based on Idea, on the "reality" of Idea as the object of artistic contemplation and creation. Such is true even if the metaphysical reality brought about through metaphysical aesthetics (which are the result of de Chirico's metaphysical poetics), does not seem to be based on thought, but rather, on feeling and on art as

⁸ See G.W.F. Hegel, *Werke*, vol. 20, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a./M. 1970, vol. 5: *Wissenschaft der Logik*, p. 44. "Accordingly, logic is to be understood as the system of pure reason, as the realm of pure thought. This realm is truth as it is without veil and in its own absolute nature. It can therefore be said that this content is the exposition of God as he is in his eternal essence before the creation of nature and a finite mind." Hegel states: "To get some idea of this one must discard the prejudice that truth must be something tangible. Such tangibility is, for example, imported even into the Platonic Ideas which are in God's thinking, as if they are, as it were, existing things but in another world or region; while the world of actuality exists outside that region and has a substantial existence distinct from those Ideas and only through this distinction is a substantial reality. The Platonic Idea is the universal, or more definitely the Notion of an object; only in its Notion does something possess actuality and to the extent that it is distinct from its Notion it ceases to be actual and is a non-entity; the side of tangibility and sensuous self-externality belongs to this null aspect."

⁹ See *Méditations d'un peintre*, in G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1*, cit., p. 650.

vision. Magritte often spoke of how, in 1924, upon seeing a black and white reproduction of the painting *The Song of Love*, he cried, describing how he had "seen thought" in that moment. This, of course, is a question of metaphysical thought carried in reality in itself, that is, in the reality of the Idea, a reality that is accessible only to the artist/philosopher and made visible in painting, just as dance is capable of translating this into plastic form. Dance springs from music and for he who dances memory is no longer necessary. Logic is also no longer required. De Chirico had indeed banished logic from the world of art (especially from Metaphysical Art) in his early writings by distinguishing dance and ballet from pantomime, concluding that: "pantomime is a concrete thing, whilst dance is an abstract phenomenon that has nothing to do with the actions and feelings that are part of Man's reasoning and logic", to which he added, "after all, the modern penchant for ballet, with its pantomimic systems, has proved without a doubt that the modern spirit despite its hankering for 'high spirituality' and 'metaphysics', has understood nothing of the metaphysics of dance and has not felt the essentially abstract essence of dance, which goes beyond human logic"¹⁰.

What is Metaphysics?

These essays were written at a time when the terrible 'reality' of war put de Chirico face to face with human reality, a reality all too human (as he called it like Nietzsche), a reality opposed to Idea (and of which Idea constitutes both the base and the end). In his eyes, this metaphysical reality seemed desecrated if not all together lost. It is interesting to compare de Chirico's essay, *Desecrated Reality*, with Heidegger's critique of Metaphysics in the inaugural lesson of his tenure at the University of Freiburg in 1929 entitled *What is Metaphysics?*. Heidegger followed up with a *Postscript* in the fourth edition in 1943 (around the same time de Chirico wrote his essay), and an *Introduction* in 1949 on occasion of the fifth edition.¹¹ Let us begin with an exposition of Heidegger's thought.

Heidegger's inaugural lesson in Freiburg was held two years after the publication of his fundamental study *Being and Time*, whose theme is in line with classical metaphysics' question on 'being as being'. He attempted a new path in this book by positioning the question in light of a new and fundamental ontology based on man's 'being-in-the-world', that is, of man thrown into Space and Time, the consequence of which is man's immersion in temporality understood as History or 'project'. The question of man's being was thus based on the temporality of his 'being-in-the-world', which suggested Time as the meaning of Being. But Heidegger only published a third of what he had planned to publish; the true discussion on the meaning of Being based on his critique of Aristotle was never published. The critique of western metaphysics based on Greek thought – Plato

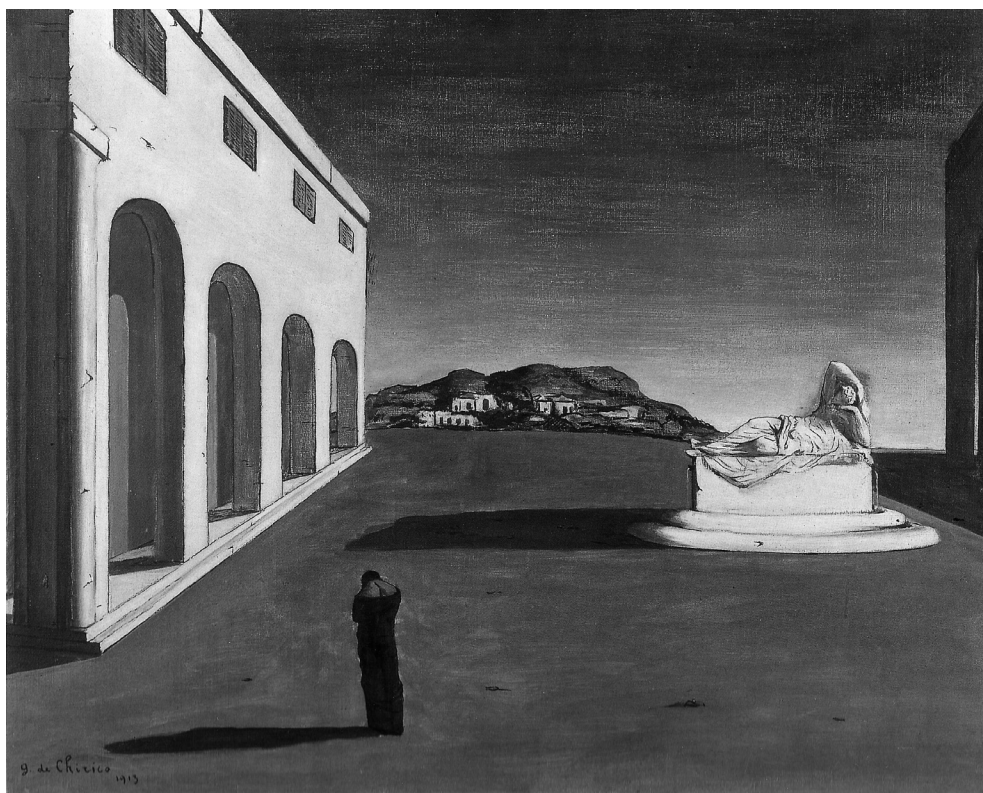
¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 550.

¹¹ This collection of Heidegger's writings was published while he was still alive and benefited from his supervision (*Wegmarken* Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt a.M. 1967). The collection of essays develop a common theme of Heidegger's thought, after a change in his thinking know as "the turn" (*Kebr*) as Gadamer called it. The collection is organised in chronological order according to publication, of which: *What is Metaphysics?* (1929), *On the Essence of Ground* (1929), *On the Essence of Truth* (1930), *Postscript to "What is Metaphysics?"* (1949), *Letter on "Humanism"* (1946), *Introduction to "What is Metaphysics?"* (1949). M. Heidegger, *Pathways*, edited by William McNeill, Cambridge University Press, New York 1998.

and Aristotle – was newly configured in the question posed in the title of his lecture: *What is metaphysics?* The enquiry into the meaning of Being was no longer looked at from a perspective of Time, but rather, of nothingness. Heidegger's critique of Greek thought came about by a return to Parmenides and to western philosophy's origin (which was also its end). With Plato and Aristotle western thought had embarked on a different path, in which the original truth of the being was forgotten and remained essentially hidden. Having lost the meaning of Parmenides' principle "being is, not being is not", and thus the original meaning of Being with respect to nothingness, the being was simply thought of as 'being-in-the-world'. As such, nothingness came out winning. By replacing the truth of Being with truth of the worldly being, truth was reduced to the certainty modern man pursues through science. In this way, the being was reduced to mere technical instrumentation, abandoned in the quest to possess the subject, in line with the absolute Subjectivity of modern thought, which in Hegel manifests itself as 'will to absolute knowledge' and in Nietzsche as 'will to want' or 'absolute will'. The epilogue to all of this is nihilism. However, in the subject's self-certainty, not only is the being lost, but nothingness is lost as well. The human subject, or man, becomes a "lieutenant of the nothing". In order to escape nothingness it is necessary for it to be there in front of us and this cannot happen through metaphysical thought, which should discover the essence of nothingness, just as it discovers the essence of Being. Metaphysics, or the question of the being of beings, regards the definition of essence, the 'what is it'. This is a question that can neither be asked of Being nor of nothingness. This is clearer with respect to nothingness, as merely asking, "what is it" would make it cease to be nothing, thus making it something. Nothingness manifests, rather, itself in anguish, a state of being in which the world and the whole of being disappear before us. However, with regard to the principle of identity this requires a leap of thought, a leap of logic that should bring us back to an essential quality of thought that is not that of traditional metaphysics, but a way of thinking that goes beyond logic in which the being (that is forgotten) appears to us once again in non-latency (*Unverborgenheit*)¹², and with it, nothingness. Such nothingness is lost to our logic and way of thinking, even if it is an intrinsic part. Does this have something to do with appearance or 'revelation' as de Chirico calls it, in which the world appears to us as something else, in a way that is unprecedented of or strange?

The set-up of de Chirico's first metaphysical paintings seems to be a preview of what Heidegger would later describe in his *Introduction*. In these paintings, the world, or the scene, appears in an unreal light, a light that does not correspond to daylight, as shown by the relationship between the hour on the clock and the shadows cast by the buildings and the tiny figures in the background next to a wall separating the scene from a dark sky that is not really a sky, but rather, the empty space of the cosmos, or, the presence of nothingness. The slight figure in the foreground is positioned in front of a fountain that has a trapezoidal shape, like a sarcophagus; his inward-turned

¹² The dialectic of *Unverborgenheit*, non-latency as truth, *Αληθεια*, and *Verborgenheit*, latency, *ληθη*, hidden, the concealment of being, as well as *Seinsvergessenheit*, the forgotten being, and remembrance (*Andenken*) is carried out in *What is Metaphysics?*, *ibidem*, pp. 82-96.



G. de Chirico, *The Melancholy of a Beautiful Day*, 1930. Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels

gaze embodies the act of self-reflection on the mystery of life as if imbued with melancholy or anguish in front of nothingness. The Italian Piazzas and train stations, carefully drawn in Renaissance perspective (purposely askew at times), lack all reference to reality. The dominating colour light ochre runs into dark shadows. The white buildings with arcades act as theatre stage wings. But no spectacle is enacted here, if not the scene itself, a scene evoking human absence and silent melancholy embodied in the statue of Ariadne in the centre of the piazza, and the measured relationship of carefully calculated lines, surfaces and volumes in contrast to the empty space of the cosmos. And yet, is this not a higher manifestation of reality inasmuch as it transcends the realm of common logic? Does this not transport us to a realm of truth in which the mystery of our existence and the true relationship between Being and nothingness is unveiled to us? Where the entity as such acquires meaning through the transcendence of the authentic being, which philosophy thinks about but that only the artist is capable of representing?

Heidegger seems to speak in the same way that de Chirico draws and to say what he portrays: transcendence is the being held out into the nothing (*Hingehaltenheit in das Nichts*). This transcendence is Metaphysics. Indeed, Heidegger, like de Chirico, specifically uses the Greek expres-

sion: τα μετα τα φυσικα¹³ and also affirms, as de Chirico also does, that this "going beyond the physical", beyond the entity as such, or reality, does not mean going beyond physical matter, but rather, in allowing the true being or the true reality of Being to reveal itself. For de Chirico this happens in painting where perfection and the beauty of physical matter are intended not only in a simply physical sense, but in an artistic one, which together reveal an unknown and strange reality. But such transcendence is only possible when based on an idea of nothingness that comes out of anguish, from the anguishing metaphysical question: why is there Being instead of nothingness? It is only through this question that Heidegger discovers the true meaning of Being or the truth of Being and provides us with a base on which we can authentically comprehend the entity and engage in science without annihilating the being in pure instrumentalisation. For de Chirico, this transcendence is the basis on which it is possible to make art. In other words, transcendence that reveals itself through the unreality or hyper-reality of an art that belongs to a spiritual reality and appears to the painter through 'revelation'. What is the relationship of the artist's revelation with the truth of Being, and with the being of entity? Is it, or is it not, the same thing? This is what we need to look at. Finiteness or the being's finite state constituted the being's truth for Heidegger. This affirmation caused much discussion with regard to his atheism and the death of God, intended as the death of the God of traditional Metaphysics. For Heidegger, the fact that the being is finite signifies that the truth of Being manifests itself to man only on the basis of nothingness. If God were absolute Being, He would be limited by nothingness in the creation of the world. Hence, it is necessary to acknowledge that nothingness pertains to Being itself, therefore: "being itself is essentially finite and manifests itself only in the transcendence of a Dasein that is held out into the nothing"¹⁴. The transcendence of existence with respect to the whole of beings is ensconced in its finiteness, which at the same time is both finiteness of the being and the co-existence of Being and of nothingness. It must also be said that only melancholy, anguish and the presence of nothingness allow the being to appear, or rather, the truth of Being to appear, in a state of non-latency that Metaphysics had endeavoured to find through a purely eidetic vision of the being (the idea in Plato and form in Aristotle).¹⁵ The authentic value of Being was lost in Greek superficiality. A value that can only manifest itself in co-presence of nothingness: just like in Giorgio de Chirico's metaphysical paintings where melancholy and anguish are present even in the titles of the first works of 1910-1914.¹⁶ So how does transcendence of the worldly being stand from the philosophic perspective based on the transcendence of Being or of God in the world? Just what is the rapport between what we are accustomed to consider as authentic transcendence (God in the world) and transcendence through the worldly being's perception of noth-

¹³ See M. Heidegger, *What is Metaphysics?*, cit., p. 93; G. de Chirico, *Noi metafisici* in "Cronache d'attualità", Rome, 15 February 1919.

¹⁴ See M. Heidegger, *What is Metaphysics?*, cit., p. 95.

¹⁵ See *Letter on "Humanism"*, cit, pp. 252-253.

¹⁶ These include *The Anguishing Morning*, 1912, MART, Trento e Rovereto; *Solitude (Melancholy)*, 1913, private collection; *The Melancholy of a Beautiful Day*, 1913, Musée des Beaux Arts, Brussels; *The Anxious Journey*, 1913; Museum of Modern Art, New York; *The Anguish of Departure*, 1913, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo; *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street*, 1914, private collection.

ingness that elevates it above being as entity, whilst establishing it as being-in-the-world? In a note to his later essay, *On the Essence of Ground*, Heidegger wrote: "The ontological interpretation of Dasein as being-in-the-world decides neither positively nor negatively concerning a possible being toward God. Presumably, however, the elucidation of transcendence first achieves an *adequate concept of Dasein*, and with respect to this being it can then be *asked* how things stand ontologically concerning the relation of Dasein to God"¹⁷. This means that regardless of what is said regarding the non-sense of life or nothingness as intrinsic in Being, a possible relationship regarding the Sacred remains open for both.¹⁸ But let us now examine the concept of reality and the world in the essay Giorgio de Chirico dedicated to these subjects: *Desecrated Reality*.

Desecrated Reality

We have seen how in posing his question on Being, Heidegger distanced himself from the way the question had been asked in classical metaphysics, in particular from Aristotle who considered it a science of *ὄν ἡ ὄν* (entity as entity), an expression which has been translated as 'reality as reality' or even 'being as being'. On one hand, Heidegger makes a distinction between the being as such and the entity as the worldly being, which is the object of various sciences and technologies. He affirms that a fundamental difference exists between the being (which remains hidden for the most part) and the entity, which he calls an *ontological difference*. But Heidegger also speaks continuously of the being as entity and the entity in its state of being, saying that entity as such cannot be separated from Being, because it is Being that gives it its meaning, a meaning that goes beyond the questioning of science and the dispositions of technology. Classical metaphysics has not looked into Being, limiting itself to the study of the natural reality of its various aspects, from the physical, biologic, botanic, zoological, right up to man himself. When the being of entity is placed at the disposition of science and technology, the meaning of the being and of the entity remains hidden, whilst that which we call reality escapes us. Let us read what de Chirico says about reality:

Reality is another concept the meaning of which has been completely disfigured by the dishonest and stupid spirit of our age. Today reality is a word that man hears too often and sees written at random; but we must go back to the origin of this disfigurement. At the beginning of our century according to the opinion of the intellectual avant-garde (which has been so often the cradle of future misfortunes)

¹⁷ See *On the Essence of Ground*, M. Heidegger, cit., note 62 p. 371.

¹⁸ For de Chirico on the Sacred, see *L'arte sacra*, in *Commedia dell'arte moderna*, cit.; now in G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1*, cit., pp. 522-527. In Heidegger, an essential passage is found in Postscript to "What is Metaphysics?": "The thinker says being. The poet names the holy", *ibidem*, p. 237. This brings to mind de Chirico's extraordinary painting, *Le poète et le philosophe*, 1914, private collection, of which a very fine preparatory drawing exists. In addition to this phrase, Heidegger, recalls the nearness of being to man in his essays on Hölderlin, a theme he also spoke of in *Letter on "Humanism"*: "In such nearness, if at all, a decision may be made as to whether and how in the upsurge of the holy an epiphany of God and the gods can begin anew. But the holy, which alone is the essential sphere of divinity, which in turn alone affords a dimension for the gods and for God, comes to radiate only when being itself beforehand and after extensive preparation has been cleared and is experienced in its truth", p. 258. It must be kept in mind that earlier in the same essay he had written: "Being' is not God and not a cosmic ground" (p. 252) because these determinations belong to western metaphysics and not thoughts on remembrance of being.

reality became a synonym of mediocrity and banality. [...] How did this foolish contempt for reality, this complete disowning of the part it plays in art begin? Contempt for reality is in fact one of the characteristic sentiments of our epoch.¹⁹

What de Chirico thought about artists, Heidegger thought about philosophers. But, of course, there are artists and artists, just as philosophers can differ greatly from other philosophers. De Chirico considered that the disdain of reality characteristic to his epoch (which is the same as Heidegger's) came about for two reasons: the first was a lack of great artists with the modern spirit (as he called it), a condition he dates to the second half of the 19th century to the time of writing. He specified that there was an absence of artists strong enough to handle "both reality and unreality". By this he meant that artists needed an authentic sense of reality in order to be capable of transcendence into unreality, which is exactly what Heidegger said with regard to the transcendence of Being in man.

The second reason is also in line with Heidegger. The oblivion or the hiding of Being is seen as caused mainly by technology and science's focus on reality for practical and utilitarian purposes. For Heidegger, science looks at the whole of beings, as well as the essence of the entity, but not at the being as such. De Chirico calls this a materialistic tendency, whilst Heidegger sees it as the will of the modern era Subject to take possession of reality, in other words, to dispose it to its own objectives. In doing so, it fails to appreciate the truth of its being. But let us hear what de Chirico has to say:

After marking and stressing this first factor regarding the absence of genius which was so clearly manifest after the epoch of great talents in the last century; a second factor must be mentioned which is the tendency towards positive sciences. I mean the direction along which the progress of the 20th century was moving, the very strong interest felt for technical achievements, medicine, mechanics, the sciences in general, tending towards reality which serve above all the material needs of our life. The strong grip materialism had always exercised upon men provoked a reaction against reality in questions belonging to the elevated plane of the spirit.²⁰

Of course, Heidegger did not speak of materialism, just as he practically never spoke of the 'spirit', as both of these terms belong to traditional metaphysics which he saw as the cause of the dangerous passage towards technology, which reduced the being to entity by forgetting the essential difference between the two. In particular, Heidegger considered the term 'spirit' as essentially belonging to Hegelian philosophy and the fulfilment of metaphysics in the modern era as a metaphysics of subjectivity. Technology, materialism, science are nothing other than forms derived inadvertently from classical metaphysics, concerning which he claimed the advent of a radically different way of thinking, a retrospective way of thinking (*Andenken*), to bring authentic reality or the

¹⁹ G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1*, cit., pp. 551-552.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 552.

being back to its full splendour and non-latency (*Lichtung, Unverborgenheit*). What should we expect from this retrospective way of thinking? Is it possible for a completely different consideration of metaphysics that does not reduce the being into an entity and that can present the Being as it really is without falling once again into metaphysics? Does de Chirico's oeuvre and metaphysical painting represent this very disavowal of classical metaphysics? Is the destiny of his art the same that Heidegger saw as the destiny of metaphysics in philosophy? Let us listen more to what de Chirico has to tell us, which is once again consonant to Heidegger regarding man's rapport with reality, the being's way of thinking or what he calls the true significance of the unstable and difficult phenomenon we are dealing with here: reality.

Without any doubt the discourses and discussions about reality quickly deprived reality of its true significance, as reality is a very delicate and unstable phenomenon that is difficult to handle. One must remember that reality is bound to all the manifestations of time, the past, the present and also the future. I can even say that it is formed by these three manifestations of time. Thus reality is a strange phenomenon, which although it is temporal, at the same time and in a certain sense it is enclosed in eternity; to the same degree, reality is one with truth. And then, reality has many different aspects corresponding to the many and diverse mentalities and individuals.²¹

What is being said here coincides once again with Heidegger's thoughts on Being and time as seen in his principal work. Eternity is not outside of time; it is not simply the eternity of time, because time does not consist in the simple flowing of an infinite series of instants. Reality is connected to time, but not in the sense that it is simply *in* time, but moreover as it is based on these three temporal manifestations. Heidegger stands by the same principle, in which the being is not simply *in* time, but time is instead the meaning of Being.²² Of course, de Chirico does not actually say that time is the meaning of reality, but he does say that reality is formed of these temporal manifestations, which, in a certain way is the equivalent to saying that the temporality is a fundamental *dimension* of reality. For Heidegger, this is equivalent to saying that temporality is the fundamental dimension of existence, which is the being of man as thrown into time and as project (history). Being-in-the-world is the basis on which *Being and Time* asks the fundamentally ontological questions of the existential structure of 'being-in-the-world', and draws the conclusion that time is the meaning of being.²³ In de

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 552-553.

²² See *Introduction to "What is Metaphysics?"*, cit., p. 286: "Being as such is thus unconcealed in terms of time. Thus time points to unconcealedness, i.e., to the truth of Being. But the time that is to be thought here is not experienced through the changing course that beings take. Time is evidently of an altogether different essence, which not only has not yet been thought by way of the concept of time belonging to metaphysics, but never can be thought in this way. Thus time becomes the preliminary name – a name that has first to be pondered – for the truth of Being that is yet to be experienced." Heidegger quotes here from his fundamental work *Being and Time*: "Meaning of Being' and 'truth of Being' say the same. Granted that time belongs to the truth of Being in a way that is still concealed: then every projective holding open of the truth of Being, as an understanding of Being, must look toward time as the possible horizon of an understanding of Being. (See *Sein und Zeit*, §§ 31-34 and 68)." M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by Joan Stambaugh, State University of New York Press, Albany 1996.

²³ *Being and Time* draws to a close with the repetition of the same question, as Heidegger points out in the Foreword, that through repetition becomes rhetorical: "Is there a way leading from primordial *time* to the meaning of *being*? Does *time* itself reveal itself as the horizon of *being*?" *Ibidem*, p. 398.

Chirico, time as the meaning of existence is the focus of his famous paintings with large clocks on public buildings.²⁴

De Chirico is not overtly explicit, but by speaking about reality as a strange, almost inexplicable phenomenon constituted of temporality and eternity, he surpasses the concept of time as a mere relationship of instances of past, present and future. The kind of temporality that Heidegger calls *Zeitlichkeit*, a vulgar conception of time as simple flowing. Reality is not to be considered as eternity; it is not a question of reality being eternal. Rather, it is held within eternity and this is what makes it a strange phenomenon. The way in which de Chirico attempts to make the phenomenon clear is by saying that it consists fundamentally in the three dimensions of past, present and future. But these three dimensions are essentially the dimensions of man, of the 'being-in-the-world'. It is here that we see how the artist and the philosopher think the same: reality is non-eternal, but is held within eternity, which is essentially temporal; and manifests itself in its truth in the transcendence of 'being-in-the-world' which is temporality, through which it reveals its truth and meaning.

At this point we must remind ourselves that *Being and Time* was not thought of as only fundamental ontology, which it was inasmuch as it posed the question regarding Being at its very base, that is, man as existence. Moreover, it was essentially a hermeneutic phenomenology, or in other words an interpretation of the original phenomenon: the meaning of Being that allows the 'being-in-the-world' to become apparent.²⁵ If we did indeed manage to bring this strange phenomenon into a state of evidence rather than concealment, what understanding would we acquire with regard to the authentic meaning or significance of reality?

The answer, clear for both de Chirico and Heidegger, is the same: authentic thought and the awareness of authentic reality provide us with nothing less than truth itself: being in its state of non-latency is truth. Reality, when it is not forgotten or desecrated is also *truth*. But what is truth exactly? It is obvious that we cannot say here that it is a question of adjusting our thinking to reality, if it is a strange and inexplicable phenomenon, because we would have to know what reality is in order to say whether our way of thinking corresponds to it or not. Reality cannot be considered simply as something objective that we measure with our thought, because that would make it such that it wouldn't be a strange phenomenon anymore, but rather something we know or that science knows. Rather, if we manage to shed light on the strange and inexplicable phenomenon that reality is, we can say that it is identical to truth. But just how can light be shed on this phenomenon? De Chirico's understanding of the concept of 'phenomenon' is very similar to that of Heidegger, whose understanding differs in turn from his teacher Husserl who was the founder of phenomenology, one of the first philosophic tendencies of the 20th century. A strange, inexplicable phenomenon cannot be

²⁴ These are among de Chirico's early metaphysical paintings: *The Enigma of the Hour*, 1910, private collection, *The Delights of the Poet*, 1912, private collection; *The Philosopher's Conquest*, 1914, The Art Institute of Chicago.

²⁵ Heidegger points out how this was prone to misunderstanding; see *Introduction to "What is Metaphysics?"*, cit., p. 289: "For what the title 'fundamental ontology' suggests is that the thinking that attempts to think the truth of Being – and not, like all ontology, the truth of beings – is, as fundamental ontology, still a kind of ontology. In fact, the attempt to recall the truth of Being, as a going back into the ground of metaphysics, has already left the realm of all ontology with its very first step."

clarified by being explained, described, reduced to pure form and revealed in its hidden essence, as attempted by Husserl's eidetic reduction. Reality remains a strange and unexplainable phenomenon, as it cannot per se be made the object of an eidetic vision that requires putting empiric reality aside and suspending our judgements and problems in order to get to the essence of things. Rather, it is by remaining firmly within our experience of the world and its set of problems, within the tension of reality itself, that reality can appear to us in a non-latent form, even if this is in contrast not only with temporality and eternity, but with all of reality's diverse aspects in relation to different individuals across history's changing periods. Even with such movement, and beyond all relativity, reality is thought of as being not simply at a standstill in itself, but identical to itself. This is the condition in which it can appear to us in non-latency, as the truth we continue to search for, as it constitutes our principal of our very bearing. The notion that reality stays the same to itself yet appears differently in the changing contexts of history is a condition that allows it to come out of hiding and appear, when it actually does appear to us, in its non-latency or as truth: as such, reality and truth mean the same to us. Reality ceases to represent the whole of beings, the *omnitudo realitatis* of scholastic metaphysics in which it remains indistinct and indifferent to us. Instead, depending on how we place ourselves in relation to it, it can appear instead as non-latency to us. Reality exists for us through how we exist for reality, in other words, in our willingness to be within truth, which is the only way reality appears as true. Through our authentic manifestation of reality (our willingness to be in truth), we become the means of reality's truth, as authentic spiritual reality, the reality of our lives and our story and the story of all spirits, thus the same as reality as such. This is what de Chirico means when he speaks of the seriousness of reality and does so with good reason. With respect to the seriousness of reality, particularly spiritual reality, which for de Chirico is authentic reality, we note that in the same essay two paths are open, if one should want to go beyond simple philosophical discourse and embark on life's path, or the *Lebenswelt* of which Husserl speaks. According to de Chirico, the first path is wisdom; the other one is art, which touches directly upon the relationship between art and reality.

Reality and Wisdom: *Phronesis* or Practical Knowledge

In examining de Chirico's essay, we are surprised to find a striking similarity of ideas on Being and reality held by a philosopher and a painter. However, although they did not know each other both took an interest in metaphysics as a problem of human existence. It is even more of a surprise to find a likeness between de Chirico and another great philosopher of the last century, Hans Georg Gadamer, who was Heidegger's most illustrious student. Gadamer, a philosopher of hermeneutics, or the art of interpretation, never dealt with metaphysics although he was interested in art and even wrote an ontology of art in the first part of his important study *Truth and Method*.²⁶ However, as we

²⁶ See H.G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, J.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) Tübingen 1960; 2^o expanded edition, Tübingen 1965.

shall see, it is neither on the concept of art, nor the ontology of artwork, nor ontology per se, that the two come together. This occurs rather on the ethical relationship or the way of dealing with reality that both consider as the duty of 'wisdom'.

Let us deal with the question of wisdom by reading more of what de Chirico has to say:

But the many aspects of reality must not lead us to forget prudence in our opinions on its relativity for there is the reality of the situations and the life of men, reality as taken in its principal lines. But the reality of truth is concrete and is the most important for us. This is the reality of wisdom, and since wisdom is always the same, it has managed to conceive over the course of the centuries a reality that corresponds to truth, a reality deriving from various situations and corresponding to the sentiments and opinions of reasonable men of all times. This reality must never be forgotten, and the disfigurement of its significance must never be allowed. And yet today we stand before the accomplished fact. Reality has become invisible to the majority of men; the deplorable spirit of our time has totally deprived men of clarity of opinion and has caused them to forget even the notion of that which used to be the real conception of reality.²⁷

True reality, which has been forgotten today, can only be reached through wisdom. This step is extremely important for two reasons: the first because it allows a concept to emerge, which is the concept of wisdom that de Chirico also refers to as 'prudence'. It was Gadamer who brought the concept of prudence to the attention of contemporary philosophy where it is having enormous fortune today. The second reason is that it raises another question strongly felt today, which is that of the relativity of viewpoints, known as the 'pluralism' of ideas and opinions. In opposition to the pluralism of viewpoints, a call rings out for wisdom, which is also known as prudence.

The concept of wisdom plays an important role in the origins of hermeneutics and in Heidegger's phenomenological hermeneutics, as well as Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. The true meaning and origin of the concept hails back to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, which deals with the Greek concept *phronesis*, especially according to the meaning Aristotle gave it in this work, which was translated as *prudentia* in Latin. Originally, it dealt with a kind of knowledge that was not theoretical, but rather, *saper pratico* (practical knowledge), the sort of knowledge that deals with judgement and decisions to be made regarding practical matters in which theoretical knowledge is not enough. A typical situation in which *phronesis*, or wisdom, is required regards the decisions a judge must make in court. The variety of circumstances law must take into consideration, the difficulty criminal law encounters whilst dealing with a lack of clarity regarding proof, as well as the problem of proving intention, have always left a margin of uncertainty in the application of the law, for which the greatest prudence in making decisions is required. It is not for nothing that juridical knowledge is called *jurisprudencia*, a fact that shows that knowledge of the law is only one part of authentic knowledge, as authentic knowledge means knowing how to judge using practical knowledge and

²⁷ G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1*, cit., p. 553.

knowledge of how to practice law. Decisions are arrived at after lengthy deliberation and by associating a particular case with universal law, as well as different laws and their various applications. In other words, knowing how to judge means judging with prudence: this is what *jurisprudencia* is, which does not correspond to theoretical or technical knowledge. Judicial erudition or technical knowledge does not take into consideration the final objective of the decision that needs to be made.

As shown in a previous essay dedicated specifically to Aristotle's consideration of *phronesis*²⁸, it is with him that the meaning of the term was transformed. Up until Plato it was identified with *sophia*, or knowledge and considered as one of the four cardinal virtues. With Aristotle, *Sophia* loses its scientific connotation and explicitly becomes practical knowledge²⁹. In the example given by Aristotle, Thales was justly considered knowledgeable, whilst Pericles could not be considered a *sophos*, but rather a *phrominos*, or man of wisdom.³⁰ Wisdom distinguishes itself from knowledge thanks to its prime characteristic prudence, with which decisions can be taken correctly. In addition to prudence, *phronesis* has another meaning, which is how to use reason and can be translated as reasonableness. Aristotle describes the concept in relation to taking ethical decisions. Such decision-making cannot be carried out through the application of *kata ton logon*, or by following *logos*, which is the dictate of reason. In jurisprudence, there is a pertinent saying: *summum ius, summa iniuria*. Nevertheless, decisions should be taken using reason or, *meta logou*, a concept in which both wisdom and prudence are implicit and which form a true capacity for judgement, which we call reason.³¹ De Chirico also uses this term, in addition to prudence and wisdom, to express the same notion. The concept of *phronesis* was a central focus of Heidegger's attention from 1923 onwards, after he gave his lecture *Ontologie - Hermeneutik der Faktizität* (Hermeneutics of Facticity)³², which indeed can be considered to mark his move from Husserlian Phenomenology towards Hermeneutic Phenomenology as a fundamental ontology in *Being and Time*. Gadamer, who went to Marburg that same semester to listen to both Heidegger and Husserl's lessons, must have attended this lecture and heard the term hermeneutics used as a substitute for ontology (which was also implicit in its title). At the age of 23, this would have had a fundamental effect on his thought. Gadamer would later tell of how he returned to Marburg once Heidegger had been called there as a professor and how he attended his lessons diligently and later did his doctorate on Plato's dialectical ethics with him. Heidegger, still a young teacher, invited him home and gave him a couple of 'private lessons' specif-

²⁸ See R. Dottori, *La phronesis in Aristotele e l'inizio della filosofia ermeneutica*, in *Il cammino filosofico di Hans Georg Gadamer*, edited by M. Failla, "Paradigmi", Rivista di critica filosofica, 3, 2008, pp. 53-66.

²⁹ Gadamer demonstrated this in his first published work, a review of Werner Jäger on Aristotle, which was well received at the time. See H.G. Gadamer, *Der aristotelische 'Protreptikos' und die entwicklungsgeschichtliche Betrachtung der aristotelischen Ethik* (The Aristotelian *Protreptikos* and Aristotelian Ethics from the Standpoint of their developmental History), in "Hermes", 63, 1927, pp. 138. Gadamer discusses the history of the term's changing meaning, which according to him took place in Plato and is reflected in Aristotle's *Protreptikos*, written when he was still following Plato, and showed its limits.

³⁰ See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1140 b 8, 1141 b 3.

³¹ See *ibidem*, 1144 b 11.

³² The full title of the work is *Ontologie (Hermeneutik der Faktizität), Frühe Freiburger Vorlesung Sommersemester 1923*, published in the complete works of M. Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe, II Abteilung: Vorlesungen*, Bd. 65, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt a.M. 1988.

ically on the concept of *phronesis*. After completing his doctorate and obtaining a professorship with Heidegger, he would go on to publish his research in 1929. Gadamer also wrote a paper on *phronesis* entitled *Praktisches Wissen* or practical wisdom.³³ The work was to be included in a volume of studies in Paul Friedländer's honour, but was never published. Gadamer kept it in his desk and in fact forgot all about it for fifty years. It saw the light finally when a collection of his work was published in a set of ten volumes. The concept of *phronesis* is fundamental to the development of Gadamer's thought, as he expressly noted both in his Louvain lessons, which were published in French (*Le problème de la conscience historique*), in which the fourth lesson is dedicated to Aristotle and in, *Truth and Method*, with a chapter specifically dedicated to the meaning Aristotle gave to Philosophical Hermeneutics.³⁴

Coming back to de Chirico, we see how wisdom is also central to his concept of reality: only through wisdom can we access true reality, or reality as truth, which allows us not only to keep reality out of hiding, but also to not desecrate it. This aspect of wisdom as practical knowledge throws light on the concept of both truth and reality: de Chirico shows us that the opposite of wisdom as practical knowledge is not simply a question of non-truth as in false or erroneous, but rather the desecration of reality that not only hides the world from us, but brings wickedness to the world. For Heidegger, in fact, error is etymologically understood as deriving from the Latin *errare*, of which the equivalent in German is *Irre gehen*³⁵, where *Irre* is correctly translated as wandering, or moving aimlessly in search of the correct path with the possibility of discovering unknown lands and aspects of reality, thus producing knowledge, particularly with regard to the entity, yet remaining in the veiling of the being. De Chirico tells us openly that those who speak of reality are actually hiding it, and in doing so they not only err but mislead. Not only do they not recognise reality, they essentially desecrate it. The fundamental importance here, is that this was said in 1943 and the accusation of desecration is explicitly aimed at those who were wreaking disaster on Europe. Heidegger had originally adhered to Nazism and allowed himself to be fooled by those promising a rediscovery of German traditional values and spirit. Convinced to accept the position of Rector at the University of Freiburg, he quit just nine months later without completing a full year's tenure. He retreated completely from public life and only held lessons on Hölderlin and poetry in the years that followed. He must have felt that the ideals of national culture and the creation of a new social state, or nationalism, had been betrayed. However, he did not openly disavow the regime, which

³³ In this work, the meaning of *phronesis* in Aristotle is brilliantly presented as: "a balanced reflection on what everyone needs for their own existence, in order to live well" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1140 a 25).

³⁴ See H.G. Gadamer, *Le problème de la conscience historique*, Presses Universitaires, Louvain 1956, a collection of lessons dealing with his first reflections further elaborated on in *Truth and Method*. The timeliness of Aristotle's Hermeneutics is taken up again in *Work and Method*, 1960, Teil II, 2, b, *Die hermeneutische Aktualität des Aristoteles*, pp. 295-306.

³⁵ See H.G. Gadamer, *On the Essence of Truth*, cit., p. 150 "7. Un-truth as Errancy": "Humans err. Human beings do not merely stray into errancy. They are always astray in errancy, because as ek-sistent they in-sist and so already stand within errancy. The errancy through which human beings stray is not something that, as it were, extends alongside them like a ditch into which they occasionally stumble; rather, errancy belongs to the inner constitution of the Da-sein into which historical human beings are admitted. Errancy is the free space for that turning in which in-sistent ek-sistence adroitly forgets and mistakes itself constantly anew. The concealing of concealed beings as a whole holds sway in that disclosure of specific beings, which, as forgottenness of concealment, becomes errancy."

would have only been possible if he had taken exile or gone to jail. He did not even repudiate his original political beliefs and at the end of the War did not ask for forgiveness publicly for his adherence to the regime. De Chirico did not publish *Desecrated Reality* and a later essay, *Discorso sulla Mentalità* (Discourse on mentality), in which he openly condemned Hitler, until after the War. This essay, and even more so the second one on 'mentality' (or 'ideology', as we discover) contains an accusation regarding the desecration of reality in name of the regimes that were guiding Europe to ruin. These two brief, intense essays, written at the most inauspicious moment of the War, could not be published at the time, but came out immediately after and bear witness to the artist's political belief. Invoking wisdom was a way of calling Europe back to reality, in contrast to those who use the term 'reality' deceptively, to conceal and desecrate it:

For a long time reality has no longer guided men in their actions and intentions. Dictatorships have used the word reality to turn their people away from truth, from urgent problems, from the real political, economical and social situation of the world. Political personalities in their speeches and propaganda used the word reality for their rhetoric, calling reality that what they would invent for their own convenience without fearing the ridiculous or the absurd. It had become the habit to use the word reality when it was necessary to confuse issues, causing people to be ignorant of what reasonable men according to their logic had always termed reality.³⁶

The explicit mention of rhetoric calls to mind the Socrates and Plato's age-old critique of sophism and rhetoric, as being deceiving uses of *Logos*, language and discourse. De Chirico is moving in the direction of what was later known as the critique of ideology and the political use of rhetoric aimed at deceiving and manipulating the masses, an action that effectively suffocates the use of logic and reason in 'reasonable' men as well as their ability to use reason with logic and wisdom. In what he goes on to say, de Chirico is clearly developing a critique of ideology regarding a correlative concept of the vision of the world, with regard to which he employs the German term *Weltanschauung*, first used by Hegel in *Phenomenology of Spirit* to characterise Kant's moral as a moral vision of the world, with a less than positive meaning. Dilthey would use the term with a positive connotation, followed by Max Weber who expressed what even de Chirico speaks of in the next essay treated here. De Chirico continues to give the term *Weltanschauung* a positive connotation with regard to the need to represent the world in order to live in it. This is also the original meaning of ideology for the *idéologues* of French Enlightenment shortly before the Revolution; a vision of the world upheld by Idea. Marx gave it a negative connotation in his critique of Hegel and the Hegelian left that pigeonholed this way of thinking as 'German ideology'. By ideology he meant the demystification of reality. Whilst, instead of establishing true reality as the basis of work, productivity and own-

³⁶ G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1*, cit., p. 555.

ership, therefore within the economic class interests, ideology made Idea and Reason a superstructure of true reality. The great 20th century sociologist Max Weber believed instead that it is up to ideology to represent the world of each social class: the peasant, merchant, industrialist and intellectual, rather than have one social class exercise the power of interpreting the world for all other classes. The critique of ideology fell thus to the wayside. From being a mistake or a demystification of reality it became, on the contrary, something that each class could use to create a vision of the world of its own and therefore its own identity. De Chirico also saw that the error lay, not in man creating a representation of the world or of reality, but in the risk of his not being able to do so, inasmuch as reality had been desecrated and its very essence completely hidden and made inaccessible, such that the creation of a world representation was hampered, a fact that simply caused chaos:

Looking carefully around us we can easily perceive that the very notion of reality having disappeared from the brains of our contemporaries, the privilege granted to men to form for themselves an understanding of the world does not exist. For modern men a representation of the world, *Weltanschauung*, had simple been replaced by chaos, for real chaos is dominant both in life and in minds of men. Never in the whole course of history have there been more difficult times, yet in any age one could have found more easily than now men capable of coping with the disastrous state of things.³⁷

We can of course ask ourselves what is really meant by saying that reality has disappeared and why this makes it impossible to give form to a representation of the world. It means that when 'reality' is used rhetorically, as a word or motto to intentionally deceive, it loses its meaning. De Chirico is saying that the concept of true reality (upon which we base practical activity) disappears when we are guided by the will to prevaricate and deceive rather than by wisdom. The effect is even more powerful when, through this deception, of others, but especially of our own selves, we delude ourselves that we can attain reality without exercising our will for truth, in other words, our wisdom. What exactly is wisdom? As far as practical knowledge is concerned, it means never taking for granted what we think or what we believe is true without engaging in a true confrontation with that which does not depend on us, especially when dealing with the will and opinions of others. This is how we can gain knowledge of that which is other from us. This can only occur if we are ready to allow it to reveal itself, regardless of our will. In this way the notion of reality, as true reality or truth does not depend simply on theoretic knowledge, but fundamentally on practical knowledge or wisdom. The discussion thus draws a conclusion that is valid for both: we can only perceive reality, and with it truth, if we do away with preconceptions and are willing for reality to manifest itself to us. This implies approaching reality without the preconception that truth can be reached by investigating the worldly being by subjugating it to our purposes. Once again, in concealing the being of entity and

³⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 555-556.

the concept of truth as non-latency, reality and truth remain hidden to us. Allowing reality to come out of hiding and reveal itself is a concept common to Heidegger and de Chirico. For this to happen wisdom is needed and it is here that the extraordinary meeting of de Chirico and Gadamer's thought occurs. In addition to opening a path to truth, de Chirico's concept of wisdom opens a discourse on eternal reality or, more precisely, the reality of the spirit. Now, the concept of eternal and unchangeable reality lies precisely in metaphysics as understood traditionally. De Chirico would therefore be seen as belonging to this tradition of thought, which was radically criticised by Heidegger. If however, eternal reality is the reality of the spirit, it is not a reality that remains eternally the same like the Spinozian substance, for whom reality is not eternal but is contained in eternity, meaning that it is finite like the being. Eternal reality is not simple objectivity, or the whole of beings, but rather a spiritual reality, which is the reality that forms itself through a continuous rapport with truth. For this reason, the truth held in spiritual reality (which is an ethic reality) is in a continuous state of becoming, the prime circumstance of which regards the responsibility of the spirit. As de Chirico says: "Today's mentality is one of thoughtlessness towards responsibility and duty. Everyone is preoccupied with his or her own strictly personal business. The consequence of this is that it has become one hundred percent impossible for even a touch of idealism to be heard. [...] This is as much true for politics as it is for art."³⁸ Although, at this point the need arises to ask oneself what responsibility can art exercise here? Is it simply the artist's ethic responsibility, his reality as an ethically responsible human? Or is there a kind of responsibility that is characteristic to the artist in the making of art? And could this possibly mean engaging in making art in an authentic manner without wanting to deceive? Without yielding to specific situations or to the taste of the time, without betraying one's own genius in the search for originality at all costs?

Reality and Art

We now arrive at the relationship between art and reality as dealt with in this essay. It goes hand in hand with the relationship between art and truth. In de Chirico's distancing himself from modern art, which commenced with his return to order and which became even more polemic in the 1940s, when he went to the point of asserting that in modern art (a form of art of which he himself was a

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 559. In *Discorso sulla mentalità* (Discourse on Mentality), in which 'mentality' is intended as ideology in a negative connotation as being the cause of the Second World War and the disaster of Europe. Mentality is also given a positive meaning as the world vision of different social classes: "How do races belonging to the same mentality form themselves? Are they formed by social classes, by nations, by races? [...] Thus in our minds exist the type of mentality described as bourgeois, peasant, noble etc. Evidently such models were created little by little according to experience and observation. But even if originally any special mentality was limited to some determined class in consequence of marriage, inheritance, reverse of fortune, the mentality of one class penetrated into another and so, today, the mentality of classes is purely symbolic." Max Weber also describes this as industrial society's process of rationalisation that puts all world visions on the same level, a process that becomes modern era ideology, the modern mentality of which de Chirico speaks, which is, indeed, an ideology with a negative meaning. With regard to this excellent essay, which dates to the same period in which a discussion on the critique of ideology in Gadamer and Habermas took place, see P. Ricoeur, *Herméneutique et critique des idéologies*, in *Démystification et Idéologie. Actes du Colloque organisé par le centre internationale d'études humanistes et par l'Institut d'études philosophiques de Rome*, Aubier, Édition Mouton, 1973, pp. 25-64, that deals with the same question, which was still timely in the early 1960s. The discussion was one of the famous 17 conferences organised by Enrico Castelli, director of the periodical "Archivio di Filosofia" and of the Istituto di Studi Filosofici.

famous exponent), an attack was being carried out on reality as a concept. He pointed out from the very start that the relationship between art and truth must not be confused with the relationship between art and its subject. By this he meant that the question was not one of art being a reproduction of reality or that the value of art was to be found in its adherence to reality. De Chirico justly writes: "Flemish paintings are indisputably works of art but certainly not because of the figures, objects, interiors, etc are painted in a realistic manner." The value of a piece of art resides within itself, in its value as a work of art. He affirms that the art of the moment had instigated a distancing from reality due to the lack of great geniuses strong enough to bear "both the real and the unreal". It follows that art is strong enough in itself to possess a reality of its own even when this reality appears in the form of the unreal. The reality that art possesses and the unreality that the work of genius holds, is its spiritual reality or the reality of the spirit. However, if art belongs to the reality of the spirit, it does not necessary follow that all spiritual reality is art. As we have seen, spiritual reality is also ethic reality, or the reality of our responsibility "the clear comprehension of which requires wisdom, logic, experience and foresight". At this point an unavoidable question must be asked: what role does art play in spiritual reality and what role has it always played?

De Chirico was acquainted with Kandinsky, at least he knew of his work, seeing that he was one of the principal collaborators of the periodical "Valori Plastici" edited by Broglio in which an article by Kandinsky entitled *Painting as Pure Art* was published in 1920, that dealt with fundamental themes from his book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*.³⁹ Kandinsky also believed, like de Chirico, that art, in particular painting, needed to free itself from nature, from the natural subject in order to elevate itself to a purely spiritual reality. Kandinsky distinguishes three phases through which painting had passed, the first consisting in "the practical desire to fix the fleeting physical element", which is the origin of realistic painting; the second phase, during which painting developed, consisted "in the slow separation from practical aims, in which the spiritual element became predominate". Kandinsky identified this as the naturalistic painting of Impressionism, Neo-impressionism and Futurism. The third phase, which is the one in which painting develops its true objective in the "highest achievement in art, in which residual practical desire has been completely surpassed. Art speaks a purely artistic language from spirit to spirit, and portrays a painterly-spiritual way of being". An art that seems to want to detach itself from nature and subject, just as from all practical enterprise, may seem like an art that is outside of reality. Instead, it constitutes a new reality that de Chirico calls a 'second reality' whilst speaking of German painters in an essay written at the same time as Kandinsky's article (1920-1921). A passage of which is worth presenting:

³⁹ See W. Kandinsky, *Pittura come arte pura*, (Painting as Pure Art), in "Valori Plastici", a. II, n. 1-2, Rome 1920. Kandinsky's article follows Van Doesburg's 3rd article on new art in Holland.

We all have a feeling for beauty and the transformation or idealization of reality that constitutes a second reality. We all have a feeling for choices made with care and intransigently with regard to the various aspects of nature, forever changing, yet always the same.

For de Chirico, it is also a question of the spiritual reality of art, or the communication between spirits. It is only in this light that a role for art can be said to be free from all practical-utilitarian or ideological objectives. This is true however only by way of an authentic commitment on the artist's behalf. But how can an artist's commitment and responsibility be defined from an ethical point of view? What does the final objective of art implicate? If art must distance itself from nature and all practical purpose, can it simply be said that the artist's commitment and responsibility work toward the unveiling of reality in its true form? Indeed, can one maintain, as de Chirico does, that the spiritual reality of art achieved by the genius through his work is an 'unreality'? The question applies to all kinds of art, that is, to art as art, and is a concept we find in the essay *Metafisica della danza* (The Metaphysics of Dance). The reality that the artist turns into 'unreality' brings us back to the Idea that is at the origin of nature, which, through art, produces a spiritual reality. This allows for a consideration of what the world would be like if the final objective of creation were recognised as the reality of nature, that is, the translation of the Idea into nature. By returning nature to its spiritual Idea, a purification of the natural occurs that makes it spiritual. This implies life going beyond nature of which Nietzsche speaks and that de Chirico refers to when he speaks of the metaphysics of dance.

In dance, accompanied, naturally, by music, which is its very soul, all is beautiful and perfect when the execution is faultless, meaning done by great artists; even the idea of love, which in dancing (I do not mean pantomime), remains in a state of vaguely outlined sentiment. In dance, love is not the senseless sentiment felt by terrestrial creatures and this phenomenon has nothing to do with the one that constrains and obliges creatures down here to perpetuate their race without considering the uselessness of such an aim.⁴⁰

The indication de Chirico gives here is fundamental for understanding the role art plays generally, including even the role of modern art: it is within spiritual reality that art shows us the reality of the Idea through beauty. It is here that we see the final objective of nature and life as perfection, which is identified in beauty and goodness. Like all forms of art, dance can do this when it is not pantomime or a mere imitation of natural reality (including the nature of man), but when "dance is an abstract phenomenon with nothing to do with actions or feelings that belong to reason or to the logic of men"; in other words, when it is metaphysical art. Its 'unreality' is not simply chimera or an imaginary 'should be', as in the unreality of ideology or utopia, but rather, the reality that art reveals to us in obtaining perfection and abstraction, which are invisible to our terrestrial eyes and unreach-

⁴⁰ G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1*, cit., pp. 547-548.

able. And yet, this vision can be transferred into painting and plastic form. In this case, art's role is that of not hiding, but rather, of revealing reality as truth, a role that is essential to life and to society. This is the responsibility of the artist, when he acts as an artist, and not as a political figure, because in doing so the artist involves himself in spiritual reality as an ethical reality, where responsibility lies in decision and the wisdom is employed in the field of practical choice.

These choices touch directly upon the act of making art, because the very making of art is a decision the artist takes, as is the decision to do so in an authentic way without giving way to artifice, but rather, in allowing reality to reveal itself in truth. It is through beauty as form that art touches upon the highest spiritual reality, which Kandinsky justly calls the communication between spirits. However, this is not a choice that all men can make and is separate from the ethical choices that all men are in the position of making; as Kant justly says "I can so I must". Not every person is born an artist and not every artist, even if gifted with talent, is born or can become a metaphysical artist. But if one has the privilege to be born as such, they also have the duty to communicate to others what they see and feel. Just as those not born as artists have the duty to not use art in a deceptive way, but to allow it to attain the perfection it holds within and thus contribute to the unveiling of a reality in which one finds truth and an authentic human and spiritual world in which life is possible. The constitution of this world comes about through the transcendence of man and openness to that which is sacred. This is art's contribution, similar to the contribution that thought and wisdom make relative to man's passage on earth and to civilization. Instead, when this is disregarded, not only is reality concealed and remains hidden, but is demystified through ideology, giving way to the catastrophe that has been and is yet to be brought upon man.

There is perfect accord between de Chirico and Heidegger on this, just as there is between de Chirico and Gadamer. Being cannot remain unrecognised and hidden forever or mankind will suffer grave consequences. De Chirico goes on:

But reality even when invisible to men, exists and mercilessly awaits its hour. An intelligent man understands that reality, so dangerous by nature, has been left too long alone, unwatched; he knows that this ignoring of reality has caused a wide spreading of evil and he trembles in thinking of the fatal moment when evil will have reached its culminating point and the calamity will be great. So great will the calamity be that in it and through it reality will again appear to all and all will have to recognise it.⁴¹

Heidegger expressed prophecies of this kind, which are now revealing themselves as bitter truths, during the same years as de Chirico did. Heidegger saw technology triumphing in what he called the new planetary civilisation, which today is known as globalisation, if indeed this can be considered civilisation. In this he saw the triumph of the will to power which Nietzsche spoke of

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 556.

and the complete possession and enslavement of the planet through the technological means available to man. Faced with this, his last declaration was: only a god can save us and in his final work he spoke of the "last god", as if it was his last hope. In an interview with Gadamer in August 2000, in commemoration of Heidegger's 100 year anniversary, he spoke of how Heidegger had repeatedly and insistently told his son: "Nietzsche ruined me", and that even he was not totally convinced of the coming to earth of the last god. In the interview, the same end of century tone was heard even in Gadamer:

In my view, we are heading toward a series of global crises. Considering the level reached in science, we must ask ourselves if there is a way to quantify the real danger of what is happening. [...] It is perhaps inevitable that someone begin to do just this. If this occurs, we will have a lesson to learn and maybe we can succeed in establishing an organisation to control the technology supporting the industrial production of chemical weapons and put a brake on ideological conflict. Indeed, I do not believe that Enlightenment alone can do the trick. Instead, I believe that humanity is likely to embark once again on a catastrophic path (the development of chemical weapons) that is very difficult to control. However, something might awaken a feeling of anguish in man and humanity as a whole will feel threatened. When each and every one of us begins to perceive the danger on their own skin, hopefully a spark of reason might alight that will bring man to understand one another and, based on the concept of transcendence, we can begin to ask ourselves (of our own initiative and without such a question being imposed), why we are born and why we die etc.⁴²

In the face of all of this, can there be any question left as to whether or not authentic art, achieved through an artist's commitment and sense of civil and political responsibility can help indicate a course of action and raise awareness regarding the existence of a rapport with nature that is effectively cultural rather than submitting the earth and society to its own purposes; a rapport that is aimed at building a world that does not appear increasingly artificial and that preserves traces of a sacred world?

Translated by Katherine Robinson

⁴² See. H.G. Gadamer and R. Dottori, *L'Ultimo Dio. La lezione filosofica del XX Secolo*, I libri di Reset, Reset, 2000.