

METAPHYSICAL ART. THE REVELATION OF THE *ALL*

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In 1945, when Giorgio de Chirico presented a collection of articles by Isabella Far, he gave his own wholly singular and probably misleading version of those texts. In recounting their background he confuses the issue with a sort of “double-dealing”. He recalls that Far’s first article *Considerazioni sulla pittura moderna* (Considerations on Modern Painting), appeared in 1942 in the magazine “Stile”, adding that “for personal reasons” he had been induced to put his name to it, a procedure that was to continue in a series of subsequent articles she wrote. He then explains how that article had a tremendous impact on intellectual society of the day, yet without Far contesting the fact that the by-line was his. “It was not my writing style, which moreover was well known at the time,” declared the *Pictor Optimus*, but Far pointed out how very few were capable of noticing such things and maintained that nobody would therefore have attributed the piece to any other writer.

This game of mirrors in de Chirico’s presenting such an important work in the mid 1940s is significant, at a time when the cards were down and everything that needed to be said had already been extensively said. The *Considerations on Modern Painting* article was effectively fundamental to dechirican poetics and – whether he or Far wrote it – remains the foundation of any inquiry into the meaning and genesis of Metaphysical Art, because this is precisely what it dealt with, a statement of poetics presented in terms of a close historiographic analysis, which it certainly was not. Even if de Chirico did not write the article in its entirety, he took the greatest care in overseeing it. Indeed in that text he tried to give order to a subject that was still alive and palpitating, not yet free of the contingency of immediate polemics. In brief, de Chirico acted as if nothing had happened, distancing from the urgency of the everyday, something he wanted to look like a critical ordering, written moreover not by him but by his wife although it bore his signature.

It is the *enigma* he loved so much and continually brings forth in his writing. Some passages of the article are indeed fundamental to recovering the true and deep meaning of Metaphysical Art as it was experienced by its creator. It was 1942 and the authoress (or author) declared that “the only extant value in modern painting is the value of revelation”, adding that in order to grasp this proposition well one must have a clear idea of the difference between *inspiration* and *revelation*. In this context *inspiration* is God-given. It is inexplicable. Those who have it have it, and there is no more to be said. *Revelation* (and here lies the crucial point for any correct study of metaphysical painting) “is another phenomenon, not bound to Superior Talent and therefore not in direct relationship with art.” This seemingly incredible and inconceivable idea, expressed by the very creator of meta-

physical painting and therefore by the artist who repeatedly and proudly proclaimed himself superior to any other, is actually the keystone for a possible clarification of the whole issue. It is worthwhile re-reading and reconsidering this long and crucial excerpt of the article:

Revelation expressed by works of art is a phenomenon not found in ancient pictures except, fragmentarily, in Dürer's *oeuvre*. In some of Poussin's pictures one perceives a phenomenon that approaches revelation but could be better defined as legend interpreted by genius. The phenomenon of revelation was first manifested in the nineteenth century in various works by painters, philosophers and poets. The moment in which man has a revelation we shall define as that moment in which he glimpses a world existing outside of things known to the human spirit. It is a world of which human logic cannot conceive and which does not exist for mortals, since what effectively exists for us is only what we know, or at least that of which we can conceive the possible existence. This metaphysical world, inexistent for us, in other words this world completely outside human knowledge and concepts, this world of which our brain perceives nothing, is the one that Nietzsche and Hölderlin have let us glimpse in certain poems and passages. In painting, Böcklin, Max Klinger, Previati, Picasso and Giorgio de Chirico have traced out an image of it in a number of their works. It is an inexplicable world that the intelligence can only feel through intuition that cannot be understood by logic. A picture painted following revelation shows an aspect of a strange world unknown to us. Execution of such a picture might consist merely in structuring the image correctly, since the value of this picture lies not in the quality of the painting but in the spiritual content of the work.

A text of this kind could easily be filed under cultural ravings, lacking, as it is, in meaning, at least from a historical-artistic point of view. Assuming an attitude of omniscience, the painter declares that the quality of painting counts for nothing and that what is represented is in itself incomprehensible. So what interest should there be in an art form that proclaims unawareness, albeit sublime, and the irrelevance of quality?

But that's not how it is, and this text is actually an authentic keystone for seriously grasping what de Chirico's highly serious intentions were in the exploit of "inventing" metaphysical painting. Is it at all possible he upheld the notion that metaphysical painting was valid even when of mediocre execution, as long as it was correct? In such a thesis, thus formulated in *Considerations on Modern Painting*, an apparently irremediable contradiction is found in other aspects of de Chirico as theoretician: precisely the incredible statement that metaphysical painting eludes the cognitive logic of the human being.

In all likelihood this is not the case; nor did de Chirico himself think so in the least. But then why tackle an abstruse and apparently self-destructive argument, especially in the years in which it was formulated? Which is to say, at the beginning of the fifth decade of the twentieth century, in the middle of a war and in a world torn and tragically devastated by political and social upheavals whose consequences nobody could foresee at the time.

De Chirico had explained the issue shortly before the end of the previous war, in June 1918, on occasion of the *Mostra d'arte indipendente* (Independent Art Exhibition) organised by the newspaper "L'Epoca" at its Rome headquarters in n. 72 Via del Tritone. He said it in his prodigiously ele-

gant and derisory prose, as caustic and on target as ever: “at last we can say that we too have a new art that is neither an idiotic aping of modern French painting nor a hysterical twisting of monoform Futurism.”

We need only go back over certain well known crucial moments of metaphysical “escalation” to better understand the *Pictor Optimus*’ exalted and somewhat ill-expressed arguments at many years distance from his metaphysical debut. In 1910 de Chirico was living in Florence with his uncle Gustavo, his father’s brother. This is how he presents the situation at the time, in a very well known passage repeatedly examined by historiographers:

The Böcklin period had passed and I had begun to paint subjects where I sought that powerful and mysterious feeling I had discovered in Nietzsche’s books: the melancholy of fine autumn afternoons in Italian cities. It was a prelude to the Italian Piazzas painted a little later in Paris, then in Milan, Florence and Rome.

The passage holds the original key that must always and in all cases be employed, whatever interpretation one wants to make of dechirican testimony, whether it reflects the truth of events narrated or has been craftily doctored to demonstrate a critical thesis formed after the fact. So whatever interpretation one wishes to give these statements (and a great many have been given, some very well founded, some aberrant) it remains evident that de Chirico wanted to highlight three certain elements of his poetics: Melancholy, Italy and Nietzsche.

There has, in truth, been much discussion about the effective sources of the first, extraordinary metaphysical pictures. These would include the influence of Giovanni Papini and the lively literary world in Florence; of Munich architecture and music; of Greek culture (ancient and modern), assimilated by the artist during his childhood in Greece and subsequent phases of his travels. As early as the *Portrait of the Artist’s Brother* signed and dated “Mediolano MCMX”, there is the figurative definition of the image of the sage, meditating in a setting broadly interpretable as a Renaissance evocation, transformed into a modern Hamlet identified with Nietzsche’s Dionysian man, the man who feels the essence of all things within him, in accordance with poetics very similar to that of the artist’s contemporary Joyce in *Dubliners*, and is therefore convinced of the impossibility of translating his own interior consciousness into practical action – destined in any case to fail –, quite aside from any other exegetic element. It is a concept which, by way of Schopenhauer (but not only), might be linked up with the Yoga doctrine of transcendental meditation where the more acute the reflection the more the concrete object that elicited the concentrated thought recedes. Perceptible here are evident effects of a philosophical deposit that would remain with de Chirico throughout his life, though he never had any philosophical claims, strictly speaking, for a plausible interpretation of his painting. The subject of representation, in a word, does not exist in this context because *Revelation* consists precisely in consciousness of the *beyond* (or if we like, of a substance *different* from apparentness) which is imminent but cannot be thought of in the same terms as a concrete object set before us, be this a thing or a person. It is what de Chirico would call, not without a certain wilful ambiguity of meaning, the *Enigma* (somewhat equivalent to Kant’s *noumenon*) which

led him to put forward, in the celebrated *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon* (1910), the metamorphosis of Piazza Santa Croce in Florence and the statue of Dante into images of fixity, and the reduction of semblances of phenomenal reality to a structural quintessence he called “the strange impression of seeing everything for the first time.” In the version recounted by the artist himself this “seeing everything for the first time” was the result of a state of convalescence and thus became the supreme instrument through which man overcomes illness and recovers a mental health that the physical sickness had rendered weak and dull: “I had just recovered from a long and painful intestinal illness and was in a state of morbid sensitivity. All of Nature seemed convalescent [...]”

This idea of *convalescence* is decisive, as the most attentive critics have repeatedly noted. Metaphysical Art, in a word, arrives in concomitance with “de Chirico’s return to physical health”. And there is no doubt about the fact that good health is all-important. Yet behind the proverb, common to all traditions and peoples, there is a very marked idea, sublime and to a certain extent inexpressible, of the *All*. Metaphysical Art is, in fact, the expression of the *All*; in other words, of that which cannot be expressed through single entities, which, if evidenced would constitute its very negation. Or to put it better, Metaphysical Art is artistic perception of the *All*, which painting can express when the artist succeeds in leaving sickness behind him.

Metaphysical Art aligns itself in the artist’s mind as supreme *health of the Spirit*, which, prostrated by the inevitability of sickness and suffering, is unable to recognise its own vocation that consists in the perfect definition of Self. It needs to know and recognise itself but often cannot as it is distracted and distanced from itself by things that overshadow it: Nietzsche and others concentrated on this elementary and decisive truth. Now, if the central thesis, which filters from the very words of the artist creator, concentrates on the idea of the *All* (thus implying condemnation of Cubism and Futurism which in a context of this kind spring from a partial and uselessly analytic vision of painting, a position abhorrent to de Chirico), then it is logical that this idea coincides or may coincide with its opposite: Nothingness. In fact, if the concept of the *All* is taken as necessarily lacking in any specific definition of content, this makes it tantamount to its opposite, the concept of Nothingness which in itself also lacks any specific content. Positive and negative coincide in this sublime meditation and each is the opposite of the other, neither is representable, therefore they lie outside the traditional quality of painting criterion since there cannot be a specific quality of what, conceptually, sums up in itself the very ancient idea of Being which, precisely, is at once All and Nothing. It is interesting to note the practically absolute correspondence between this strange and to some extent puerile doctrine – which would have painting springing from ancestral and impenetrable, and in any case unverifiable events – and Edmund Husserl’s so called phenomenological philosophy. If it is highly improbable that the albeit cultured de Chirico felt inclined to seriously tackle such difficult and complex philosophical themes, it is also true that Husserl formulated his “pure phenomenology”, in some ways extraordinary and unique, over exactly the same years in which de Chirico arrived at the idea of metaphysical painting. And it is indubitable that this idea has in any case an astonishing “speculative” matrix. Without prejudice to the sacrosanct objections of those who do not wholly trust the artist when he states that he is substantially and especially dependent on the Nietzschean viewpoint, we should never lose sight of the

substantial philosophical matrix of the metaphysical idea of painting. This idea certainly depends on suggestive moods through which de Chirico breathed an atmosphere common to his living environment – immersed between Milan, Rome, Florence, Ferrara and Venice – but we must always distinguish between the “sentimental and evocative” origin of metaphysical painting and the “philosophical and strictly speculative” origin. The two “origins” do not coincide, and this simple observation perhaps explains the very long diatribes among experts that began at the inception of this singular form of art and are still going on today. Undoubtedly it was de Chirico himself who encouraged these “oscillations”, since he was the one who spoke about a genesis of metaphysical form from a soft and vague mood of convalescence, while at the same time endorsing the idea that the new [kind of] painting had also sprung from very precise philosophical principles. So at this point it may be wholly legitimate to draw attention forcefully to the correspondence between the doctrines of de Chirico and Husserl. We certainly cannot say that de Chirico, directly or indirectly, knew and studied Husserl’s youthful works which, known only to a limited circle of specialists, were hard to decipher and were not widely circulated. Yet the coincidence is too striking to be left unsaid. Essentially Husserl, developing the epistemological research of the school of German philosophy that dated back to Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, reaffirmed (a hundred years after Hegel’s inquiries) the antique “Greek” matrix of immortal western philosophy with which everyone would have to identify in order to achieve a full maturing of the consciousness of Nations and individuals and open up to the new twentieth century, harbinger of hopes of enormous progress for the human spirit. Husserl’s lofty and often-confused utopianism was certainly no isolated phenomenon on the intellectual scene of the early twentieth century. But the truly remarkable power of his reasoning, seeking the overcoming of a past now inadmissible for the development of the Sciences (he had set out from controversial and daring mathematical studies) was connected, largely unconsciously of course, with the development of de Chirico’s inner torment, immersed in a new dimension of creativity for the universal benefit of men of good will. This sort of “messianic” dimension, which drove many figures active in different fields of knowledge and in politics at the beginning of the twentieth century, should not be ignored.

De Chirico saw himself as promulgator of a new “Word” destined to enlighten minds and regenerate collective consciousness. And this was the same, identical orientation of a great philosopher like Husserl. In other words, in conceiving the idea of metaphysical painting de Chirico put himself forward as a new *Vate* (though not at all in the sense linked with D’Annunzio), a prophet to whom new generations could refer in order to improve the world and themselves, thus marking an actual chapter in the history of humanity. So if we grant that de Chirico knew nothing about Husserl’s philosophical inquiries, it is quite remarkable that the latter was a sort of twin brother as regards to the direction of his thought and work. Essentially, Husserl’s *Phenomenology* consists precisely in that *seeing for the first time* which de Chirico speaks of as a painter on the subject of the advent of Metaphysical Art. It is that dimension of logic and knowledge, which in everyday experience constitutes a heritage common to each one of us. Except that philosophical reflection demonstrates how it is precisely in this satisfaction with the everyday and obvious that the apparently inexplicable limit of our knowledge lies: a limitation which, if not underscored and over-

come, distances us from the truth of knowledge just when we are convinced of being immersed in it. "But how can this be?" we often hear. "It is all clear, simple and evident!" What is there to discover when things are so clear? This is the point where a painter like de Chirico and a philosopher like Husserl meet. And it is truly a meeting at the limits of the absurd, because it is a "putting together" of things which instead would appear to have no point of contact, a feature found more-over precisely in many of de Chirico's crucial metaphysical paintings.

But where this "point of contact" between philosopher and artist may really be found should be better clarified, because it is precisely in this aspect that the decisive question of the whole Metaphysical Art problem lies. At the beginning of the new century Husserl proclaimed the new road. Here is what he says in *General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*:

Pure phenomenology is a new science, far from the natural way of thinking and therefore emerging only in our own times [...] We denote it as a fundamental science of philosophy [...] phenomenology deals with the self and with "consciousness" [...] to neutralise the complex of mental habits dominant to date, with their barriers that limit the horizon of our thought, to grasp in full freedom and set forth in a radically new manner the genuine philosophical problems, accessible thanks only to a broadening of horizon – all this is a tough proposal which cannot be lightened [...] an approach completely different from those which come naturally to us in experience and thought.

What we are suggesting here is that the entreaty formulated by de Chirico with regard to the genetic presuppositions of metaphysical painting is precisely this.

De Chirico, then, well knew how "Sensation" (vague and indeterminable, such as that of a man who comes through an illness, recovers his strength and perceives the world in a new and slightly unexpected way) and "Theory" (precise and detailed in identifying mechanisms of the mind, modes of perception and of empirical and speculative knowledge) may and must be seen as two sides of the same coin, but only when the artist takes the stage. He is an authentic sage, but in the creative act he sets aside that philosophical awareness of which however he can exhaustively demonstrate possession.

In the dechirican view, the artist has global perception of the essence of things, precisely in accordance with that "sentimental reasoning" practiced in the same years, as mentioned above, by a great writer like James Joyce in a series of delicate short stories subsequently published under the title *Dubliners*. Here, and in the later, supreme *Ulysses* which appeared amid a thousand conflicts and polemics in 1922, we perceive the same terms of dechirican creativity, set forth in a unique and incomparable writing project that inextricably mixes the highest philosophical speculation with the most merciless simplification of the everyday and the natural order of existence, extracting a recon-dite essence that draws us into a maelstrom where we may delve into remote hopes of regeneration and pacification of consciousness and enjoy recognition of a language that seems to flow directly from the apparently unfathomable sphere of the Unconscious.

How does one achieve this? How in the first place to be aware of it and ascend to the level of artistic creation which, more than any other human function, can let us *see for the first time*, reveal-

ing us to ourselves? In the *Considerations* article de Chirico, or rather Isabella Far, cites a series of artists who, over the years, have turned an eye in this direction. The precursors in mind are Dürer and Poussin while the contemporaries mentioned are Böcklin, Klinger, Previati and Picasso. In the historiography concerning the “great metaphysician” some of these names are constantly considered, especially Böcklin and Klinger, whereas Previati and Picasso are for the most part not seen as actual precursors of de Chirico. We should however pay heed to these attestations and draw further stimuli for research that deserves more in-depth investigation.

Whilst de Chirico speaks highly of Klinger, he is very hostile, when he gets the chance, towards the great genius of Gustav Klimt. In a famous 1919 “Valori Plastici” article, marvellously written and right on target – *La Galleria d'Arte Moderna a Roma* – he dealt out a fierce and emblematic slating. Here, no one was saved. The museum, says the *Pictor Optimus*, is a chamber of horrors. And then we come to Klimt: “I find myself before a satanic delivery by Klimt: *The Three Ages of Woman*; philosophy of a female medical student down from Warsaw to set up in Berlin.” The “foreign botchers” room leaves him indignant and Klimt is among the ones most flayed and slaughtered by de Chirico’s bad temper. The supreme insult is to charge Klimt’s painting with grotesque evocation of embarrassing situations connected with the practice of medicine. It was 1919, exactly when Longhi had torn de Chirico to pieces with the accusation of sacrificing to an “orthopaedic God”. The insult de Chirico hurled at Klimt turned against him. But how? Because Klimt had actually taken up a position analogous to that of the *Pictor Optimus* precisely at the time when de Chirico conceived metaphysical painting but had achieved diametrically opposed results, which, if endorsed by the *Pictor Optimus*, would have seriously weakened his own proposition. In a word, “health against sickness”, and metaphysical painting was born out of convalescence. So the problem that presented itself to de Chirico’s mind was as follows: if my painting is excellence, Klimt’s must be bungling; otherwise the bungler might have appeared, in his own eyes, to be the great metaphysician himself.

To understand how the idea driving both artists – apparently so distant and incompatible – was at bottom analogous but with antithetical results, we need only examine certain self-images that Klimt wanted to project at the exact time when de Chirico arrived at Metaphysical Art. There is a photograph symptomatic of this situation. It is a fine image, taken on an undefined date but probably in 1910, and can be found in the archives of the Albertina, Vienna. It shows the artist standing in the small garden of his studio in Josefstädtrasse: dressed in an ostentatiously “antique style” work smock with his arms folded, motionless as a Greek column; he is staring ahead but with his intent gaze lost in a distance that goes far beyond the garden. It is the exact spiritual and figurative situation of de Chirico’s immortal painting *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon*. Ten years prior to that date, almost coinciding with the beginning of the twentieth century, Klimt had executed his celebrated *Beethoven Frieze* in the Secession Building, manifesto of an exasperated art, enclosed under the aegis of an abstraction which is instead supercharged with wild and aggressive naturalism, where forces of the most refined and dignified culture seem to struggle against the immediate and uncontrollable impulses of the human being that are still immersed in a state of Nature. And this pointed Klimt in the direction of a morbidity that obsessively mixed the anxiety for deep liberation of the spirit – struggling under the burden of matter – with an underscoring of the “sickness”

inevitably deposited within every living being. Already in the early 1910s Klimt was creating exaggerated works such as *The Virgin* in the Narodni Gallery, Prague. De Chirico might have taken the same direction, whereas he repudiated it precisely on the basis of the principle of a necessary and peremptory recovery from sickness. Klimt was exorcised, and the terrible darts of the great metaphysician qualified (indeed disqualified) him as a poor sick person. Longhi could not have done a greater disservice to the *Pictor Optimus* than enlist him in the ranks of the unsound, afflicted by complex sicknesses that prevent them from seeing the plain reality of things, who think of art as the grotesque and narcissistic projection of an overgrown ego. In Klimt's art there is a "deathlike" idea which stands well with all the Italian D'Annunzism of the time. De Chirico was at the opposite end but he too thought that the new art should descend into the recesses of the not yet apprehended, the not yet understood. He too evinced fear of taking a road never walked, because such a road might lead to risk and ruin. And in spite of the fact that de Chirico rejected all temptation of a "negative" complacency, his precocious arrival at a vision with claims to absolute globality put him face to face with the perturbation and bewilderment of one who, struck by the "right" intuition, is unable to fully understand its consequences.

It is precisely Husserlian perturbation that urges Man towards an actual vortex of thought. But this vortex is the very presupposition of Metaphysical Art. Because Metaphysical Art in any case means "beyond physical things", and if de Chirico identified this term (certainly borrowed from many other literati and writers of his day) he chose it after due consideration. Recovery of health is the logical and declared premise for metaphysical vision, but the threat of illness does not for this reason disappear. Health is life and illness is the antechamber of death. This is the point of the whole matter: the antechamber.

This is Metaphysics in de Chirico's figurative conception, the antechamber understood of course in the metaphysical sense, which is to say Limbo in the Christian credo, a metaphysical "invention" which occupies precisely the unbeliever's horizon of waiting, rooted however in a principle of supreme ethicality. All metaphysical painting is the representation of a "limbo", just as it is seen by the protagonist of *The Dead*, the sublime story that closes Joyce's *Dubliners*. It is the supreme image that distinguishes *death*, terrifying and unrepresentable, from *the netherworld*, imaginable and reassuring for those who have faith in the Spirit as quintessence of the living being, quite aside from individual traditions and religious beliefs. It is the story of Gabriel who, only after many years and under trite everyday circumstances, discovers that his wife Gretta has always lived with the painful and ineradicable memory of a young man who, many years before, had killed himself for the love of her. On hearing the terrible confession the husband does not know what to say except "And what did he die of so young, Gretta? Consumption was it?", bringing the situation back to the "health-sickness" problem. But she answers simply, "I think he died for me" and then recounts the essential points of the old story.

There follows a dramatic and quivering confession at the end of which she falls into a deep sleep. Gabriel looks at her and relives their own life: "He watched her while she slept as though he and she had never lived together as man and wife." He observes the bedroom they are in and begins to reconstruct it mentally as if it were a space never fathomed:

The air of the room chilled his shoulders. He stretched himself cautiously along under the sheets and lay down beside his wife. One by one they were all becoming shades. Better pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither dismally with age. He thought of how she who lay beside him had locked in her heart for so many years that image of her lover's eyes when he had told her that he did not wish to live [...] in the partial darkness he imagined he saw the form of a young man standing under a dripping tree. Other forms were near. His soul had approached that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead. He was conscious of, but could not apprehend, their wayward and flickering existence. His own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world: the solid world itself which these dead had one time reared and lived in was dissolving and dwindling. A few light taps upon the pane made him turn to the window. It had begun to snow again [...]. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.

This is the end of the story and might be put forward as an emblem of the quintessence of de Chirico's metaphysical painting. Like the philosopher Husserl the painter sees, reawakened in convalescence, a threshold of perception which illness had as if solicited him to bring forth but which was restricted to uneasiness and the impossibility of expression. With revived strength this borderline world between fullness of existence and fear of death takes on a mental form which is what he would call Metaphysical Art and which is the visual representation of a hypothetical limbo in painting that is not the terrifying Nothingness of the end but rather the reassuring All recovered from the very ancient idea of a world "beyond the grave", where there is no nullifying of existence but simply a different form thereof: where great spirits roam, where the eternal dimension coincides with the early one of childhood, where there is no difference between "ancient and modern" since represented time does not pass. Indeed, precisely the "pause in time" is suggested by metaphysical images that gradually build up an iconographic armoury, unique and incomparable, a mixture of personal memories and ancestral symbols, of humour and tragedy, of tranquillity and unease. This is why the idea of quality cannot be the same as for a Poussin or a Picasso. The *quality* of Metaphysical Art is rather a reduction to the bone of the laying on of paint. It is a flattening of density in favour of an essential outline. As with the ancient Egyptians or the Etruscans, reconnoitring a possible beyond generates symbols and visions that are not necessarily heartening but they do have the supreme seal of perfection of what can never be experienced in the same terms as terrestrial life.

Metaphysical painting, then, lacks that gloomy if not actually "cursed" yet so seductive element which inevitably derived from many aspects of D'Annunzian culture and is readily found in Klimt. On the contrary, it is a visual form of reassurance and comfort. An epic, as it was for the ancients and for a writer like Joyce. Taken as a whole, the metaphysical pictures are a continuous exploration and description of a universe of symbols welling up from a mind that imagines the dimension of a hypothetical "beyond". This, however, is far closer to Joyce's Kingdom of the Dead at the end of *Dubliners* than to the dimension of rampant Austrian and German civilians heading to a real and terrible death in the abyss of the Great War. De Chirico moves rather in a dimension of Limbo, lord and master of a world where imagination coincides with a hypothesis of "hereafter".

The metaphysical season would not last long but will last forever: because it is inconceivable to interpret de Chirico's development after Metaphysical Art in anything other than a metaphysical key. There is no doubt, however, that he soon felt the need to step out of that magic circle which was destined to be perceived as the domain of dream and supreme tranquillity: as early as the mid 1920s he entered into closer contact with the dynamics of the world around him and wrote a sequence consisting of second, third and fourth "chapters" of that figurative novel which today reads precisely like a collection of visual short stories, but so compact that they may be interpreted either as a fine fairytale or as a solemn treatise on phenomenological philosophy. The result is the same.

Translated by David Smith