

“ARCADES IN THE SUN” GIORGIO DE CHIRICO’S FRENCH POETRY

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That Giorgio de Chirico was an accomplished poet as well as a painter is not widely known. And yet a considerable body of poetry exists that not only parallels the development of his Metaphysical Art but also sheds additional light on his artistic endeavors.¹ Written in both French and Italian, the poems can be divided into three main periods. The first group (n. 1-16) dates from 1911-1915, when the artist resided in Paris and first began to make a name for himself. During this period he frequented avant-garde circles, exhibited at several artistic salons, and soon acquired a dealer (Paul Guillaume). The second group (n. 17-27) belongs to the period 1915-1918, after war had broken out and de Chirico had been drafted into the Italian army. Assigned to a desk job in Ferrara initially, he continued to paint and influenced several Italian artists including Carlo Carrà and Filippo de Pisis.

The third group of poems (n. 28-80) dates largely from 1925-1930, when the artist returned to Paris and eventually married his first wife Raissa (figs. 1-2-3). A number of the poems were written later (n. 81-90) (fig. 4). This period marks de Chirico’s involvement with the French Surrealists, whom he decisively influenced but with whom he ultimately parted ways.

Understandably, perhaps, since de Chirico was living in Paris, the first group of poems was composed entirely in French. Of the works belonging to the first category, however, four were included in the original language publication in 2008 that are actually translations of poems by Arthur Schopenhauer (“Metafisica” n. 7/8, 2008, n. 18-21) presumably by de Chirico himself. One wonders in any case how much the artist really knew about French prosody, which, going back to the 17th century, is highly codified. Everything is prescribed, from the length of the lines to the rules governing elision and hiatus to the kinds of rhyme that are permitted. Nothing is left to chance. Interestingly, none of the remaining sixteen poems are rhymed, which removes one of the potential problems. While there are a few sonic echoes from time to time, these are feeble at best. Although de Chirico juxtaposes “*félicité*” with “*cités*” in “Epode” (n. 22), for example, he makes no attempt to construct a coherent rhyme scheme. A similar sporadic echo occurs in the very first poem *Espoirs (Hopes)*:

The astronomer poets are exuberant.
The day is radiant the public square filled with sunlight.
They are leaning against the veranda.
Music and love. The unbelievably beautiful woman.
I would sacrifice my life for her velvet eyes.

¹ G. de Chirico, *Tutte le poesie. Edite e inedite*, in “Metafisica. Quaderni della Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico” n. 7/8, 2008, pp. 423-507. The complete poems, published in the original French and Italian languages, are numbered 1-108. The first extensive English language translation of de Chirico’s complete French and Italian poetry is published in this periodical.

Antibes

Tronc de pins, pins de poitrine
 Sur le golfe salutaire
 Pins quotidiens
 Pins poiteinaires
 Sur le doux méridien.

Pins polychromes montant en trophée
 de long du tronc de celui qui assis
 Sourit Souanis dans l'antichambre.
 Les coqs ont chanté
 C'est le temps qui se change
 C'est le temps qui chante enchante.
 C'est l'heure indécise on dit qu'on attend
 Quelqu'un, quelque chose, mais si on savait!
 Peut-être aussi que rien ne viendrait
 et figure araise dedans le fauteuil

Tout figure ne pouvant se tenir autrement
 Debout serait fou, impossible, incorrect
 Apôtre gothique ne tient pas debout.
 C'est bien consolant qu'au lieu d'une chlamyde
 Les pins sur ton tronc montent en pyramide
 Le porteur ton tronc ton destin subconscient,
 Voyage inutile, fatigue inconnue
 Pendule qui s'arrête, valise égarée,
 Et dans l'antichambre figure qui attend
 Et porte sur ton tronc la couleur de nos temps

fig. 1 Antibes, (n. 37) ca. 1927-1928, "Tronc de pins, pins de poitrine, Sur le golfe salutaire..." (Pine trunks, chesty pines, / On the salutary gulf)

A painter has painted a huge red smokestack
 That a poet adores like a divinity.
 I remember that night of springtime and cadavers
 The river was carrying gravestones that have disappeared.
 Who still wants to live? Promises are more beautiful.

So many flags are flying from the railroad station
 Provided the clock does not stop
 A government minister is supposed to arrive.
 He is intelligent and mild he is smiling
 He comprehends everything and at night by the glow of a smoking lamp
 While the warrior of stone dozes on the dark public square
 He writes sad passionate love letters.²

Although the second and third lines rhyme, this fact turns out to be completely meaningless. Here and elsewhere in the first group of poems, de Chirico refuses to impose a "foolish consistency" on the final vowels. Interestingly, his refusal to bow to poetic tradition is reflected in his failure to observe several other traditional rules. Paradoxically, although *Espoirs* is the most conventional looking poem in the group, it violates a long list of poetic norms. In particular, the length of the lines is far from uniform, varying between eight and sixteen syllables. Not only are the lines uneven, moreover, but many of them contain an odd number of syllables. French poetry typically employs verses containing eight, ten, and/or twelve syllables. Although this describes a few lines in *Espoirs*, the poem is dominated by verses containing eleven syllables. While the French regard the latter with horror, the hendecasyllable has played a prominent role in Italian poetry since the 13th century, when Dante proclaimed it the most noble of meters. In this instance, at least, de Chirico seems to have been influenced by the Italian model. Since the poem is written in free verse, however, the fact that it differs from traditional French poetry is ultimately ambiguous. Influenced by Apollinaire and other avant-garde poets, who rejected the conventional model, he set out to write poetry that was resolutely modern.

Shortly after inventing Metaphysical Art, therefore, de Chirico began to experiment with Metaphysical Poetry. In contrast to the first paintings, which were executed in Florence in 1910, the first poems date from his arrival in Paris the following year. Inspired by the former, at least initially, they share many of the same images, the same themes, and the same preoccupations. The public square broiling in the midday sun, the factory smokestacks, the flags flying from the railroad station, the mysterious statue – these and other images also occur in many of de Chirico's pictures –. With very few exceptions, the latter were received with widespread incomprehension. As Alessia Abadyem remarks, "[the artist's] existence destabilised and disorientated the majority of people. Few could understand his work".³ Since the paintings appeared to be devoid of meaning, during the next 65 years critics focused largely on what they depicted. As late as 1975, citing the artist

2 Les astronomes poétisants sont bien joyeux / La journée est radieuse la place pleine de soleil. / Sur la véranda ils sont penchés / Musique et amour. La dame trop belle / Je voudrais mourir pour ses yeux de velours. // Un peintre a peint une énorme cheminée rouge / Qu'un poète adore comme une divinité. / J'ai revu cette nuit de printemps et de cadavres / Le fleuve charriait des tombeaux qui ne sont plus. / Qui veut vivre encore? Les promesses sont plus belles. // On a hissé tant de drapeaux sur la gare / Pouvu que l'horloge ne s'arrête pas / Un ministre doit arriver. / Il est intelligent et doux il sourit. / Il comprend tout et la nuit à la lueur d'une lampe fumante / Pendant que le guerrier de pierre dort sur la place obscure / Il écrit des lettres d'amour triste et ardentes.

3 A. Abadyem, *Brief Notes on the Poetry of Giorgio de Chirico*, *ibid.*, pp. 517-518.

himself, Wieland Schmied emphasized the works' materiality and concluded "Giorgio de Chirico himself has discovered some blind symbols that illustrate the blindness of symbols".⁴ And yet, as Paul Guillaume warned as early as 1918, the paintings' apparent opaqueness is deceiving: "Their calm surface conceals abysses that harbor innumerable unsuspected *things*".⁵

Eventually, beginning around 1980, critics began to understand that the paintings are symbolic representations of two forces that, according to the artist, govern the universe. Each of the persons depicted embodies either the Apollonian impulse or its Dionysian counterpart and is descended from a long line of predecessors.⁶ Many of these are individuals associated with the *Risorgimento*, the Renaissance, or Classical antiquity. As I have suggested elsewhere, the Astronomer who appears in a later painting of the same name may be a descendent of Dionysos and Gallileo.⁷ Whether this describes the astronomer poets in *Espoirs* is hard to say. Judging from appearances, the first stanza evokes a lively house party that has spilled over onto the veranda. Not only has the host hired musicians for the occasion, but the guests include members of both sexes who seem to be flirting with each other. De Chirico is particularly struck by a beautiful lady with dark velvet eyes for whom, he confides, he would give his life. Among other things, this suggests that the poem describes an actual gathering. Although it is impossible to prove, the joyous individuals evoked in the first line could very well be de Chirico and his brother.

The second stanza depicts another scene altogether. Juxtaposed against a macabre background, an anonymous poet stands transfixed before a painting of an enormous red smokestack by de Chirico. Although the poet is never identified, he is almost certainly Apollinaire, who was the artist's earliest supporter and his most enthusiastic critic.⁸ Whereas the previous scene takes place during the day, the present activities take place at night. The remainder of the stanza is frankly puzzling. Spring rains appear to have swollen a nearby river which, as a consequence, has flooded a nearby cemetery. As the poet watches corpses and tombstones being washed away, he voices his despair. What is the point of living? For some reason, promises hold more attraction for him than life. By this time, the poem's architecture has begun to become clear. *Espoirs* is constructed around a series of binary oppositions. Like the public square and the huge smokestack, whose sexual symbolism is evident, female is opposed to male, day to night, life to death, hope to despair, and Apollo to Dionysos. Because the square is filled with sunlight it is associated with the Greek sun god. Because the smokestack is obviously phallic, it represents the Greek god of inebriation and ecstasy. Indeed, the phallus figured prominently in seasonal processions in his honor.

This leaves the third stanza, which continues the preceding structure and introduces a historical dimension. The railroad station with its flags and large clock occurs in many of de Chirico's early paintings. Although the

4 W. Schmied, *Giorgio de Chirico*, Musée Marmottan, Paris 1975, pp. 6-7.

5 P. Guillaume, *Allocation à l'occasion de l'exposition Chirico*, discourse delivered on-stage at Paris' Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier during the presentation of nine of the artist's paintings on 3 November 1918. Published for the first time in K. Robinson, *Allocation à l'occasion de l'exposition Chirico. On-stage Presentation of Giorgio de Chirico's Paintings by Paul Guillaume at Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier* in "Metafisica. Quaderni della Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico", n. 7/8, 2008, pp. 383-392.

6 For a detailed discussion of de Chirico's paradigmatic method, see W. Bohn, *The Rise of Surrealism: Cubism, Dada, and the Pursuit of the Marvelous*, SUNY Press, Albany 2002, pp. 73-119.

7 W. Bohn, *Giorgio de Chirico et le portrait de Guillaume Apollinaire*, "Revue des Lettres Modernes", special issue *Guillaume Apollinaire* 22, Paris 2007, pp. 136-137.

8 See W. Bohn, *Guillaume Apollinaire critique de Giorgio de Chirico*, exhibition catalogue *Giorgio de Chirico: La Fabrique des rêves*, edited by J. Munck, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 2009, pp. 80-84.

position of the clock's hands varies from one work to another, it invariably contributes an eerie note to the painting. Rightly or wrongly, a number of critics have concluded that the clock has stopped and the scene has succumbed to a general paralysis. Noting that the big hands of several clocks have nearly completed their revolution, other critics have proposed an apocalyptic interpretation. Life will come to a sudden end not with a bang or a whimper but with the sound of a clock striking the hour. The scenario in *Espoirs* would seem to reflect the first interpretation. As long as the clock does not stop running, the poet confides, paralysis will be averted and the government minister will arrive on the next train.

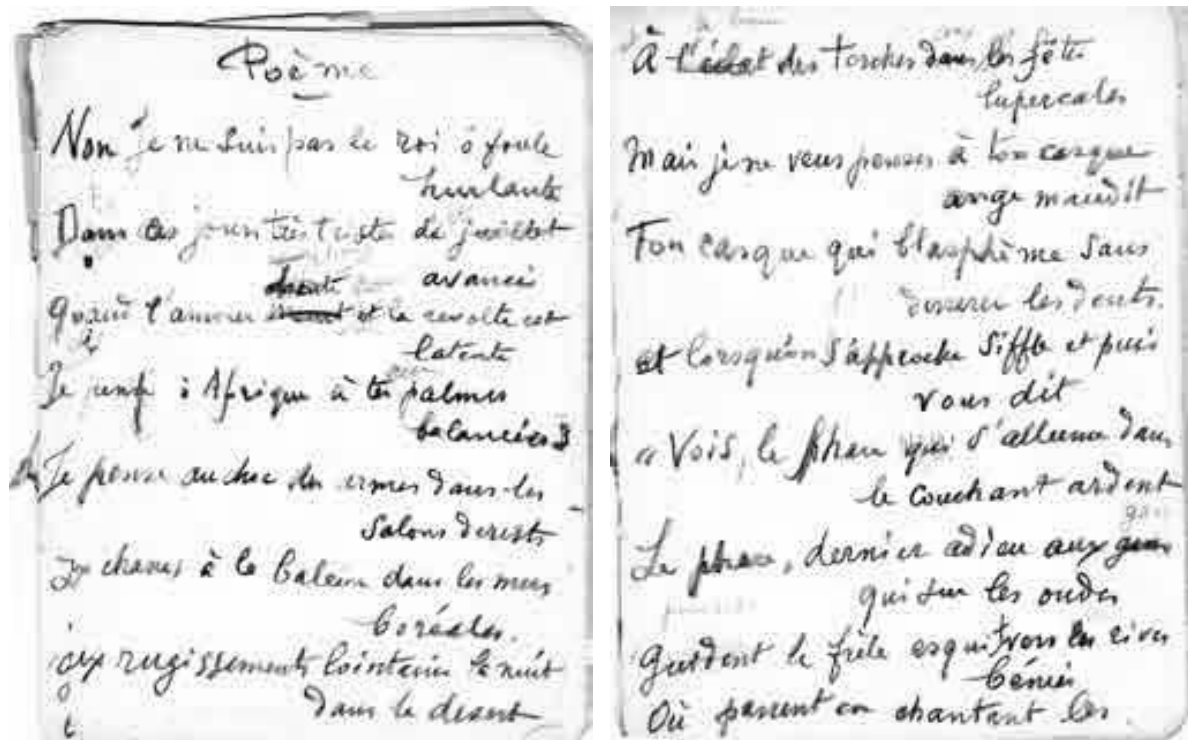
This individual, whom de Chirico hastens to praise, is in fact Vittorio Emanuele's prime minister Count Camillo di Cavour. Together with Napoleon III, Cavour succeeded in creating modern Italy in 1861. In the final line, we see him making plans to unite the country. While both men belong to the artist's pantheon of heroes, Cavour is paired here with the warrior of stone rather than with the French emperor. A glance at Italian history suggests that the statue portrays Giuseppe Garibaldi, who played an important role in the unification of Italy as well. Continuing the structural dichotomy discussed earlier, Cavour embodies the Apollonian impulse and Garibaldi the Dionysian impulse. Unlike the first man, who is governed by logic and reason, the second is impetuous and hot-headed. The fact that the two characters are juxtaposed with each other, like those in the first two stanzas, is far from accidental. Despite their static appearance, they are engaged in an animated dialogue concerning the principles that govern the universe.

Other poems are more personal and portray a de Chirico who suffered from acute intestinal illness, beginning with his father's death in 1905. Entitled *Mélancolie* (n. 9), like several of his paintings, the following poem captures de Chirico at one of his lowest moments:

Weighed down by love and sorrow
my soul drags itself along
like a wounded cat
– Beauty of the tall red smokestacks
Solid smoke.
A train whistles. The wall.
Two artichokes of iron regard me.

I had a goal. The flag has ceased to flap
– Happiness, happiness, I pursue you –
A nice little old man was softly singing
a love song.
The song disappeared in the noise
of the crowd and the machines
And my songs and my tears will also disappear
in your horrible circles o eternity.⁹

9 *Lowrde d'amour et de chagrin / mon âme se traîne / comme une chatte blessée / - Beauté des longues cheminées rouges / Fumée solide. / Un train siffle. Le mur. / Deux artichauts de fer me regardent. / J'avais un but. Le pavillon ne claque plus / - Bonheur, bonheur, je te cherche - / Un petit viellard si doux chantait doucement / une chanson d'amour. / Le chant se perdit dans le bruit / de la foule et des machines / Et mes chants et mes larmes se perdront aussi / dans tes cercles horribles / ô éternité.*



figs. 2a, 2b, 2c Poème (n. 36) ca 1925-1930, “Non je ne suis pas le roi ô foule hurlante / En jours très tristes d’été avancé...” (No I am not the king oh screaming crowd / In the mournful days of / the middle of summer...)

Like the preceding text, *Mélancolie* is written in free verse. Although the lines are shorter, they are unrhymed and vary in length from four to thirteen syllables. Somewhat unexpectedly, there are several baudelairien echoes that recall the author of *Les Fleurs du mal*. The gruesome cat simile at the beginning reminds one of the four Spleen poems in particular. Judging from the first line, de Chirico’s melancholy stems from what the French call “une déception sentimentale” – a disappointment in love. As before, in any case, it helps to know the poem contains several references to his paintings. This time there are several factory chimneys, which appear to belch clouds of heavy black smoke. In the distance, the little train that appears in so many of his pictures whistles mournfully, separated from the spectator by a long brick wall. Since artichokes appear in several of de Chirico’s paintings, apparently symbolizing virility, their presence makes a certain amount of sense. However, the fact that they are made of iron comes as a complete surprise. Except for the flag that has ceased to flap, the images in the second stanza are not related to the paintings. The second line is basically ambiguous. The words could be uttered either by de Chirico or by the little old man singing a love song. Like the latter tune, the poet complains, his own songs and tears will disappear into the voracious maw of eternity. Nothing is permanent, nothing lasts for ever.

If *Mélancolie* portrays de Chirico in a despondent mood, he is overcome with joy in *Le Chant de la gare* (*The Song of the Railroad Station*, n. 10):

“Little station, little station, how much happiness I owe you. You look in every direction, to the right and also to the left. Your flags flap furiously, why suffer? Let us pass, aren’t we already *quite numerous*? With white chalk or black coal let us trace happiness and its enigma;



the enigma and its affirmation. Beneath the arcades there are some windows; at each window an eye regards us and voices call to us from *behind*. The station's happiness comes to us and leaves transfigured. Little station, little station, you are a divine toy. What distracted Zeus forgot you in this public plaza so square and so yellow, near this spurting fountain so limpid and so troubling? All the little flags flap together beneath the luminous sky's vertigo. Behind the walls life rolls on like a catastrophe. What does all that matter to you?... Little station, little station, how much happiness I owe you."¹⁰

Conceived as a poem in prose, this delightful composition focuses on one of de Chirico's favorite motifs: the railroad station. Although the title suggests that the song will be sung *by* the station, one soon

discovers that it is *about* the station. Technically, since de Chirico addresses the latter directly, the whole poem qualifies as a rhetorical apostrophe. Besides the flags flapping gaily in the breeze, which have been encountered previously, the list of motifs borrowed from the paintings includes the public square, the arcades, and the spurting fountain. Although some of de Chirico's sun-filled squares are brown, the vast majority are a rich yellow colour like the one in the poem. As far as one can tell, the weather appears to be extremely hot. Baking in the afternoon sun, the ground seems either to be bare or to be covered with sand. Fortunately, the fountain provides a welcome relief from the scene's aridity. Bordering the square on at least two sides, a series of rounded arcades provide an equally welcome refuge from the sun.

If there is a single key to the poem, it is contained in the word "enigma". On the one hand, de Chirico is fascinated with the concept of happiness, which eludes so many people. Where does it come from, and what does it consist of? These are the implicit questions that underlie the poem. On the other hand, the scene that it depicts is rather mysterious. Who are the people peering through the windows under the arcade, one wonders, and why are they calling to us? Why is the life they lead behind the walls catastrophic? These questions and others are never answered. The ultimate enigma, finally, is constituted by the poem itself, which illustrates one half of the Apollonian/Dionysian dichotomy. The two impulses do not always exist side by side in de Chirico's works. Often, as in the present poem, he chooses to explore a single side of the dichotomy. That the composition is dominated by the public square and the arcades, both of which are

10 *Petite gare, petite gare, quel bonheur je te dois. Tu regardes de tous les côtés, à droite, à gauche et par derrière aussi. Tes étendards claquent éperdument, pourquoi souffrir? Laissons passer, ne sommes-nous pas déjà assez nombreux? Traçons avec la blanche craie ou le noir charbon le bonheur et son énigme; l'énigme et son affirmation. Sous les portiques il y a des fenêtres; à chaque fenêtre un oeil nous regarde et derrière des voix nous appellent. C'est à nous qu'il vient, le bonheur de la gare, c'est de nous qu'il sort transfiguré. Petite gare, petite gare, tu es un jouet divin. Quel Zeus distrait t'a oublié sur cette place si carrée et si jaune, près de ce jet d'eau si limpide et si troublant? Tous tes petits drapeaux claquent à la fois sous le vertige du ciel lumineux. Derrière des murs la vie roule comme une catastrophe. Que t'importe à toi de tout cela?... Petite gare, petite gare, quel bonheur je te dois.*

female symbols, alerts us to the presence of Apollo, who is the poem's titular guardian. The fact that the square is filled with sunshine reinforces this impression. Interestingly, despite the anxiety that pervades the work from beginning to end, the little station is happy, carefree and self-sufficient. It is neither an Apollonian nor a Dionysian symbol – it just is. This, de Chirico implies, is the secret of happiness.

Composed in Ferrara, the second group of poems is written entirely in Italian and thus exceeds the purview of the present article.¹¹ Composed in Paris, the third group consists of 51 French poems and one poem written in Italian, *Vale Lutetia* (n. 28). However, *Prière du matin du vrai peintre* (n. 88) is a translation of one of the Italian compositions, and *Rêve* (n. 29) is not really a poem at all. Published in *La Révolution Surréaliste* in December 1924, it is a *récit de rêve* (“dream transcription”). Intended to illustrate the mysterious workings of the unconscious, it was accompanied by four other dreams recorded by André Breton and Renée Gauthier.

By the time World War I had ended everyone was thoroughly exhausted. The experience had been much worse than anyone had ever imagined, and people just wanted to get on with their lives. Although the Futurists, the Dadaists, and the Expressionists were still active, few other members of the European avant-garde felt like resuming the feverish experimentation that characterised the *avant-guerre*. Following a widespread call for a Return to Order, they took stock of the situation and consolidated their artistic gains.¹² While Picasso began to cultivate a classical style, de Chirico developed an interest in Renaissance art and began to paint pictures that were realistic. Thereafter, for the rest of his life, he alternated between the two styles: realistic and Metaphysical. Not surprisingly, his poetry underwent a similar change. Abandoning his earlier dichotomy, he adopted a style that was more personal and more traditional. Not only do most of his subsequent poems rhyme, for example, but most of them strive to employ a uniform line length. Although he prefers alternating rhymes in general, he employs several other schemes as well. While the count varies from text to text, *Poème* (n. 47) employs hendecasyllables, *Prière* (No. 56) decasyllables, *Bucolique provinciale* (n. 57) seven-syllable lines, and *Révélations et prophétie* (No. 60) octosyllables:

As Agamemnon's steed
halts pensive before the wave
You fair Lord at the Parthenon
Adult with a piercing gaze
Continue to wait sweet Sea for the reward
To arrive from on high
Wait for the white herald on the tower
To announce to the kings what you are thinking.
Fear neither me nor my anger
For the years have passed quickly
In the next quarter of our era

11 An Italian poem entitled *Epodo* (2008 n. 28) is accompanied by a French version and the rough draft of that version (2008 n. 29A e B). Although it is indicated that the first poem is a translation of the second (see *Tutte le poesie. Edite e inedite, cit.*, footnote 32 p. 433) the fact that the latter was later incorporated into *Salve Lutetia* (n. 31) suggests that the reverse is true. The poet wrote *Epodo* in Ferrara in 1917 and translated it into French when he returned to Paris in the 1920s.

12 The term was apparently suggested by a book of essays Jean Cocteau published in 1926 entitled *Le Rappel à l'ordre*.

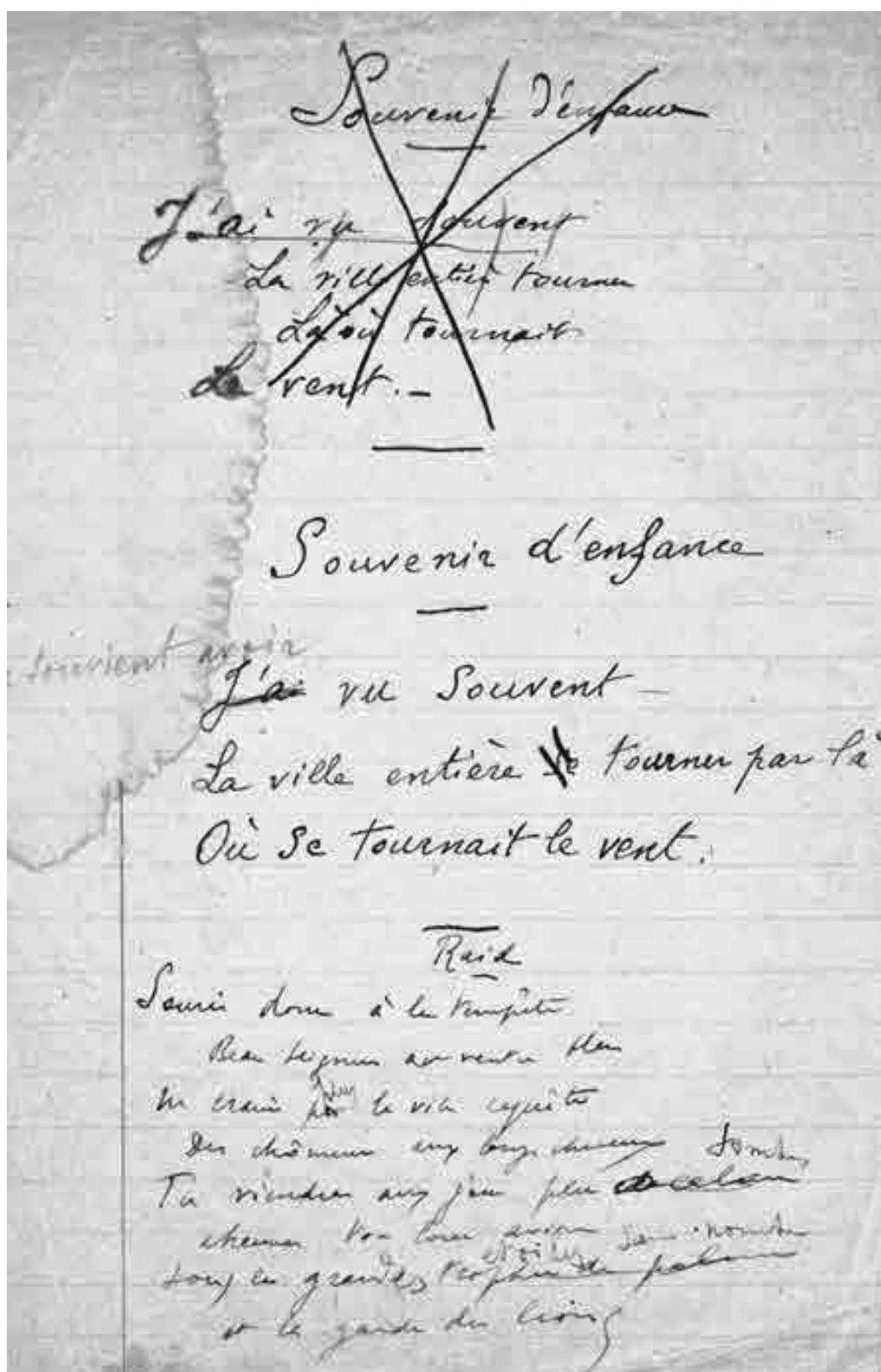


fig. 3 Souvenir d'enfance, (n. 78) ca 1925-1929, "Il me souvient avoir vu souvent / La ville entière par là / Où se tournait le vent." (I recall having often seen / The whole town whirling around / There where the wind was whirling around.)

The joy of youth will grow tired
 Then more alone but more modest
 you will be able to read my heart
 and part toward that ancient white city
 in quest of your fortune.¹³

Technically the poem is surprisingly good. With one exception (“*haut*” / “*héraut*”) the rhymes are all valid, which means the endings share at least two phonemes. Even more surprisingly, the poem observes the requisite alternance between masculine and feminine rhymes – between those that end in a silent “e” and those that do not. The poet slips up at one point and follows “*penses*” with “*colère*”. Unfortunately, his twisted syntax and irregular punctuation make it difficult to tell who is doing what and why. The problem is compounded by the short lines, which fail to provide enough room to maneuver. Significantly, the French tragedians insisted on using a twelve syllable line.

Despite the Homeric atmosphere that suffuses the poem, it does not seem describe a specific event. Agamemnon, to be sure, was the most powerful ruler in Greece. After Paris seduced his sister-in-law Helen and absconded with her to Troy, he was chosen to be the commander-in-chief of the army sent to bring her back. De Chirico portrays him as the Greeks prepare to depart, gazing out to sea and thinking about the future battle. Described as a fair Lord with a piercing gaze, Agamemnon has previously visited the Parthenon in order to receive Athena’s blessings. While the speaker himself is never identified, he cautions the sea and Agamemnon to be patient. The former must wait until the wind picks up to propel the Greek ships, the latter until a herald can convey his orders to his allies. Judging from the rest of the poem, the speaker must almost certainly be Zeus, who promises not to harm the commander-in-chief and his men. On the contrary, he confides, after the war is over and the troops are finally exhausted Agamemnon will learn his innermost thoughts and will join him in heaven.

A large number of the poems in the third group consist of only a few lines. Although it is devoted to a Homeric hero, for example, *Odysseüs* (n. 76) resembles an epigram more than an epic:

The petty officers run toward the Sirens,
 Charming Ulysses, what do you want with me?...
 See these athletes standing in the arena
 Whose only armor is their virtue.¹⁴

Theoretically inspired by *The Odyssey*, the first two lines are puzzling to say the least. Unlike the Homeric epic, which recounts how Ulysses stuffed his sailors’ ears with wax to escape the Sirens’ deadly song, the sailors in the poem rush toward them as if they were bathing beauties. The last two lines introduce a different subject altogether. The naked gladiators have nothing to do with Ulysses but are borrowed from de Chirico’s paintings and drawings. Rather than construct a coherent narrative, he simply evokes two of his favorite themes.

13 *Comme le coursier d'Agamemnon / s'arrête pensif devant la vague / Toi beau Seigneur au Parthenon / Adulte sans un regard vague / Attends toujours que du plus haut / T'arrive Mer douce la récompense / que sur la tour le blanc héraut / annonce au rois ce que tu penses. / Ne craint ni moi ni ma colère / Car les années sont vite passées / Dans l'autre quart de notre ère / La joie des jeunes sera laissée / Alors plus seul mais plus pudique / tu pourras lire dedans mon coeur / et vers cette blanche cité antique / partir in quête de ton bonheur.*

14 *Les contremaitres courent aux sirènes, / Charmant Ulysse, que me veux-tu?... / Vois ces athlètes debout dans l'arène / Qui n'ont pour cuirasse que leur vertu.*

Some of the more rewarding texts from this period echo some of the Surrealists' preoccupations. Like André Breton and his colleagues, who were interested in unconscious processes, de Chirico had long been fascinated by dreams. Indeed, Metaphysical Art was deeply indebted to dreaming and to its numerous implications. During his first sojourn in Paris, for example, de Chirico recorded the following thoughts: "I believe, and perhaps even have faith, that as the sight of someone in a dream is proof of his metaphysical reality, from a certain point of view, so a sense of revelation is proof of the metaphysical reality of certain chance occurrences that we experience from time to time".¹⁵

These remarks help to understand a prose poem de Chirico composed during his second sojourn in Paris entitled *Salve Lutetia* (n. 31). While most of the text is devoted to praising the French capital, toward the end he recounts several miracles he experienced, including the following:

"At dawn one morning last spring, following a night of insomnia, I took the first subway train at the Kléber station in order to get to Montparnasse, to the rue Campagne-Première. Just when the train was emerging onto the bridge over the Seine, I perceived a splendid vessel down below that partly resembled a galley, a barge, a plow, and an airplane; the spirit of Neptune, Ceres, Aeolus, and Peneus seemed to be concentrated in this magnificent vessel, which was simultaneously marine, terrestrial, aerial, and fluvial. Jason was standing at the bow whom I immediately recognized by his majestic beard and especially by the royal manner with which he leaned on his lance, emphasizing the exaggerated curve of his right haunch where the pleats of his *chlamys* descended in stylized lines. At the same time, a mysterious individual sitting near me and who disappeared from view several moments later, like those that one encounters in dreams, whispered to me 'They spent the night in the Trocadero museum; they slept there without the guards knowing'. But I focused my attention elsewhere, for the vessel had already left the river and was skimming over the tops of the buildings lining the quay; unfortunately the train was going too fast, then faster, I just had the time to see the strange boat veer toward the southeast, toward the Ecole Militaire, and then disappear."¹⁶

What de Chirico actually witnessed, he explains in the preceding paragraph, was the departure of the Argonauts, who were headed to Colchis to obtain the Golden Fleece. The artist was particularly fond of this myth, which he illustrated in a number of his paintings. Since Jason and his crew departed from Volos, where de Chirico and his brother grew up, the artist was particularly fond of this myth. Indeed they both identified with the Argonauts as long as they lived. Unexpectedly, although Colchis is sixteen hundred miles in the

15 G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1 (1911-1945). Romanzi e Scritti critici e teorici*, edited by A. Cortellessa, Bompiani, Milan 2008, p. 600.

16 *A l'aube d'un matin du printemps dernier, j'avais pris, après une nuit d'insomnie, le premier métro à la station Kléber pour me rendre à Montparnasse, à la rue Campagne-Première. Juste au moment où le train débouchait sur le pont de la Seine, j'aperçus en bas un vaisseau splendide qui avait quelque chose entre la galère, la péniche, la charrue et l'avion; l'esprit de Neptune, de Cérès, d'Eole et du Pénéé me parurent concentrés dans ce vaisseau magnifique, à la fois marin, terrestre, aérien et fluvial. Sur la proue se tenait Jason que je reconnus tout de suite à sa barbe majestueuse et surtout à la façon vraiment royale dont il s'appuyait sur sa lance, faisant ressortir le courbe exagérée de sa banche droit où les plis de la chlamyde retombaient en lignes stylisées. Au même moment un individu mystérieux, assis auprès de moi et que je perdis de vue quelques instants après, comme ceux qu'on entend en rêve, me chuchota: "Ils ont passé la nuit dans le Trocadéro; c'est là qu'ils ont dormi à l'insu des gardiens." Mais moi je regardai de tous mes yeux, car déjà le vaisseau avait quitté les eaux du fleuve et rasait les toits des immeubles qui longent le quai; malheureusement le métro filait trop vite, plus vite, j'eus encore le temps de voir l'étrange navire virer vers le sud-est, du côté de l'Ecole Militaire, et puis disparaître.*

Hommage

Le gant tombé de ^{ta} main très pure
 Je porterai, ô femme, là bas, très loin,
 Aux fords solitaires d'une mer mystérieuse,
~~Le~~ ^{entre} deux trépieds sévères où brûlent
 Un encens éternel
 Le dresse ^{tout blanc} un autel;
 Sur cet autel, ô femme, je poserai en tremblant
 Le gant sacré
 Alors ^{par} la grande plaine amère
~~de~~ ^{des} flotteront des flots ^{jusqu'à l'horizon lointain} et encore des flots,
^{qui} ~~de~~ ^{jour et nuit} ~~des~~ pieds de ~~l'autel~~ ^{des roses} ~~et~~ ^{et} sans nombre,
 deversant ~~des~~ roses, ~~et~~ sans nombre,
 et ~~comme~~ offrande au sacré.
~~Le~~ ~~gant~~ ~~de~~ ~~ta~~ ~~main~~ ~~très~~ ~~belle~~
^{aux pieds de l'autel}
 jour et nuit, les flots incessants couleront des roses
~~de~~ ~~vers~~ ~~et~~ ~~encore~~ ~~des~~ ~~roses~~, ^{des roses} sans nombre
~~de~~ ~~vers~~ ~~et~~ ~~encore~~ ~~des~~ ~~roses~~.

fig. 4 Hommage, (n. 85) Florence February 1933, "Le gant tombé de ta main trop belle / je porterai, ô femme, dans la nuit du désert..." (The glove fallen from your exquisite hand / I will carry it, O woman, in the desert night...)

opposite direction, the Argonauts in the poem elect to leave from Paris. Adding to the confusion, thousands of years have elapsed since Jason originally agreed to undertake this mission. He and his fifty companions are caught in a space-time warp where bronze-age triremes and modern subway trains exist side by side. Perhaps this explains why the vessel looks so unusual. Part boat, part agricultural implement, and part airplane, it was fashioned by "all-seeing Argus" (whence the vessel's name). Perhaps the fact that Argus had a hundred eyes was responsible for some of the confusion. Since the vessel inhabits four different realms, it is protected by the appropriate god for each one. Neptune has dominion over the sea, Ceres over the earth, Aeolus over the wind, and Peneus over the rivers.

All of a sudden, a mysterious individual materialises out of nowhere, informs de Chirico that the Argonauts spent the night in the Trocadero museum (devoted to anthropology), and then disappears. As if this were not astonishing enough, the Argo suddenly rises into the air and flies off toward the Ecole Militaire! If surprise played a key role for the Surrealists, it played an equally important role in de Chirico's works. Indeed, the artist is commonly regarded as the father of Surrealist painting. Inspired by Nietzsche's comment that the creation of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* "surprised" him, he made it a cornerstone of his aesthetics. The above episode recalls a similar event in *Beneath the Room Where He is Sleeping*, where a god suddenly appears from nowhere. It also recalls a passage from de Chirico's novel *Hebdomeros* (1929):

"And we know what it means to have that daemon constantly snickering at our side; you are far from town ...you are seated on a bench ...you think you are free and at peace, and suddenly you realise that you are not alone; *someone* is sitting on your bench [...]"¹⁷

In the novel, this mysterious individual turns out to be Dionysos, who appears in the guise of Napoleon III. Perhaps something similar takes place in *Salve Lutetia*. Unfortunately, in the absence of further clues, the mysterious visitor and the reasons for his appearance remain an enigma.

¹⁷ G. de Chirico, *Hebdomeros*, English translation, The Four Seasons Book Society, New York 1966. p. 89.