

## THE ENIGMA OF A SENTENCE: TRANSLATING GIORGIO DE CHIRICO'S ITALIAN POETRY

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A Giorgio de Chirico sentence is a magical diorama whose glass front or curtain we can pass through to enter a raucous three-dimensional space in which personal detritus sits beside figures from the long past, the surreal machines of contemporary industry, and “harbinger ghosts” of what is yet to come. An ancient American warrior god might suddenly appear on a sombre and empty European street at high noon prophesying the future. How is one to interpret, to encounter, to translate these scenes when what holds their disparate figures together is no familiar conception of order or narrative? Where do we find ourselves inside a de Chirico sentence?

One significant challenge I faced in translating de Chirico's poems is the fact that no narrative or rhetorical context supports, for example, my articulation of a giant papier-mâché pear or pike raised on iron poles: these objects are not obviously tethered to the long distance packet-boats and pepper trees that precede them. The ability to enter a writer's scene is an important first step toward powerfully rendering it in another language; but how to envision “terrible golden nails” in relation to a “big zinc coloured glove” as they both swing from the door of a city shop (“*Il guantone di zinco colorito, dale terribili unghie dorate, altalenato sulla porta della bottega*”)? Can one recreate the *particular* strangeness of another's language, opening through translation a new and necessarily different physical space on the flat page?

For some objects in the poems – artichokes, smoke stacks, lengthening shadows, those statues – de Chirico's paintings offer a kind of a visual lexicon providing a satisfying rush of recognition, confirmation that I have found my coordinates in the world of the artist's imagination. In other instances (say, in “the packet-boat café” where “they bore in triumph the president in alpaca”), only my intuition suggests that “the immense museum of strangeness”<sup>1</sup> I wander through is truly de Chirico's own.

As Willard Bohn points out in his essay in this volume, de Chirico's paintings have also posed similar difficulties of navigation and interpretation. Exploring 1914's *The Song of Love*, art historian Emily Braun presents this situation with a simile that makes recourse to grammar: “The other familiar items have been rent from any logical space and time and rendered strange, like words cast out from the ordered syntax of a sentence”.<sup>2</sup> Figurative with respect to the paintings, Braun's words could be a literal description of de Chirico's poems, whose sentences do not hew to syntactical conventions, but, instead, make meaning visceral through grammar's manipulation.

Consider the lines from the 1917 poem *Canzone* (n. 18), “*Non più rotti gli ormeggi sui mari / il kajak vogherà magnetici*”, – which I rendered, “The sea moorings no longer broken / magnetic the kayak will row” –

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<sup>1</sup> Manuscript from the collection of Paul Éluard, translated by Louise Bourgeois and Robert Goldwater. Published in *Hebdomeros*, translated by John Ashbery, Exact Change, Cambridge 1992, p. 186.

<sup>2</sup> Braun, Emily. *De Chirico: The Song of Love*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York 2014, p. 7.



G. de Chirico,  
manuscript of the poem  
*Sadness* (n. 86) with  
a sketch of a lakeside  
landscape, ca. 1938.

where the masculine adjective “magnetic” is literally unmoored from its referent (whether “*ormeggi*” [moorings] or “*mari*” [seas]) on the previous line. De Chirico’s syntax performs its sense: here, the unmooring. In English, where an adjective’s placement determines what it qualifies, I had to find a solution that would capture de Chirico’s spirit of play, his floating magnetism, but not overtly change the potential meaning (making, for example, “magnetic” a de facto adverbial description of rowing by retaining its position at the end of the line) or obliterate meaning entirely. Frequently, as in this example, de Chirico uses enjambment to heighten the tension between line and sentence. It is the poetic equivalent of inviting someone for a walk and planting a surprise around the corner – which could be, of course, a description of de Chirico’s aesthetic of sudden sightings, visions, revelations. Becoming a poet, he has written, means, in part, “know[ing] what echoes [your] songs awaken”.<sup>3</sup> The translator, then, must enter this non-existent space of sound and be attentive to reverberations in a new language.

De Chirico’s Italian writings don’t just push against the conventions and limits of writing in Italian. As the artist lived between languages, so do his poems. (De Chirico was fluent in Italian, French, German, and modern Greek, and had some knowledge of English.) In *Frammento* (n. 19), it is Latin: “*Il portinaio cieco – ad limina custos – insegna allo scolaro di gesso / l’agebra delle mie nostalgie*” (“The blind doorman – *ad limina custos* – teaches the plaster disciple / the algebra of my longings”). In *Viaggio* (n. 20), a French phrase quietly interrupts the speaker’s nostalgic musing: “*Sul marciapiede bianco di polvere e di freddo, / Etrange jouet, della mia già lontana / Infanzia*” (“On the sidewalk white with dust and cold, / *Etrange jouet* of my already far-off / Childhood”).

<sup>3</sup> Éluard manuscript, tr. Mark Polizzotti, p. 178.

These words in French, so subtly interjected, carry some of the particular texture of their strangeness as well as the felt experience of their distance from the “now” of the poem. Once more, de Chirico’s word choices perform their significance. For this reason, I have carried all non-Italian words and phrases directly over into the English of my translations, choosing to retain the meanings suggested not through logic, but through the textual richness, the various echoes, of the poems.

At times, individual words become the sites of de Chirico’s juxtapositions and collisions. The invented word “cauciugantato,” for example, brings together “caucciù”, or synthetic rubber, with “*guantato*”, or gloved, to render something appropriately tight and airless, which I have translated without space or hyphen as “rubbergloved”. Even more challenging and exciting is his formulation of the “*avanticittà*”, which appears in both *Frammento* and the longer prose piece *Vale Lutetia* (n. 28). In Italian, “*avanti*” suggests both a spatial and a temporal formulation – it is forward, ahead, before. What de Chirico calls the “*avanticittà*” might be the land surrounding the city, its outskirts, that which lies farther ahead. His work, even with its apparently clean lines of perspective, manipulates space as it does grammar. Instead of reducing this provocative formulation to one easily digested and overlooked location, I worked, above all, to remain true to both its music and its strangeness, translating “*avanticittà*” into English as the avant-city. My choice, as all choices of translation inevitably do, brings a cascade of other resonances. English speakers, in particular those invested in arts and culture, are most familiar with “*avant*” from the French “*avant-garde*”; and so the avant-city wraps de Chirico’s own interests of language play and artistic play more tightly around its invocation.

De Chirico placed enormous value in what he called the “enigma” – a word that shows up again and again across his writings and as the title of numerous paintings, where it modifies things as wide ranging as an autumn afternoon, the oracle, and the world. Articulating his ideal of artistic practice, he asserted, “Above all a great sensitivity is needed. One must picture everything in the world as an enigma, not only the great questions one has always asked oneself [...] But rather to understand the enigma of things generally considered insignificant”.<sup>4</sup> It is this attention to the seemingly insignificant that I kept most urgently in my mind throughout the process of translating. What is more ordinary than the syntactical machinations of a sentence? At the same time – as de Chirico’s experiments in language so palpably show us – what has more dislocating, strange power?

It is true that the artist’s pictorial images and poetic images share a good deal, especially in terms of what we might call their content (those afore-mentioned artichokes and smokestacks). Though obviously related, the methods and materials of their creation, their magic, differ. “Works of art are not mirrors of the world,” Keala Jewell reminds us in her monograph on the de Chirico brothers and the politics of Modernism.<sup>5</sup> Each discipline and genre uses the tools at its disposal to provoke and invoke meanings, relations, the echoes of songs, ideas, and memories. Perspective and grammar, the choice of words and the texture of paints. De Chirico understood his own movement between forms, as he did his movement between the “real” world and the world of art, through the metaphor of translation. “I became aware”, he recalls, “that there is a multitude of strange, unknown, solitary things which can be *translated* into painting”.<sup>6</sup> And so, I meet the artist in a kindred act of translation, working to make three-dimensional the enigma of his sentences.

4 Éluard manuscript, tr. Bourgeois and Goldwater, *cit.*, pp. 185-186.

5 Jewell, Keala. *Art of Enigma: The de Chirico Brothers and the Politics of Modernism*. University Park, Penn State U P, 2004, p. 47.

6 Éluard manuscript, tr. Bourgeois and Goldwater, p. 185.