

GIORGIO DE CHIRICO, APOLLINAIRE AND METAPHYSICAL PORTRAITURE

by Willard Bohn

Arriving in Paris in July 1911, Giorgio de Chirico exhibited three paintings at the Salon d'Automne the following year. While the general public paid little attention to him, he managed to attract the interest of Guillaume Apollinaire and Pablo Picasso. Writing in "Paris-Journal" two years later, Apollinaire confided: "C'est en 1912 que j'ai eu l'occasion de dire à quelques jeunes peintres comme Chagall, comme G. de Chirico: 'Allez de l'avant! Vous avez un talent qui vous désigne à l'attention!'" (In 1912 I happened to tell a few young painters, such as Chagall and G. de Chirico, 'Go ahead! You have a talent that is destined to attract attention!').¹ Toward the end of the same year, convinced more than ever of de Chirico's artistic talent, he persuaded Paul Guillaume to include his works in the gallery he was opening. Between 1912, when he first met the artist, and 1918, when he succumbed to the Spanish flu, Apollinaire was de Chirico's staunchest defender and his most enthusiastic admirer.²

As one would expect, de Chirico was extremely grateful for all the advice and publicity he received from Apollinaire. Writing to the latter toward the end of January 1914, he confided: "L'intérêt et la profonde compréhension que vous avez pour ce que je fais m'encouragent sur mille et un chemins et m'ouvrent beaucoup d'horizons" (The interest and the profound comprehension that you have for what I am doing encourage me in a thousand and one ways and open a great many new paths).³ Interestingly, the same letter reveals that Apollinaire had previously received several paintings from de Chirico. These probably did not include the *Portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire* (fig. 1), now in the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris, which he seems to have acquired later. Learning that Apollinaire was planning to publish a volume of poetry "prochainement" ("in the near future"), the artist asked him, in return, to dedicate one of the poems to him. Since Apollinaire had published *Alcools* less than a year before, one wonders what he could have had in mind. Apart from de Chirico's letter, no trace remains of this intriguing project. When *Calligrammes* was published four years later, however, it contained a poem dedicated to de Chirico entitled *Océan de terre* (Ocean of Earth).

¹ G. Apollinaire, *Nouveaux Peintres*, "Paris-Journal", 14 July 1914. Repr. in Guillaume Apollinaire, *Œuvres en prose complètes*, ed. Pierre Caizergues and Michel Décaudin, Gallimard, Paris 1991, vol. II, p. 824.

² See W. Bohn, *Guillaume Apollinaire critique de Giorgio de Chirico*, in *Giorgio de Chirico - La Fabrique des rêves*, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 2009, pp. 80-84.

³ G. de Chirico, *Letters by Giorgio de Chirico to Guillaume Apollinaire, Paris-Ferrara 1914-1916*, in "Metafisica. Quaderni della Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico", n. 7/8, 2008, p. 611. Based on a tiny portion of this letter, communicated to me years ago by Apollinaire's nephew, I mistakenly dated it July 1914 previously.



fig. 1 G. de Chirico, *Portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire*, 1914, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

Centered around a single mysterious figure, the *Portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire* belongs to a larger group of works that employ some of the same iconography. These include *The Torment of the Poet*, *The Destiny of the Poet*, *The Nostalgia of the Poet* (previously called *The Dream of the Poet*), and *The Departure of the Poet*. Since several of these contain de Chirico's very first mannequins, which appeared in May or June 1914, the *Portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire* was probably painted a few months before. Although the portrait is obviously related to the works listed above, it differs from them in one crucial respect. Instead of the mysterious Poet, who haunts many of de Chirico's works, it depicts an actual human being. Or at least that has always been the assumption, for the title assures us that the picture portrays Apollinaire. It is simply amazing, nevertheless, how little is known about this work.

One wonders, for example, if Apollinaire sat for his portrait in person. And, if so, how many sessions were required. And why they were not noted in his appointment book. Or whether de Chirico painted his portrait from photographs. Or simply from memory. Most of all, one wonders how the painting could depict the French poet at all, since he does not seem to be present anywhere.

Despite repeated claims to the contrary by de Chirico, his brother Alberto Savinio, and the poet himself, it has become increasingly clear that the *Portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire* does not actually portray Apollinaire. A conspiracy of silence and misinformation has surrounded the portrait from the beginning. The three conspirators did not seek to deceive the public so much as to amuse themselves at the public's expense. Conceived originally as a private joke, the work was not actually exhibited until twenty years later. The idea of transforming the original painting into his own portrait filled Apollinaire with delight. All he had to do was to give it a new title; there was no need to modify the work itself. During the war, the three friends engaged in a similar mystification after the poet suffered a head wound at the front. Pointing to the silhouette in the background with a circle on its temple, they claimed that de Chirico possessed prophetic powers. However, the fact that the original painting was simply retitled explains why it contains no trace of Apollinaire. Despite certain superficial similarities, neither the marble bust in the foreground nor the silhouette hiding behind the column resemble him.⁴ Instead of living people, moreover, the artist preferred to depict historical figures like Napoleon III, mythological characters like Ariadne, and abstract figures such as the

⁴ Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco has argued repeatedly that the silhouette, and thus the portrait, depicts Apollinaire. See, for example, M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, *L'opera completa di de Chirico 1908-1924*, Rizzoli, Milan 1984, pp. 89-90. In the light of Pierre Roy's testimony in the next paragraph, however, this

Poet. His metaphysical style was reserved for characters who were no longer alive or who inhabited an imaginary realm. On the various occasions when de Chirico painted living subjects, he invariably adopted a realistic style.

While these factors strongly suggest that the painting does not depict Apollinaire, they are basically circumstantial. The definitive proof was provided by another artist, Pierre Roy, who was present when the poet acquired it from de Chirico. Together with several other canvases, Roy confided to Pierre-Marcel Adéma, the painting was waiting to be exhibited or sold.⁵ In return for various favors, de Chirico invited Apollinaire to visit his studio and to select one of the pictures for himself. Struck by the silhouette in the background, which he fancied resembled his own, Apollinaire chose the work that currently bears his name. Although some critics have detected a similar resemblance between the silhouette and the poet, this similarity is clearly coincidental. The painting was never conceived as a portrait of Apollinaire, and the poet was not aware of any possible resemblance until he arrived at the studio.

Originally, like the other paintings in the group noted earlier, the *Portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire* undoubtedly depicted the Poet. For that matter, despite its factitious title, it continues to depict the Poet today. Unfortunately, we no longer know what this mysterious person is supposed to be doing. The decision to modify the original title was made not by de Chirico, in any case, but by Apollinaire acting according to a sudden whim. The artist and his brother merely went along with the joke by concealing the picture's true identity. For that matter, Apollinaire never formally modified the title either – he simply began referring to the work as “mon portrait.”⁶ Interestingly, de Chirico had already formed the habit of inviting sympathetic critics to choose a painting. Following the publication of a previous review by Apollinaire, on 9 October, 1913, he presented him with *The Great Tower*, now in the collection of the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Düsseldorf. Nor was Apollinaire the only critic to benefit from de Chirico's generosity. When Maurice Raynal published a favorable article in “Gil-Blas” one week later, the artist invited him to choose a painting as well.⁷

The discovery that the *Portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire* is not concerned with Apollinaire raises several interesting questions. If the painting does not portray the French poet, after all, whom does it portray? Who are the mysterious characters that the artist has chosen to depict, and how are they related to each other? What kind of enigmatic drama is being enacted on the pictorial stage? In order to answer these questions it is necessary to briefly consider de Chirico's aesthetics. At the beginning of his career, while he was still honing his craft, de Chirico imitated artists such as Arnold Böcklin and Caspar David Friedrich, from whom he borrowed several prominent motifs. In addition, he was heavily influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche and Arthur Schopenhauer. From the former he learned the

hypothesis must be abandoned. Unfortunately, Paolo Baldacci perpetuates Fagiolo's erroneous argument in *De Chirico: The Metaphysical Period, 1888-1919*, Bulfinch, Boston 1997, p. 248.

⁵ P.M. Adéma, *Entretiens avec Pierre Roy sur Guillaume Apollinaire 1943-1944*, in *Guillaume Apollinaire, Pierre Roy et le surréalisme*, ed. Daniel Briolet, Le Dé Bleu, Nantes 1997, p. 36.

⁶ The painting was not exhibited in public until 1934, by which time it had somehow acquired its present title. Although Apollinaire referred to it as “mon portrait” from the beginning, de Chirico and Savinio initially called it “l'homme cible” (the human target).

⁷ Maurice Raynal, *Exposition G. de Chirico*, “Gil Blas”, 16 October 1913, p. 4. De Chirico's letter to Raynal is reproduced in Willard Bohn, *De Chirico's Early Years in Paris*, “The Burlington Magazine”, vol. CXIV, No. 1206, September 2003, pp. 649-652.

importance of surprise, revelation and *Stimmung* (“atmosphere”). From the latter he borrowed the concept of a metaphysical reality inhabited by a number of phantoms. Part of de Chirico’s genius was to integrate his Germanic sources into a distinctly Italian setting: vast, deserted public squares baking in the afternoon sun. Another stroke of genius was to employ a realistic style in the pursuit of anti-realistic ends. Since Metaphysical Art is concerned with essence, rather than with physical appearance, meaning is relegated to the symbolic plane.

Nietzsche’s declaration that God was dead was not an announcement so much as a confirmation. Like other artists and writers who were unable to embrace religion, de Chirico was consumed by a sense of loss – not of faith but rather of purpose. Without guidelines imposed by a benevolent deity, the world seemed devoid of meaning. Convinced that existence was far from gratuitous, the artist set out to devise a coherent explanation. In particular, he believed that human history was studded with a few rare individuals – both real and imaginary – who embodied certain elementary forces. Metaphysical Art sought not only to identify these individuals but also to dramatize their role in mythology, literature, history, and life in general. Some of de Chirico’s characters are taken from classical mythology. Others are borrowed from the Greek and Roman epics. Most of the remainder are historical figures who played a key role in the evolution of Italian culture, science, or politics. Belonging to de Chirico’s personal pantheon, each of these characters exemplifies one of the twin creative principles celebrated by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Those who derive their inspiration from dream embody the Apollonian impulse. Those whose inspiration resembles ecstatic inebriation embody the Dionysian impulse. In contrast to the first process, which is essentially rational, the second is irrational and unconscious. These two principles govern de Chirico’s entire artistic production.⁸

One of de Chirico’s favorite books, purchased in 1913, was a section of Schopenhauer’s *Parerga und Paralipomena* entitled *Essay on Apparitions and Various Tracts*.⁹ After discussing nine different causes of visions, such as somnambulism, dreams, and clairvoyance, Schopenhauer examines the mental pictures associated with these states. One passage seems to have greatly interested de Chirico: “Jeder anschauliche Gegenstand hat im Traum eine Wahrheit, Vollendung, konsequente Allseitigkeit bis zu den zufälligsten Eigenschaften... da wirft jeder Körper seinen Schatten, jeder fällt genau mit der seinem spezifischen Gewicht entsprechenden Schwere.” (In a dream every object of intuitive perception has a truth, perfection, completeness, and consistent universality down to its most accidental properties... For every object casts its shadow, every body falls with a heaviness that corresponds exactly to its specific weight.)¹⁰

The importance of shadows, which emphasize an object’s volume and weight, was to become one of the hallmarks of de Chirico’s art. Their prominent role in his paintings guaranteed that the works were authentic dream pictures. Equally important was Schopenhauer’s insistence on the truth and pre-

⁸ For a detailed account of de Chirico’s system, see W. Bohn, *The Rise of Surrealism: Cubism, Dada, and the Pursuit of the Marvelous*, State University of New York Press, Albany 2002, pp. 73-119.

⁹ The cover and several pages are reproduced in I. Far de Chirico and D. Porzio, *Conoscere de Chirico*, Mondadori, Milan 1979, p. 13. De Chirico’s copy bears the following inscription, dated 1913: “Meditatio mortis et somniarum magna semper poetarum et philosophorum delectatio fuit” (poets and philosophers have always much delighted in the contemplation of death and dreams).

¹⁰ A. Schopenhauer, *Versuch über das Geistersehn*, in *Parerga und Paralipomena, Sämtliche Werke*, Cotta, Stuttgart and Insel, Frankfurt 1963, vol. IV, pp. 278-279.

cision of the dream image, which dovetailed with the sculptural vocation of Nietzsche's Apollonian artist, likewise devoted to the world of dream.

Following the creation of *The Song of Love* (1914, fig. 2), which included a bust of the Apollo Belvedere, the same sculpture reappeared in at least five more paintings including the *Portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire*. This procedure was illustrated again and again during the metaphysical period. Zeroing in on a particular object, de Chirico would explore its artistic and semiotic possibilities before eventually exhausting them. There are some indications that he thought Apollo's presence in *The Song of Love* was too obvious, for he partially disguised the bust in three of the remaining five works. It is clear, nonetheless, that the bust in the *Portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire* was borrowed from the earlier painting. Although the statue's eyes are concealed behind dark glasses and the familiar hairstyle has been changed, the lips, the nose, and the left ear are identical. That the bust portrays a balding Apollo, moreover, encouraged the artist to superimpose it on his previous bald-statue motif, which, as we will see, was also associated with the Apollonian tradition.

During his metaphysical period, de Chirico was often concerned with Apollo. The motif recurs insistently throughout his works from beginning to end. Introduced in some of the earliest paintings, it was transformed into a series of surprising avatars that culminated brilliantly as the period drew to a close. Situated strategically between *The Song of Love* and the mannequin paintings, the *Portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire* constitutes an important development in the motif's history.¹¹ Consigned to the painting's foreground, the bust of Apollo confronts the viewer immediately, momentarily eclipsing the remainder of the work. Despite the dark glasses, which conceal (but also emphasize) his blindness, the figure seems to be endowed with a penetrating gaze. According to an ancient tradition going back to Homer, blind poets were often endowed with a special kind of vision. As compensation for losing his sight, for example, the soothsayer Tiresias received the precious gift of prophecy. According to all indications, the bust in the *Portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire* represents the Apollonian Poet, who is simultaneously a prophet and a visionary.



fig. 2 G. de Chirico, *The Song of Love*, 1914, Museum of Modern Art, New York

¹¹ While M. Fagiolo dell'Arco claims that the bust represents Orpheus, there is no Orphic tradition in de Chirico's Metaphysical Art for the painting to exploit. See *L'opera completa di de Chirico: 1908-1924*, cit., pp. 89-90.



fig. 3 G. de Chirico, *The Enigma of the Oracle*, 1910, private collection



fig. 4 G. de Chirico, *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon*, 1910, private collection

Compared to the bust of Apollo, whose identity seems perfectly clear, the masculine figure lurking behind the column is more problematic. Although only his silhouette is visible, one can discern several chalk marks on his coat and a large circle superimposed on his left temple. These markings indicate that he is related to de Chirico's early mannequins, who were modeled initially on tailor's dummies. Like them, he is descended from two theatrical characters invented by Apollinaire and Savinio.¹² Unlike the mannequins, however, whose bulging heads are presumably filled with sawdust, he possesses human features. Rather than Apollinaire, the silhouette resembles a Frankenstein monster. For this reason, I suggested previously that it represents Death preparing to carry off the Poet, who, because of his blindness, is unusually vulnerable.¹³ In retrospect, however, threatening shadows can be found everywhere in de Chirico's works. Like his use of multiple vanishing points, enigmatic objects, and provocative juxtapositions, they contribute to the uncanny atmosphere that he liked to cultivate in his paintings. Accentuated

by the eerie green sky, the silhouette in the *Portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire* mainly evokes the viewer's unconscious fears. The Poet in the foreground is probably not in any danger after all.

If the mysterious silhouette represents neither Apollinaire nor Death, whom (or what) does it represent? Fortunately, the key to its identity is provided by a combination of physical and circumstantial evidence. Entitled *The Enigma of the Oracle* (1910, fig. 3), one of de Chirico's early paintings portrays a hooded priest of Apollo gazing out over the town below from the temple at Delphi. As many critics have remarked, the image (and its associations) were borrowed from Böcklin's *Odysseus and Calypso* (1881-1883). Among other things, this marks the first appearance of "the Poet" in de Chirico's works, which is one of the names he reserves for Apollo. Although the god occasionally appears in his true guise, he is usually represented by one of his emissaries – in this case by the temple priest. The next painting in the series, *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon* (1910, fig. 4), depicts

¹² The relationship between Apollinaire's *A quelle heure un train partira-t-il pour Paris*, Alberto Savinio's *Les Chants de la mi-mort*, and de Chirico's paintings is explored in detail in W. Bohn, *Apollinaire et l'homme sans visage: création et évolution d'un motif moderne*, Bulzoni, Rome 1984, translated into English as *Apollinaire and the Faceless Man*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison, NJ 1991.

¹³ W. Bohn, *The Rise of Surrealism*, cit., p. 105.

the piazza Santa Croce in Florence. Although the Poet has been transformed into a marble statue, his identity is readily discernible. Judging from his robe and his pose, he is related to the priest of Apollo encountered previously. In addition, the statue is also modeled on the monument to Dante, by Enrico Pazzi, that graces the actual piazza. In this way, de Chirico managed to add the author of *The Divine Comedy* to the list of the Poet's aliases. That Dante is widely known in Italy as "il Poeta" made the operation all that much easier. Two years later, de Chirico expanded the list again to include the first prime minister of Italy, Count Camillo Benso di Cavour, who appears in numerous paintings. Like the statue in *The Chimney* (1913, fig. 5), Cavour is usually viewed from the rear and portrayed as a bald man dressed in a frock coat. Since he has one arm extended, he seems to be addressing a crowd. In 1914, Cavour's statue was replaced by the bust of the Apollo Belvedere, as noted, and soon thereafter by the faceless mannequins.

From the preceding discussion, it is clear that the marble bust in the *Portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire* is descended from the hooded character in *The Enigma of the Oracle*. In both works, the Poet is portrayed as someone who is privy to divine secrets. Like the chlamys worn by the priest of Apollo in the earlier painting, the dark glasses on the bust of the Apollo Belvedere testify to his prophetic powers. Whereas the first figure interprets the Pythia's frenzied pronouncements behind the curtain, the second figure seems to interrogate existence itself. Like its prophetic companion, moreover, the silhouette in the *Portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire* also illustrates the Apollonian principle. The manner in which it operates, however, differs markedly from that of the Apollo Belvedere. Unlike the latter, which recapitulates the entire Apollonian tradition, the silhouette concentrates on one individual in particular. While the Apollonian characters noted previously culminate in the Apollo Belvedere, the silhouette focuses on a single representative of Apollo. That person appears to be Dante Alighieri, who inhabits a number of de Chirico's paintings, beginning with *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon*. The silhouette was apparently modeled on the poet's death mask (fig. 6), which explains why it is so frightening. Together with his long, bony nose, Dante's bushy eyebrows and jutting chin combine to produce a sinister profile.

Like *The Song of Love*, which is also centered around Apollo, the *Portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire* is essentially a paean to the creative spirit. To be sure, Apollo presided over a great many aspects of life in ancient Greece. He was associated not only with medicine and healing, for example, but also with the sun, plagues, oracles, light, and knowledge. De Chirico was attracted to him primarily because he was the patron god of music and poetry. In paintings where Apollo himself is absent, he is often represented by one of his reincarnations, such as the hooded priest, Dante, or Cavour. De Chirico never celebrates the deity himself, it is important to note, but rather the creative spirit (*poiesis*) that he embodies. In contrast to Dionysos, who is associated with unbridled excess, Apollo stands for

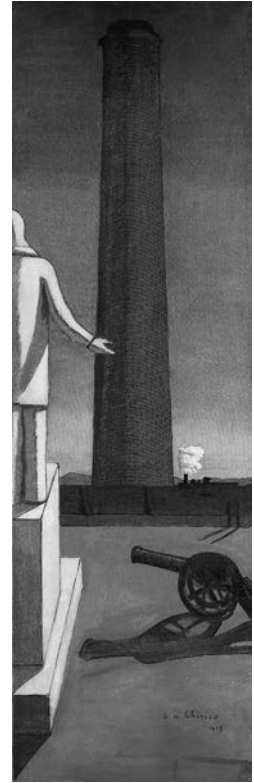


fig. 5 G. de Chirico,
The Chimney, 1913,
private collection

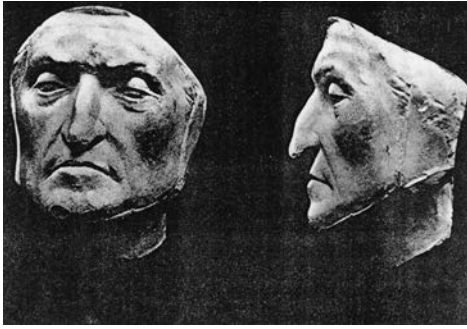


fig. 6 Dante Alighieri, death mask

reason and moderation. Every creative activity conceived in the Apollonian mode is characterized by clarity, harmony, and restraint.

While de Chirico concentrates exclusively on Apollo in *The Song of Love*, he divides his attention between two different figures in the *Portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire*. Not surprisingly, the second painting is more complex than the first. The addition of the second figure not only introduced a mysterious note into the portrait but also increased the number of artistic possibilities. The

two characters could interact with one another according to several different scenarios. Many observers are struck by the apparent sterility of de Chirico's works, dominated by tall brick chimneys, endless arcades, and wide open spaces. Since human beings are either absent or reduced to minute proportions, there seems to be very little activity. To the casual observer, the paintings appear to be frozen in time. Upon closer inspection, however, this impression turns out to be mistaken. In reality, the paintings are filled with a restless energy that reflects the tension generated by the different components. Although they are admittedly stationary, the figures in the *Portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire* are engaged in a lively conversation. The subject of this exchange is the creative spirit that they share in common.

De Chirico illustrates Nietzsche's concept of sexual duality in virtually every one of his paintings. The German philosopher, he knew, employed procreation as a metaphor for the interaction between the Apollonian and the Dionysian impulses, which were "sich gegenseitig zu immer neuen kräftigeren Geburten reizend" ("continually inciting each other to new and more powerful births").¹⁴ De Chirico acknowledges this principle in his works by, among other things, juxtaposing various sexual symbols. Like the towers and arcades that occur in so many of the paintings, the fish and the seashell in the *Portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire* reflect Nietzsche's sexual dichotomy. That they actually appear to be aspic molds makes little difference, since their function is purely emblematic. One of many phallic symbols in de Chirico's works, the fish illustrates the male principle. Recalling the scallop shell in Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, the seashell represents the female principle. Although the *Portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire* concentrates primarily on the Apollonian impulse, it does not ignore its traditional rival altogether. The presence of the fish and the seashell reminds us that neither the Apollonian principle nor the Dionysian principle can exist without the other. While they represent contradictory impulses, they are intertwined throughout eternity. Although the painting is an impressive achievement, therefore, it merely illustrates one half of Nietzsche's philosophical equation. Its true value appears only when the secret competition between Apollo and Dionysos is acknowledged.

¹⁴ F. Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie, Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, de Gruyter, Berlin 1980, vol. I, p. 25.