

DISQUIETED BY THE MUSES
INSPIRATION, POSSESSION AND HAPPINESS
IN THE WORK OF GIORGIO DE CHIRICO

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Giorgio de Chirico was just over twenty years old when he sat down *on a bench in the middle of Piazza Santa Croce in Florence*; he had lost his father and left Greece some time before.

It was on an *autumn afternoon* in 1910, that the artist, weakened by a *long and painful intestinal illness*, a symptomatic representation of his grief, observed a *lukewarm and unloving sun* illuminate the *church façade* and the statue of Dante wrapped in a *long cloak* with his head bowed to the ground *thoughtfully*.

The young artist managed to compensate his loneliness and psychophysical malaise by reading common signs in his surroundings: “all Nature, even the marble of the buildings and fountains, seemed to me to be convalescent also”.

Once this visionary game had begun, his imagination ran increasingly wilder and as such, in an *almost morbid state of sensitivity*, a “miracle” happened: “I then had the strange impression that I was seeing everything for the first time. And the composition of my painting came to me and every time I look at it, I relive this moment once again. Still, this moment is an enigma for me because it is inexplicable. And I like to define the resulting work an enigma”¹ (fig. 1)², he wrote in a text in 1912.

We are fortunate that de Chirico lets us witness a genesis: reality is shown and one could say that it is in the moment of revelation that the complete enigma of the resulting painting is condensed and contained. It thus follows that the painting is a revelation of a revelation, an exponential enigma.

De Chirico actually goes beyond this, almost indifferent to the explosive power of his words: the work performs a function of a “keystone” between reality and... itself! In another text which followed shortly afterwards, we read: “A revelation can be born all of a sudden, when we least expect it, and it can also be provoked by the sight of something such as a building, a street, a garden, a public square, etc. [...] When the revelation derives from the sight of an arrangement of things, then the work which presents itself in our mind is closely linked to what brought about its birth. The work is similar to this reality, but in a particularly strange way. Like the similarity between two brothers –

¹ *Méditations d'un peintre – Que pourrait être la peinture de l'avenir*, Paulhan Manuscripts, in Giorgio de Chirico, *Scritti/1 (1911-1945). Romanzi e scritti critici e teorici*, edited by A. Cortellessa, Bompiani, Milano 2008, p. 650 ff.

² For the illustrations which accompany this essay see the Italian text *Inquietato dalle Muse. Ispirazione, possessione e felicità nell'opera di Giorgio de Chirico*, in this Periodical, pp. 165-183.

or rather the similarity between the image of a person we know that we see in a dream and that person in reality; it is, and yet at the same time it is not, the same person; there is a sort of light and mysterious transfiguration of their features.”³

We note the singular role of mediation presented in the painting: a moment of revelation about the world (*the view of an arrangement of things*) provokes the birth of a work that ... is *similar* to reality, *but in a particularly strange way*: the vision of reality creates the work of art which *recreates* reality.

Without going into this speculation too deeply, we should point out, on top of the customary dizziness and the slipperiness of concepts (the moment of revelation, work, reality) that the Metaphysician has shown us, how difficult or fruitless it is to try to keep hold of each term (in the sense of both definition and outcome) on this chess board, how the enigma circles around itself, bouncing from pole to pole, becoming charged with renewed tension each time.

If we want to understand the breadth of the range of de Chirico's work then we cannot get out of attempting to go backwards, daring to recover the original moment of *revelation* which the work preserves, amplifying its echoes.

We continue to pursue de Chirico, as he pursued Nietzsche in that period: “When Nietzsche speaks of the conception of his Zarathustra and says: I was *surprised* by Zarathustra, you will find the whole enigma of the sudden revelation in this participle ‘surprised’”.

It is here in this personal account that the artist starts to break down the moment of his “illumination” into fundamental components, in almost consequential terms, as if to motivate it: “I will now say how I had the revelation of a painting that I exhibited this year at the Salon d'Automne entitled: *L'enigma di un pomeriggio d'autunno* (*The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon*). On a clear autumn afternoon I was sitting on a bench...” and so on, as we have already read.

If paradoxically we reassembled the fragments of that moment at high density, would we perhaps obtain *L'énigme d'un après-midi d'automne* (*The enigma of an autumn afternoon*)?

As for the discovery of Nietzsche, de Chirico is immediately prepared to recognize the very heart of the revelation in this characteristic of mysterious “extraneousness” and passivity contained in the adjective ‘*surprised*’, whilst as far as *his* revelation is concerned, we note how he is not at all willing to relinquish the force of his “*T*” in the name of an unknown power, which is both mysterious and, to some extent, extraneous.

It is clear that the term *revelation* is an indication of a method of knowledge not at our complete disposal, but Giorgio de Chirico appears “more Catholic than the Pope” in this period: more Nietzschean than Nietzsche⁴; he superhumanly claims his discoveries for himself, the power of his *genius* (in the sense of he who *generates*) which can actively control and consciously understand what is happening to him.

What is in fact extremely strange and interesting is that we never see a total abandonment to the

³ Eluard-Picasso Manuscripts, in *ibid.*, p. 600. Part of this text also appears in the above mentioned *Que pourrait être la peinture de l'avenir*, Paulhan manuscripts.

⁴ Nietzsche actually starts a revolution in the system of communication: in his *Attempt at self-criticism* introduced in the 1886 edition of *The birth of tragedy* he regrets that until now he has used language which is logical instead of “singing... that which lay at the threshold of something communicable”. His language thus moves in the direction of “poet-like” writing (typical of his last works), the role of which de Chirico attributes to him in full.

mystery of art by the undisputed 20th century Master of the enigma. There is no surrender at the Pillars of Hercules because he cannot go, say or understand any further. Instead we see the very opposite, we see him as an obstinate man, the last follower of the Enlightenment, an armed *Monomakh* of an unshakeable trust in the positive powers of art, of intelligence and also of the word.

Even when the painter of the dream and of the delicate areas of the soul and life (the titles of his paintings suffice, from *La gioia e gli enigma di un'ora strana* (*The joy and enigmas of a strange hour*), to *La Malinconia di una bella giornata* (*The melancholy of a beautiful day*), *L'enigma della fatalità* (*The enigma of fatality*), *Mistero e malinconia di una strada* (*Mystery and melancholy of a street*) and so on) declares the moment of revelation to be enigmatic, unexplainable, as in the previously quoted passage, he bravely continues to try to explain (his word being always a *talking word*) and never gives in to silence.

In fact, perhaps it is not strange to hazard that in de Chirico (a second Bonaparte, in which two centuries are *armed one against the other*) a part consisting of an enormous creative effort can emerge from the conflict between an extremely active intellectual nature, 19th century-like in its confident desire to illuminate the reality of the world with enlightenment, and a sensitivity that is already nocturnal and disturbed in a modern sense.

Inspiration, whether it be that of poets, of Bacchante or of the prophet, has been a mystery since the dawn of time.

Giorgio de Chirico recognises its mysterious power but he does not surrender to it. He cautiously moves closer to it, like Böcklin's ferryman slowly approaching the *Isle of the dead*. He circumnavigates it to get to know its morphology, to learn how it works: *in order to conquer it*.

We can explain some striking stages as proof of this titanic undertaking: "We would need continuous control of our thoughts and all the images which are present in our minds, even those that appear when we are awake but which have a close link to the images we see in our dreams. It is curious that no image in a dream, no matter how strange, strikes us for its metaphysical power; and therefore we escape from the search for creative sources within our dreams; Thomas de Quincey systems do not tempt us", de Chirico wrote in the opening pages of the text *Sull'arte metafisica* (*On metaphysical art*) which appeared in journal 4-5 of "Valori Plastici"⁵ in 1919.

What is de Chirico searching for? He would like *continuous control* of his thoughts so that he does not get lost in the immense potential of images of extraordinary metaphysical power which are present in our minds.

It may *not be in dreams*, but he is looking for a *creative source*.

It is *not de Quincey's*, but he is looking for a *system*.

He is like the man who, feeling that he has found the philosopher's stone, now wants to seize the mechanism in order to possess all its powers at any cost. And his philosopher's stone is the great discovery that he is accomplishing: his *Arte nuova*⁶ (*New art*).

⁵ *Sull'arte metafisica*, 1919, in Giorgio de Chirico, *Scritti/1...*, cit., p. 286.

⁶ The title of a section in the abovementioned text *Sull'arte metafisica*, in *ibidem*.

The artist is a herald of the new system and anticipates the exertion required by his undertaking: he is a messenger, a *wearry archangel*, and he feels the particular weight of “the terrible mystery caught between the right angles of the frames.”⁷

But he cannot rid himself of this weight: another fundamental characteristic immediately emerges which is part both of the inspiration and of the work which springs from it: *necessity*.

In *Ecce Homo*, we read about the experience of revelation: “Something which with indescribable certainty and subtlety suddenly becomes visible, audible, something which shakes and upsets us to our very depths. [...] One hears, one does not seek; one takes, one does not ask who gives; a thought leaps forth like lightning, with necessity, without hesitation in its form – I never had any choice,” writes Nietzsche.

The young de Chirico almost “answers” Nietzsche in his notes of 1913-1914: “After having read the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, I realised that there were a number of strange, unknown, solitary things that can be translated into painting; I reflected on this at length. I then began to have my first revelations. I drew less, I had even forgotten a little how to, but each time that I did draw was because I was moved to by necessity.”⁸

In his notes, the artist explores the “instruction manual” of his Metaphysics, of which he noticed the almost subversive power, exactly in the way he theorizes about opening up a toy for cognitive purposes: “To portray all the objects in the world as enigmas, not just the great questions that we have always asked ourselves, why the world was created, why we are born, live and die [...]. To live in the world like in an immense museum of oddities, full of bizarre, multicoloured toys which change what they look like, which like children we occasionally break to see what they're like inside.”⁹

It must therefore be the mysterious aspect that our mind confers on the objects of the world in certain moments of “clairvoyance” that art must be ready to seize: “Art is the fatal net which catches these strange moments, like mysterious butterflies, that flee the innocence and carelessness of common men”¹⁰.

It is here that the author fondly remembers Jules Verne, *the slippered explorer*: “Who knew better than he did how to hit on the metaphysics of a city like London [...] The spectrality of a Sunday afternoon in London...,” that *unconsciously metaphysical* writer from whom the new artist distinguishes himself, confirming the hypothesis of the true new nucleus of dechirican art in line with the attitude of wanting to understand, of trying tirelessly to explain: it is de Chirico himself who notices that the value of the “Copernican revolution” used by his painting resides in his “metaphysical conscience”¹¹.

The famous metaphor of the “chain” seems enlightening: “It is a truth of axiom that madness is an inherent phenomenon in every profound manifestation of art. Schopenhauer¹² defines a mad man

⁷ *L'arcangelo affaticato*, 1918, in M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, *Il Meccanismo del pensiero*, Einaudi, Torino 1985, p. 52.

⁸ Eluard-Picasso Manuscripts, in Giorgio de Chirico, *Scritti/1...*, cit., p. 611 onwards.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ *Sull'arte metafisica*, in *ibidem*.

¹¹ “It's not something that was invented yesterday. However doing it consciously is a recent, in fact extremely recent, thing... a fact of great importance, the conscience in metaphysical art”, in *Noi metafisici...* 1919, in *ibid.*, p. 269 onwards.

¹² M. Calvesi has clarified that in following Schopenhauer's lesson, de Chirico projects his own personal poetic inclination which diverts thought in a more mystifying key, matured through contact with the cultural context of the Florence of Giovanni Papini. The latter was the first to have applied the German philosopher's presumed principle of considering the most common events as if they were “new and uncommon” to artistic creation (in his case, literary). M. Calvesi, *La Metafisica schiariata*, Feltrinelli, Milan 1982.

as the man who has lost his memory....I enter a room, I see a man sitting on a chair, I see a cage with a canary in it hanging from the ceiling, pictures on the wall, books on a bookshelf. None of this surprises me, it does not shock me because the chain of memories that are linked one to the other explains to me the logic of what I am seeing. But let us imagine for a moment and for reasons which are unexplainable and beyond my control that the thread of this chain is broken; who knows *how* I would see the seated man, the cage, the pictures, the bookshelf; so who knows what stupor, what terror and perhaps also what sweetness and what consolation I would feel looking at that scene. The scene would however not be changed, it is I who sees it from a different angle. Here we are at the metaphysical aspect of things”.

From this passage, taken from the paragraph *Pazzia e arte (Madness and art)* in *Sull'arte metafisica*, another significant indication of the creative mechanism which generates the work emerges: the subject's undertaking to make himself *look in a certain way*, in a sort of conscious exercise of displacement or estrangement or suspension (*The scene would however not be changed, it is I who sees it from a different angle*) is repeated: art is a “conscious madness” and is intentional.

Another fascinating image appears in a text of 1919 - the *graded object*. This is further evidence of the Master's effort to attain a “mathematical” clarity, a programmatic *Theory of Metaphysics*. Moreover his undertaking at this time is not isolated, rather it is inserted in the project of a new group and of a future to be renewed (he wrote letters to Papini and to Carrà in which he talked about a *new renaissance*: “We are the new Vespuccis, the new Columbuses”. Elsewhere he declares that he feels “the survivor and the unborn”¹³).

De Chirico writes: “Primitive people unconsciously exploited the metaphysical power of things, isolating them, putting up magical and insurmountable barriers around them; fetish, the sacred image ... are real concentrates of metaphysics. Everything depends on a certain *way* of arrangement and isolation. Primitive man did it unconsciously ... modern artifice on the other hand does it consciously, guiding, or rather increasing, modifying and cunningly exploiting the metaphysicality discovered in objects. This metaphysical state is represented in objects which possess it by a distinctive sign which determines the extent of it....We also need to add that the object licensed with metaphysicality should be seen *in a certain way* and from *a given side* in order for it to appear in its true form; just like a captain, a colonel, a general in khaki battle uniform should be seen straight on or from the side and with his cap on his head in order for us to recognise his rank”¹⁴.

The artist from Volos reacts to the abyss that throws itself open before him: it is the abyss of the metaphysicality of the world, and thus the revelation of his art, with an impulse of almost prescriptive systematization: with this material which feels incandescent in his hands, he does his utmost for the analysis of the variables, to fathom, to exemplify, to recognise the rules of the game, with an attitude inclined to cataloguing, similar to that of the ancient treatisers.

We have seen that the rules are for example *to represent things in the world as enigmas, to seize these strange moments*, and above all *to look in a certain way and from a given side (a certain way of framing*

¹³ *Villeggiatura*, in M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, *Il Meccanismo...*, cit., p. 49.

¹⁴ *Arte metafisica e scienze occulte*, 1919, in Giorgio de Chirico, *Scritti/1...*, cit., pp. 673-674.

and isolating) so as to increase and alter the metaphysicality found in objects. It appears clear how in reality it is always about the same prism, which we circle around: we look at it from various sides.

De Chirico stylises almost a list of the “tricks” of the trade.

“Miracles occur. If you care to call those spasmodic tricks of radiance miracles” reads a poem by Silva Plath, the author of a poem called *The Disquieting Muses*.

The artist resounds with the world. He can exploit, modify and increase this resonance (radiance?) but he cannot order it, it remains “miraculous” for ever.

We in fact ask ourselves once again: imagine slavishly following all the “tricks” and rules indicated by de Chirico, as if they were a recipe, would we perhaps end up with *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon?*

The cognitive effort made by the artist is considerable: a lucidity or a desire for lucidity, both disconcerting, emerge from it. And yet something remains *beyond speakable*, something slips beyond control.

Interesting proof of this underground flight is found in the aforementioned description that de Chirico makes of the revelation of Nietzsche *surprised* by Zarathustra “you will find all the enigma of the sudden revelation in this participle ‘surprised’”.

If the *Pictor Optimus* tries to seize the keys to his *Arte nuova* with every instrument (drawing, studying, and painting, writing visionary poems, theoretical treatises, critical and polemical essays), he will however sense that he cannot (consciously!) possess it in its entirety: something eludes his inexhaustible interrogation, and he feels *the whole enigma of the revelation hit him all at once*: he realises that it is his Metaphysics for the most part that surprises and possesses him! This is the sense of the powerful impression which provokes Nietzsche’s participle in him.

So how does inspiration work?

We can only attempt to evoke it and to get near to it. Because the revelation comes to the artist *from faraway*, as if from outside. Otherwise what would the Muses be for?

There has been an attempt to define inspiration, to deconstruct it into elements in the name of a reasoning which *divides and rules*: to govern it, to be able to hold it in your palm, to possess it. Giorgio de Chirico’s words reveal this desire and this effort, but also, despite everything, the extreme exertion and the opposite of exertion: that of accepting its irriducibility to the will and thoughts of man.

De Chirico’s almost superhuman yearning for clarity in fact coexists with an epidermic sensitivity to the shadow that looms. We see a struggle within the spirit of Metaphysics, its mental landscape: the artistic scene to which he gives life is perhaps so vast and rich because it contains its opposite in itself.

The artist tells us of the *promontory* of his 29th year: “Nine years have passed since that discovery lit up the dark chamber of my conscience with a stormy, nocturnal flash of lightning; I do not know more terrible photographs than those taken at night in a flash of magnesium inside a house”¹⁵.

Nietzsche’s *lightning* resurfaces.

In these words we see the centrality of the conscience again, but not only, as the metaphors in the mind of a painter are primarily images.

¹⁵ *Promontorio* 1917, in M. Fagiolo dell’Arco, *Il Meccanismo...*, cit., p. 50.

The paintings of his youth, the conceptual thread of which is perhaps clearer, appear to us as *terrible* rooms that reveal their author living in the balance between light and shadow: from the New York Metropolitan's *Piazza con Arianna (Piazza square with Ariadne)* from 1913 (fig. 2), where a dense shadow skims and almost brushes the illuminated body of the dechirican heroine but which stops just in time, and makes the point of contact incredibly audacious, vibrant; to MoMA's *La gare Montparnasse (The Melancholy of Departure)* (fig. 3) of the following year in which light shines incandescently in a segment to defend itself against a shadow that is so domineering that it acts as a wall: from fondly drawing space within the structure a *pilotis* or even in *Il grande Metafisico (The great Metaphysician)* of 1917 (fig. 4) where the hero seems to be such due to his power to conduct, to assign roles: to become a referee between light and dark.

Let us take a step back and once again attempt to investigate the path that goes from the "illumination" to the birth of the work of art. De Chirico continues: "Today, from this promontory of my 29th year, I can see the breadth of my work extend kilometre after kilometre..." He describes the panorama as extending from his *promontory*: "Waters that do not dumbly mirror the landscape which stand over them because they are brightly coloured by the boiling, sulphurous waterfalls which continually cascade from the steaming rocks of the banks stream. Sweet eruptions of the telluric bile¹⁶. The work of a thousand palpitations was born in that fecund heat of an afternoon of sulphur and steam, soaked in bitter sweat"¹⁷.

As for vapour, Plutarch tells us that the Pythia, Apollo's priestess at Delphi, inhaled "*sweet vapours*" to obtain prophetic visions.

If we spy on the metaphysical alchemist in his laboratory, we see the work emerge from a remote interiority which are the hot bowels of the earth as suggested as much by sulphur (traditionally associated with the edge of volcanic craters) as by vapours; or the depths of the artist: "I feel defeated by all the distance and fatally, as if I were squashed by a plaster hand of some inexorable ghost which watched over me, I bend under the labour pains of the imminent birth....So great metaphysical paintings go..."¹⁸.

In the great paintings, the greatest intimacy (the earth's vapours, the pregnant belly) coexists with *all that distance*: the image of extraneousness.

The artist *gives birth* to the work: fruit of the creator's *bitter sweat* and at the same time a creature with its own life, which is autonomous and vibrant. It is *different* to the person who created it because it is the daughter of an original *alterity*.

It is I calling you. I, who can do nothing without you.

I, the Idea, who can do everything together with you.

writes Paul Valéry in his *Chant de l'idée-maitresse*.

The idea comes to the artist from *that great distance*.

¹⁶ It is interesting to note that in the area that surrounds Volos, as pointed out by Katherine Robinson, it is still possible to see sulphurous springs with green-blue water that we see in several paintings, such as *La Battaglia sul ponte (The battle on the bridge)* of 1969 (fig. 5) which belongs to Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico (a note in which de Chirico talks of *Acquae Calidae* is also located in the Foundation's archives).

¹⁷ *Promontorio*, in *ibidem*.

¹⁸ *L'arcangelo affaticato*, 1918, in *ibid.*, p. 52.

The initial opportunity “calls” its interlocutor: someone who will welcome it and who will sow the seed. And this starting point is extremely autonomous, and the message that he is the bearer of from such a great distance, that the receiver is profoundly surprised by it:

*Your ordinary intelligence is stunned by itself;
and will find such paths that will seem to make you rave.*

continues Valéry.

Since the distant past, inspiration has been perceived as a gift from the gods which sweeps man away and lifts him up. In the Platonic *Ione*, Socrates speaks of *theia mania*, or rather divine possession, as something that makes the poet the most stolid and the most knowledgeable of men.

In the beautiful *Le nozze di Cadmo e Armonia (Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony)*, Roberto Calasso writes: “Apollo and Dionysus are false friends, as they are also false enemies. Behind the scenes of their contrapositions, of their meetings and of their overtakings, something unites them forever and detaches them from all their other divine companions: possession. Both Apollo and Dionysus know that possession is the highest form of knowledge”¹⁹.

Apollo unleashes in his assistants, for example Pythia, a tremendous delirium: Pindaro writes that “the enigma resounds from the ferocious jaws of the virgin”. He causes a possession that stuns and frightens. Yet in this feverish frenzy we catch a prophetic word which has close relations with poetry, art and philosophy.

“Apollo is the bearer *par excellence* of a knowledge of which we are not masters, which develops through incessant questioning and which is based on an enigmatic coincidence of moderation and excess, of lucidity and darkening...” writes Mario Perniola²⁰.

A coincidence of opposites illustrated, amongst other things, by a symbology which acknowledges Apollo’s excellence at founding temples and protecting their erection and construction. The scholar of aesthetics continues: “the connection between the flame and the stone is repeated: Apollo’s priestess brought the stone with her and stepped onto it before speaking; many myths about Apollo are connected with episodes of petrification. The world’s navel, the centre of the earth, was identified in a stone at Delphi”.²¹

Sobria ebrietas, stone and sacred fire, poetic rage and self control, given and kept *together* in an experience which covers millennia, which has spoken of the sensitivity of poets, philosophers and artists.

“We know how to tell many lies that are similar to the truth, but we also know how to tell the truth when we want to,” declare the Muses in Hesiod’s *Theogony*. Many centuries later, Adorno repeats: “works of art *say* something that they *bide* with the same *flatus vocis*...”²²

Once again in connection with Apollo, the Nymphs are at the *source* of art, of poetry: originally the Muses were water nymphs, the murmuring of streams having perhaps favoured the impression of music in nature. The Romans revered water nymphs called Camenae²³ to whom they attributed

¹⁹ R. Calasso, *Le nozze di Cadmo e Armonia*, Adelphi, Milan 1988.

²⁰ M. Perniola, *Del sentire*, Einaudi, Turin 1991.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² T. W. Adorno, *Teoria Estetica*, edited by E. De Angelis, Einaudi, Turin 1975.

²³ Amongst whom was the famous nymph, Egeria, Numa Pompilius’s inspiration.

the art of singing and divination. When Greek mythology spread to Rome by the Ancients, Muses were identified with the ancient Camenae.

Is it a coincidence that in *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon* the plinth on which the statue of Dante stands wrapped in his cloak on which the initials G. C. appear (the painter's signature at that time) is, if we look carefully, also... a fountain?

We question the Nymphs who "possessed by god, spoke in impeccable rhyme. In fact it was actually then that men learnt what the perfect word meant as the hexameter was a gift from Apollo to his daughter Phemonoe, who was his mountain nymph and his Sybil. The god knew that power came from possession, from the snake wound around the fountain. But this was not enough for him: his women, his prophesying daughters had to reveal the verse, not just the enigmas of the future. Poetry was presented as the form of ambiguous words that consultants used in order to decide about their life," clarifies Calasso²⁴.

Apollo, the *Musagète*, links clairvoyance to poetry forever: the double knot clearly appears, the mirror reflection between truth and art; for which art could be, for example, the revelation of *enigmas of the future*, but the prophecy happens in an impeccable poetic verse: it has the *form* of art.

It should not be dwelled upon but in the Greek world we find the mythpoeic characteristic of the truth surface, the emerging of the problem of the true value of the artistic experience, the issue at the root of aesthetics, which from Novalis' romantic thesis moves on to Nietzsche ("The world has become a fable") and is placed at the centre of the contemporary philosophical debate.

In the distant past, the web of possession (revelation in delirium) and art was felt to be indissoluble: "The nymph is possession, *nymphòleptos* is one who becomes delirious on being captured by Nymphs. Apollo does not possess the Nymphs, he does not possess possession, but teaches it and governs it. The Muses were wild maidens from Helikon. It was Apollo who made them migrate to the opposite mountain of Mount Parnassus. It was Apollo who educated them in the gifts that turned this group of wild maidens into the Muses, the women who invaded the mind, but giving each one of them the laws of an art,"²⁵ as the scholar of the myth underlines again.

When the screen of mystery is too thick, divine intervention rushes to help.

"When something undefined and powerful shakes one's mind and one's fibres, it makes the whole body shake. When that person, who felt numb and agnostic until a moment before, feels jolted by laughter and by a homicidal mania or by an amorous yearning and by the hallucination of its form, or he bursts into tears, then the Greek man acknowledges that he is not alone. There is someone next to him. And that someone is a god".²⁶

Inspiration creates astonishment in man. Possession with its copresence of the opposites of truth and madness is an excessive, ineffable and unfathomable enigma.

An attempt at objectification makes the artist turn to an *inspirational Muse* for help.

"Man is the dream of a shadow", says Pindaro, "But when a divine flash rains down on him from the sky, it covers him in light and life is pleasant".

²⁴ R. Calasso, *op. cit.*

²⁵ *Ibidem.*

²⁶ *Ibidem.*

Once again the dialectic of light and shadow, according to the metaphor of illumination that descends from the divine and which will then have great fortune, allows us to clearly underline the exact recourse to the afterworld in the phenomenon of inspiration.

After having witnessed the unfathomable abysses of the earth with their sulphurous vapours, we now note how the divine flash rains *from the sky*: the elsewhere for the sake of antonomasia.

We can make a Pindaric flight by looking at artist Philippe Guston's work, in which several dechirican influences were recently revealed in his iconographic alphabet²⁷: "a picture is not made of colour and painting. I know neither what a painting is nor what causes the desire to paint. Perhaps it is the things, the thoughts, the memories, the feelings which have nothing to do with the painting itself. The painting is not the surface but the plane that is imagined there. It is the plane which moves the mind. It does not physically exist at all. It is an illusion, it is magic: what you see is not what you see".

The artist is therefore at the centre of the throng of voices which come from another place perceived as distant and remote. That the voices of the gods are then translated in modern times into voices that rise from our hidden depths makes little difference for the sake of this discussion.

We have already mentioned the "giving birth" alluded to by de Chirico, but we can also recall one of his more eloquent statements: "a truly profound work will be obtained by the artist from the remotest depths of his being"²⁸.

In order to once again reveal the sense of a relationship interwoven through a work of art, with a self observed as something other than oneself and with an 'I' that is extraneous to oneself, a possible objectification of the unconscious, it could be helpful to also quote the verse of one of de Chirico's poems of 1915 or 1916 which is dedicated to Govoni and from which emerges the characteristic of the self referencing (even if mysterious) of the painting: "on the stage everything is a mystery...: *Lo specchio sul cavalletto (The mirror on the easel)*"²⁹. This would also throw light on the genesis of many self portraits.

In support of this, we can call into consideration the well-known Freudian thesis that states that it is inside man himself that the elsewhere actually resides, for which a poetic work, as Freud continued discovering in those years (*The poet and the fantasy* was published in 1907), would be a form which substitutes the satisfaction of impulses that affect man's unconsciousness.

The fact remains that, as we have already said, wherever one wants to "localize" it, the Muse's voice originates from an *elsewhere* (external or internal, sky or earth) which makes it the counterpart to the *alterity* of the work.

It is moreover to the discovery of another reality that the surrealists also move.

The otherworld in de Chirico is revealed as beyond-reality, as *Metaphysics*, founded as a lay religion with its rituals and its rules which we have already looked at: the strong group of expedients lucidly identified by the artist.

De Chirico's aforementioned positive concept of human activity, aimed at highlighting its sacred

²⁷ *Enigma Variations: Philip Guston and Giorgio de Chirico*, Santa Monica Museum of Art, 2006.

²⁸ Eluard-Picasso Manuscripts, in Giorgio de Chirico, *Scritti/1*..., cit., p. 607.

²⁹ *Il signor Govoni dorme*, in M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, *Il Meccanismo*..., cit., 47.

value, is repeated with a Nietzschean aphorism: "On this earth. There are more enigmas in the shadow of a man walking in the sun than in all religions, past, present and future".³⁰

We are told that Zeus presented himself to Mnemosyne disguised as a shepherd, lay with her for nine nights on Mount Pierus and the nine Muses were born from this amorous encounter. Mnemosyne was the personification of memory, begotten by Uranus, god of the Sky, and Gaia, the Earth. The Muses, custodians of the Arts, certainly reveal themselves under the sign of memory but they are primarily a manifestation of the complex union of sky and earth.

"New magic came down to earth,"³¹ writes de Chirico in a poem of 1917.

The sky, infinity in the work, only exists thanks to its opposite: in the perimeter, in the earthy, limited concreteness of its material, as in the aforementioned verse: "the terrible mystery caught between the right angles of the frames": the elsewhere would not exist if not *here*.

The Muses, the messengers of art, are the most courted women of all time: no poet of ancient times would start his verse without an invocation to the goddesses of the arts. We find them everywhere, even in the proems of the two most celebrated epic poems: the *Illiad* and the *Odyssey*.

According to Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo, there is in fact no subject that any painter or sculptor has used more often or with more diligence than the nine muses, because, amongst so many subjects, they are most noble and pleasant to look upon.³²

Giorgio de Chirico also *uses* the Muses in this way on several occasions.

The most sensational and most widely known case is *The Disquieting Muses* painted in Ferrara in 1918 (fig. 6).

In a letter dated 10th June to Carrà, we learn the original title of the painting: "I work continuously, I have finished a painting: *Le vergini inquietanti* (The disquieting virgins)".

In an article published in 1919 in the newspaper, "Provincia di Ferrara", in which Filippo de Pisis writes about a lost drawing, he offers us a useful reference to enable us to understand the iconography of the painting: "In the drawings [...] he develops and comments on themes which are famous and which have already been displayed in his oil paintings. [...] An example of this is found in the *Goddess Hestia* which is a marvellous comment on the wonderful painting *The Disquieting Muses*."

Like Artemis and as a symbol of their total detachment, Vestals, the twelve priestesses of Vesta, guardian of the city (of Ferrara in this case), had to be virgins on pain of death of the woman and misfortune for the city.

In the case of Ferrara, this was a difficult lot for the woman and for the city, as de Chirico writes in *Memoirs*: "[...] the Ferrarese are also terribly lecherous; there are days, especially at the height of spring, in which the libidinous atmosphere which hangs over Ferrara becomes so strong that it can almost be heard, like rushing water or the roar of fire"³³.

³⁰ Eluard-Picasso Manuscripts, in Giorgio de Chirico, *Scritti/1...*, cit., p. 602.

³¹ *Epodo*, in M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, *Il Meccanismo...*, cit., p. 48.

³² Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo said: "non è soggetto in cui soglia e più sovente, e con maggiore studio adoprare l'arte sua ogni Pittore, e Scoltore indutture di quello delle nove Muse, per esser soggetto fra tutti e nobilissimo, e vaghissimo a vedere". *Della forma delle Muse, cavata da gli antichi autori greci et latini, opera utilissima à Pittori e Scoltori*. Milan 1591.

³³ G. de Chirico, *The Memoirs of Giorgio de Chirico*, Peter Owen, London 1971, p. 81.

The artist portrays a disturbed and dark atmosphere of the city's character: "What struck me most of all among the Ferrarese was a kind of more or less latent madness, which could not escape an acute observer, such as I have always been". He then cites the continuous humidity and the fumes of the hemp (in light of explanations of an illustrious phrenologist, the director of the city's asylum, and even Baudelaire!) as the reason for this madness. Yet a spirit of unrest like *genius loci* is in any case still evident.

To de Chirico, the thirty-year-old soldier, Muses and Vestals are virgins, women who *disquiet*.

The artist continues to interact with his masterpiece throughout his life; he cannot rid himself of it. We see him, with the same repetitive nature of a myth, approach his subject again and again, in many versions, with many variants, some of which are sometimes only minimal. The seriality is objectification, it creates distance, allows understanding and reconsideration, and it perhaps reassures.

From the studies, the drawings and the sketches to the infinite series of paintings in de Chirico's endless production, we see the mythical characteristic of eternal repetition, of remaining himself precisely in the way he is different to himself: there is an inexhaustible creative generosity, a starting again *ex novo* each time, but with infinitesimal rejects, with the exact form of the eternal tale, like the one that Ulysses keeps the Phaeacians listening to all night.

So de Chirico frequents his *Disquieting muses* throughout his life, playing with variations on a theme.

If we compare the 1925 version from the National Gallery of Modern Art in Rome (fig. 7) to the 1917-1918 painting from the Mattioli collection, the differences are perhaps just perceptible in the greater chromatic contrast and the accentuated sinuosity of the figures of the Muses who are standing in the foreground.

In the 1974 painting which is part of the collection of the Giorgio and Isa de Chirico Foundation (fig. 8), the obvious difference is that the floor which resembles the deck of a ship, the characteristic sloping "stage" on which the artist tirelessly *improvises*, has in fact disappeared. A variant which makes his Muse even more suspended, volatile.

The painting was read like an ideogram of "returning" time³⁴, an "encoded return to the castle of Ferrara": the location assigned to him for his military duties.

As we have already seen, the artist resumes the theme, "he returns to return": a mismatching of timings that is typical of a Greek tragedy surfaces, between the eternal repetition of the myth and the present of the scenic action, and thus the (tragic) unresolved dialectic between the necessity of destiny and the free self-determination of man.

Critics have often likened de Chirico's painting to the theatre - for his unnatural lighting, the staged scenes with so much scenery and backdrop; it could perhaps be interesting to study which plays the artist could have had in his mind and eyes as a source for his works, if, beyond the metaphysicality which he discovered in the world, it is possible to find more precise references to ancient tragedy by an artist imbued with Greek culture and a passionate scholar of the author of *The birth of tragedy*.

But let us return to the *disquieting virgins*.

³⁴ J. de Sanna, *Il cavaliere errante (crasi del tempo)*, in *Giorgio de Chirico, dalla Metafisica alla "Metafisica"* edited by V. Sgarbi, Marsilio, 2000, p. 25.

Callimachus tells how, at the age of three, Artemis asks Zeus for the gift of eternal virginity as a symbol of invincible and total detachment. She also asks for the Nymphs to be her servants and hunting companions: "sixty dancing maidens". Naturally they too had to be virgins for life.

What is striking is that, amongst so many divine figures, Artemis chose as companions in chastity the very people who, as we have already observed, *are* possession: *nymphóleptos* is one who becomes delirious on being captured by Nymphs. Exactly like the Muse, *it is women who invade the mind*.

Is an atavistic ambiguity staged as a prefiguration of the drama of Ferrara with its vestal virgins and its lascivious inhabitants?

"Erotic possession is the basis of any possession"³⁵ states Calasso. The Nymph provokes primitive possession, erotic possession (from which we gain the term *nymphomania*) which strikes not only man but also the gods.

Regardless of the issues of chastity, we should now underline a fundamental link: once again we find possession (the revealing delirium closely bound, as we have already seen, to the artistic experience), to the root, and perhaps more originally, to the experience of love.

We thus discover possession as a middle term between art and love, revealed by myth. Love and art are visible manifestations of possession; they are two sides of the same coin.

Both in art (where the artist feels "called upon" from outside, from faraway, by his demons) as in love (where the demons are just as powerful), man experiences a feeling of which he is not entirely the master, in that he is partly *outside* him.

On the other hand, the pair are extremely well-known and referred to throughout the history of poetry and art over centuries: from the famous Dantesque passage *I am one who, when Love breathes in me, takes note and, as he dictates deep within me, so I set it forth*, spreading as far as the motto of Ralph Waldo Emerson, American philosopher and writer: "art is a jealous lover"...

Once again in the ancient Greek world, we find confirmation of this twin genesis of art and love, of the original interweaving of love and *logos* intended as thought and word, a source therefore of poetry and art. "The heavenly dissymmetry on which Athenian love for girls and boys is based was described in the minutest detail by the erotic geometrician, Plato," explains Calasso.

Greek tradition expected that sooner or later the loved one would put down arms and surrender to the lover. But whilst the Spartans or the Boeotians believed that the loved one giving their graces was in fact a law of the State as it was "simply a beautiful thing and, as such, obligatory", in Athens, things, identical in essence, were expressly different.

The scholar of the Greek world continues: "As always, the Athenians are a little more complicated and diverse, this is true also for the law of love [...]. They do not have the impudence to speak of a grace which is then discovered to be an obligation. So what should be devised to obtain the grace without ever being certain of it? The word. Just as warriors lay siege to a fortress by multiplying stratagems to obtain their long-desired goal, so the Athenian lover is a warrior of the word; he surrounds his loved one with speeches which constrain in the way that soldiers do. And these

³⁵ R. Calasso, *op. cit.*

speeches are not rough compliments but the fiery beginning of what one day, using a Greek word without mentioning its origin, will be called *metaphysics*.

That thought is a derivation of erotic dialogue is shown to be true, for the great Athenians, in the driest literalness. In fact the link between a body to be conquered like a fortress and metaphysical flight is, for Plato, the image itself of eros³⁶.

Next to the united *flaming start* of logos and eros, of philosophy and physics, of poetry and love, there is still one characteristic to be underlined: even when it is a law of the State to surrender to the courtship of the lover, love (and its game) reveals itself under the sign of infinity, of setting out for a conquest *without ever being sure of it*, this is its original internal rhythm.

In *Symposium*, Plato describes Eros as the son of poverty but states that he is “what keeps all things and the whole world united”, whose power even Zeus cannot escape.

Love, like art, always flees: they are united by a potent feeling which possesses man but which man can never possess.

And yet Plato continues to say that only the lover is *éntheos*, is enthusiastic: only the lover is *full of god*.

In Savinio's *Nuova Enciclopedia (New Encyclopaedia)*, we see a melancholic analogy with the motif of eros that escapes: “Only love that is unrequited lasts, love that has no chance of ever arriving at the point of love, or rather at the point of possessing the object of desire [...] Love then? Love does not actually exist. It is a hypothesis, a great immense hypothesis”³⁷.

It is difficult to find explicit declarations on the theme by de Chirico. Here the loquacity of the Master gives way to restraint, the same restraint that he himself recognised in his father: “Between me and my father, in spite of the deep affection which linked us, there was a certain aloofness, an apparent coldness or, rather, a kind of reserve which prevented those spontaneous effusions found among people of mediocre birth”³⁸.

We see the artist defend himself against the abyss of artistic possession with strokes of the pen and paintbrush: does he do the same against erotic possession as well?

De Chirico skilfully uses the expedient of the *alter ego* (once again is it an indication of art as the objectification and expression of self through the self's *other*?): it is known that Isabella, his second wife, became his “literary counterfigure”, under whose name the author published several writings, amongst which the *Commedia dell'Arte Moderna (The Comedy of Modern Art)* in 1945.

“Isabella Far is the imitation of a muse from Apollonian Greece. The metaphysical artifice of the division (of which de Chirico is the greatest exponent of the 20th century) is perfected: the character acts as himself whilst keeping himself external”³⁹.

De Chirico rules this trick like an uncontested lord; he delights in the discovery of this literary invention. The function of guide in Italian (*faro* = lighthouse) and the sense of distance in English (*far*) converge in the pseudonym Far.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

³⁷ A. Savinio, *Nuova Enciclopedia*, Adelphi, Milan 1977, p. 33.

³⁸ G. de Chirico, *The Memoirs...*, cit., p. 46.

³⁹ J. de Sanna, *Postfazione a Giorgio de Chirico, Isabella Far, Commedia dell'Arte moderna*, Abscondita, Milan 2002, p. 259

The artist seems to have more familiarity with the Muses than with women in the flesh. In none of his works, not even in his more *Renoirian* phase which celebrates the beauty of the body, do we ever find female bearers of the gracefulness and lightness of *joie de vivre* that, for example, Matisse associates with women.

On an intellectual pedestal, even if it is illusory, *Far* is de Chirico's woman: she has promise of distance.

It seems to be exactly that love *de loin*, from afar, sung in the troubadour tradition, the painter's most congenial sentiment: polite love made to *mezura*, offered to the unattainable loved one by the *Troubadour* (a figure not alien to our artist!).

We understand that de Chirico is more at ease with mythological figures from his tendency to transform women into Muse. His pictorial production is filled with them. We find an almost infinite multitude of them, more or less "disquieting", more or less evocative.

A kaleidoscope of female figures in all forms, like a strange photograph from 1937 which shows the Master in New York (fig. 9) surrounded by conventional representations of women who embody different typologies: from the peasant woman to the guardian angel, from the woman with the flag of the United States to the maiden at a mirror.

The following figures appear in his works: prophetic Sybils, Nymphs, Nereids, lovely Graces, exotic Odalises... and Minerva the wise warrior, Artemis the virgin goddess of the hunt, Andromache the sorrowful bride, Antigone and brotherly love, Electra the revenger of her father and consoler of her brother Orestes, Lucretia the female virtue, as far as Bathsheba of the biblical story.

A veritable *prophetic tribe with burning eyes*, as recited in Baudelaire's verse.

Raissa, his first wife, a ballerina and an archeologist, was transfigured into the powerful *Donne Romane* (*Roman Women*) and into the *Archeologi* (*Archeologists*).

Isa lends her face and her looks to many of the abovementioned figures, as well as being a literary Muse, as we have noted.

And above all, Ariadne: again almost an alter ego for a tireless artist who lives the labyrinth of the enigma, who like Theseus, "knows that the secret he is missing is found in woman"⁴⁰.

Ariadne is multiform, just like Giorgio de Chirico.

"As soon as he grasps it, the myth expands into a fan of many parts"⁴¹. His Ariadne also lives a thousand times. "No woman, no goddess had as many deaths as Ariadne. The stone of Argolis, the constellation of the sky, the hanging, the death in childbirth, the maiden with the stabbed breast: all this is Ariadne"⁴². The female equivalent of the hero, who lives not one but many selfs ...

Calling upon even Jung, the other mythical figure of the investigation into the human psyche, it is far too evident how the numerous women painted by the artist are different archetypal representations of the female principle. They are the feminine side of de Chirico: his *soul*. This comes from the Greek word *ànemos*, which means wind, breath, sigh: to *inspire* the artist.

Let us make a comparison. A 1973 oil painting belonging to Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico,

⁴⁰ R. Calasso, *op. cit.*

⁴¹ *Ibidem.*

⁴² *Ibidem.*

La musa del silenzio (*The muse of silence*) (fig. 10), displays exact iconographic references to its previous graphic production (a frequent occurrence, as we have in fact already seen in *Le muse inquietanti*). A painting of 1916-1917 from the Broglio collection⁴³ is very similar in composition and has a significant title for the painting in question: *La sposa fedele* (*The faithful bride*) (fig. 11) thus revealing the *bridal* nature of our Muse.

It seems to be a clue to help us understand the real sense of the work: who in fact is the bride – here identified as a Muse – and about whom in another painting from a couple of years earlier *Il segreto della sposa* (*The bride's secret*) (fig. 12) whispers the *secret*? Attempting to make a comparison between the two “brides”, it seems to emerge that de Chirico insists on the relationship and the exchange between several essential elements.

The female figure in *Il segreto della sposa* is the pivot, the axis of symmetry around which on the left turns the image of a nature without time, represented by rocks, like the bowels of the earth which close around the temple almost to protect it (just like a secret?), and on the right the potentially infinite rise of cultural constructions symbolised by measuring instruments.

In *La musa del silenzio* (*The muse of silence*), the figure establishes a similar dialogic relationship with the plant on the floor, the head of the statue, the mysterious objects, the blocks of buildings in the background: a necessary spatial balancing and a living interlocutor who, through her gaze, puts them all in contact with one another.

Once again: if, there, the bride in *Il segreto della sposa* was a painted canvas and placed on a plinth (in order to boldly underline the double character shared between painting and sculpture), here the Muse in *La musa del silenzio* is structured through frequently recurring instruments to rise up to the role (she is almost made up of the words of the dechirican personal phraseology).

A final important note: if the iconography of the woman “bride” refers to the tradition of the Capitoline *kore*, in the latter we see the coexistence of female elements in form of the Muse’s shoulders, in the shapeliness of their figures. And yet at the same time there are pronouncedly masculine elements such as the powerful muscles, the pose and how the back is drawn.

Jean Cocteau writes: “Apollo, holding within himself the tricks of androgyny, / beautiful / like humans were originally / when one heart alone warmed the two sexes united...”⁴⁴

In light of this comparison, the identification of the bride-Muse as art appears to be unveiled: that she alone is able to keep the world of nature and the world of culture, civilisation, history, and the male and the female principle of life in a dynamic and “talking” balance. The artist draws from the *undivided* source from where everything has origin, where the sexes, word and love, delirium and revelation, light and shadow are united.

Once again *art* is Giorgio de Chirico’s real interlocutor: his Muse, his true bride.

But by comparing the various Muses of the Metaphysician, something else emerges, perhaps the hidden meaning in the typical recurring manner of the myth, carried out by de Chirico himself, as we have already mentioned, and exemplarily exhibits in the reiteration of many figures of thousands

⁴³ C. Bruni, *Catalogo Generale*, vol. II, no.111/1. This belongs to the Nazionale d’Arte Moderna Collection, Rome.

⁴⁴ J. Cocteau, *Mythologie*, in M. Fagiolo dell’Arco, *G. de Chirico Metafisica dei Bagni misteriosi*, Skira, Milan 1988, p. 160.

of faces; the type of cognitive experience made *with possession* surfaces: a knowledge which has the pathos of an abrupt lighting, of a sudden revelation, which we do not possess as acquired once and for all, but which possesses us, surprises us, *transforms* us.

A metamorphic knowledge therefore, which appears not in a resemblance, but precisely in the passages between one and the other, because every change is an acquisition of knowledge. We perceive a powerful trace of this type of knowledge within the infinite transformations of dechirican forms.

Aristotle defines pathos as the mystical experience, but not only, surprisingly the philosopher speaks about he who is taken, possessed by the Nymphs (*nymphòleptos*) in a context which deals with... happiness!

In *Eudemian Ethics*, he even dares to define and specify the limits of happiness, isolating five types. And the *nymphòleptos* is the protagonist of the last two, described in fact as he who enters into elation for inspiration of a divine being or through fortune.

Calasso admirably comments: "The Nymph or the divine or fortune are powers which act suddenly, capture and *transform* their prey... The element which is entirely new and surprising is the relationship with happiness. The modern image of possession still depends largely on 19th century occultism, even if we do not admit it. They are foaming mouths or witches... Which of our scholars has ever dared consider possession, this terrorizing disease, a path towards happiness?"⁴⁵

The "disquiet" of de Chirico's Muse comes from their potential of revelatory possession; they reveal themselves (by means of their ability to manifest themselves through continuous metamorphoses) as bearers of a mobile knowledge, that is both living and pulsating, which surprises us and pushes us to continually renew ourselves. It engages hand-to-hand with the figures that inhabit our world and mind... but in this complex form of knowledge we experience *happiness*.

Who knows, perhaps it is also due to this close co-habitation with the Muses that the multiform Master, the most ancient of the modern and the most modern of the ancients, declared with a smile during an interview, "I am always happy, actually I have the *disease of happiness*".

Translated by Rosamund King

⁴⁵*La follia che viene dalle ninfe*, Adelphi, Milan 2005, p. 25-26.