

GIORGIO DE CHIRICO, ARDENGO SOFFICI AND ROUSSEAU LE DOUANIER A NEW SOURCE ON THE BIRTH OF METAPHYSICAL ART IN FLORENCE¹

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Soffici and Rousseau in Florence: an additional source for de Chirico's Metaphysical Art

De Chirico spent the year 1910 in Florence where he suffered from an intestinal illness that no doctor could cure and during which time he painted very little (perhaps even not at all). Instead, he spent his time reading.² He certainly would have broadened his study of Nietzsche as can be seen from the first book he chose to consult in Florence's National Library on 23 April 1910 (*L'origine de la tragédie ou hellénisme et pessimisme*). He also consulted a variety of books on philosophy (Kant, Schopenhauer, Plato), archaeology and ancient history, as well as some modern literature (as can be deduced from his request for a "Revue" which can perhaps be identified as the "Nouvelle Revue Française"). And yet at the same time he would have been aware of what was going on in Florence, one of the most active cities in the literary and artistic debate taking place in Italy at that time. Without doubt he saw the *Prima mostra italiana dell'Impressionismo* at the Florence Lyceum, a show organised by Ardengo Soffici that opened in April 1910.³ It cannot have been uncharted territory for de Chirico who had already had the chance to see Impressionist works at the Munich Secession. This was nonetheless an avant-garde moment for Florence that put Soffici at the forefront of avant-gardism, which one of the leading Italian cultural publications, "La Voce", had already contributed to establish. At the cutting edge of Florentine intellectualism, the publication saw the trio of Prezzolini, Papini and Soffici defined as one of the cultural leaderships of Italy, bolstered by an irrefutable cosmopolitanism that had overtaken other emerging Florentine publications such as "Hermes", "Leonardo" (which was the predecessor of "La Voce") and "Il Marzocco". The publication also significantly broadened the predominantly literary range of "Il Marzocco" by taking on an artistic and philosophical slant. There is no doubt that de Chirico was aware of all of this: Maurizio Calvesi has clearly shown the complex interweaving of Papini's ideas with the intellectual incunabulum of de Chirico's Metaphysical Art.⁴ Even if we cannot ascribe this to an even earlier Florentine sojourn, as Calvesi hypothesises, Papini's dialectic must have made its mark, and deeply, on the unsettling development during the course of 1910 which led to the elaboration of the first paintings of this new "vision". Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Weininger, and even Papini's experiences are discernible in

¹ This text was published in Italian with variations in *Secessione e Avanguardia. L'arte in Italia prima della Grande Guerra 1905-1915*, exhibition catalogue edited by S. Frezzotti, Electa, Milan 2014.

² "I did more reading than painting. Above all I read books on philosophy and was overcome with severe crises of black melancholy", G. de Chirico, *The Memoirs of Giorgio de Chirico*, Peter Owen, London 1971, p. 61. De Chirico's words find full confirmation in a fundamental article (V. Noel-Johnson, *De Chirico's Formation in Florence [1910-1911]. The Discovery of the B.N.C.F. Library Registers*, in "Metaphysical Art – The de Chirico Journals" n. 11/13, 2014, pp. 137-177), in which numerous texts are identified that were fervently read by de Chirico and Savinio (who had decisively different interests) at Florence's National Library.

³ On the exhibition, see J.-F. Rodriguez, *La réception de l'impressionisme à Florence en 1910*, Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, Venice 1994.

⁴ M. Calvesi, *La Metafisica schiarita*, Feltrinelli Editore, Milan 1982.

de Chirico's many writings and acted as a counterbalance based on analogies of intuition. In addition to this, we can note that "La Voce" played host to these reflections by quoting an essay by Giulio A. Levi which is in effect a long review dedicated to the philosopher *Oskar Ewald* with a highly significant date (22 September 1910). It was published in "La Voce" together with an important article by Soffici on the use of perspective (which opens up fundamental reflections on the eccentric use of perspective in de Chirico's *Metaphysical Art*, which Calvesi has already noted.⁵ The article examines Ewald's philosophical critical essays on Nietzsche and his analogies with Weininger's thought: these were precisely de Chirico's reflections at that time.

Calvesi's predominant, or rather, unique treatise on a potential as well as evident relationship between Papini and de Chirico was dedicated specifically to a philosophical, literary and poetic vision, and did not examine the stylistic and painterly elements that led to the development of a new figurative style by de Chirico. As we will see, it was above all the artist's take on Soffici's pragmatic, critical and specifically artistic thought that just might constitute the great missing piece of the complex puzzle of concentric reflections which led to the definition of *Metaphysical Art's* painterly poetics in the autumn of 1910.

The crucial point of de Chirico's metaphysical innovation resides not only in the development of a new poetic and aesthetic system but in the development of a completely new system of representation, in a clear break from his former Böcklinesque (i.e. Milanese) production, compared to the "*nouvelle vague*" which started with the paintings produced from the autumn of 1910 onwards: *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon* and *The Enigma of the Oracle*. This innovation is not only about contents but it also owes its original expressive force to the adoption of a new and original painting technique which, in contrast to that previously used, succeeded in condensing the objective sense of symbols emptied of all meaning, of a figurative and bare evidence that makes up the essential basis of the new *Stimmung* which de Chirico finally succeeds in fully bringing to life in the autumn of 1910.

An initial indication of the change in act is found in a group of letters de Chirico wrote to his friend Fritz Gartz in Monaco in the years between 1909 and 1911.⁶ The epistolary begins with a brief postcard from Milan dated June 1909 in de Chirico informed his friend that he was planning a trip to Rome in September. In a second postcard dated 8 July 1909, he mentions having written a couple of weeks earlier without receiving a reply. In a third, significant, letter of 27 December 1909 he specified that he had gone to Rome and Florence in October and that in the spring he was planning to move to Florence, adding: "I have been working and studying a lot and I now have very different goals than before". He also asked his friend to send him the regulation for the (Monaco) Secession, in order to exhibit there in the spring (1910). On 11 April he wrote

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 58.

⁶ The complete epistolary written in German (which also includes a letter from the artist's mother Gemma in French and a postcard from Savinio) was published together with Italian and English translations in "Metafisica. Quaderni della Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico", n. 7/8, 2008, pp. 521-579. The epistolary was the centre of a long debate which was definitely resolved thanks to an in-depth analysis that established the consecutive order of the 12 letters, especially of the letter de Chirico wrote in December 1910 in which he announced the discovery of *Metaphysical Art*. The rectification of the errors resulting from the incorrect dating of the letter as "January 1910", clears the historical field of a series of strange assumptions made by two authors who backdated the birth of *Metaphysical Painting* to 1909, something that was possibly done in order to attract critical attention unattainable in any other way. The historical periodization thus remains that of established scholarship. It is also incomprehensible how such eventual backdating could change anything with regard to de Chirico's original intuition and allow this to be ascribed instead to Savinio. The conception of metaphysical *Stimmung* in image form can be exclusively attributed to Giorgio de Chirico. If anything, what emerges from the letters is that it was indeed de Chirico who helped his beloved brother Savinio give form to his own musical vision ("my brother and I have now composed the most profound music"). The question, with its multiple and related interventions, is reconstructed in P. Picozza, *Betraying de Chirico: the Falsification of Giorgio de Chirico's Life History over the Last Fifteen Years*, in "Metaphysical Art – The de Chirico Journals" n. 9/10, 2011, pp. 28-60.

again (from Florence where he had evidently moved), thanking his friend for the Secession documentation asked for in his previous letter, adding that he had decided not to exhibit after all as he was thinking of holding a personal exhibition instead. He spoke of paintings that were “too profound” for an exhibition like the Secession: a possible indication of the beginning of a change in his painting, or at least, of a different reflection taking place (as we shall see, it was most probably a period of creative stasis of restless research lacking, as yet, of an outlet). Paintings such as *Serenata* can be attributed to this period of transition, not technically dissimilar to the Böcklinesque ones painted in Milan, but in which a “profound” and mysterious aspect is accentuated compared to the more explicitly mythological character of the earlier paintings.

The change in painterly style between the new metaphysical paintings and the early, more simply Böcklinesque ones is clear. The artist’s painting style undertook and brought about a radical evolution that substantially changed its linguistic and expressive value. This difference was not so much a question of a distancing from Böcklinesque iconographies that in fact continue to emerge in the new paintings in the form of references, but rather, that of a total and radical abandonment of the earlier representational style and painting technique that derived from Böcklin’s and Klinger’s realism, of the manner of the Milanese paintings with their miniscule, pasty and trembling thin-lined brushstrokes which relate to the language of 19th century realism as well as the symbolism of Mitteleuropa. This technique was resolved and surpassed in the new paintings, in an “*aplat*” laying down of paint area by area in the composition in an almost total abandonment of the painterly vibrations that the brushstrokes evoked in earlier paintings and that had conferred a phenomenal and realist value to wholly fantastical subjects such as centaurs or characters submerged in a mythical antiquity.

It is crystal clear that such a radical transition of style set the pace and extent of the innovation of the new metaphysical paintings. And yet one has difficulty finding an explanation, or even a suggestion, in critical investigations (even recent ones) in reference to this technical and, as a consequence, linguistic transformation that is of such great importance. In fact this sudden calibration of the metaphysical painterly and stylistic language is the result of the evolution and the fine-tuning of thought that was principally philosophical and eventually found significant expeditious definition in the development of the two aforementioned paintings. In essence this is also the interpretation that de Chirico himself gives, not alluding to any suggestion that is “visual” but only theoretical and philosophical in its realisation. However, there are two points that must lead us to look further in the direction of precise suggestions that are of a highly “figurative” essence. The first point relates to the same aesthetic reflection that does not change track, despite going deeper, whilst positioning itself within the realm of Böcklin and Nietzsche dating back to the artist’s sojourn in Munich and is something that would not have generated the motives of discontinuity seen in the new paintings. The second point is that there must have been an influence or more concrete visual reference determining a “linguistic” change of this extent. In reality, given that the theoretical direction remained substantially unchanged, a spark that inspired the artist to so radically change his representational style is – from a philological point of view – a necessity. *Natura non facit saltus*.

Leaving aside the specific Florentine reference to Papini (which in all events is a philosophical-literary one) and looking at the contemporary Tuscan context, I have the impression that the event responsible for this technical “leap”, which led to the full application of the feeling of metaphysical estrangement, can be identified.

Attempts to identify de Chirico’s metaphysical stylistic references relative to this chronological period have been very effectively made by Calvesi.⁷ These include Giotto’s painting and that of Paolo Uccello, supported

7 M. Calvesi, *op. cit.*, pp. 55-62.

by a critical reading regarding “primitive” perspective, on which Soffici placed emphasis at that very moment in “La Voce”⁸ (this is in fact more evident in works that followed immediately after these two initial pieces). Calvesi later included an influence from Gauguin, a reference made however in relation to a later Parisian phase of the painter, as was that of Van Gogh and Picasso. An influence of Titian was also indicated, which is however certainly less evident and substantial when compared to the “chromatic planes, imbued with a certain gloom, such as those extraordinary greens and reds which, even when in the light, do not shine”.⁹ The influence of Matisse, which was critically highlighted in the late 1990s in an exhibition at MoMA in New York and newly taken up by Baldacci,¹⁰ cannot date to the 1910 period (the Matisse painting exhibited in Florence in the Impressionist show is far from de Chirico’s monochrome and uniform planes). The reference pertains to a linearity with chromatically contrasting silhouettes set side by side, together with a formal synthetism present above all in certain later nudes such as the 1913 *Étude* and *Nu (au cheveux noirs)* which is reminiscent of certain Matisse nudes in its dark lines.

In addition to the important article on the use of perspective by Italian primitive painters (22 September 1910), which must have affected de Chirico’s subsequent Parisian work (where the perspectives seem to contradict each other, creating scenes that are objective and at the same time emanate a feeling of displacement, something not yet evident in the Florentine works), Soffici dedicated an article to Rousseau *Le Douanier* in the 15 September 1910 edition of “La Voce” (fig. 1). The article, drafted some time earlier by Soffici who had purchased two paintings by the French painter (a still life and a landscape) at the start of the year, was brought to a close and published after the news of the painter’s death. From the time of the article’s publication and de Chirico’s vision and execution of his first metaphysical painting in the autumn¹¹ of 1910, we can imagine his careful and significant reflections. It is helpful to quote extensive passages from the article that is divided into two parts. In the first part, Soffici talks about popular painting which he maintains is one of the most meaningful revelations for a tired intellect¹² (it should be noted how de Chirico felt metaphysical innovation as a relief for his tired and excited sensitivity¹³): “I don’t know if you are like me [...] but I adore that painting that intelligent people call stupid” concludes Soffici. In the second part he speaks more precisely about Rousseau, of the modernity of his painting, of his cultural references (Paolo Uccello) and even of his original painting technique.

In the first part we find statements that will be largely echoed by de Chirico as well as descriptions of scenes that seem to be a premonition of what de Chirico’s metaphysical painting will shortly bring into being; or rather a poetic and thematic suggestion for de Chirico. Even the visionary language, made of almost Rimbaudian or Nietzschean enlightenment, corresponds to the language of de Chirico’s first theoretical

8 A. Soffici, *Divagazioni sull’arte*, in “La Voce”, 22 September 1910, in particular the paragraph entitled *Le due prospettive*.

9 M. Calvesi, *op. cit.*, 1982, p. 56.

10 P. Baldacci, *Giorgio de Chirico e il “Novecentismo”. Alcune riflessioni*, in *Novecento, Arte e vita in Italia tra le due Guerre*, exhibition catalogue edited by F. Mazzocca, Silvana Editoriale, Cinisello Balsamo 2013, p. 372.

11 De Chirico himself recalls how the “vision” of Metaphysical Art struck him in the autumn of 1910. From that moment the poetics of the autumn, with its long shadows and marble-like light, remains a constant of his poetics.

12 “[...] it has something of the divine about it and if you get up close when you are tired and disheartened by your own intelligence, it consoles you and restores you, as if you breathed the air of an ancient homeland that perhaps it would have been better never to have abandoned”. Here Soffici seems to almost prefigure de Chirico’s theme of “nostalgia” and of the abandonment of the country of his birth.

13 Narrating the birth of the first metaphysical painting, de Chirico recalls how he was physically and morally prostrate and how the vision gave him an “imaging that awakens in our soul, at times surprise, often meditation and always the joy of creation”, in *Giorgio de Chirico. Scritti/1. Romanzi e scritti critici e teorici 1911-1945*, edited by A. Cortellessa, Milan 2008, p. 652.

writings dating to 1911-1915. Let us look more closely.

Soffici writes: “I am talking about a different kind of painting: more naive, more candid, more virginal, so to speak. [...] But oh! The intensity of expression increased by the awkwardness of the forms and the colour! [...] The irreparable tragedy of dark and subordinate souls! All cosmic life [...] the day after a cataclysm. Now that I think about it, I would also say this – putting aside commercial value – Raphael’s *Marriage of the Virgin* on the same playbill! [...] And it is precisely this power of sentiment, despite everything (conscious or casual, what does it matter?) that counts for me. In works such as these, I find the nude and crude expression of an unadorned but sincere soul, lacking in harmony but penetrated by reality”.

We find an echo of this in de Chirico: “This is what the artist of the future will be; someone who gives something up every day; whose personality becomes ever more pure and innocent with every passing day”¹⁴ and “The artwork has a strangeness to it that comes close to the strangeness a child may feel”.¹⁵

Furthermore, the repertoire of objects mentioned by Soffici (barber and storefront signs, funfair booths) seem to foresee the poetical interpretation that will take place in his *Metaphysical Art in Paris* (hanging gloves, barber’s busts, etc.): “They are the tarpaulins of acrobats, old fire screens, signs for dairies, hotels, barber shops and herbalist shops, village tabernacles, ex votos, funfair ballet dancers and soldiers, still lifes above the exits and frescoes on the walls of countryside inns”.

The childish and primordial scenes that Soffici evokes have all the metaphysical and solitary gravitas of de Chirico’s compositions, including even the Parisian mannequins, heavy with a sense of melancholy: “Around them a grey and brooding square opened up like a desert. At the very end, down at the bottom stands a straight white wall along which a yellow dog runs. No perspective, no balance between the various parts of the painting. Monstrous drawing and colour [...]. The soldier as hard as wood and shiny as a saucepan, the bundled-up servant [...] alone, in that immense square; the watermelon seller, the dog and the white wall at the back! A Sunday-like feeling of desolation in strange neighbourhoods, an area surrounding barracks, silent and solitary leisurely walks threatened by the fate of the captain and the butler! [...] A canary-yellow streetcar [...] arrives scraping the black edges of the corner, traced with curves. In the background, a terrace of light brown houses, with hundreds of yawning windows in a row, unrelentingly square, revealing dark, empty rooms that one senses are uninhabited. The same drawing, the same colour. But once again here, as in thousands of paintings of this sort, the same sense of irreparable, routine, daytime melancholy”.

Some time later de Chirico, now in France, wrote descriptions that are almost identical for their effect and *Stimmung*, in which a sense of melancholy dominates: “It is the enigma of the school, the prison and the sailor’s barracks; it is the locomotive whistling in the night under the icy vault of the stars”;¹⁶ “All of a sudden I found myself in a big square city. All the windows were closed, silence and meditation were everywhere”;¹⁷ “the conqueror’s square city, the tall towers and huge sunny squares, the train rolled along broiling in the summer heat [...] there was no more joy. The soldier in the railway car and all the families’ sorrow”.¹⁸ “It was solemn. It was melancholy. When the sun arrived at the top of the celestial curve, they inaugurated the new clock on

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 614.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 607.

¹⁶ G. de Chirico, “*Life, Life, Great Mysterious Dream! All the Enigmas...*”.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, *One night*.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, *August 1911*.

the town's railway station. Everyone was crying. A train passed frantically whistling away";¹⁹ "Behind the walls life rolls on like a catastrophe".²⁰

The striking description of de Chirico's paintings, expressed even before they had been painted, gives us the measure of how, just prior to his intuition, de Chirico must have read these pages and that he must have felt charged with an as yet unrealised prophesy.

When Soffici subsequently speaks more specifically about Rousseau, the circle closes in yet further: according to Soffici the painter evokes "the childishness of the world", a concept that de Chirico draws from Schopenhauer, and above all from the study of Heraclitus, which was of great interest to de Chirico who also found validation in Nietzsche: "a truly immortal artwork can only be born of a revelation. It was possibly Schopenhauer who best defined this moment and even (why not?) actually explained it";²¹ "it is the hour of the enigma. It is also the hour of prehistory".²²

Following in Soffici's text are descriptions of deserted squares, of heart-wrenching melancholy and senseless objects, of lyricism that has been stripped of rationality: "How he knew how to render the dark sadness of an inhospitable square, of an empty lane, of an expanse of sombre Parisian rooftops under the gloomy clouds"; "immense compositions [...] where the grotesque marries the tender, the absurd unites with the magnificent and the absolutely weird joins that which is indisputably beautiful and poetical [...]. A new mix of geniality and mental cross eyedness"; "Now one must ask oneself: what does this overcrowding of heterogeneous things that are discordant amongst themselves, placed close to the other without any plausibility [...]. What does it mean? Well, it does not mean anything [...]. It is that Henri Rousseau, who does not reason but works, rather, in his own special way of conceiving from first impulses, had understood this truth: in art everything is allowed and legitimate if every element contributes to the sincere expression of a state of the soul. Both for their colour and for their structure, that divan, that nude body, that moon, those birds, those beasts and flowers, represented for him many images which, independently of any articulate logic, formed in his spirit a purely artistic unit, that he found the most appropriate for expressing his personal vision. Conforming in this way to the tendencies of the modern school of painting with its desire to expel any rational element from art in order to abandon itself completely to a lyrical exaltation emanating from colours and lines, seen and conceived independently of their practical destination and their office of delimiting and differentiating bodies and objects. Rather than asking oneself what these things mean, which for the painter are nothing but images, it would be better to see if the poetic sense that he wanted to bring out, does indeed emerge through the respective forms and colours and, if it does, to recognise its power and at the same time his full right as a free creator".

The comparison to the words, poetics and concepts of de Chirico's Metaphysical Art are striking: "To live in the world like in an immense museum of oddities, full of bizarre, multicoloured toys which change what they look like and which like children we occasionally break to see what they are like inside";²³ "I became aware that there is a multitude of strange, unknown things that can be translated into painting";²⁴ "What is needed

19 *Ibidem*, *A Celebration*.

20 *Ibidem*, *The Song of the Railway station*.

21 G. de Chirico, *Méditations d'un peintre. Que pourrait être la peinture de l'avenir*, in *Scritti/1*, cit., p. 649.

22 *Ibidem*, p. 623.

23 *Ibidem*, p. 612.

24 *Ibidem*, p. 611.



fig. 2 H. Rousseau, *Le Douanier, The Muse Inspiring the Poet* (first version), 1909

above all is to free art of everything it contains of what is known today, all subjects, all ideas and thoughts, all symbols must be put aside”;²⁵ “one must have great sensitivity above all. To represent everything in the world as an enigma, not only the big questions that have always been asked, why the world was created, why we are born, live and die, as after all it may possibly be, as I have already said, that there is no reason in this”;²⁶ “Divest art of everything that it still may contain of routine, of rules, of a tendency toward a subject, of an aesthetical synthesis; completely suppress man as a point of reference, as a means of expressing a symbol, a sensation or a thought [...] to see everything, even man, as a thing. It is the Nietzschean method”.²⁷

There is also significant consonance regarding the concept of “state of soul”: “It is that Henri Rousseau, who does not reason but works, rather, in his own special way of conceiving with first impulses, had understood this truth: in art everything is allowed and legitimate if every element contributes to the sincere expression of a state of the soul”.

The German word *Stimmung*, which de Chirico places at the foundation of his metaphysical perception means “state of soul” and many years later, remembering that he had derived the concept from Nietzsche, de Chirico actually defined his aesthetic intuition as: “This novelty is a strange and profound poetry, infinitely mysterious and solitary, which is based on *Stimmung* (I use this very effective German word which could be translated as atmosphere in the moral sense)”.²⁸

But what is perhaps even more interesting about this article on Rousseau, which describes his poetics and his dawn-like images of the world, is the passage in which Soffici “technically” describes Rousseau’s painting process in terms that cannot fail to influence de Chirico, constituting a truly unique parallel: “And firstly his colours, even though they are achieved in a bizarre way (he spreads his colours on the canvas one at a time; for example, first all the greens, then all the reds, then all the blues and so on), are refined and magnificent [...] they have nuances and hues of an unprecedented sweetness and richness”.

There can be no doubt that this technical influence, which is one of painterly concreteness and not only of a poetic and philosophical kind, is exactly what de Chirico put into practice in his earliest metaphysical renderings. This influence is completely different from the painting technique he previously used: the layers become expansive and monochrome, heightened by gentle brushstrokes that are light or dark that give volume to the forms. This technique is completely different to the fizzling weaves of layered brushstrokes that build forms in the Böcklinesque paintings. The use of this new technique has double value for de Chirico. If on one hand, he expresses himself through a “modern” technique that abandons the tiresome

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 613.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 612.

²⁷ G. de Chirico, *Que pourrait être la peinture de l'avenir*, cit., p. 649.

²⁸ G. de Chirico, *The Memoirs of Giorgio de Chirico*, cit., p. 55.



fig. 3 G. de Chirico, *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon*, 1910 (detail)

traditions in which the paint impasto struggles to adhere to reality and its forms, on the other, he succeeds in representing a world in which the abstraction of colour gives a noumenal, abstract and mental absoluteness that achieves an interior and synthetic vision.

If the two paintings appeared in black and white in the article on Rousseau and no true association with his themes can be seen in de Chirico's forms, a new "method" making colour a wellspring of "primitive" preciousities did however emerge and constituted a practical suggestion for the decisive leap that occurred in the search for a language capable of expressing the intellectual and philosophical innovations developed at the time.

De Chirico applied the "Douanier method" diligently: spreading broad and monochrome areas upon which he intervened

with light patinas and black outlines to give concrete substance to the elements. We see brick and stonewalls achieved with a uniform background to which the painter added simple and schematic lines; uniform facades without contrasts but only sparse patinas; skies that are no longer rippling with reflections but are intact and monolithic like glazes. If we compare them with the paintings that came just before, the technical difference is truly profound: the new metaphysical method took form on indications revealed by Soffici about a painter who, like him, was above and beyond artistic modes and movements. De Chirico derived from these influences a method of transforming a reality that is still realistic and phenomenal into an archetypal, sound and absolute form:²⁹ he opened the way to the "total solidification of the universe"³⁰ he would achieve in a decisive manner in Paris.

An element of direct iconographic reference to Rousseau does indeed exist, even if de Chirico carried on his own personal path, toning down any comparison to Le Douanier, a sort of elective brother he knew only through the words of Soffici (who reveals scenes from deserted cities laden with a sense of inexplicable melancholy

29 A further, much later reference but of extraordinary significance comes from the *Memoirs of Julien Levy*, de Chirico's New York art dealer (my thanks to Katherine Robinson for the reference). It was 1936, de Chirico had just arrived in New York when Levy took him for a tour of the city one evening with Chick Austin (Director of Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford): "In Sands Street there is a bar, or was a bar, with murals by a primitive Sunday painter of Italianate name and mysterious de Chirico technique. We ordered beer and drank it while the belligerent barman told us that if we didn't remove our madman friend (Giorgio) who was staring furiously at the murals, he would have to remove one or the other himself. I wanted to buy those murals, would have bought them, or at least have learned the painter's name had I been sober. He was my candidate for the laurels of Customs Inspector Rousseau. [...] That night I was confused (too much beer) concerning everyone's actions and reactions. What de Chirico was really like became clear later at one of the sailor's dance halls where we wound up the evening. The lights were painful, the music was tortured, and the dancers threw themselves about in a kind of agony that was neither pleasurable nor simulated. Giorgio was really frightened. Chick and I were having fun; de Chirico, for a moment I understood, really saw *things as they were*". De Chirico's hypnotized amazement shows how he was reflecting on the origins of Metaphysical painting. Levy's careful account is part of his *Memoirs* (J. Levy, *Memoir of an Art Gallery*, New York 1977) in which he reveals an extremely introspective portrait of de Chirico. Republished in "Metafisica. Quaderni della Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico", n. 7/8, 2008, pp. 707-715.

30 G. de Chirico, *Arte metafisica e scienze occulte*, in "Ars Nova", 3, 1919.



fig. 4 G. de Chirico, *Picasso, Baroness Hélène d'Oettingen, Serge Férat and Léopold Survage at dinner, with Self-portrait by Rousseau*, 1914

interesting as it uses Paolo Uccello as a significant and exclusive comparison with de Chirico's metaphysical painting and as the only painter he believed also had profound similarities with Le Douanier. Clearly he had glimpsed a common denominator in the purity of the chromatic layers in both artists' works and found further evidence of a direct vision of the works of Le Douanier, Apollinaire's favourite artist, in de Chirico's Parisian production.

We must ask ourselves a question to which, admittedly, there may be no definite answer. In 1910-1911, Florence was a truly a small milieu, in which one could bump into anyone just walking past Giubbe Rosse café. The question is whether de Chirico may possibly have been able to have had direct contact with the intellectuals of "La Voce", which as we have seen had a clear influence on the development of this turning point in his painting, and in particular Soffici. Neither of the two protagonists speaks of it nor seems to even hint at it. And yet we cannot rule out that a casual encounter may have taken place (but neither can we take it for granted based on current knowledge). If they did meet, de Chirico could have possibly seen the two Rousseau paintings in Soffici's home and in particular the *Still Life* with its green background that has the same resonance as certain metaphysical skies, the same disquieting, semi-precious stone-like solidity of the sky in *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon*, *The Enigma of the Oracle* and *Self-portrait*, painted in Florence. Four years before de Chirico and Soffici's meeting in Paris in 1914, a fleeting encounter could have taken place between the two when de Chirico was still entirely unknown. Soffici may have forgotten such an encounter (de Chirico certainly not); it is also possible that de Chirico would not have mentioned it to his new friend whom he now saw absorbed in Apollinaire's circle. And yet a passage of the review, in which the two de Chirico brothers are described as "Florentine" (based solely on a year's sojourn in Florence) by a "genuine" Florentine such as Soffici, leaves a wide margin of plausibility for this hypothesis. Here is Soffici's text, published in the 1 July 1914 issue

to him) and two mediocre reproductions published in the periodical seemingly not on his wavelength. The first painting depicts a tropical forest in which a wild beast devours a buffalo and the other, *La Muse inspirant le poète* (fig. 2), is quoted almost literally in his first revelatory painting *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon*: the two figures lost in the middle of the square are undoubtedly dressed as ancients: a man and a woman arm in arm (fig. 3). In the corresponding part of Rousseau's painting we see the Poet and his Muse in the same pose: a raised hand, the other resting on the Poet's back. Incidentally, Rousseau's Muse also wears an ancient tunic. It is difficult to imagine that de Chirico's figures do not represent the Poet and his Muse in such a programmatic painting and at the same time that they are not a silent homage to Rousseau, whom de Chirico would later pay tribute to in a drawing (fig. 4).

A secondary comparison of this strict analogy between de Chirico and Rousseau is given to us later by Soffici who is first in Italy to write about de Chirico whom he had met at Apollinaire's studio in Paris in 1914. The article is very

of “Lacerba”: “Imagine a painter at the very heart of the increasingly daring research burning up this city that is the crucible of the world’s genius, who continues to paint calmly and with the application of an old, solitary master. He is a sort of Paolo Uccello enamoured with divine perspective and unaffected by anything outside its beautiful geometrics. I wrote Paolo Uccello’s name with no intention of establishing an indispensable similarity. Giorgio de Chirico is first and foremost absolutely modern and his geometry and the effects of perspective are the principle elements of his art and methods of expression and emotion. It is also true that his work is not similar to that of anyone else, ancient or modern, developed on these same elements. De Chirico’s painting is not painting in today’s sense of the word.



fig. 5 G. de Chirico, *Processione su un monte*, 1910

It could be defined as a writing of dreams. By means of almost infinite flights of arches and facades, long straight lines, gigantic masses of simple colours, lightness and almost funereal darkness, he expresses a sense of vastness, of solitude, of immobility, of stasis, which sometimes produce spectacles reflecting the state of memory in our soul that has almost fallen asleep. In a way that no-one else has ever done, Giorgio de Chirico expresses the poignant melancholy of the end of a beautiful day in an ancient Italian city, where at the far end of a solitary scene, beyond the background of loggias, porticoes and monuments from the past, a train puffs past, a lorry from a large warehouse waits or a tall industrial chimney stack smokes against a cloudless sky. The two brothers are Florentine [...]”.³¹ We can see that the terms that Soffici uses about de Chirico are somewhat similar, and sometimes identical, to the ones used for Rousseau. Whilst keeping de Chirico’s originality clear, the reference made to Paolo Uccello in relation to Rousseau in 1910 becomes extremely significant:

“Even good old Donatello laughed about the pictorial eccentricities of his shy friend Paolo Uccello; but those who know what art and beauty mean, know that today he was wrong, and that the madcap who did not know how to draw a horse’s anatomy, was one of the freshest, most sincere and courageous, and thus one of the greatest painters of the 15th century and of all time, of Florence, of Italy, of the world. Remembering Paolo Uccello, I may have involuntarily mentioned the only European artist to whom Henri Rousseau can be compared. Like him, he lives in a strange world that is both fantastical and real at the same time, present and distant, sometimes laughable and sometimes tragic, like him he is gratified with the luxuriating abundance of vegetables, fruit and flowers, in the imaginary companionship of the animals, beasts and birds, like him he spends his life in work that is ignored, he is collected and patient, greeted by laughter and by mockery each time he comes out of his solitude to show the world the fruits of his labours.”

31 A. Soffici, *Italiani all'estero*, in “Lacerba”, II, 13, 1 July 1914, p. 207.



fig. 6 G. de Chirico, *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon*, 1910

***A proto-metaphysical painting: Procession on a Mountain*, 1910**

Some words should be dedicated to a painting that is unanimously considered to immediately precede the new metaphysical path, as a link between the strictly Böcklinesque paintings and the first Enigmas: *Procession on a Mountain* (fig. 5). The composition is influenced by a painting by Camillo Innocenti which de Chirico most certainly saw at the Venice Biennale in 1909, as suggested by Calvesi,³² or by a composition by Charles Cottet present at the Venice Biennale in both 1903 and 1907, as Lecci suggests.³³ This shows us de Chirico's ability to seize upon stimuli and influences from very disparate and unpredictable elements, such as Innocenti's painting, which appears to have no point of contact with de Chirico's reflections or even his central models of that moment. It is a litmus test of the omnivorous ability of de Chirico to use influences of images on various

32 M. Calvesi, *La "nuova" Metafisica*, in *De Chirico. La nuova Metafisica*, exhibition catalogue edited by M. Calvesi and M. Ursino, Rome 1995, pp. 19-20. The obviousness of the reference has made this influence unanimously accepted; see P. Baldacci, *cit.*, 1997, p. 65.

33 On the painting see L. Lecci, *About an Early Painting by Giorgio de Chirico. Procession on Mountain*, in "Metafisica. Quaderni della Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico", 1/2, 2002, pp. 229-232. The author observes that after Cottet's painting *L'office du soir en Bretagne* was exhibited in 1903, a coloured etching of the same subject was shown in 1907 (again at the Biennale). Innocenti surely saw it and was inspired for the painting he exhibited in 1909. Whilst de Chirico saw the Biennale in 1909, he did not see the 1907 edition, and could have perhaps see Cottet's image only as a reproduction. Lecci makes the mistake of dating de Chirico's painting to 1909, as immediately preceding Metaphysical Art, supporting the incorrect dating of the letter spoken of in note 6.

levels of consciousness, of his powerful ability to redevelop and metabolise casual and linguistically disparate influences. These reflections give a detailed account of the eccentric ways of taking on and transforming considerations that have intrigued him, as the article on Rousseau did, accompanied by two photographs that were seemingly far from his perception (but with contents that are rather consistent with his anxious reflections about the search for a new style to express new contents). Beyond these reflections, what is striking about *Procession* is its technical achievement which is totally different from Innocenti's model. It is instead much closer to that of the two Enigmas and to the Rousseau influence as Soffici described: colours painted "one at a time" in large spreads, the absence of raised and quivering brushstrokes, the synthetic and "childlike" definition of the forms. There can be no doubt that the subject reminded the artist of an image of Greece, but the ghostly figures that move as a couple, with no luminous painterly vibrations, already belong to the metaphysical transfiguration. The primordial and *naïf* elements which exist in the composition have a direct relationship with Le Douanier's simplifications, with his "wrapped up" characters and the solitary desolation of his landscapes (and at the same time he clearly removes himself from Camillo Innocenti's naturalist figures whose clothes move in the wind). These are described by Soffici: "you need only look at his portraits, his family groups, his scenes of local life in the countryside and in the city, his weddings, still lifes and landscapes, in order to feel with what acute even if good-natured and almost kind perception he grasped the fright of the empty soul of his models, the bundled misery of the bourgeois man, his equal and relative". The distant similarity with Gauguin, aired by Calvesi and picked up by Lecci through Cottet, is not however likely at this chronological stage, if one takes into consideration the Impressionist works de Chirico saw in Florence (see above). The synthetism of the depiction is instead intimately linked to that of Le Douanier.

An even greater similarity to Rousseau's paintings found in the subject and rendering of this painting suggesting that it was completed earlier than the later, more mature ones and is a fact that is clearly and unanimously accepted by art historians. However, given the evolution of a style of painting of flat, silhouetted areas, it was certainly completed after the reading and the considered influence of Soffici's article on Rousseau: thus after 15 September 1910. Not only does the clear debt the painting owes to Le Douanier confirm what waw said in the previous paragraph, but the date of the painting is thus strictly connected to that of *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon*, namely the beginning of October, and it forms the first experiment, as yet still immature, of the new metaphysical path.

***The debut of Metaphysical Art: The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon*, 1910**

In various writings between the first Parisian period (1911-1915) and the second post-war period, de Chirico himself recalls how the birth of his first metaphysical painting was linked to a moment (the autumn) and a specific place, namely Piazza Santa Croce in Florence, as well as a particular deteriorating condition which put him "in a morbid state of sensitivity": "On a clear autumn afternoon, I was sitting on a bench in the middle of Piazza Santa Croce in Florence. Indeed, it wasn't the first time I had seen this square. I had just recovered from a long and painful intestinal illness and found myself in a morbid state of sensitivity. All of Nature surrounding me, even the marble of the buildings and the fountains, seemed to me to be convalescing also. In the centre of the square stands a statue of Dante cloaked in a long robe, hugging his oeuvre to his body, thoughtfully bowing his pensive laurel-crowned head toward the ground. The statue is of white marble, to which time has given a grey tinge that is very pleasing to the eye. The autumn sun, lukewarm and without love, lit the statue as well as the facade of the temple. 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,



fig. 7 Piazza Santa Croce, Florence, historical photograph early 20th Century

the moment is for me an enigma, because it is inexplicable. And I also like to define the resulting work as an enigma”.³⁴

The reason for frequent walks through Piazza Santa Croce (“Indeed, it wasn’t the first time I had seen this square”), apart from the compactness of the city, is shown in Noel-Johnson’s analysis, in which she reveals how the square was a somewhat compulsory point of passage on the frequent journeys that de Chirico made between his home and the National Library of Florence which is situated just behind it. This was a journey that he repeated at least 49 times between 23 April and 9 November 1910.³⁵

Comparing (as Soby did) *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon* (fig. 6) with a photo of the time of the square where the statue of Dante is still opposite the facade,³⁶ the initial inspiration seems clear, as does de Chirico’s enormous ability for poetic and iconographic reconstruction (fig. 7). The “metaphysical” content of the painting is well noted, and it was the artist himself who referred it to Nietzsche and his poetics of *Stimmung* (“the frame of mind” or “atmosphere in the moral sense”) as de Chirico defined it in Italian many years after that autumn afternoon, an atmosphere in which things appear to our eyes heavy with the inexplicable mystery of their nature, devoid of the common sense with which habit tends to dress them.

The houses in the background however are an echo and almost a copy of one of the backdrops described by Soffici in his article on Rousseau, in which he makes his most explicit reference to melancholy: “In the background, a terrace of light brown houses, with hundreds of yawning windows in a row, unrelentingly square, revealing dark, empty rooms that one senses are uninhabited. The same drawing, the same colour. But once again here, as in thousands of paintings of this sort, the same sense of irreparable, routine, daytime melancholy”.

Few other places in de Chirico’s metaphysical imagery have been identified by art historians, or have been suggested by the artist himself. For example, the silhouette of the horse monument which we see in two paintings from the Parisian period derives from monuments in Turin (in particular the statue of Emanuele Filiberto by C. Magliocchetti, as Soby noted, at the end of the road where Nietzsche lived in Turin, a city in which the philosopher had a breakdown holding a horse in his arms in 1888). De Chirico saw these monuments in Turin in 1911 on the occasion of a brief visit during which he found himself once again in a state of physical discomfort that intensified his sensations and perceptions. The painting *La gare Montparnasse* of 1914 unites childhood memories (his father was an engineer who built railways in Greece) and forms part of a nucleus of paintings featuring railway stations and locomotives blowing steam (“*peintre des gares*” is how Picasso defined him in 1914, as the artist later recalled in an autobiographical text³⁷).

34 G. de Chirico, *Méditations d’un peintre. Que pourrait être la peinture de l’avenir*, in *Scritti/1*, cit., 8, p. 650.

35 V. Noel-Johnson, *cit.*, p. 141, 145.

36 J. T. Soby, *Giorgio de Chirico*, New York 1955.

37 A. Bardi (pseudonimo of Giorgio de Chirico), *La vie de Giorgio de Chirico*, in “Sélection. Chronique de la vie artistique”, VIII, Éditions Sélection,



fig. 8 G. de Chirico, *The Enigma of the Oracle*, 1910

There are other places in de Chirico paintings that are seemingly imaginary but are identifiable. These places always hold special significance in his pictorial philosophy as locations of *Stimmung*. We could say that de Chirico's inspiration is aimed towards the identification of the mysterious side of places and things: "You must find the demon in every thing" as he wrote in 1918.³⁸ This aspect prevails in the initial definition of Metaphysical Art, based on a precise recovery of real elements that he transformed so greatly as to render them almost unrecognisable, as mysterious echoes of a dawning world. At the end of 1913 and the start of 1914, whilst his relationship with Apollinaire was intensifying, de Chirico exceeded every allusive reference to existing places in the construction of spaces. These spaces lose all links with reality towards the end of his stay in Paris (1914-1915). He would once again propose formally and iconographically plausible places whilst in Ferrara in 1917 and 1918.

The Enigma of the Oracle, 1910

Of the three paintings de Chirico exhibited in Paris at the Salon d'Automne of 1912, we have seen that *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon* of 1910 was inspired by Piazza Santa Croce in Florence. The other two include a self-portrait and *The Enigma of the Oracle* (fig. 8). The identification of the site where the

Anversa 1929, pp. 20-26; now in "Metafisica. Quaderni della Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico" n. 5/6, 2006, pp. 496-500.

38 G. de Chirico, *Zeuxis the Explorer*, in "Valori Plastici", I, 1918; English translation in this periodical.

mantle-clad oracle is inspired by a god partially hidden behind a curtain,³⁹ is useful for the full understanding of the meanings and forms of visual inspiration of this very first metaphysical moment. The painting was executed in Florence in the second half of 1910 and together with *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon* and the fundamental *Enigma of the Hour*, also of 1910,⁴⁰ it represents a programmatic display of the painter's philosophical-poetic intentions.

The identification of this transfigured place dates back to an essay of mine of 1992.⁴¹ Even in the radical transformation of single elements (which one can ascertain also in the portrayal of Piazza Santa Croce), the small temple on a terrace recalls the Athens Acropolis seen from the temple of Athena Nike with fitting clarity. The terrace overlooking the void, the continuous walls with no openings both of the temple and of the propitious atmosphere of the picture gallery, the narrowing of the shadow created by the open-air propylaea, but above all the white city in the distance at the foot of the hill, with the view in the background of the sea of Piraeus bounded to the left by Mount Egaleo, are elements that all converge with extreme precision (and reinvention) in the iconography of the painting.⁴²

If de Chirico alludes to Athens as an inevitable place of thought and the place of his childhood education in *The Enigma of the Oracle* (as he had shortly before alluded to Florence as the "Italian Athens"), the city where he deepened his philosophical interest thanks to Nietzsche and Schopenhauer and where he reached the "revelation" of his new metaphysical method of painting (simplified through Rousseau's childish and motionless technique), the two paintings can be read as a diptych, a sort of manifesto dedicated to the enigma (which gives the two paintings their titles and that are the same size): the Greek enigma and the Florentine enigma as syntheses of a new system of thought, of a kind of painting that reveals content until then unknown. For this reason we suggest a further influence from, Charles Maurras, a French writer and journalist who certainly must have spent time with the de Chirico family during his lengthy stay in Athens (March-May 1896) for the first Olympic games: it would have been almost impossible to avoid him given the narrowness of the cultured circle of Athens. In 1901 he published *Anthinéa – D'Athènes à Florence*, a book that had many print runs, in which he wrote widely about the parallels of Athens-Florence, a piece of the puzzle that cannot have escaped the consciousness of the artist, his mother and brother: the index of a widespread European sentiment which saw Athens and Florence as the origins of modern, classical and Renaissance civilisation. The book contains many references that are echoed in de Chirico's vision of the first metaphysical painting.⁴³

39 It is more than certain that it is about an oracle and not, as suggested by Fagiolo, about Odysseus; see M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, "Et quid amabo nisi quod aenigma est?", Rome 1981.

40 In the previously cited letter to F. Gartz, de Chirico made a precise reference regarding the size of the paintings made in the autumn of 1910, specifying: "My paintings are small (the biggest is 50x70 cm, but each of them is an enigma, each contains a poem, an atmosphere (*Stimmung*) and a promise that you cannot find in other paintings". The small paintings indicated necessarily include *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon* and *The Enigma of the Oracle* (respectively 45x61 and 42x61 cm). From the artist's specification we also know that *The Enigma of the Hour* was executed in 1910, as it measures 54.5x70.5 can be considered one of the "biggest" paintings.

41 F. Benzi, *I luoghi di de Chirico*, in *Giorgio de Chirico - Pictor Optimus*, exhibition catalogue edited by F. Benzi and M.G. Tolomeo Speranza, Rome 1993. The text was republished in Id., *Eccentricità. Rivisitazioni sull'arte contemporanea*, Milan 2004.

42 Moreover, a further hypothesis regarding the localisation has been recently formulated by N. Velissiotis, who indicates the small hilltop town of Makrinita situated above Volos on Mount Pelion. See Velissiotis in *La nascita della metafisica nell'arte di Giorgio de Chirico*, Edizioni del Centro ellenico di cultura, Milan 2011, p. 11.

43 C. Maurras, *Anthinéa – D'Athènes à Florence*, Paris 1901, ed. 1936, in particular *Préface* and pp. 169-170. This matter, which is perhaps marginal but by no means inessential, is dealt with in a later study. Here are some lines from Maurras: "A stay in Florence made me understand the similarity between Greece and Tuscany in the best they have to offer"; a passage seems to have inspired the influence of the first metaphysical painting: "I found myself thinking about the familiar silhouettes of Florence. Despite the great instability of their nature, they were composed together with the monuments. For

A further element in *The Enigma of the Oracle* that alludes to the Greek experience is seen in the curtains hanging in the temple, which recur in *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon* where de Chirico also carries out a “Hellenisation” of the Neo-Gothic facade of Santa Croce. If on one hand the figure of the mantled man with his back to us is taken directly from Böcklin’s *Ulysses and Calypso* (as Soby often noted), and represents the oracle, the poet-prophet invaded by the mysterious spirit of God, on the other hand, curtains do not recur in any of the Swiss painter’s paintings and they are a curious addition that are wholly a Dechirichian brainchild. We can find an explanation of this iconography, which would recur in the painter’s work, in the de Chirico brothers’ childhood experiences. It is Savinio who makes particular reference to it: “In the middle of the iconostasis the arch masked by a red cotton curtain opened up. The hieron was behind. Nivasio tiptoed closer, he stopped to listen, he heard the rasping breath, the thick sighs of He who was hiding in the sacred partition [...]. Nivasio *knew* that two steps away, behind the red cotton curtain, in the sacred and cold space [...] sat the Greek God. And a warm piety brought tears to the rim of his eyelashes”.⁴⁴

The curtains are those found in Greek orthodox churches that divide the holy place from that of the worshippers, thus hiding the “presence” of god. The reference is even clearer in *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon*, where they seem to be precisely part of the iconostasis. In a painting of 1930, *Le Père Éternel contemple la maquette du Paradis Terrestre*, Savinio himself would portray the god hidden behind the sacred mystery of the curtain with disquieting mystery and had also echoed his brother’s painting in a well-known drawing of 1918.⁴⁵

It seems even more evident from this last element that the figure within the holy area that is seen from behind, cordoned off by the curtain blowing in the wind, can only be the oracle of the hidden god (whose head we can get a glimpse of behind the impenetrable curtain), he who puts divine thought in communication with the world of man; and the oracle is also in de Chirico’s projection of Heraclitus, the philosopher upon whom Nietzsche founds the philosophy of Zarathustra (in *Ecce homo*). De Chirico himself describes the sentiment of the oracle he wanted to represent: “One of the strangest and profound sensations that prehistory has left us with is the sensation of premonition. It will always exist. It is like eternal proof of the non-sense of the universe. The first man must have seen premonitions everywhere; he must have trembled with every step he took [...]. I have often imagined vaticinators attentive to the lament of the wave which in the evening withdraws from the Adamitic earth; I have imagined them with head and body enveloped in a chlamys, awaiting the mysterious and revelatory oracle. Thus I once also imagined the Ephesian meditating in the first light of dawn beneath the peristyle of the temple of Artemis of the hundred breasts”.⁴⁶ The hour of the day is dawn, in contrast to the afternoon of the “founding” painting of Metaphysical Art. The lack of shadows in the painting also attests to this, appropriately for the “frozen hour of dawn”. In the same passage, which constitutes a very accurate description of the painting that we are examining, de Chirico indicates to us perhaps also the time of year (in addition to the time of day) in which he imagined the painting, namely

the whole evening I could not shake this persecutory dream, animated and regulated by the spring breeze which, in winter as in summer, would rise up from the Florentine Arno. The sensation was nothing new. I felt it immediately when I arrived. But it became ever stronger, an intoxication [...]. Following my stroll in a dreamy state still wrong, I went down Via Dante and past the house of the father of the most beloved of poets [...]. This thin and humble facade, which has the character of an architectural transposition of the character of the poet”.

⁴⁴ A. Savinio, *Infanzia di Nivasio Dolcemare*, Mondadori, Milan 1941, Einaudi, Turin 1973, p. 58.

⁴⁵ There is no reason to date Savinio’s painting differently. It was donated to art collector Signorelli (the first Italian collector to purchase a de Chirico painting) by Savinio, who attributed the date himself, a fact well remembered by the family.

⁴⁶ G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1*, cit., p. 625.

“towards the end of springtime”: “In a temple in ruins, a mutilated statue of a god spoke in a mysterious language. This vision always comes to me with a cold sensation as if a wintery wind had touched me from a faraway, unknown land. The hour? It is the frozen hour of a bright day dawn towards the end of springtime when the glaucous profundity of the celestial vault causes dizziness in he who delves his gaze into it. Startled, he feels drawn to the abyss as if the sky was beneath him; he stares, like a trembling helmsman leaning from a prow bathed in the golden light of dawn, at the cerulean blue profundity of the withdrawn tide. It is the hour that has already been. Like the man who from the light of day finds himself in the shade of a temple and does not see the white-looking statue, then little by little reveals its form to him, a form ever purer; it is thus that the sentiment of the primitive artist is born in me again. The first to chisel out a god, the first to feel the desire to *create* a god. And then I thought that the idea of imagining God with a human face as the Greeks conceived in art could be an eternal pretext for the discovery of great sources and new sensations”⁴⁷.

In addition to noting how the intention for “primitive” representation is clear (which we have seen widely examined in Rousseau through Soffici’s interpretation) we must observe how the painting is quite likely a representation of the spirit of springtime, of something poised in a forward position, on the vertiginous void of becoming, whilst lending an ear to the oracle, he who sees beyond.

De Chirico’s creation of Metaphysical Art, which comes into being at a deep level during his Italian sojourn and conspicuously in Florence, reached maturity in Paris, where he arrived on 14 July 1911, ready to encounter what was new in France and to show his paintings in public. Through the reading of Soffici, he had already seized upon the pictorial crux of Rousseau who held a privileged place of honour on the Parisian intellectual scene: Picasso and Apollinaire were indeed great admirers of Le Douanier. The French novelties would touch de Chirico only marginally, as at that time he was mature and established and conscious of his innovation. His language, an increasingly complex and abstract development, was something Apollinaire would discover with marvel (even though this did not occur immediately). Confident in the eclectic circle of poet-prophet of the avant-garde (which ranged from Rousseau to the Cubists, from Picasso to the Orphists, and to de Chirico himself), from that moment onwards de Chirico was no longer an Italian artist (or “Florentine”, as Soffici wrote) but European more than anything else, capable of uniting Germany, Italy, France, ancient and modern Greece – all the founding souls of the continent – in a lasting synthesis. The “Greek-ish Chirico”, as Carrà called him in a vaguely derogatory tone,⁴⁸ never lost his Greek accent even in Italian, as a testimony to how deep his Greek roots were. *Hellénisme et pessimisme* was also the title of the first book by Nietzsche that he read in the National Library of Florence, upon his arrival in the city of metaphysical revelations.

Translated by Rosamund King

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 623.

⁴⁸ C. Carrà, *L’italianismo artistico e i suoi denigratori*, in “Il Selvaggio”, 30 December 1927.