

DE CHIRICO: MIND AND HAND

Pierangelo Sequeri

Expressed in the compelling form of an aphorism, the intuition reaches us from one of the rare fragments handed down to us from the thought of Anaxagoras of Clazomenae (500-428 BC), one of the thinkers who inaugurated the adventure of Western philosophical and scientific thought, in which we have been raised. (At least until now).

“Man is the wisest of living creatures because he has hands”¹

Its aphoristic quality is more evident if one thinks how the insight of this connection, formulated thus and in that age, was really not that obvious. To such an extent that the great Aristotle would later “correct” Anaxagoras by carefully observing that, if anything, the opposite was true. That is, man has hands because he has a “rational” soul that forms even his body and his aptitude in a congruent manner with activities guided by the mind. As such, he actually determined the success of the relationship Anaxagoras had so brilliantly perceived: the correlation between man’s mind and hand. It is a strategic axis in understanding our species’ “technical” and “artistic” – even “spiritual” – cultural development.

Today we are capable of describing, even in biological and anthropologic terms, the uniqueness of this relationship. Although ancient philosophy (Aristotle as mentioned, as well as Saint Thomas Aquinas) had already elaborated the matrix-like characteristic – ontological and symbolic –, in order to comprehend the prodigious interaction between mind and body which characterises the human being. The hand is able to incorporate, in a fairly ductile, fine and distinctive manner, the spirit’s intent and receptivity in its interaction with the material world. Through this special mixture of intelligence and functionality, expression and sensitiveness, ideal elaboration and material manipulation, the human world, or rather – the world –, has been transformed into an environment which is literally moulded with thought, knowledge, memory, freedom, desire and imagination. Our world is “physically” inconceivable in terms of a clear separation between the universe of mental facts and the collection of material objects. The hand is the sensitive terminal of the entire sensorial apparatus, giving

¹ Diels-Kranz 59 A 102.

operative course – literally giving body – to our sensitiveness, making it active in the world. As with other organs of the sensorial apparatus, the hand must be “competent” on both sides. The hand must know many things about the spirit and be able to distinguish these things with the degree of differentiation requested. And it must be very proficient in its interaction with the material element, to mould it – directly or indirectly – in the most efficient way, in order to give expression to something which has been thought of and desired.

If an artist does not know all this, then who does? The ancient relationship between art and *techne*, which has gone through a thousand transformations, has also generated many forms of contrast. Now, we must live ourselves. Within art, the debate regarding the relationship between the spiritual, mental, aesthetical and technical, has explored various possibilities. In part, this is a sign of growth and evolution of meaning. After all, the matrix of these dialectics remains, even now, the ancient intuition of this very close rapport, the tie that binds the spirit’s immateriality to the hand’s corporality, even in its apparent abyssal distance. It is a prodigious relationship which does not cease to amaze (think of the ‘hand’ of a painter, or the ‘touch’ of a pianist!). Intrigue, paradox and admiration which do not cease to give rise to thought.

De Chirico shows his perception of the questions that the new knowledge of evolutionary functionality and anthropological specificity of the bios bring to the solid base of this ancient intuition. A few decades later, we see the fruits achieved by the phenomenology of perception (Merleau-Ponty) and the new philosophical impetus of aesthetical knowledge (grasped from its *aesthesis* side, or rather, the typically human sensitiveness with regard to the bond between sensation and interiority, which moulds the order of logos as it does that of imagination, affection and spirituality). This research has elaborated, by means of new conceptual instruments, the anthropological roots of the human’s symbolic and artistic aptitude. Once more, the operative axis of the entwinement between the spirit and the senses – the hand – give us “food for thought”. With great acumen, de Chirico had already grasped the risk, which in the meantime had started to undermine the enthusiasm around this rediscovery. The notes on the “manuscript”² on which our interest resounds, are in many ways developed in the cheerful autobiographical *meditationes* (with an St. Augustinian lean, even if played out with self-irony and minimalism), published posthumously under the title *Il Signor Dudron*³. I will choose two points, which in my view, seem to be particularly dear to de Chirico.

The first alarm derives from an instrumental interference, as one might call it, in which we have been taken up on a global level for some time now.

“The machine takes man’s intelligence away. Man’s hands no longer have the important task of producing everything that man’s brain invents. The hands are loosing and will continue to loose their capacity and ability more and more. [...] If we consider how all human intelligence, which is so superior to the intelligence of animals, has its origins in and has been able to develop thanks to the construction of the human hand, and that if man’s hands had had the shape of a dog’s paw or a horse’s hoof, none of that which has been created would exist. Therefore, we must admit that mechanics,

² Cf. G. de Chirico *The Brain and the Hand (on Drawing)*, in this Periodical, pp. 532-533.

³ G. de Chirico *Il Signor Dudron*, Le Lettere, Florence, 1998.

which diminishes the important role the hand plays in the creation of things, diminishes our cerebral capacities, and will continue to do so more and more".⁴

In order to fully appreciate the value of these annotations, I feel it is better not to place de Chirico's opinion in relation to the vast theoretical and complex philosophical questions tied to the domain of technology and mechanisation (Heidegger or Anders, for example). De Chirico is not a philosopher by profession. His criticism of mechanisation (as well as psychoanalysis, for that matter) presents us with an image of the time period, which reaches us from his viewpoint, or to put it better, the special refinement which originates in artistic practice in the relationship between the exercise of the mind and hand. Seen from this angle, his warning touches on a critical point which can only be safeguarded by the presence of artistic creativity on a social level. The artist is, still today, the only one – even with respect to the philosopher – who knows exactly what it is that the mind (and the soul) will miss out on the day there will be no sign (and event, and world) which only the hand's sensitivity is able to create and understand.

In order to fully understand the importance of the artist's irreplaceable contribution, I would suggest we follow Mr. Dudron's careful description of the detailed manual actions of the symbolic acts that mark everyday life, over his philosophical conversations with his admired Isabella. I would listen carefully when he tells us of his intolerance for the useless manual virtuosity – in his opinion wasted and detestable – needed to produce a plate of snails stuffed with onions⁵, which, although an extremely refined dish, is anything but pleasing. I would observe him as he savours – with his hand and mind, and all the senses of the soul and body – the fine manual gestures that he is taken up in as he lights his much-loved pipe.⁶ It is here that the artist gives us the perception of his irreplaceable contribution to the safekeeping of a culture linked to the hand's sensitivity.

Even if it has matured for a long time now, the second danger spot which de Chirico announces finds us substantially unprepared. The issue regards the capacity to mould the "spiritual senses", which is precisely equivalent to what de Chirico calls "the material substance of paint". This loss enshrouds contemporary art in an obscure, profound, melancholic exile which does not illuminate the past and consumes the future in resignation. The heart of the problem resides, as always, in the torpor of the point of contact between the soul and the world, balanced as it is, on the axis of the mind and hand. The draining of cooperation reduces both to separate organs, centres of instrumental function incapable of scoring signs and lighting meaning into the material substance of the universe.

"The material substance with which one paints is not a vague thing; it is a concrete body whose quality is already evident on the pallet which the painter has prepared for his work. Art amateurs as well as the majority of modern painters do not even ask themselves what the real meaning of the material substance of paint is, and as a consequence, they can not even imagine what composes such substance. But true artists, conscious of the necessity of finding once again the secret of the material substance of paint, without which painting can not return to perfection, these true artists ardently search

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

for this substance. Only their talent and work can assist them in this research because this tradition was interrupted around the middle of the nineteenth century and we must start all over again".⁷

De Chirico, in the midst of lasting incomprehension, has brought the material substance of paint to this threshold.⁸ And he has obliged the spiritual senses to visually measure themselves with a question that philosophers and theologians have sterilely wrestled with for too long, and at great distance from the "artistic touch" in which the soul feels and the hand thinks. "What is metaphysics?" Heidegger asks with a new accent at the start of the age of radical reconsiderations. "Where is the hand's soul? From where do the forms of space and time take the life which is destined to them?" de Chirico asks, as he moulds paint's material substance. His gesture – so very far from "conceptual" art which allows for an exclusion of the physical substance of paint – has analogous strength. This is how de Chirico's painting reformulates his question. The exercise of the spiritual senses is the highest point, the incandescent summit of the mind-hand axis, which qualifies the human. The secret of the material substance of paint is the profound unification of technique and beauty, strength and form, intelligence and enjoyment, which make the difference in the work of art. And the work of art's difference marks the difference of the human spirit in the world. A billion experiments which move within the limited confines of the relationship between cause and effect are not worth a drop of this innovation in which the spiritual senses appear as the material substance of paint and vice versa.

Painting – Art – immediately registers the metaphysical downfall. It brings it out, it suffers with it and makes it felt. It is an illness of the soul that the material substance of paint suffers, which concerns us and that which we hold dearest. Certainly, the evidence of a sickness of the soul is already something. It is a start. With the radicalism of a new beginning, philosophy – it is about time! – comes forward cautiously, and with fresh humility. Something may come of it, if painting and philosophy search together. It is another possibility for an alliance of the mind and the hand, each with its own resources. In the meantime, the treatment of beauty, form, intelligence and enjoyment has passed over to the marketing of things and bodies. Can art be satisfied with merely accumulating the evidence of these symptoms? Would it not want, in the meantime, to have a bit more care for the soul that dwells between the mind and the hand, whilst it waits?⁹

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 78-79.

⁸ Cf. in this Periodical G. de Chirico, *A Discourse on the Material Substance of Paint*, pp. 541-547.

⁹ See image p. 177. Giorgio de Chirico, *The Maestro's hand*, early 1940s. [Extraordinary "transposition" of the right side of Michelangelo's Creation of Man. Here, the hand of the man-artist reaches to collect the creative vibration of the life of the spirit, by means of the "material substance of paint".]