

## HERACLITEAN INFLUENCES IN DE CHIRICO'S POETICS

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### *Heraclitus, the Obscure and the Lone Fighter*

It is well known that the constant presence of philosophical thought in Giorgio de Chirico's metaphysical poetics established the extent to which philosophy was an essential point of reference for the artist and just how philosophic his way of understanding painting was. This discipline, developed within de Chirico's historical-artistic pursuit, led to the insertion of an increasing number of absolutely new elements into painting, enriching the notion of "metaphysical" with new and diverse meanings. Personal experiences of differing magnitude subsequently consolidated the artist's approach with the works of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, his philosophers of reference, with whom he shared criticism of scientific knowledge and traditional Metaphysics.<sup>1</sup> With the philosopher Heraclitus (fig. 1), a considerable affinity in the "vision of the world", and therefore of things, led eventually to a special relationship not ascribable solely to the art-philosophy theme; the artist's individual memory, in relation to his own cultural formation and to his singular perception of the phenomenal element, constitutes the structure of the poetics therein. So the crucial point is not to establish contexts and relations of either philosophy or art, nor to refer to the attempts of philosophy to define and explain what art is, but rather to see what synthesis the artist was able to implement between the two disciplines in drawing up a philosophical mode of understanding art.<sup>2</sup> What "opens up" in metaphysical painting is the ability to evoke a perspective on the world that has neither the ambition to produce an image of reality, nor the aspiration to embody "truth".<sup>3</sup> The painter and the philosophers become travelling companions along the road to *unveiling* reality, each assigned a different role: the philosophers theorise on the non-sense of life, the painter renders it visible in the artistic dimension. Each of them, aware that the evident non-sense of the world conceals another deeper and more inexplicable one, reveal its "metaphysical" value (fig. 2).

Thus Heraclitus and subsequently de Chirico investigated the relationships between phenomena, with their respective and distinctively powerful investigative tools, in an attempt to penetrate Nature

<sup>1</sup> Following a Nietzschean line of thought, de Chirico also accuses classical metaphysics with inadequacy inasmuch as it ends up depriving reality of value; its transcendent dimension shifts the ultimate meaning of things to a celestial world and is thus unable to identify the mechanisms of "revelation".

<sup>2</sup> See J. M. Schaeffer, *L'arte dell'età moderna. Estetica e filosofia dell'arte dal XVII secolo ad oggi*, Italian translation by S. Poggi, Il Mulino, Bologna 1996, p. 127.

<sup>3</sup> De Chirico had no desire to see a new truth for art in the eternal, nor to attribute any cathartic function thereto. This is borne out in the indissoluble union the painter brought about between the notion of Metaphysics and that of Enigma. The two do not define absolute concepts in the works, which remain, in a sort of suspension of judgement in attendance of what de Chirico calls "revelation", the only one actually manifested in the work.



fig. 1 Raphael, *Heraclitus*, detail from *School of Athens*, 1510-1511, Vatican Museums, Vatican City

"I interrogated myself" (fragment 124), drives knowledge into an egocentric dimension: "Nietzsche responded to this problem by drawing, in a very clear-cut style, a truly touching spiritual portrait of Heraclitus, whilst interpreting the fundamental meaning of his "interrogating himself" in a highly original manner worth recalling here. He sets forth his reflections on Heraclitus in a piece called *On the Pathos of Truth* where he speaks of those men who live to seek the Truth itself and in doing so follow impassable roads. Among such men it is precisely the philosophers who emerge as the boldest of knights. In effect, says Nietzsche, travelling the road alone is part of their essence, and requires a truly exceptional capacity for resistance to the hostility they come up against. Nietzsche cites Heraclitus precisely as an example of "the pride of the wise", considered to be of such scope that were there not a real example it could not even be imagined in the abstract."<sup>4</sup> And again, obscure, enigmatic, solitary and difficult, as he is presented by Diogenes Laërtius who brings in Timon's assessment, probably shared by many other contemporaries: "Among them came Heraclitus who cried shrilly as the cuckoo, reviler of the common people, enigmatic."<sup>5</sup>

The Greek philosopher's traits are immediately evident: inopportune, intransigent and none too clear, criticising and judging the men of his time very harshly. He had no qualms about constantly underscoring the ignorance of the general run of men and even of the foremost Greek thinkers, deriding erudition that lacked intelligence: "He was arrogant as no other and looked on everyone with proud

with view to drawing up, not an answer, but that model of answer which each has built up upon the basis of his knowledge.

With the same freedom and with the exceptional ability – peculiar to both – to represent reality, they express a meaningful and highly consequential synthesis of the idea of Nature that "loves to hide" (fr. 116-DK 22 B123). Diversification of the interpretive means leads the philosopher to the "Logos" and the artist to the "Enigma".

The philosopher and the artist seem to have trodden impassable paths. Both are aware that in any formative itinerary – be it ethical, political or purely cultural-cognitive – the point of departure is oneself. To understand this we may read Nietzsche's sketch of Heraclitus, quoted by Giovanni Reale, in which the philosopher explains the reason why Heraclitus, with the motto

<sup>4</sup> G. Reale in R. Mondolfo and L. Taran, *Eraclito. Testimonianze, imitazioni e frammenti*, M. Marcovich ed., Bompiani, Milan 2007, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Diogenes Laërtius, *Vite dei filosofi*, vol. II, book IX, Laterza, Bari 1976, p. 354.

disdain, as may be clearly seen from his work in which he says: "Erudition does not teach intelligence; otherwise it would have taught Hesiod and Pythagoras, and moreover Xenophanes and Hecataeus. As wisdom consists in one thing alone, in understanding reason, which governs the world far and wide."<sup>6</sup> Heraclitus' teachings could not but arouse amazement and scandal by their novelty, and his polemic targets were many: the corruption of politicians, the habits and customs of his fellow citizens, which induced him to avoid ever taking part in political life. The ignorance of minds, the wickedness of hearts, led inevitably to reprehensible conduct: symptomatic proof of this lay in a somewhat unclear economic well-being. Their religious practices appeared absurd and intrinsically impious,

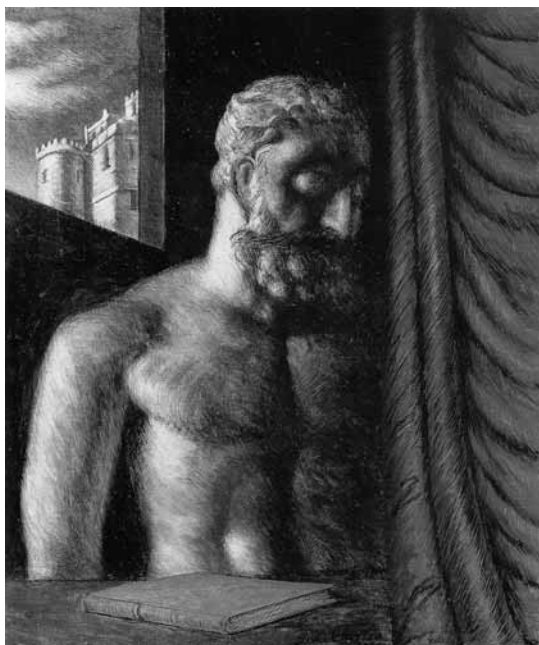


fig. 2 Giorgio de Chirico, *The Philosopher*, 1924

without any degree of moral nobility. So the Just were more unique than rare. No wonder then that as a consequence of these bitter assessments Heraclitus decided to leave the city and live in solitude.<sup>7</sup> Heraclitus' universal law – eternal and common to all things –, was not understood even by those whom history has presented to us as wise. These were men whose judgment was based on their excessive faith in perception, which limited their intellectual activity to the mechanical reproduction of sensations at a conceptual level. Instead, the intellect must interpret what sight and hearing communicate to the human mind and act on this formless material in accordance with the mind's own intrinsic and universal laws: those of logic. This does not mean a devaluation of knowledge gained through perception, but rather, underlines the role played by the intellect in surpassing Sensism.

Intelligence, de Chirico was to say, is the ideal of the age, an ideal his contemporaries were unable to live up to. Proof of this is found in the phenomenon of modern art, where intellect rules to the detriment of intelligence, which instead, became increasingly rare; and excessive reflection on how to become "wise" inevitably leads to fallacious intellectualism.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 352. Heraclitus believed that knowledge of many things was necessary, but not enough if we want to acquire wisdom. Those who think wisdom is the same as knowing many things are mistaken. Faced with the considerable variety of phenomena the world shows us, the true wise man must recognise them as multiple aspects of a unitary reality. Only through use of the intellect are we able to go beyond variety, multiplicity. Those sages, including Homer and Archilochus, are not truly wise. Though they know many things they are not in fact able to recognise the universal "Logos". See *Omero merita di essere cacciato via dagli agoni a frustate, e così Archiloco*. Fr. 45. See A. Tonelli, *Eraclito. Dell'Origine*, Feltrinelli, Milan 2005, p. 98. Paradoxically, possessing a great deal of knowledge is not an aid to understanding but becomes an obstacle to grasping the unity that binds multiple things. Most men lack this ability, and in spite of Heraclitus' efforts to teach them to acknowledge the universal law that operates in the world, men were unable to understand it. See *ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

<sup>7</sup> Heraclitus tended to be pessimistic and bitter; traditionally, he has been depicted as "weeping". He felt that it was mere dream and illusion to look on reality without considering its inherent discord and struggle. See *ibid.*

"In all epochs one may observe a preference for a determined quality, a determined human ability. There were epochs in which courage and the art of warfare were appreciated above all. There were others in which virtue and abstinence were admired. Yet others placed prime importance on elegance and refinement. Our age too has its ideal, which is "intelligence". Many of our contemporaries wish for one thing only: to be or at least to appear intelligent. Since intelligence is a gift from heaven and can in no way be acquired, intellectualism was invented as a substitute. [...] One of the phenomena that most clearly demonstrate man's need to create intellectualism (true intelligence is becoming increasingly rare) is the phenomenon of modern art."<sup>8</sup>

In de Chirico's metaphysical painting, the representation of a reality that goes beyond perceptible appearances is effected through mysterious, hallucinatory or dreamlike images; qualities comparable to Heraclitus' ambiguous and oracular style. His prose work, usually referred to as *On Nature*, has come down to us in fragments collected for the most part from quotations by ancient philosophers and above all by the Fathers of the Church. These brief and incisive sayings<sup>9</sup>, which are not always clear, earned Heraclitus his nickname "the obscure" and document his enigmatic personality. These concise and isolated fragments present his philosophical doctrine through allusions and hints of which it is hard to reconstruct the original order.<sup>10</sup> "Not in haste do we read the book by Heraclitus of Ephesus. Strait is the gate, narrow the way. Deep night and darkness. But if the guide is initiated into the mysteries, it is more limpid than the shining sun."<sup>11</sup> It appears that Heraclitus employed "obscure expression" as a way of selecting his audience. In the words of Diogenes Laërtius: "Heraclitus deposited his work in the temple of Artemis and, some say, had deliberately written it in a fairly obscure style so it would be approached (only) by the worthy and not be easy prey for the scorn of the herd."<sup>12</sup>

Whilst others bestowed the epithets of obscure and enigmatic to Heraclitus, the qualities de Chirico wished to be associated with were self-attributed over time. In *The Memoirs of Giorgio de Chirico* the painter explains how these appellations can be traced to characteristics of his personality present since boyhood and that distinguished his way of facing the difficulties of life: a greater capacity of courage, enterprise and intelligence than other people. In the early chapters of the *Memoirs* the artist recounts: "Life in the small town of Volos was dense with metaphysical and provincial events. I used to make kites. I had become a real master in making coloured paper kites. When I went to fly these kites in a square in front of our house I was almost always alone."<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> G. de Chirico, *Considerazioni sulla pittura moderna*, signed I. Far, «Stile», January 1942; now in *G. de Chirico, Scritti I, (1911-1945). Romanzi e scritti critici e teorici*, A. Cortellessa, ed., A. Bonito Oliva., dir. Bompiani, Milan 2008, p. 433.

<sup>9</sup> Traditionally the fragments are called "aphorisms", brief definitions or sayings which, in a pointed manner, summarise a reflection or insight. The aphorism is congenial to philosophic thought inasmuch as the style is evocative and seductive but also charged with ambiguity. The aphoristic form appears often in philosophic thought, especially at the origins: the truth of a wise oral tradition, in part still linked to the mysteries of oracular and sacerdotal culture, maintained and handed down by the early philosophers in sayings and proverbs. Use of the aphorism, which would be renewed over the course of the history of philosophy, was also chosen by de Chirico's most beloved philosopher, Nietzsche, whose incisive language and intensity of poetic evocativeness were a prime source of fascination. He called Nietzsche the most profound poet, just as he called Böcklin the most profound painter.

<sup>10</sup> With regard to the fragments see German scholar H. Diels, who first collected the pre-Socratic fragments, set them out in the alphabetical order of the sources who cited them, believing this to be the most philologically objective criterion. "It is impossible to reconstruct the original order of the fragments other than conjecturally or approximately." A. Tonelli, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

<sup>11</sup> Anonymous, in Diogenes Laërtius, *Vite dei filosofi*, cit., p. 358.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, IX, 6, p. 354.

<sup>13</sup> G. de Chirico, *Memorie della mia vita*, Astrolabio, Rome 1945; II ed. Rizzoli, Milan 1962; English translation *The Memoirs of Giorgio de Chirico*, Peter Owen, London 1971, p. 21.

De Chirico is careful to underscore both his expertise and the ease with which he carried out his undertakings alone. This ability to act individually was precisely one of the reasons why he felt even more besieged. The artist continues: "Urchins from another quarter also came to fly their kites in that square, but they stayed away from me and tried to send theirs higher in order to entangle the strings and bring mine down, an action known as *fanestra* in local slang. If I wanted to make a verb out of *fanestra*, I could say that when I was fanestrated. I reacted violently, hurling stones at the "fanestrators"; I was pretty good with a slingshot."<sup>14</sup>

### *Logos and Enigma*

De Chirico's knowledge of the Greek world and Greek philosophy favoured an approach to the natural element similar to that of the pre-Socratics. The question of Nature represented a research laboratory for the artist and the naturalist philosophers. For the former it was artistic experimentation and for the latter, an identification with Nature through science.<sup>15</sup> Nature was animated by mysterious forces and manifested its meanings only by allusion, like the oracles.<sup>16</sup> On this subject de Chirico expressed an analogy between the two languages, implementing a perfect synthesis in *The Enigma of the Oracle* (1910). The iconography [of the figure] is clearly inspired by Arnold Böcklin's interpretation of the Ulysses and Calypso episode (*Odyssey*, book V) in his 1883 painting of the same name.<sup>17</sup> Whilst in Böcklin's painting, the pensive figure of Ulysses in a natural setting expresses the hero's nostalgia for his far-off homeland, in de Chirico nostalgic thought is transformed into deep meditation, that of a philosopher reflecting on the enigmas of the world. De Chirico himself explains how "in every work Böcklin gives that sense of surprise and perturbation, as when we run into a stranger whom we feel we have already seen but without knowing where or when [...]. Strange and inexplicable phenomena on which Heraclitus once meditated beneath the porticoes of the temple of Diana, in ancient Ephesus."<sup>18</sup> Indeed, through his portrayal of Böcklin's Ulysses, de Chirico alludes precisely to Heraclitus: the philosopher wrapped in thought before the enigmas of the world. He is depicted here meditating on the response received from the oracle, or in simple reflection, while gazing at what appears to be a Mediterranean landscape.

In *The Enigma of the Oracle* (1910), with profound meditations gleaned from a cognitive itinerary, de Chirico transformed into painting the language of the oracle whose characteristics were clarified by Heraclitus thus: "The lord whose is the oracle at Delphi neither speaks nor hides his meaning, but gives a sign" (fr. 66-DK 22 B93).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> It was precisely a wide range of scientific knowledge, such as geometry and mathematics, that allowed philosophers to formulate visions of the world on models of rationality. The result of this different approach was that the Greek idea of "science" (*epistème*) had a broader and more complex meaning than the one ascribed in our culture today. The artist drew upon that meaning.

<sup>16</sup> In both philosophical and artistic thought Nature has been and is a fundamental component in the interpretation and representation of reality. The attempt to penetrate it elicits pointers towards understanding the world, qualifiable with two specific tools: discursive reason and artistic creation. Nature has therefore been and still is a foremost theme in philosophical research, just as it has been and is a model in artistic representations.

<sup>17</sup> The painting *Odysseus and Calypso* gave him the impetus for an in-depth approach to a theme beloved by Böcklin and a consolidated part of the Romantic tradition: the human figure, usually seen from behind, contemplating a landscape. This tradition saw in Nature the reflection of human spirituality in which the figure – as in Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* – seems to suggest a subjective involvement of identification therewith, losing the dimension of an objective spectacle of contemplation.

<sup>18</sup> G. de Chirico, *Arnoldo Böcklin*, *Il Convegno*, I, 4 May 1920; now in *Scritti/1...*, cit., p. 708.

With this, the ambiguity of the oracle is understood as the ambiguity of the god Apollo who, while he manifests the principle of all things in the Logos, at the same time renders them secret. Heraclitus points out that the communications of the god, whose methods he likens to his own, are not willed. The suggestions, veiled words and allusions are the result of a style imposed by the profundity of the argument, a profundity that can only be "glimpsed" by the human eye. Therefore the oracular word is an intermediary between the world of men and that of the gods. The enigmatic aspect of the word of Apollo is congenial equally to Heraclitus and de Chirico, precisely due to the centrality of the enigma in the thought of each, both heirs to the indissoluble bond handed down from antiquity: the bond between wisdom and enigma. It is no accident that Heraclitus addresses "night-wanderers, magi, bacchants, lenaeans and initiates" (fr. 1- DK 22 B14).

Fragment 70, which seems to be the opening of Heraclitus' work, certainly presents many problems of interpretation: its thematic core consists precisely in the explanation of the unity of the real contained in the doctrine of the Logos.<sup>19</sup> The interpretive difficulties of the fragment, over and above the language, derive mainly from the fact that there is no other extant fragment that explains what the philosopher intended by this term. So in explaining it we must proceed by hypothesis, also availing ourselves of contributions from other Greek thinkers. Logos appears to have numerous meanings, one of which is precisely that of the *law* which unifies phenomena. "Though this Word is true evermore, yet men are as unable to understand it when they hear it for the first time as before they have heard it at all. For, though all things come to pass in accordance with this Word, men seem as if they had no experience of them, when they make trial of words and deeds such as I set forth, dividing each thing according to its kind and showing how it is what it is. But other men know not what they are doing when awake, even as they forget what they do in sleep." (fr. 70-DK 22 B1). More than the other Heraclitean aphorisms, this fragment is of a discursive nature. All the same, there is no lack of ambiguity in the text, probably wilful on the author's part. Aristotle would note that the adverb 'always' in the first line might be linked both to the foregoing "is" as well as to the following "men have no understanding". Heraclitus' familiarity with the language of the oracle is explained by Giorgio Colli as follows: "In the word the wisdom of god is manifested to man, and the form and order, the nexus in which the words are presented, reveals that these are not human but indeed divine words. Hence the external nature of the oracle: ambiguity, obscurity, allusiveness hard to decipher, uncertainty."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> See A. Tonelli, *op. cit.*, p. 23. The Greek word *logos* has several meanings. Heraclitus employs three of them: universal law that orders Nature and governs the human world; Reason that is common to all men, who have the possibility of penetrating this universal law; Rational Discourse which clarifies and specifies universal law. Of this however "men have no understanding", and it is here that Heraclitus' aristocratic orientation is at once revealed, which appears to be the index of his problems. Heraclitus insists on the division of men into the sleeping - who mistake the characteristics of the dream for real life - and the awake. The latter in the wakefulness that leads them to "investigate themselves" reveal themselves as "thought" or as "logos". Heraclitus' pessimism induces him to think that the multitude of sleepers will not alter their condition. Considering it impossible to find individuals able to separate the true from the false, opinion from "logos", this last remains indefinable. See R. Mondolfo and L. Taran, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

<sup>20</sup> G. Colli, *La nascita della filosofia*, Adelphi, Milan 2006, p. 16.

### *Nature loves to hide*

Fragment 116 of Heraclitus' *oeuvre* is normally translated as "Nature loves to hide" (fr. 116-DK 22 B54); but also as "the real constitution of each thing has the habit of hiding"<sup>21</sup>, and again in Angelo Tonelli: "the origin loves to hide"<sup>22</sup>. The three translations account for the multiple meanings of the term "Nature" and, moreover, the extent to which every fragment in Heraclitus is always susceptible to various and complex meanings. The fragment includes a reference to that which is concealed and to whether it might be knowable. The Nature of this *unveiling* is perhaps the most profitable suggestion for the artist. From which veil should reality be freed? Is there something to be rendered wholly visible and comprehensible? If so, in what does it consist? The wise man, aware of the ambiguity of the cosmos we live in, intends to put us on guard against real and clear things that lead us into error. So *unveiling* does not bring us to a definitive truth but to an ongoing and inexhaustible seeking. What is evinced in the first place is that Nature is multiple but there is unity within. What this unity is, and above all what its Nature is, is one of Heraclitus' most complex conceptions. In his thought provoking analysis of the birth of philosophy Giorgio Colli maintains that one of the essential themes of Heraclitus' philosophy is what he calls the "pathos" of the hidden, "that is to say the tendency to consider the ultimate foundations of the world as being concealed"<sup>23</sup>, underscoring how the enigma is something central to Heraclitus' thought, just how important and serious it had been in the archaic age when the wise man was he who could solve enigmas.

What does this pronunciation actually mean? Another plausible interpretation of the celebrated aphorism is that *Physis*, rather than clearly unveiling its governing principles and laws, prefers to be unveiled by men. Not all men but only those who know how to employ reason, which Heraclitus calls Logos, whose use must go beyond perceptual experience and everything that is affirmed by sight, hearing, touch and taste. It is therefore from the senses that Nature is concealed, so the pursuit of Truth must draw on other instruments to discover *alétheia*, a Greek term for Truth which literally means "that which does not remain concealed, forgotten, veiled". There is no "elsewhere" in which Truth may be constructed or traced, it can only be "unveiled"; which is to say sought in the very place where it hides. Identifying the laws governing Nature implies discovering what is concealed therein.

Of course it is not a question of "Nature" in a physical sense, since this is not hidden and we need only our senses to know it. Nature that "loves to hide" and "loves to be unveiled" is that which remains concealed in its essence though manifesting itself in the things to which moreover it gives origin. This Nature is characterised by "immanence" and "transcendence", meaning that while it is within the reality it produces, at the same time it goes beyond this reality and exceeds the limitations thereof. It is this very Nature that is looked upon by the philosopher who has identified its inextinguishable creative power, albeit hidden and camouflaged, and who has embarked upon the path towards the discovery of what is indeterminate and invisible.

<sup>21</sup> R. Mondolfo and L. Taran, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>22</sup> A. Tonelli, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

<sup>23</sup> G. Colli, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

This really seems to be the painter's cultural debt to the philosopher: one must seek within reality, in which a universe is concealed, and it is precisely there that in the exploration of new expressive possibilities the artist surpasses rational knowledge and steps into a "metaphysical dimension". In this regard de Chirico states: "the metaphysical work of art appears serene; but it gives the impression that something new must take place in this very serenity and that other signs, beyond the already clear ones, must take over on the square of the canvas. Such is the revelatory symptom of inhabited depth. What is disturbing about the flat surface of a perfectly calm ocean is not so much the kilometeric distance between ourselves and the seabed, but the unknown lurking at the bottom. Were it not so, the idea of space would give us the sensation of dizziness, as when we find ourselves at great altitudes."<sup>24</sup> This original form of artistic communication presents a singular interpretation of perceived reality in which even the most commonplace patterns undergo alteration. The enigma, source of inspiration, became central to de Chirico's philosophical painting: *Et quid amabo nisi quod aenigma est?* (and what shall I love if not the enigma?) as seen in his first self-portrait (1911) on which he wrote the phrase on a painted frame within the portrait. The pose is pensive and melancholic, with his head resting on his left hand. It seems to show that there is a new way of seeing things and investigating their most hidden side. It is precisely in the representation of ordinary, recognisable things that mystery resides, where the painter communicates the anguish of man who feels extraneous to reality. In *Zeuxis the Explorer* he wrote: "The great glove in coloured zinc, with its terrible gilded nails, swung on the shop door in the saddest of breezes on a city afternoon, its index finger pointing at the paving stones, showing me the hermetic signs of a new melancholy. The papier-mâché skull in the hairdresser's window, cut off in the clashing heroism of shadowy prehistory, burned my heart and brain like a recurrent chant [...]"<sup>25</sup> Heraclitus' fragment 125 seems more than any other to unite philosopher and artist: "If you do not expect the unexpected, you will not find it; for it is hard to be sought out and difficult" (fr. 125-DK 22 B18), which A. Tonelli explains as follows: "Hope, at once evocation and openness to divine revelation and the reawakening of humanity, reveals itself as a possible form of knowledge and action at the heart of life, which is mystery."<sup>26</sup>

### Myth

Myth was the first attempt to explain Nature in all its manifestations, and the mythic vision of the world has always exerted great fascination. Mythological subjects have often been represented in painting, where myth has always been recounted and revisited. Though de Chirico's painting went through many changes, it retained the element of myth. It therefore constitutes the basis of the expression of his classicality. At the origins of philosophy we see the pre-Socratics going beyond the mythical explanation of the world as a result of primeval curiosity about knowing and explaining the phenomena of Nature. The effort of clarifying the secrets of Nature and the origins of the cosmos in ancient Greece had been a prerogative of myth, even before becoming a fundamental

<sup>24</sup> G. de Chirico, *Sull'arte metafisica, I segni eterni*, «Valori Plastici», I, 4-5 April-May 1919; now in *Scritti/1...*, cit., p. 291.

<sup>25</sup> G. de Chirico, *Zeusi l'esploratore*, «Valori Plastici», I, 1 November 1918; now in *Scritti/1...*, cit., p. 320.

<sup>26</sup> A. Tonelli, *op. cit.*, p. 31.



theme of philosophical inquiry. Myth – which literally means “word”, “discourse” and also “story” – became knowledge by supplying an explanation of phenomena. By reassuring men, it freed them from their fear of the unknown. Myth for the Greeks, due to its antiquity, was considered immutable knowledge inasmuch as it was always recounted in the same way and was inalterable, notwithstanding the many changes it underwent in the oral tradition.



fig. 3 Giorgio de Chirico, *Battle of Centaurs*, 1909

What was actually underscored was the impossibility of subjecting myth to any kind of rational analysis since it formed an essential part of the traditions and religious beliefs that the Greeks shared. Philosophy intended to construct that analysis with a wholly modified intellectual attitude. Though the basic themes of cosmology were maintained unaltered as recounted in myth, they underwent examination to verify their content in a refusal to accept uncritically what they narrated. This meant coupling empirical inquiry with rational reflection in order to proceed with a reinterpretation of the myth, which was not rejected but indeed sometimes actually confirmed. The change lay in the method with which it received confirmation: no longer from authority but from inquiry carried out by reason. Thus if Thales states that the principle of all things is water and, as Aristotle says, he does so after having observed that the nourishment of all things is humid, we may infer a method of inquiry whose conclusions are legitimated. This however does not prevent Thales from thinking that the outcome of his research might be an indirect confirmation of the Homeric myth in which the universe was generated by the river god Oceanus and his wife Tethys.<sup>27</sup> So there are deep similarities between myth and Logos, which is to say that the beginning of rational knowledge and the story of myth turn out to be closer than might be imagined. Many elements of myth persisted in the Ionic cosmologies. Subsequently the content of myth cast off the guise of story and became problem. Cosmology created a method of inquiry, became a system that laid open the deep structure of Nature. If myth had been an attempt to rationalise reality, in philosophy myth was rationalised and took the form of an explicitly formulated problem. Cosmology transformed its language: the historical tale gave way to a system more suitable for describing this deep structure of Nature. Abstract and elaborate concepts and greater rigour in reasoning were the hallmarks of philosophical language, now distant from myth in both form and content. An unbridgeable gap was created between them. Philosophy returned myth to the rock-bottom of imagination, precluding it from the world of knowledge and “truth”.

<sup>27</sup> See G. Reale, *Filosofia antica in Antichità Classica. Enciclopedia Tematica Aperta*, Jaca Book, Milan 1993, p. 19.



fig. 4 Giorgio de Chirico, *The Archaeologists*, 1927

transforms the themes while maintaining the story unaltered, combining it with the signs of his new painting. The painter enthusiastically dedicated his early works to myth, with Argonauts, Centaurs and Tritons as subjects. Some pictures show the influence of Böcklin and Klinger<sup>29</sup>: *Battle of Centaurs* (1909, fig. 3) and *Triton and Siren* (1909) by taking on the atmospheres and passions expressed by these artists. The Greek world of myth becomes the expression of a past, an archaeological dig that is valuable in terms of memory. This is why the viscera of the *Archaeologists* (fig. 4) are archaeological excavations, an interiorisation of the past in which the desire to recover it is revealed.

De Chirico's culture fed on a passion for Greek mythology and philosophy. Like Nietzsche he believed that the mythical origins of classical Greece, together with the philosophy and science of the Greeks, lie at the heart of modern European thought: the cradle of western culture where the greatest themes of humanity were tackled. It is precisely for this reason that the apparently classical-style vision employs myth, the Greek "daemon", on this side of everyday reality, to show the profound hiatus between present and past and to open an eye, neither classical nor modern but *post-modern*, on the future of art and our civilisation itself.

*Translated by David Smith*

<sup>29</sup> G. de Chirico, *Autobiografia*, reprinted in *Scritti/1...*, cit., p. 678.

<sup>29</sup> In extolling the figure of Klinger, de Chirico unequivocally recalls that of Böcklin. In fact both were capable of expressing contemporaneity in a mythical key, where the dimension of the real hovers in a metaphysical aura: the mysterious atmosphere so keenly sought by de Chirico.