

DE CHIRICO. *PROCESSION ON THE MOUNTAIN*

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The important contribution of Leo Lecci relating to the painting *Processione sul monte* (Procession on the mountain) by Giorgio de Chirico, published in number 1-2 of «Quaderni della Metafisica», enables us to make a possibly definitive pronouncement on the work under examination.

I was the one to move forward the dating of the painting, which was always believed to be of 1908 or previously. I first brought it forward to 1910, in order to explain, with the exhibition on Impressionism that was held in Florence in April, what seemed to me to be a definite “Gauguinism” of the figures. I then referred it to a moment “immediately after” the artist’s visit to the Venice Biennial Exhibition, and “perhaps” to the Gino Rossi exhibition in that same city in September. That is, I placed it in the summer of 1909, or “at the beginning of 1910”, inasmuch as the painter did not necessarily return to his easel immediately after his visit to Venice.

In the halls of the Venice Biennial Exhibition, de Chirico must have seen Camillo Innocenti’s *Al rosario* (To the Rosary), on whose composition he drew from. The hypothesis that he had also seen the Gino Rossi exhibition enabled me to explain the “Gauguinism” as mediated by a painter who had studied Gauguin.

Now the painting by Charles Cotter, an admirer of Gauguin, published by Leo Lecci, clearly explains what the origin of that “Gauguinism” is (therefore, effectively “Gauguinism” and effectively mediated by another painter). It is obvious that the figures drawn by de Chirico show strong traces of influence of that model (I would not say so, instead, of the coloured etching of 1907). However, this does not rule out that the compositional scheme takes Camillo Innocenti’s *Al rosario* painting into account which, like the de Chirico painting, presents a path leading upwards (and not a flat plane, as in the Cotter work). In the same way, it repeats the position of the first figure in the procession at the top of the

hill, followed by two other figures (something which cannot be seen in the Cotter painting). Furthermore, at the end of this ascent in Camillo Innocenti's work, there is an isolated church with a group of birds in flight nearby, as in the de Chirico painting, and not a village with several houses and windmills in addition to a church, with no birds in the sky, as in the Cotter painting. Lastly, to the right of the figures, the field is empty in both the Innocenti and de Chirico paintings, whilst it is occupied by prominent masonry structures in the Cotter work.

Besides, if we admit (and Lecci admits it) that de Chirico visited the 1909 Venice Biennial Exhibition, how can we believe that he did not pay attention to a work (the one by Innocenti) that was so similar to Cotter's, which he had certainly observed well, in order to design a painting that came to his mind precisely at that moment (mid-1909), when, that is, he visited the Biennial Exhibition and was able to see *Al rosario*? The problem remains of where de Chirico saw the Cotter painting. But since it was reproduced in the Catalogue of the 1903 Biennial Exhibition, it is more than likely that, on visiting the 1909 Biennial, the painter had purchased – or at least caught sight of – the catalogues of the previous Biennial Exhibitions. Among those pages, his attention would have been attracted by Cotter's painting, perhaps precisely because of its similarity to the Camillo Innocenti work, which was on display at the Exhibition.

In other words, de Chirico saw both paintings (one in its original form, the other in photographs) on the same occasion, in Venice, and combined the memory of them in a composition that took both of them into account, while remaining impressed above all by Cotter's dark and mysterious figures.

For me it seems probable that things occurred in this way.

It is only that I would have liked to have seen my merits acknowledged by a serious scholar like Lecci (even if I know that it is always necessary to choose between renouncing them or cutting a poor figure by recognising them for oneself. As I have grown older, I have chosen the second path). What merits? For one thing, those of having perceived in the de Chirico figures the influence – probably mediated by other painters – of Gauguin, an influence that had never been noted previously; and an influence which I myself then pointed out as being direct and effective in metaphysical works.

Furthermore, merit for having moved the date of the painting from 1908 to the middle of 1909, something which, according to Lecci, was done by.... Baldacci. My initial uncertainty between the middle of 1909 and the beginning of 1910 was more than justified, insomuch as it cannot

be excluded that some time may elapse between receiving a stimulus and translating it into a painting, perhaps due to the involvement of other engagements.

Subsequently, however, I indicated the middle of 1909 with certainty, in articles with which – I have the impression – Lecci is not acquainted: “De Chirico dall’Arno alla Senna” (De Chirico from the Arno to the Seine), in «Ars» No. 16 (April 1999, p. 52) and “La Metafisica in discussione”, (The question of Metaphysics re-opened) in «Ars» No. 20 (August 1999, p. 70). And I indicated this date with certainty for the same reasons that Lecci is now invoking: because I believed and still believe that *Processione sul monte* is one of those small paintings which de Chirico, when writing in Gartz on 26th January 1910 (a letter that was previously unknown), said that he had painted “during this summer”.

May Lecci nevertheless allow me to observe that there is an ambiguity at this point in his writing: in fact, he writes that, in this way, *Processione sul monte* comes close “to the early metaphysical works painted de Chirico during the summer of 1909”. But the early metaphysical works, as I believe I have demonstrated in the two articles just mentioned, belong undoubtedly to 1910. Indeed, I maintained that, in speaking of small paintings done “during this summer”, de Chirico had to be referring to works such as *Processione sul monte*, and not therefore to the ‘Enigmas’ of the following year, which were so different. ‘Enigmas’, what’s more, which would have an interpretation of Nietzsche made in October 1909 in Rome as their cultural background. If we give de Chirico the time to return, think and then execute his paintings, we would be in November-December of 1909. How then is it possible that, in a letter dated January, he says that he painted them last summer? And this is only one of the many – in my opinion indisputable – arguments on the basis of which it is necessary to anchor the *Enigma di un pomeriggio di autunno* (Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon) to the autumn of 1910. Without any doubt whatsoever.



De Chirico, *Procession on the Mountain*

Translated by Carolyn Cotchett