

FLORENTINE PERIOD 1910-1911 BIOGRAPHICAL CHRONOLOGY AND DOCUMENTATION

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This article aims to summarise a problem which has occupied the Foundation in recent years and which concerns the historical event and theoretical content of Giorgio de Chirico's discovery of Metaphysical Art.

In 1994 a theory emerged that altered the story of the birth of Metaphysical Art. Initially the theory changed the date of this invention (1) and, subsequently, also the place where the first metaphysical works were painted (2). Moreover, the intellectual property of the discovery of this new art form was called into question (3). Some years later, in 1997, the theoretical meaning at the heart of metaphysical painting was also altered (4). The only aspect to remain unchallenged was the art of painting itself, and with this, the compositional design and material execution of Giorgio de Chirico's first metaphysical works.

The place and year of the birth of Metaphysical Art have always been a historically certain and accepted datum among scholars of the artist. Historiography had clearly ascertained that metaphysical painting saw the light in Florence in 1910, according to documentation available at the time, consisting mainly of Giorgio de Chirico's autobiographical writings. One of these, a text drawn up by the artist two years later, on the occasion of his artistic debut in Paris, contains a number of important indications. Written in 1912, it bears witness to the place (Florence) and the season of the year (autumn) in which the first metaphysical painting was conceived. Over and above this data, the text supplies a clear and evocative picture of what de Chirico was thinking, feeling and seeing at the specific moment of his artistic illumination that had led him to create the manifesto work, *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon* (fig. 1), with a grouping of cognitive factors he would later conceptualise as "revelation":

I will explain how I had the revelation of a painting which I exhibited this year at the Salon d'Automne entitled: *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon*.

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, thought-

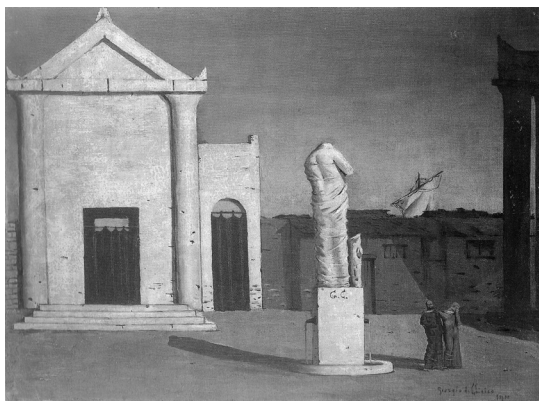


fig. 1 G. de Chirico, *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon*, 1910, private collection

fully 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, the moment is for me an enigma, because it is inexplicable. And I also like to define the resulting work as an enigma.¹

During the important years of his training, de Chirico spent the autumn season in four different cities, prior to launching his artistic career: Munich 1906-1908, Milan 1909, Florence 1910 and Paris 1911, where he exhibited his work for the first time at the Salon dell'Automne the following year. These sojourns are confirmed in subsequent autobiographical texts that recount various circumstances of the life and travels of the family, consisting of his mother Gemma and younger brother Andrea (Alberto Savinio), during the years preceding de Chirico's arrival in Paris (14 July 1911). Consequently, the account of quiet meditation "on a clear autumn afternoon" in Piazza Santa Croce can only refer to 1910. The young artist's state of health and subsequent recovery dealt with in the text are elements which supply a further key to interpreting the timeline and which he would describe in detail in his 1945 *Memoirs*.

This testimony is part of a text drawn up by the artist after his participation at the Salon d'Automne with the works *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon*, *The Enigma of the Oracle* (1910) and *Self-portrait* (1910-1911). The essay, well thought-out and of a theoretical nature, is aimed at opening up a new avenue for painting: "What will be the aim of painting in the future? The same as poetry, music and philosophy. To give sensations theretofore unknown".

Eighty years later, at the beginning of the 1990s, an additional autograph testimony by the artist came to light, dealing with the discovery of Metaphysical Art. More intimate and exalted, it precedes the Paris text and is contemporary with the execution of the first metaphysical works in Florence in 1910. The 22 year old de Chirico wrote a letter to Fritz Gartz, friend and fellow student at the Munich Academy, enthusiastically announcing the leap forward he had made with his research and the creation of his first works which he described as "paintings that are the most profound that exist in the absolute". The letter was written in Florence immediately after the moment in which de Chirico created "the enigma" in painting as a perceptible but indecipherable exteriority. In this letter he talks

¹ G. de Chirico, *Méditations d'un peintre. Que pourrait être la peinture de l'avenir*, in Id. *Scritti/1(1911-1945). Romanzi e scritti critici e teorici*, edited by A. Cortellesa, Bompiani, Milan 2008, pp. 649-652.

about the very heart of his new vision embodied in the paintings just completed and mentions how Nietzsche's philosophy nourished his miraculous revelation. He furthermore explains his conviction that he had created something extraordinary and absolutely new which, in his own words, "will be a revelation for the whole world".

Handwritten in German and erroneously dated, this letter is part of a correspondence of 12 letters written between mid 1909 and early 1911 that de Chirico sent to Fritz Gartz (also including a letter in French from his mother Gemma in summer 1908). By its very nature the correspondence cannot be subdivided as the information and developments it contains are clearly linked together. The letter in question (written in Florence), is part of a series of correlatable events. Analysis of various information in the correspondence sets the date of the letter in question as late December 1910 (the 26th). It further confirms the dates of the family's movements in those years, fully in agreement with what de Chirico himself stated in his subsequent autobiographical writings. The correspondence therefore constitutes an additional and precise reference to the discovery of Metaphysical Art in Florence in 1910, purely on the basis of timing and logistics.

The extraordinary and evocative testimony of the late December letter appreciably enriches what was known about the discovery of Metaphysical Art and its theoretical meaning. Over and above confirming the timeline of the historic event in itself – a substantial but not indispensable demonstration, given the validity of the existing historical reconstruction – the importance of the discovery of the correspondence lies in its exceptional theoretical content. If one thinks only of the references made to artists and poets in the one single letter – including Böcklin, Dante, Goethe, Nietzsche and Michelangelo – it constitutes rare material for anyone intending to investigate the formation and maturing of de Chirico's thought.² He would later speak of these artists who were fundamental to the development of his creative consciousness in future essays: Böcklin and Nietzsche in the *Theoretical and Lyrical Texts* of the Éluard-Picasso manuscripts (1911-1915), and of Michelangelo from 1919 onwards. These texts were written when de Chirico was well on his course and set himself as a theoretician not only of his own art but of art in general, and therefore with a more conceptual and theoretical detachment. Whereas in the letter in question he expressed with passion and conviction his awareness of how these influences led him to his new discovery. His understanding of Nietzsche took form in painting: "I will whisper something in your ear," he wrote, "I am the only man who has understood Nietzsche – all my works demonstrate this". His enthusiasm reveals a new level of comprehension that seems to distinguish between an intellectual understanding and the concretization of Nietzsche's thought in *visual form*. These references bear witness to what he would later write in his *Memoirs*, where he affirmed that before the age of 20 he had already grasped the depth and the metaphysics of Böcklin's works and the mysterious side of Friedrich Nietzsche's oeuvre. The letter to Gartz is wholly singular and may very well be regarded as the artist's first theoretical text. As for his first paintings he wrote: "It is a *tremendous* joy for me to have painted them".

² Recent research carried out by V. Noel-Johnson regarding the library registers belonging to the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze constitutes a significant advancement and substantial contribution to research on de Chirico and his brother Savinio's formation during the period they lived in Florence (1910-1911). The author's research indicates 47 publications and journals consulted by de Chirico and Savinio from April 1910 to May 1911 and bears witness to the frequency of their visits to the library (published in this Journal, pp. 171-211).

The correspondence

The first indication of the existence of a de Chirico-Gartz correspondence appeared in the exhibition catalogue, *Betraying the Muse – De Chirico and the Surrealists* (New York, 1994), where the letter in question was quoted to justify the initiative taken on this occasion by curator Paolo Baldacci to back-date the painting *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon* from 1910 to 1909. The painting itself was not part of the exhibition. However, a framed reproduction of it hung alongside the copy of the painting executed by Max Ernst that bears the apocryphal signature: “Giorgio de Chirico” (1924). The catalogue entry information for the work states: “The new date relocates the painting, although signed and dated 1910, to late October or November, 1909, a radical change recently acknowledged and accepted as the artist’s beginning. [erroneous translation from the original Italian; the sentence should read: ‘a radical change in what has been acknowledged and accepted until now regarding the artist’s origins’ ed.]³ The existence of a letter from de Chirico to Fritz Gartz dated “January 1910” was announced as unequivocal proof of the new dating of the work. The fundamental problem here is that the letter was written in December 1910. The announcement was peculiar inasmuch as it was published as fact rather than a hypothesis subject to further verification. It was specified that the letter, together with other recently discovered material, would subsequently be published.

For the general reader the modification might have seemed merely the pointing out of a painting’s date. Whereas for those who have studied and researched de Chirico’s oeuvre, alteration of the date of this key work of Metaphysical Art weighs significantly on the young artist’s biography. The difference of one year more or less is not a negligible circumstance in an artist’s history, because it affects many factors of his training and contingent aspects of his private life. Announcement of the upcoming publication of the correspondence remedied the somewhat reckless form in which the news was given, a development that substantially changed the historicity of the origins of Giorgio de Chirico’s art.

The correspondence with Fritz Gartz was not published as announced, so for many years the academic community was unable to verify the documentary solidity behind the statement. The letters were at last published five years later, in 1999, but only in the original German (including ten letters from Giorgio de Chirico, one from his brother Alberto [handwritten by Giorgio] and a letter from their mother [in French], in an Italian publication that not only suffered from scarce distribution but, in fact, also limited accessibility of the specific documentation to German speakers only⁴. The form in which it was published made the material difficult to examine and consequently impossible to be duly verified. In 2008 the Foundation took the initiative of publishing the entire correspondence in anastatic copy with transcription in the original language and with translation into Italian and English so that scholars could have an overall view of the material.⁵

Baldacci who initially had access to the correspondence in 1994, erroneously interpreted the date and took it upon himself to rewrite de Chirico’s life history. As well as numerous incongruities between the information in the letter in question and in the other letters of the correspondence, there

³ *Betraying the Muse – De Chirico and the Surrealists*, exhibition catalogue, Paolo Baldacci Gallery, New York, 21 April – 28 May 1994, p. 252.

⁴ G. Roos, *Giorgio de Chirico e Alberto Savinio. Ricordi e documenti Monaco-Milano-Firenze 1906-1911*, ed. Bora, Bologna 1999.

⁵ See *Letters by Giorgio de Chirico, Gemma de Chirico and Alberto de Chirico to Fritz Gartz, Milan-Florence 1908-1911*, in “Metafisica. Quaderni della Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico”, n. 7/8, 2008, pp. 559-567; also available at www.fondazionedechirico.org (downloadable in pdf format).

is a clear conflict with what the artist states in his autobiographical writings, where he speaks of the transformation that took place in his art in Florence in 1910:

It is to this Florentine period that works such as *The Enigma of the Oracle*, or *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon*, belong. We speak of two works that, by their poetic power and their element of “discovery”, are worthy, even if dated 1910, of being placed on the same level of any of his later works.⁶

In Florence my health grew worse. Sometimes I painted small canvases. The Böcklin period had passed and I had begun to paint subjects in which I tried to express the strong and mysterious feeling I had discovered in the books of Nietzsche: the melancholy of beautiful autumn days, in the afternoon in Italian cities. It was the prelude to the Italian Piazzas painted a short time later in Paris and then in Milan, in Florence and in Rome.⁷

Instead of integrating the new documentation into the artist’s existing historiography, an erroneous reconstruction was carried out which called into question the invention of Metaphysical Art and also radically altered de Chirico’s biography. Subsequent to the backdating of the event by a whole year, the entire history of the artist’s early period was subjected to a fanciful rearrangement in order to make various other historical events fit into the new timeline, including the dates of earlier paintings (Böcklin period) and the family’s travels and changes of residency.

Therefore, the first alteration was the backdating of the work *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon* from 1910 to 1909 on the occasion of the 1994 exhibition. The second modification regarding the place where Metaphysical Art was discovered was announced in a newspaper article in December of the same year entitled “Something new on the de Chirico front: metaphysical painting was born in Milan in 1909 and not in 1910”⁸. The theory was reaffirmed on the occasion of an exhibition the following year (1995) dedicated to de Chirico’s brother: *Alberto Savinio, Musician, Writer and Painter*, held in the same New York gallery. In the catalogue, *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon* was dated 1909 and was no longer indicated as having been painted in Florence, as specified in the previous catalogue, but “probably” in Milan, together with another key work, *The Enigma of the Oracle*. It is at this point that the city of Milan was introduced as an integral part of the theory.⁹

In 1997 a 450 page monograph was published in Italian, English and French on Giorgio de Chirico’s early metaphysical period¹⁰, in which the theory that “Metaphysical Art was born in Milan in 1909” is presented as a historical fact. Paolo Baldacci, author of the monograph, thanks Gerd Roos for having supplied him with the Gartz correspondence (which he had discovered), together with

⁶ G. de Chirico, *La vie de Giorgio de Chirico*, in “Sélection. Chronique de la vie artistique”, signed “Angelo Bardi”, 1929, pp. 20-26. English translation, “Metafisica. Quaderni della Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico”, n. 5/6, 2006, with an introductory note by K. Robinson, pp. 496-500.

⁷ G. de Chirico, *The Memoirs of Giorgio de Chirico*, Peter Owen, London, 1971, p. 61.

⁸ P. Baldacci, in “Giornale dell’arte”, December 1994.

⁹ P. Baldacci, *Alberto Savinio, Musician, Writer and Painter*, exhibition catalogue, Paolo Baldacci Gallery, New York 1995, p. 16. With regard to the relevance of the city of Milan in relation to the correspondence, see P. Picozza, *Betraying de Chirico: the Falsification of Giorgio de Chirico’s Life History over the last Fifteen Years* in “Metafisica. Quaderni della Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico”, n. 9/10, 2011, p. 32.

¹⁰ P. Baldacci, *De Chirico 1888-1919. La metafisica*, Electa, Milan 1997; *De Chirico – The Metaphysical Period 1888-1919*, Bulfinch, New York 1997; *De Chirico – La Métaphysique 1888-1919*, Flammarion, Parigi 1997.

the results of Roos's own research.¹¹ Various passages from the correspondence are quoted in the book, interpolated with the narration of a theory thrown together in support of the new dating and the different place in which Metaphysical Art was invented.¹²

The cover page of the first chapter, *The Formulation of a Mode of Thought: July 1888 – July 1911*, introduces the volume with the following high-sounding quotations: "This is the Torah, the rest is but gloss" (Rabbi Hillel, 1st century BC) and "Art is magic free from the lie of seeming true" (Theodor W. Adorno, 1951).

Carrying out a playful inversion of roles between de Chirico's youthful testimony (1912) and the theory formalised in 1997 – with no intent to provoke but simply to transfer a metaphorical sense to what is set forth in this article – let us read an imaginary testimony by the author of the new theory: "I will explain how I had the revelation that de Chirico's Metaphysical Art was invented in Milan in 1909... I was sitting in front of recently discovered documents... I then had the strange impression that I was seeing everything for the first time. And the composition of a new theory came to me; and every time I look at it, I think of the reader, because it is inexplicable. And also I like to define my resulting monograph as an enigma".

Returning to the points listed at the beginning of this essay, we recall that over and above the place and date, even the intellectual property of the artistic discovery and the theoretic meaning at the heart of Metaphysical Art were affected by the new theory (points 3 and 4).

Maintaining that de Chirico's Metaphysical Art was created in Milan in 1909 rather than Florence in 1910, the co-authors of the theory¹³ necessarily had to attempt to reconcile the incongruity between their theory and the autobiographical testimony of the artist. The "ingenious" solution, of an impeccable "logic" is as follows: "At this point in the narrative we are compelled to inquire as to the origin of the widespread belief that Metaphysical Painting was born in Florence, and we will not be surprised to find that the precise point of origin is de Chirico himself who, by conscious choice, first created and then continued to fuel this myth [...]. All of the references to the years 1906-1911 in de Chirico's writings share the single aim of creating a chronology, false but seemingly precise, which assigns the Böcklinian paintings to the Milan period and the Metaphysical works to Florence"¹⁴.

This statement qualifies the artist as mendacious and dismisses the historiography as a plain and worn out opinion. From this perspective the "proof" that de Chirico lied is inferred from the fact that his testimony does not fit in with their theory, as may be seen from the following: "the documents of the time and de Chirico's later writings demonstrate that Giorgio intentionally decided, in subsequent phases, to construct a biography to suit himself, a biography that negated Savinio's role, especially in Milan, in determining a new artistic course."¹⁵ The vacuum created by such a deductive leap

¹¹ *Ibidem*. Baldacci refers to Roos' research as published in 1997, whilst his book only went to press in 1999.

¹² In a 1992 biographical note published in AA.VV., *Idea del classico 1916-1932. Temi classici nell'arte italiana degli anni Venti*, Baldacci replicated what Calvesi had indicated specifying that: "De Chirico was intellectually and spiritually ready to give life to a revolutionary style of painting full of promise upon returning to Florence following a brief period in Milan. The first compositions of the new aesthetical cycle, which would later be called metaphysical, were executed in Florence in the autumn of 1910". Fabbri Editore, Milan 1992, p. 229.

¹³ Gerd Roos, who had discovered the correspondence, upholds and promotes the theory of "Metaphysical Art, Milan 1909".

¹⁴ P. Baldacci, *op. cit.*, 1997, pp. 100-101.

¹⁵ P. Baldacci, *Metafisica in discussione*, in "Ars", August 1999, pp. 71-72. In the article, the following terms are used with regard to the artist: "liar", "prevaricator" and "Levantine".

is filled by the motive, according to the two authors, behind the ‘mystification’ employed by the artist: de Chirico lied in all his subsequent autobiographical writings because he had stolen the idea of metaphysical painting from his younger brother Alberto. The theft, or appropriation of another person’s intellectual property, is the dramatic driving force behind the theory and also constitutes the central theme of numerous articles published in the 15 years of its promotion.¹⁶

The two quotations are enough to illustrate the conclusions the authors derived from historiographic inquiry into the correspondence. Within certain limits, the mistaken dating of the letter – January instead of December 1910 – could be simply an error. In 1997, it was certainly not the first time the author was seeing the documents... meanwhile no less than three years had passed between his first access to the correspondence and publication of his monograph.

The theoretic-artistic content of the book suffers from the same approximation. The author supports a theory that deprives Metaphysical Art of the perceptive, visual and experiential quality of “revelation” as recounted by de Chirico in the Santa Croce passage and developed in subsequent theoretical essays. In these texts de Chirico speaks of revelation as a mysterious phenomenon that occurs at a moment in which an artist may “glimpse a world existing outside things known to the human spirit”¹⁷. Whereas in the monograph, de Chirico’s inspiration is described as an obstinate working method through which the artist drew “new communication techniques”¹⁸ from literature to be diligently applied to painting. For anyone intent at studying the origins of Metaphysical Art, de Chirico’s extraordinary gaining of awareness becomes a colossal farce.

In recent years the Foundation has made duty-bound and in-depth verification of documentary material to counter the eccentric and moralizing statements put forward, the fruit of an incomplete research method, as may be readily ascertained. Had the Foundation not intervened in the artist’s defence, the exceptional correspondence would have been viewed solely through the tendentious interpretation described above.¹⁹ As well as publication of the correspondence, three contributions were presented in “Metaphysical Art”: two essays by Paolo Picozza on historical aspects and in-depth analysis of the related documentation, and an essay by Riccardo Dottori dealing with the question from a theoretic-artistic viewpoint, dedicated to metaphysical painting.²⁰ Paolo Picozza’s contribution, *Betraying de Chirico: the Falsification of Giorgio de Chirico’s Life History over the last Fifteen Years* (published in the previous issue) retraced the various phases of the theory’s development. The article includes a brief summary of the in-depth analytical work carried out on the correspondence

¹⁶ A brief chronological summary of the promotion of the theory “Metaphysical Art, Milan 1909”, reads as follows: exhibition New York, 1994; article “Il Giornale dell’Arte”, 1994; exhibition New York, 1995; monograph, 1997; monograph, 1999; article “Ars”, 1999; exhibition Dusseldorf, 2001; exhibition Padua, 2007; exhibition Winterthur, 2008; exhibition Florence, 2010; article “Il Giornale dell’Arte”, 2010; conference Milan, 2011, as well as numerous articles published over the course of the years on the website www.archivioartemetafisica.org.

¹⁷ G. de Chirico, *Discorso sulla materia pittorica*, in *Scritti/1...*, cit., p. 459.

¹⁸ P. Baldacci, *op. cit.*, 1997, chapter entitled *From Word to Image. A Working Method*, p. 55.

¹⁹ M. Calvesi contested the 1909 dating of the paintings and underlined the importance of de Chirico’s autobiographical writings in his article *De Chirico dall’Arno alla Senna*, published in “Ars”, April and August 1999. Regarding the irrelevance of Savinio’s theoretical contribution to de Chirico’s work, see J. de Sanna, *Gambling with Intellectual Ownership* (signed with the pseudonym Viola Mangusta), in “Metafisica. Quaderni della Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico”, n. 1/2, 2002, pp. 311-316.

²⁰ See P. Picozza, *Betraying de Chirico...*, cit., pp. 28-60 and Id., *Giorgio de Chirico and the Birth of Metaphysical Art in Florence* in “Metafisica. Quaderni della Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico”, n. 7/8, 2008, pp. 56-92; R. Dottori, *From Zarathustra’s Poetry to the Aesthetics of Metaphysical Art*, *ivi*, pp. 117-138.

in an initial article of 2008 in which the underlying error was made clear. A difference of 12 months in the dating of the letter in which de Chirico announced the discovery of Metaphysical Art has set straight an incorrect and damaging theory – substantially built on nothing – which lasted more than 15 years and threatened to go ahead *ad libitum*, with superficial repetition of the false information it purveyed. Paolo Picozza's article brought clarity at last: his exposition of the facts and analysis of the documents triggered a much needed debate on the foundations of that theory, long awaited by the academic world.

It is comforting to note that simple presentation of the related documentation and reconstruction of the facts were enough to ensure that a correct historical reconstruction was revealed. This confirms that the basic principles of historiography – documentation, analysis, evaluation and verifiability – are indispensable in forming a judgement, over and above the most common good sense.

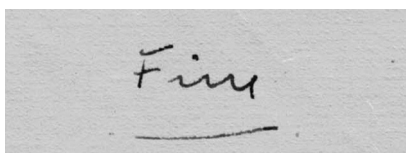
Today the dating – 26 December 1910 – of the important letter in which de Chirico announced his discovery of metaphysical painting is accepted without reservation in the field of Dechirican studies. Even Paolo Baldacci has expressed his conviction that the letter was “certainly written toward the end of the year”²¹.

The Foundation notes that in spite of corroboration of the dating of the letter as late December 1910, the two authors continue to state 1909 as the year of execution of the first two metaphysical works in their publications. Although it was de Chirico's letter to Gartz that originally flipped the light switch on, the theory now seems to burn of its own light in a sort of “historiographic miracle”. At this point it would be fruitless to pursue the further developments of a defence carried forward with even less methodology than the original theory.²² To continue along this line just to refute the writings of Baldacci and Gerd Roos would be time wasted, uselessly taken away from genuine study of the Great Metaphysician.

As a positive result of the Foundation's effort to re-establish the historical truth, it should be noted that in recent contributions, if nothing else, the claim that Alberto Savinio was the mind behind metaphysical painting has disappeared and, at least in this specific context, the insults aimed at Giorgio de Chirico have lessened in number.

Let us leave the last word to Giorgio de Chirico, that short word he appended to his manuscripts, as in *Hebdomeros*, in his *Memoirs* and in *Il Signor Dudron*, which, with his characteristic aplomb, brings this sad story to conclusion. The word is simply:

The End



²¹ P. Baldacci, letter to P. Picozza, Milan 25 July 2012.

²² From having defined the letter as the “key document” and dedicated numerous studies to it (1994-2013), the letter has been recently set aside, with focus being dedicated instead to a letter of 27 December 1909, which now takes on the role of “key-document”, in a merry-go-round of ever-changing affirmations, with about-faces and distortions lacking coherence and academic methodology.