

ZEUXIS THE EXPLORER¹

Giorgio de Chirico

Once the idiotic fences penning the bleating and bellowing cattle of the various modern groups of Italy and France have been opened, the new Zeuxes leave solitarily to discover the oddities that nestle like moles and mushrooms on the good crust of both hemispheres.

Explorers in search of surprises are on the move, fatally lured by the magnetic flux oozing out of all that, which, with puppeteerish spectrality, fidgets and gesticulates behind the barrier of remote mountains, behind straight walls (red for the terracotta of the overlapping tiles), along the factories and the suburban buildings, behind the doors and shutters of the city dwellings.

“The world is full of daemons”, said Heraclitus the metaphysician, strolling down the shaded portico of Ephesus, in the hour pregnant with whispering mystery on the precipitous stair of vertical light. Meanwhile, down below, in the dry embrace of the Asiatic bay, the salt water bubbles under the midday south-western wind.

You must find the demon in every thing.

The ancient Cretans used to print a monstrous eye – a golden shape filled-in with black – in the middle of the skinny profiles that chase each other around and around their vases, domestic utensils, walls of houses. An old xylography returns to mind, in which various foetuses, of a man, of a snake, of a chicken, of a fish, only appear through the bleakness of their enormous eye.

You must find the demon in every thing.

A truth that could not have been born but in Italy. More than any other country, to the new creators our peninsula offers resources for new metaphysical discoveries. One of these resources, and certainly not the least important, is the intrinsic aspect of destiny embodied by the construction and architectural setup of its cities. The first to have noticed it and spoken of it clairvoyantly were two poet-philosophers: Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche.

In painting, I was the only one to reveal this mystery.

I have the serene joy and pride to believe that I was the first to make use of the solidly occult nature of our architecture. At the Paul Guillaume gallery in Paris, as well as in private collections, there are some of my earlier works, which clearly testify to the profound truth of such a discovery. Few know about this in Italy, but the day will come when the bipeds traipsing all over the country

¹ This full-length, previously unknown version of *Zeusi l'esploratore* was recently published in G. de Chirico, *Zeusi l'esploratore e la corrispondenza con Giorgio Raimondi*, edited by V. Malerba, Raffaelli Editore, Rimini 2018. The known version of *Zeusi l'esploratore* (“Valori Plastici”, a. I, n. 1, in November 1918), signed April 1918, turns out to have been an adaptation of this full-length text dated March 1918. The manuscript is held in the archives of Giuseppe Raimondi's heirs.

will be grateful to me, for I was the first, on foreign land, to put on canvas the solemn mystery of our cities.

I summon you, consolatory daemons of the Italian portico! In the houses, the streets, the squares, the monuments of Turin, Bologna, Ferrara, Ravenna, Florence and down, down to the extreme edge of the hermetic boot [Italy's shape, *ed.*], I can see uncharted deserts, untouched mountain chains, erupting volcanoes, most pleasant thermal geysers, dark woods, and other such peculiarities. So that, if discovered with the explorer's eye and pinned on canvas like large butterflies on the diligent naturalist's thin display board, they would make the most unusual oddities of California's flora and fauna resemble a myriad of fireflies in the scorching midday sun.

After that first architectural-metaphysical period, another one followed, short but momentous: it occurred between the autumn of 1913 and August 1914, months during which the outbreak of war interrupted my activity and research. – I was living in Paris then. Around me I could see the international gang of cubists, Avant-gardists, Orphists, Synchronists, etc. fumbling idiotically with still lifes à la Picasso, trinkets à la Archipenko, and giant squashes à la Derain. In my squalid atelier on rue Campagne-Première, I was the only one beginning to catch glimpses of an art that was more complete, more purified, more apparent, and more enigmatic in meaning, more profound in mystery, more spectral in form; to say it in a single word, at the risk of giving Louis Vauxcelles biliary colic, more *metaphysical*.

The dreadful appearance of fossilised melancholy of a mannequin with moveable neck, hanging on the door of a ready-made clothing shop; the gloomy lyricism of a hairdresser's parlour skull, hollow wooden globe, fatal helmet, staring behind the thick glass walls of an aquarium, amidst the clinical solemnity of a red-velvet softly stuffed shop front; the strident heroism of the painted zinc glove, ending in the five magnetic tips of its gilded fingernails, which the tepid gusts of most disheartened urban afternoons rocked back and forth over the dark shop – they all pointed me to an entirely new world of creations and yet to be harvested lyricism. It was in that short span of time that I painted: *The Vaccinator*, *The Two Sisters*, *The Duo*, *The Mannequins of the Pink Tower*, *The Revenant*, *Penelope*, *The Philosopher and the Poet*, *The Dream of Tobias*, *King Pharaoh*, *The Metaphysical Antechamber*, as well as a whole series of drawings. In all these works, the spectrality and lyricism of the aforementioned subjects, and of many others, combined with the unexpected appearance of a room, a hallway, a table, a floor, and with the hopeless vanishing point of a ceiling ending in the terrifying vision of a window overlooking the mystery of the street, or of a door ajar onto the enigma of an adjacent room.

In the same period, the great Alberto Savinio was writing *Les Chants de la Mi-mort*, published in the June/July 1914 issue of the journal "Les Soirées de Paris". It is a powerful poem, of Dantean gloom, left unfinished due to unpredictable circumstances, but where all the new features which I was already unveiling in my paintings, Savinio was putting into prose, verse, and music, with an extraordinary and mysterious talent, the secret of which he is the only keeper.

...Of course, it is with some nostalgia that, today, I look back to that time, so abundant in metaphysical labour after all the misunderstandings, the injustices, and the nonsense I have seen and am still seeing. It was a destined and memorable time, the immense importance of which has not yet been assessed. It was obscured by the fog of incipient war and then by the squawking imbecility of the artistic gangs, which survived in that fog like pubic lice resistant to mercury treatments. Imbecility reinvigorated by the hysterical irritation of some decrepit atrabilious *râtes* of the colourful republican metropolis.

Little by little, as with the weariness of the dying seasons, the horizon clears up. If nothing else, the war helped me (and perhaps not only me) to take leave of my compromising little Parisian family. Today, in Italy, the sense of a new art grows in each city and acquires a magnificent and exquisitely peninsular meaning. The first painter who has begun to profit knowingly from the metaphysics which I and Alberto Savinio have discovered is Carlo Carrà. I am saying this in his praise, so our friend should not take umbrage, and rather see us as friends and not as rivals.

In his most recent paintings, Ardengo Soffici as well has ultimately distanced himself from the Parisian bunglers, to sit at the restorative mess with us, the metaphysicians.

Still, it may not be beneficial to colonise this Land for too long either.

Dear friends, we need to leave once more, to startle in anguish before the unseen. We must once more let the anchor chains screech together on the ships, and, in ports, untie the drenched hawser knots.

...On dry land, Zeuxes the explorers are ready to set off. May each of us be respectful of our companions' secrets. In the middle of the triangle of platform roofs reverberating metallic cries, they hit the controls and give the signal of departure.

It's time.

In the signal boxes the bells ring out.

Gentlemen, all aboard!

March 1918

Translated by Francesco Caruso