

fig. 1 G. de Chirico, *Scatola di cerini e sigarette*, ca 1904-1906

NEW EVIDENCE ON THE ORIGIN OF THE INFLUENCE OF NIETZSCHE AND OF THE IDEA OF IMMANENT MYTH IN GIORGIO DE CHIRICO: MAVÌLIS, PALAMÀS AND THE EARLY XX CENTURY ATHENS LITERARY SCENE

Fabio Benzi

There have been many attempts at identifying an influence of the Greek milieu on the young Giorgio de Chirico. From his birth (1888) to his late adolescence, the artist lived in Greece, in Volos and especially Athens, until he moved to Munich in October 1906. So, he spent the first eighteen years of life – undoubtedly a formative moment for any young intellectual – mostly in Athens, where he also completed his first artistic studies in the Academy of Fine Arts of the Polytechnic School.

As might be expected, research aimed at contextualizing and furthering the knowledge of possible Hellenic influences on de Chirico's artistic activity has focused so far on the specific analysis of the local painting scene, although with little or less than significant results. To be sure, we are not aware of any extant early painting from his Greek period, except for a negligible, small still life painted on cardboard, depicting a box of matches with a lit cigarette leaning against it (fig. 1); the verso shows an earlier copy of a detail of a chromolithography by Belgian painter Jan van Beers (Lier, 27 March 1852-Fayaux-Loges, 17 November 1927), which we have identified here (figs. 2, 3).¹ If this copy is an example of the nearly photographic unyielding adherence by a young artist who might have not yet attended the academy, the small oil is actually a genre exercise, probably painted while de Chirico was still a student. However, being it a small sketch with an intimate character makes it nearly impossible to speculate on its stylistic references.

We have no direct knowledge of any of de Chirico's works from his subsequent stay in Munich (1906-



fig. 2 G. de Chirico, *Boarding on the yacht*, copy after a chromolithography by Jan van Beers, ca 1898-1902

¹ The copy of the chromolithography probably dates back to the period when he was taking lessons from the Swiss painter Jules-Louis Gilliéron, copyist of antiquities and also teacher to the Greek Royal family. De Chirico recalls that he "he had a kind of school for drawing and painting in his house. We copied a lot of prints in this house", in G. de Chirico, *The Memoirs of Giorgio de Chirico*, Da Capo Press, New York 1994, pp. 33-34. The small work (10x14 cm) is in the collection of Alberto Savinio's heirs in Rome. Unless noted otherwise, the translations are by Francesco Caruso.



fig. 3 J. van Beers, *Boarding the yacht*, chromolithography, end XIX cent.



fig. 4 G. de Chirico posing in the atelier of the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich next to his painting, 1907

the Polytechnic School had been educated at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich, where they had spent long periods of time, and served as a bridge between modern Greek painting and the expressive novelties of the Continent. In other words, they embodied the idea of modernization of the Greek nation in the language that, through predominantly Central European connections, pointed at a direction that would renew Greek art, until that moment habitually associated with

1909), except for a painting executed in 1907, known only thanks to a period photograph (fig. 4). However, it is evident that what we know of the Athenian academic context surrounding the young artist (his professors' works at the Polytechnic School, for example), has nothing to do with the revolution brought about by the new Metaphysical painting enucleated in Florence in 1910, or with de Chirico's earlier Böcklinesque phase, which took place between mid-1909 in Milan (when the painter returned to Italy), and the penultimate quarter of 1910 (spent in Florence from March-April of that year).

De Chirico's earliest studies took place between Athens and Volos.² He devoted himself to drawing and art right away, taking private lessons from the Greek painter Mavrudis, the Italian Carlo Barbieri, and the Swiss Jules-Louis Gilliéron, personalities who today have fallen into the oblivion of respectable amateurism and academicism. After studying at the Lycée Léonin in Athens and some home-schooling, in 1903 de Chirico enrolled at the School of Fine Arts of the Polytechnic. The original plan, supported by his family, was that he would become an engineer, like his father, but the painting career eventually prevailed, and the parents complied with their son's inclination.³ All his professors at

² An overview of Greek culture in de Chirico's time and of his family's relations with that milieu is in C. Crescentini, *Giorgio de Chirico. Lenigma velato*, Erreciemme, Rome 2009.

³ This is what de Chirico's mother Gemma told during an interview to her and her son Andrea, published by «Corriere della Sera» on 19 October 1907.

the painting of holy icons.

Konstantinos Volanakis, Georgios Roilos, and Georgios Jakobides were de Chirico's three main professors at the Academy. It would be useless, as we said above, to track down their influence on the artist's mature works, even though in his earliest efforts he must have been a devoted follower of the academic realism expressed by the painting of landscapes (Volanakis), portraits and genre scenes of antiquated bourgeois taste (Jakobides), or even more refined and intellectualistic scenes, inspired by some familiarity with the Parisian Impressionism (Roilos).



fig. 5 G. Roilos, *The Battle of Pharsalus*, 1997, The National Art Gallery, Athens, on show at the third exhibition *Kallitechniki Ekthesis Athinon*, 1899

Among the three, De Chirico held Roilos in the highest regard. This may seem odd, since he was his professor of drawing⁴ only for a short time, as he left for England in 1903 to return to Athens in 1908. Nevertheless, in his *Memoirs*, de Chirico compares him with Giovanni Fattori ("He was in no way inferior to Giovanni Fattori, who was considered by our critics to be the genius of the nineteenth-century Italy. Roilos was superior to Fattori"⁵): and not wrongly, judging by a painting with which he was certainly familiar, as we shall see (fig. 5). De Chirico's high esteem for Roilos in fact dated back to some years earlier, when he saw his paintings at the third *Kallitechniki Ekthesis Athinon* show held at the *Zappeion* in May 1899, the first major exhibition of paintings he ever visited:

It was at this moment that I first saw an exhibition of painting and remained deeply impressed by it. Among the canvases that struck me most was in the first place an episode from the Graeco-Turkish War in Thessaly. Near a kind of poor-looking house was a detachment of infantry which, together with some officers on horseback, seemed to be waiting for the moment of going into action. Farther away the battle itself was visible. A file of infantry soldiers, some with one knee on the ground and some lying flat, were firing, and to the right a detachment of cavalry could be seen galloping along a wide and dusty road. In the foreground the body of a soldier who had been killed lay in the dust of the street [...]. The painter of this picture was called Roilos.⁶

We have reported this long description to remark on the extraordinary memory of de Chirico, who 63 years later can recall with almost photographic accuracy Roilos' painting on show at the 1899 Athens exhibition, which we have identified here (fig. 6). As we shall see further on, Roilos also belonged to that distinctive intellectual circle built up around Kostas Palamas and with which, for many reasons, the whole de Chirico family had connections.

⁴ "He was later my drawing teacher at the Polytechnic School", in G. de Chirico, *The Memoirs*, p. 31.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ *Ibidem*.



fig. 6 G. Roilos, *Ghentselia*, ca 1898, on show at the third exhibition *Kallitechniki Ekthesis Athinon*, 1899

Chirico himself was) to the cultural developments and debates of the time.

Although the documents on de Chirico's adolescence and youth that are being published are many, they are yielding a more circumstantial than substantial portrait of the artist: the stimuli he received at school were, in fact, limited to a rather unadventurous routine, which he would likely follow in those years. Although the young artist distinguished himself even then for his spontaneous approach to some of the future protagonists of the best avant-garde Greek art of the XX century, the connections with the lively Greek literary environment need to be investigated in greater depth.

It has always been argued that, besides a mythological afflatus associated to de Chirico's native land – along with a certain degree of even obvious classicism that he could absorb in philhellenic Germany or in Italy, countries packed with classical Roman specimens – of that extended experience that took place in such formative years, he retained only a vague, substantially aimless inkling, a culturally spineless nostalgic afflatus for classicism. As we said above, there is no direct Greek pictorial influence on de Chirico's known work: all the possible comparisons between his later works and those by his or other Greek masters clearly point to this conclusion.

However, an investigation into Neo-Hellenic literature and its major themes or into the debates in which the young de Chirico must have found himself, has never even been attempted. Certainly, the lack of a philological study of this kind has been affected by the difficulty of reading contemporary Hellenic literature, along with the false conviction about de Chirico's less than adequate linguistic skills Greek, based on the fact that the only extant evidence of his Greek writing is a letter sent to his friend Dimitris Pikionis. In fact, things are quite different: de Chirico knew Greek⁷ very

Not by chance, while in Munich and Paris and his subsequent wanderings, de Chirico will meet some friends and fellow students attending the Academy in those years, people such as Stavros Kantzikis, Dimitris Pikionis, the greatest Greek architect of the XX century and one of the great European ones, and George Bouzianis, who moved to Munich and became an exponent of the Secession and of the Expressionism. These personalities would have had an impact on XX century Greek culture: committed and well-cultured young people, attentive (as presumably young de

⁷ Living in Greece, de Chirico wrote and naturally spoke Greek fluently. This fact, proven by a letter to Pikionis of 1912 (cf. M. Santoro, *Lettera di Giorgio de Chirico a Dimitris Pikionis, 1912*, in «*Metafisica*» n. 7/8 [2008], pp. 580-584), was underestimated by the critics, who also underrated de Chirico's parallel mastery of German, with its many other implications, such as immediate and direct familiarity with Nietzsche and German philosophy in the original language during the time he subsequently spent in Germany. It should be pointed out that in his letter to Pikionis, de Chirico demonstrates a perfect knowledge of both spoken (Demotic) and formal (Katharevousa) Greek language, which he uses with precision and understanding, alternating them according to the variation of tone. Various small spelling errors (in the difficult transcription of the equivalent phonemes in Greek) are due to his little practice of Greek writing in his last years, while grammar and syntax are, instead, impeccable (if read aloud, the letter sounds finely accurate to the listener).

well, and the hint of an accent can even be still perceived in the artist's filmed interviews given in the last years of his life. Moreover, in his *Memoirs*, concerning Roilos' aforementioned painting seen at the third exhibition of Greek painting in 1899, he recalls in great detail a review he had read in a newspaper. Therefore, de Chirico did speak Greek, read Greek newspapers (and presumably also books), and, as it is obvious for a person born, lived, and educated in Greece, knew Modern Greek perfectly. His friends were Greek, and the context in which he was studying was also very much involved in a profound ideal revolution, which we will see shortly, to which he could not be by any means foreign.

What has always escaped de Chirico scholarship, exclusively focused on the figurative culture of his time (as we said above, something of little impact on the artist's mature works), is, then, the possible influence of modern Greek literature and thought of the time on young de Chirico. The complete lack of philological documentation or autobiographical testimonies makes it impossible to reconstruct that influence, which should then be assessed observing the historical and, so to speak, circumstantial milieu, ground for considerable and substantial discoveries.

For example, Kostas Palamàs – one of the great Greek poets of the XX century and, by the turn of the XIX century, a man considered the greatest living Greek poet – far from being confined to a niche of specialists and intellectuals (to whom de Chirico also belonged), was an emblematic public figure for the young people, especially university students, like young Giorgio. Palamàs was so influential that in 1901 and 1903 his writings, which endorsed “vulgar” Demotic language against formal Katharevousa, caused street riots (and even several deaths)⁸ among the progressive and conservative students of the University of Athens (where Palamàs served, on the other hand, as secretary general). We do not know whether Giorgio de Chirico participated directly in these clashes – he enrolled at the Polytechnic precisely in that fateful 1903 – nor, if this was the case, which side he took. However, a close relative to his father (his first cousin: the son of his mother's brother), the poet Lorentzos Mavilis,⁹ was decidedly on Palamàs' side, to the extent that we can easily suppose a commonality of ideas also in the family sphere, which were overtly reflected in de Chirico's younger brother Andrea.¹⁰ A young man in the Athenian cultural milieu, who attended

⁸ On the 1901 disorders, nicknamed “Gospel riots” (*Evangelika*), see P. Carabott, *Politics, Orthodoxy and the Language Question in Greece: The Gospel Riots of November 1901*, in «Journal of Mediterranean Studies», 3, n. 1 (1993), pp. 117-138.

⁹ On Mavilis, see A. Savinio, *Lorenzo Mabili, in Narrate, uomini, la vostra storia*, Bompiani, Milan 1942; Adelphi, Milan 1984, pp. 133-157, from which the quotations are taken; A. Triente, *Savinio e Mavilis: grecità, identità, lingua*, in «Notos», March 2014 (http://www.revue-notos.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Savinio-e-Mav%C3%AClis_NOTOS.pdf). Palamàs dedicated a poem, written in 1896, to his friend Mavilis in one of his most important collections of poetry, *The Motionless Life (I asàleuti zoi)*, published in 1904.

¹⁰ Andrea Savinio's faint portrait of Mavilis (*Narrate, uomini*) is useful because it informs us that de Chirico's father considered him “an Apollo”, meaning that he had great consideration for him, and they must have often spent time together while Mavilis was a Member of Parliament in Athens. Savinio reports a meeting that took place in September 1906, and gives, more than a real portrait, the impressionistic description of that episode. To embellish his description, Savinio focuses on Mavilis' commitment to Demotic Greek, which Andrea calls “maliarà” (“hairy”) according to the controversial nickname given to it at that time (see below). Savinio's position is decidedly in favor of Demotic, and he tells about the contentious and dramatic events that took place in Athens in the years 1901-1903. He has a passionate appreciation of Neo-Hellenic poetry, something that he undoubtedly shared with his brother Giorgio: “Neo-Hellenic poetry deserves to be known in its own place and in its mother tongue. I, who had the good fortune to be born in Greece and to live in Greece in those years in which the most vivid and lasting memories are collected, can say that poetry is a natural faculty as much to the Greek of today as to his most ingenious ancestors” (p. 137); “Maliarà is a colorful and very effective language [...] a ductile and playful language,

the Polytechnic School, could not, on the other hand, be unaware of the greatest Greek writer and polemicist of the time, who inflamed the souls of his friends and fellow students and most of learned Greece.¹¹ Palamàs' ideas and poetry, deeply imbued by Nietzsche's ideas, modernized ancient Greek culture and brought it into the present time, shaping, in doing so, a strong identity model. One of the controversial points that led to the unrest and riots of 1903¹² was the spectacular presentation of *Oresteia* at the Royal Theatre of Athens (Vasilikòn Thèatron), translated into Demotic and introduced by one of his poems (*Salute to Tragedy*) recited on stage by the young and already famous actress Maria Kotopouli. Given the cultural importance of the event, it is rather likely that de Chirico attended it with his family.¹³ Therefore, since his earliest youth, both the ability to synthesize modernized ancient Greek culture, and the references to Nietzsche's philosophy (Nietzsche's themes were closely correlated to those of the struggle for the Demotic language, and advocated by the intellectuals who were fighting for the Demotic cause, with Palamàs in the lead),¹⁴ must have had quite an impact on the artist's education and sensitive soul, disposing him to further investigate such topics in the future.

It is interesting to see how a person around de Chirico's age, who entered the University of Athens with him, perceived these events. A few years later, in 1919, Aristides E. Phoutrides recalled his acquaintance with Palamàs. Phoutrides was a university student of literature, and his position was initially opposed to that of Palamàs. However, he was under his spell and, like all his fellow students, involved in the Palamàs controversy provoked and led. Like de Chirico Phoutrides enrolled at the University of Athens in that fateful year 1903 which saw the most dramatic part of the student revolt:

Kostas Palamàs! A name I hated once with all the sincerity of a young and blind enthusiast as the name of a traitor. This is no exaggeration. I was a student in the third class of an Athenian Gymnasium in 1901, when the Gospel Riots stained with blood the streets of Athens. The cause of the riots was a translation of the New Testament into the people's tongue by Alexandros Pallis, one of the great leaders of the literary renaissance of Modern Greece. The translation appeared in series in the daily newspaper *Akropolis*. The students of the University, animated by the fiery speeches of one of their Professors, George Mistriotes, the bulwark of the unreconcilable Purists, who would model the modern language of Greece after the ancient, regarded this translation as a treacherous profanation both of the sacred

no less certain, and perhaps more so than Homer's Ionic and Plato's Attic. An admirable instrument for a literature that does not reject the subtleties, nuances, and the variety and multiplicity of meanings" (p. 139, *passim*); "Needless to say that the most intelligent and lively part of intellectual Greece sided with the 'Hairy' [...] One of the most fervent apostles of the 'vulgar' was the poet Lorenzo Mabili. He described himself as 'ultravulgarist'" (p.142). We can be sure that Giorgio de Chirico shared the same opinion: indeed, that he himself probably instilled such opinion in his younger brother Andrea.

¹¹ Palamàs was also a friend of one of de Chirico's masters at the Polytechnic, Georghios Roilos, who painted his portrait. Roilos, who was the painter-symbol of Hellenic Modernism close to Palamàs' positions, was also highly appreciated and esteemed by de Chirico, as we recalled earlier.

¹² Accordingly, this time the riots took the name of "Orestiaika".

¹³ G. Van Steen, 'You unleash the tempest of tragedy': *The 1903 Athenian Production of Aeschylus' Oresteia*, in *A Companion to Classical Receptions*, edited by L. Hardwick, C. Stray, Blackwell, New York 2011, pp. 360-372.

¹⁴ We would like to recall that Palamàs' own daughter used to address him as "my beloved Zarathustra".

text and of the national speech. The demotikists, branded under the name of [Greek: Malliaroi] “the hairy ones,” were thought even by serious people to be national traitors, the creators of a mysterious propaganda seeking to crush the aspirations of the Greek people by showing that their language was not the ancient Greek language and that they were not the heirs of Ancient Greece.

Three names among the “Hairy Ones” were the object of universal detestation: John Psicharis, the well known Greek Professor in Paris, the author of many works and of the first complete Grammar of the people’s idiom; Alexandros Pallis, the translator of the Iliad and of the New Testament; and Kostas Palamàs, secretary of the University of Athens, the poet of this “anti-nationalistic” faction. Against them the bitterest invectives were cast. The University students and, with them, masses of people who joined without understanding the issue, paraded uncontrollable through the streets of Athens, broke down the establishment of the *Akropolis*, in which Pallis’ vulgate version appeared, and demanded in all earnestness of the Metropolitan that he should renew the medieval measure of excommunication against all followers of the “Hairy Ones.”

Fortunately, the head of the Greek Church in Athens saved the Institution which he represented from an indelible shame by resisting the popular cries to the end. But the rioters became so violent that arms had to be used against them, resulting in the death of eight students and the wounding of about sixty others. This was utilized by politicians opposing the government: fiery speeches denouncing the measures adopted were heard in Parliament; the victims were eulogized as great martyrs of a sacred cause; and popular feeling ran so high that the Cabinet had to resign and the Metropolitan was forced to abdicate and die an exile in a monastery on the Island of Salamis. It was then that I first imbibed hatred against the “Hairy Ones” and Palamàs.

About two years later, I had entered the University of Athens when another riot was started by the students after another fiery speech delivered by our puristic hero, Professor Mistriontes, against the performance of Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* at the Royal Theatre in a popular translation made by Mr. Soteriades and considered too vulgar for puristic ears. This time, too, the riot was quelled, but not until one innocent passer-by had been killed. I am ashamed to confess that on that occasion I was actually among the rioters. It was the day after the riot that I first saw Palamàs himself. He was standing before one of the side entrances to the University building when my companion showed him to me with a hateful sneer:

“Look at him!”

“Who is it?”

“The worst of them all, Palamàs!”

I paused for a moment to have a full view of this notorious criminal. Rather short and compact in frame, he stood with eyes directed towards the sunlight streaming on the marble covered ground of the yard. He held a cane with both his hands and seemed to be thinking. Once or twice he glanced at the wall as if he were reading something, but again he turned towards the sunlight with an expression of sorrow on his face. There was nothing conspicuous about him, nothing aggressive. His rather pale face, furrowed brow, and meditative attitude were marks of a quiet, retiring, modest man. Do traitors then look so human? From the end of the colonnade, I watched him carefully until he turned away and entered the building. Then I followed him and walked up to the same entrance; on the wall, an

inscription was scratched in heavy pencil strokes:

“Down with Palamàs! the bought one! the traitor!”

At last my humanity was aroused, and the first rays of sympathy began to dispel my hatred. That remorseless inscription could not be true of this man, I thought, and I hurried to the library to read some of his work for the first time that I might form an opinion about him myself. Unfortunately, the verses on which I happened to come were too deep for my intellect, and I had not the patience to read them twice. I was so absolutely sure of the power of my mind that I ascribed my lack of understanding to the poet. Then his poems were so different from the easy, rhythmic, oratorical verses on which I had been brought up. In Palamàs, I missed those pleasant trivialities which attract a boy's mind in poetry. One thing, however, was clear to me even then. Dark and unintelligible though his poems appeared, they were certainly full of a deep, passionate feeling, a feeling that haunted my thoughts long after I had closed his book in despair. From that day, I condescended to think of him as of a sincere follower of a wrong cause, as of a sheep that had been led astray.¹⁵

If Phoutrides' point of view is that of someone who is “on the other side of the barricade” (even if he shortly after became a great admirer and even translator of Palamàs), every trace, even a faint one, of de Chirico's culture of the Greek period leads, instead, inevitably, to the pro-Demotic cultural milieu, the main representatives of which determined and nourished de Chirico's passion for Nietzsche's thought and philosophy.

In the brief and synthetic memories of Dimitri Pikionis we find traces that help identify even more clearly the ambience surrounding de Chirico. Having entered the Polytechnic School of Athens the year after the artist's arrival, Pikionis immediately became a close friend, and they would often spend time together:

In 1904, I enrolled at the Athens Technical University. [...] In the Fine Arts building just opposite ours, Kantzikis, Bouzianis and De Chirico, among others, were engrossed in their own studies. I found Bouzianis too shy and rebarbative to be approached. He would not even tolerate my frequent and gratuitous visits to classroom No. 7, where he and the others worked. In contrast, De Chirico and I soon became close friends and we had endless discussions about painting and our future plans under the arcades of the Technical University.¹⁶

What were they talking about in those “endless discussions”? As Pikionis recalls, they were obviously discussing painting, but in times so vibrant for Greek culture, as the young architect had pointed out a few lines earlier, they must have also talked about the burning and crucial issues themes that were taking center stage at that time. About this, there is a concurrence of facts that

¹⁵ A. E. Phoutrides, *Introduction: I. The Struggle*, in K. Palamàs, *Life Immovable*, translated by A. E. Phoutrides with introduction and notes by the translator, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 1919, pp. 5-9.

¹⁶ D. Pikionis, *Autobiographical Notes*, in P. Johnston et al., *Dimitris Pikionis, Architect 1887-1968: A Sentimental Topography*, Architectural Association, London, 1989, p. 34.

we cannot help but note: Pikionis had a slightly older cousin (the son of his mother's sister) named Lambros Porphiras. He was a Symbolist poet, a devout disciple of Palamàs, to whom Pikionis attributed great influence on his education as a young man: "I had the rare privilege of having a cousin who was a poet. It was from his mouth that I first heard the songs of our people, the poems of Solomos and others. He opened up a magical world before my childish eyes. For this I owe him everlasting love and gratitude. I also feel obliged to mention Nirvanas".¹⁷ It is worth investigating on Pavlos Nirvanas, who played a key role in the diffusion of Nietzsche's thought in Greece, thanks to the writings he published on «Techni» («Art»), the main art magazine published in Athens, between 1898 and 1899 (directed by the Nietzsche sympathizers Konstantinos Chatzopoulos and Konstantinos Theotokis) which young de Chirico most certainly read (we know from his *Memoirs* that as early as 1899, young Giorgio had been carefully reading the artistic reviews of the exhibitions held in Athens).¹⁸ Between the end of the XIX century and the very first years of the XX, the circle of intellectuals who gathered around the magazine caused a rise in the interest in Nietzsche,¹⁹ which had already been spreading throughout Europe for some time: among the salient episodes, in addition to the aforementioned «Techni», we can mention the magazine «Diònyssos», published between 1901 and 1902, the Nietzschean play *Triseugeni*, which Kostas Palamàs wrote in 1902, the 1093 Greek translation by Pavlos Gnefos of *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, etc...

On the other hand, Pikionis' deep interest in the German philosopher is documented, in his library, by the presence of several books by Nietzsche published since 1906:²⁰ it is not unlikely that they complemented Pikionis' earlier interest in the many works by Greek intellectuals who, as we have seen, had been his reference since his youth. It is an almost incontrovertible fact that this veritable Nietzschean "furor" spread in Greece during de Chirico's formative years, must have involved him. It involved masses of students, including the painter himself, closely connected him with Palamàs and his family (through his father's cousin Mavilis) as well as with his closest friends such as Pikionis (through Pikionis' cousin Porphyras and the Nietzschean Nirvanas).

It is difficult to ascertain how much deep and personal de Chirico's involvement was. Those Nietzschean philosophical contents and that theoretical awareness must have undoubtedly worked towards a more extensive and meticulous research during the German stay, between 1906 and 1909. In Munich, the Pictor Optimus was ready to incorporate the more detailed aspects of Nietzsche's

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ De Chirico's appreciation for his master Roilos, whom we have mentioned above, is also consistent with the position of the magazine «Techni» and that of writer Nirvanas (cf. P. Nirvanas, *I êkthesi tou Zappiou*, in «Techni» 7 [May 1899], pp. 190-191), who considered him one of the greatest Greek artists of the time, also for his political commitment. The position is akin to that of the newspaper «Akropolis», the main proponent of Palamàs' positions (cf. «Akropolis», Athens 31 May 1899, p.1). The two texts cited review paintings on show at the third Kallitechniki Ekthesis Athinòn exhibition held at the Zappeion in May 1899: the same exhibition to which de Chirico alluded to in his *Memoirs* when speaking of a painting exhibited by Roilos.

¹⁹ On Nietzsche and Greece, see P. Voutouris, *Agapimènou Zarathoustra. Palamàs-Nietzsche*, Kastaniòtis, Athens 2006; D. N. Lambrellis, *I Epidrasi tou Nietzsche stin Ellàda: "Tèchni" kai "Dionisos", Vlastòs kai Kazantzàkis*, Papazisis, Athens 2009.

²⁰ In his library, Pikionis had several of Nietzsche's works (cf. K. Tsiambaos, *From Doxiadis' Theory to Pikionis' Work: Reflections of Antiquity in Modern Architecture*, Routledge, London; New York 2018, n. 89), including F. Nietzsche, *L'origine de la tragédie ou Hellénisme et pessimisme*, Société du Mercure de France, Paris 1906; Id., *Ecce Homo. Suivi des Poésies*, Société du Mercure de France, Paris 1909; Id., *La volonté de puissance. Essai d'une transmutation de toutes les valeurs (Études et Fragments)*, tome I, Société du Mercure de France, Paris 1909.

philosophical texts read in the original language, and it was around Nietzsche's reflections that the new conception of Metaphysical painting would later develop.²¹

De Chirico also spoke, wrote, and read German fluently. That around that time he was furthering his philosophical and literary passion is indisputably attested not only by some autobiographical information, but also by an epistolary with his friend Fritz Gartz.²² In fact, besides the Böcklin-esque inspiration of de Chirico's pre-Metaphysical paintings,²³ the philosophical study conducted in these years informed his painting and constituted a turning point of his career only starting from 1910. Nevertheless, as his art historian and friend Giorgio Castelfranco reports, "what perhaps not everyone knows today is that the diffusion of Nietzsche's writings, their degree of dissemination was massive; for many and many years, thanks to his caustic, penetrating, exciting writing style, he was a dominator of minds and an irresistible spellbinder, like few in the history of European literature".²⁴ A spellbinder whose voice de Chirico must have already distinctly heard in Athens' cultural and juvenile circles.

De Chirico's familiarity with Nietzsche's thought from the very early years of the XX century, during his stay in Greece, explains some of his statements from a much more understandable perspective. For example, upon "discovering" the new Metaphysical painting, in a letter dated 26 December 1910 he addressed his distant friend Fritz Gartz speaking to him about Nietzsche with youthful enthusiasm: "I am now going to whisper something in your ear: I am the only man who has understood Nietzsche – all my works prove it".²⁵ This statement, coming at the end of a nearly a decade of in depth study of the German philosopher, ceases to be an almost naive bragging, as it may apparently seem, in fact assumes the elated character typical of those who, after a prolonged

²¹ That de Chirico studied and furthered his knowledge of Nietzsche's works in Germany (although he had been already familiar with him while still in Greece) and of Schopenhauer's, a fact that some have tried to deny, is confirmed by a very clear testimony given by the artist to the Police Prefecture of Paris on 8 September 1930 (cf. K. Robinson, *Giorgio de Chirico: Lettere a Cornelia. Carteggio inedito [1929-1951]* in «*Metafisica*» n. 14/16 (2016) pp. 146-147). In that truly extra-artistic circumstance, de Chirico affirmed that "he stayed in Germany to perfect Greek plastic art and also to study German philosophy, particularly that of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche". These were evidently his real and keenest interests while in Munich, and he even refrained from mentioning the constrictive (but "official") study at the Academy, which had evidently left him with a suffocating and unhealthy memory.

²² Cf. G. de Chirico, *The Memoirs*, cit. p. 56. The correspondence with Gartz, written in German, was published, along with its Italian and English translation, in «*Metafisica*» n. 7/8 (2008), pp. 521-579. It was published by G. Roos in *Giorgio de Chirico e Alberto Savinio. Ricordi e documenti: Monaco, Milano, Firenze 1906-1911*, Bora, Bologna 1999, pp.421-430, and anticipated by P. Baldacci, *De Chirico 1888-1919. La Metafisica*, Leonardo Arte, Milan 1997, with significant inaccuracies. The tenor of the discussion between de Chirico and Gartz reveals that Nietzsche was a frequent topic between them (and therefore something necessarily related to the Munich period). Also, in his *Memoirs*, recalling Gartz's brother Kurt, who had taken his life, de Chirico reported the Kurt's morbid and unclear fascination with Nietzsche: the formulation of such a judgement means that they must have spoken at length together (in Germany).

²³ The Böcklinesque paintings are undoubtedly the not-yet ripe fruits of de Chirico's infatuation with Nietzsche: the philosopher's love for Böcklin was known and explicit, and for de Chirico to experiment with Böcklin is an early, unripe attempt to apply Nietzsche to his painting. As for the dating of the paintings, there is no evidence that they were executed, even partially, during de Chirico's stay in Germany: all the evidence leads us to date them after he moved to Milan in the summer of 1909 (see F. Benzi, *Giorgio de Chirico. La vita e l'opera*, La nave di Teseo, Milan 2019).

²⁴ G. Castelfranco, *Introduzione all'arte del nostro tempo*, Solfanelli, Chieti 2013, pp. 83-84.

²⁵ Cf. P. Picozza, *Giorgio de Chirico e la nascita della Metafisica a Firenze nel 1910*, in «*Metafisica*» n. 7/8 (2008), pp. 19-57; F. Benzi, *Giorgio de Chirico e la nascita della Metafisica. L' "altra" avanguardia italiana, 1910-1911*, in *Secessione e Avanguardia: L'arte in Italia prima della Grande Guerra. 1905-1915*, catalogue of the exhibition edited by S. Frezzotti (Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome, 31 October 2014-15 February 2015), Electa, Milan 2014, p. 68.

intellectual sedimentation, have finally found the key to synthesize in painting an idea long and laboriously pursued.

If this aspect of Nietzsche's knowledge from the Greek period highlights even more the lengthy thinking process that would lead de Chirico to renew the European painting in the XX century, it should be also noted that his younger brother Savinio was too young at the time to penetrate the dynamics of the painter's nascent thought: this also explains the unimpressive and flat portrait Savinio made of Mavilis,²⁶ more a family memory than a full-length portrait of a man of letters. When together with his mother and brother, on his way back to Italy from Greece after the death of his father in 1906 Savinio went to visit Mavilis, he was probably unaware of the philosophical significance of that poet who was a close friend of Palamàs'. In him he only saw the champion of the renewal of the Greek language, obviously a better known fact in the family, rather than the Nietzsche-inspired intellectual. Savinio was ostensibly too young (he had just turned 15 at the time he met Mavilis), and not yet able to penetrate the more complex reflexive and cultural dynamics of his older brother Giorgio.

There are obviously not enough documents that can help us investigate by means of philology a more direct influence of Palamàs on de Chirico's work, neither through writings dating back to that period, nor from subsequent explicit statements by the artist. However, as we have pointed out so far, what seems certain is that de Chirico and his family, as well as his closest friends, all revolved around the cultural milieu that centered on the Greek poet. It is therefore necessary to analyze whether and to what extent Palamàs' thought could have influenced de Chirico's mature vision. Palamàs, native of Patras but naturalized Athenian (1859-1943), as early as 1887 gained fame with what became an extremely popular composition (the *Hymn to Athena*, which won the Philadelphios poetry contest in 1889), emerging as the acknowledged "prophet" [*vates*] of the new Greek poetry. From that moment on, Palamàs vision forged a new identity of Greece whereby he abandoned the rhetorics of Greece's olden days, seeking to modernize the cultural continuity of the uninterrupted tradition that linked classical antiquity to the Byzantine era up to the birth of the new nation. The discourse on myth was seen as a living and working way of thinking, which since the end of the XIX century, thanks to Palamàs' familiarity with Nietzsche had acquired lyrical visionary character and rhetorical imagination that surpassed the Symbolist and Romantic inspiration of the poet's early works. Poetry written for a large audience, such as the *Olympic Hymn*, written in 1895 to be recited at the first Athens Olympics (it is sung at the opening of the Olympics still today), or the aforementioned *Salute to Tragedy*, not only gave him widespread fame and secured him a prominent role, but also imposed in the Athens of his time a vivid conception of myth, permeated with vision and mystery, and turned into an ethical and aesthetic rationale. Many quotations can illustrate this point, but we will limit ourselves to some of the most significant ones:

²⁶ See fn. 9.

Immortal spirit of antiquity,
 Father of the true, beautiful and good,
 Descend, appear, shed over us thy light
 Upon this ground [...]
 In thy light, plains, mountains and seas
 Shine in a roseate hue and form a vast temple;²⁷

In the air of this most harmonious Athens
 All things are like statues, offspring
 Of Phidias, the good deeds of the mind, and those of creation
 And amidst them you look like no other.
 You rise, both Olympus and Caucasus of the Word [...]
 The weeping of the soul cries, the enigma of the fate bellows.²⁸

These are all themes, tones, positions (the world reified into statues, the riddles of fate, the spirit visible through the simulacrum of the oracle, etc.) that we shall find in de Chirico's *Metaphysical* painting. In the painter's earliest known writings, which date back to the Parisian period 1911-1915 and, therefore, to a much later phase, and already completely imbued with Nietzsche and Schopenhauer philosophy read in the original, there are no explicit quotations from Palamàs' compositions. In de Chirico's overall vision, however, myth does not equal to mythology: myth is not a set of elaborate stories and fables, but represents everything of which mythology is a symbol and a metaphor, archetype and philosophical allusion, immanent thought, root of modernity perceived as an enigmatic dowsing. Here we can establish a sort of continuity, a tight bond between the painter's ideas and Palamàs's main tenets. The ability to draw on the same primordial intuition that guided the birth of Homeric fables and Greek tragedies widely circulated among early XX century Athens intellectual circles attended by de Chirico. These impressions were soon strengthened in him as he read and

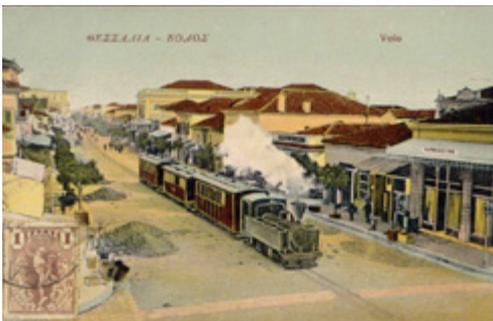


fig. 7 *Veduta di Volos*, postcard, before 1911

passionate adhered to Nietzsche's thought, for which Hellenism was a cornerstone of contemporary European thought.

The feeling of childhood is a predominant theme across de Chirico's poetics. He conceived the experienced a feeling of childhood – which he saw as the childhood of the world, of humanity and of himself – through the philosophy of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. De Chirico saw childhood as a crucible of arche-

²⁷ K. Palamàs, *Olympic Hymn*, 1895 (online translation at http://www.webtopos.gr/eng/literature/writers/p/Palamàs/Palamàs_olympic.htm).

²⁸ Id., *Salute to Tragedy*, 1903 (original Modern Greek text accessible at http://www.greek-language.gr/digitalResources/ancient_greek/anthology/mythology/browse.html?text_id=331&fbclid=IwAR0BFSVDVNL5l7y-xxJH8aAagBBsJjpTBfjETyhQX7P5Dd9cQpHq1XjXUWgE).

types, as a sentiment of primordial discovery, as a primary and unbiased form of knowledge, as a pure and ancestral state of consciousness. Obviously, it was a childhood spatially and temporally located in Greece at the turn of the XX century. Like Freud, de Chirico understood that the meaning of a lifetime is inextricably linked to childhood with unbreakable and powerful ties. The images of Athens and Volos, Olympia and Delphi incessantly hovered over de Chirico's visual imagination throughout his all life.²⁹ In a way not unlike Palamàs' archetypal and mythological images.



fig. 8 Volos, Demetriados St., postcard, first decade of the XX century

Athens, Volos and Greece remained stamped on de Chirico's mind in a complex and indelible way, and he recalled them with passionate lyricism at all stages of his life, even during his late years: "on the other hand, the landscape of Athens (this magnificent city) powerfully contributed to making his spirit incline towards that Romantic, enigmatic and dark side that was the true living force of Greek classicism".³⁰ «All these spectacles of exceptional beauty which I saw in Greece as a boy, and which were the most beautiful I have seen in all my life, made such a deep impression on me and remained so powerfully impressed in my mind and thoughts».³¹ The contrast between ancient ruins and modern industrial warehouses bristling with chimneys – as in the district of Gazi,³² the first public electricity provider to the city, adjacent to the monumental cemetery of Keramikòs (not yet excavated at the time) and with a view on the Acropolis – marked de Chirico's imagination as did the locomotives and "fatherly" railways of Volos (figs. 7, 8) as well as other characteristic details of Athens. Athens was a neoclassical architectural hybrid made contemporary by its hustle and bustle, where its citizens were daily reminded of its archaeological antiquities, and the streets were (and are) named after the ancient gods (Hermes-Ερμού, the main shopping street, Athena-Αθηνάς, etc.) and the houses surmounted by stone or terracotta effigies, forming veritable forest of antefixes, acroteria, tympanums and columns.

Above all, the atmosphere that de Chirico breathed in Greece, halfway between the immanence of myth, memory, and contemporary culture (poetically condensed in Palamàs' profoundly Nietzschean work), concocted a strange and original mixture in him. Such a blend, together with his predisposition to cosmopolitanism, predisposed him to search anxiously for novelty and to reconnect with his cultural roots, something that in different ways he shared with other contemporary masters. From the learned corners of the European continent, the new century's most powerful wind of innovation was coming closer to Europe's major urban centers: Picasso from Spain, Kandinsky from Russia, Marinetti from Egypt.

²⁹ On the many references to the images of de Chirico's Greek childhood, see F. Benzi, *Giorgio de Chirico. La vita e l'opera*, cit.

³⁰ A. Bardi (pseudonym of G. De Chirico), *La vie de Giorgio de Chirico*, in «Sélection. Chronique de la vie artistique» no. 8, (1929), p.21.

³¹ G. de Chirico, *The Memoirs*, cit. p. 24.

³² Factory chimneys were also in Singrou, not far from the Olympieion.