

NOTES ON THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF THE DE CHIRICO-GARTZ CORRESPONDENCE (1909-1911)

Francesco Caruso

Giorgio de Chirico's language is a unique blend of various idioms. By the time he wrote the letters for which we have provided the translation (1909-1911), he had been exposed to several languages, including Greek (he spent the first 17 years of his life in Greece), French "the language of his studies and conversation", and German.¹ The correspondence with Fritz Gartz is entirely written in German, a language in which de Chirico was well aware of his lack of proficiency, as evidenced by his candid admission: "It is very uncomfortable for me to write a letter, that is why I write so rarely" (Doc. 1).

As a matter of fact, these letters present several mistakes, which concern all the following: spelling; punctuation (often non-existent, with the typical omission of the obligatory comma); inflection of nouns and adjectives; use of prepositions; syntax (especially regarding the use of subordinating conjunctions); word order; collocations. All these mistakes, however, do not affect communication, and Gartz certainly would not have had a hard time understanding his epistolary interlocutor (with the notable exception of a *quid pro quo* arising over the adjective *dumm* referred to Michelangelo, of which we shall speak shortly). Nevertheless, there are a few instances where some expressions used by de Chirico appear unclear, obscure or exaggerated. We believe that this is caused by his restricted German vocabulary. Limited lexical competence is a very common trait even in post-beginner language learners, and almost fatally brings about a semantic expansion of the words and expressions that learners use more comfortably. In fact, one of the key components of lexical competency is mastering polysemy, that is, the acquisition of the ability to distinguish the different meanings of a word.² But learners who have not yet acquired polysemy are inclined to repeatedly use the same words in order to express different meanings which they believe to be lexically interrelated. A situation like

¹ F. Benzi, *Giorgio de Chirico. La vita e l'opera*, La nave di Teseo, Milan 2019, p. 25. His nurse was a German-speaking woman from Trieste and at six Giorgio wrote to his father: "I am studying my piano lessons and German", quoted in Id., p. 501 fn. 5. I would like to express my gratitude to Danila Moro, who is my co-author of the translation of the de Chirico-Gartz correspondence into Italian, as well as Bridget Pupillo who has helped me greatly in the German into English translation. I also would like to thank Ara H. Merjian with whom I discussed a few thorny linguistic issues, and Paolo Picozza who asked me to provide these notes.

² R. Gairns, S. Redman, *Working with Words: A Guide to Teaching and Learning Vocabulary*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK 1986, esp. p. 14.

this poses serious challenges to the translator, who has to investigate thoroughly the context in which such semantic expansion takes place in order to reconstruct the exact meaning that the author assigned to a specific word or phrase. Contextual elements, both internal and external (when present), are, in fact, absolutely crucial to understanding the actual meaning that the author wants to convey. In the case of the de Chirico-Gartz correspondence, the translator's work is partially facilitated: we have at our disposal a plurality of documents that offer a sufficiently broad context for a systematic interpretation, where words must be read as parts of a unitary whole rather than as merely aggregate components to be interpreted in isolation.

In what follows, we shall discuss two instances in which de Chirico assigns to the same German words (mostly qualifiers) a plurality of meanings, resulting in a semantic depletion that we felt should be avoided in its rendering in a foreign language, for it may cause potential misunderstandings and does not correspond to the artist's conviction as it emerges from the other elements of the correspondence. More specifically, we shall examine two adjectives: *furchtbar* and *dumm*.

There are seven occurrences of *furchtbar* as a modifier in the whole correspondence.³ The most immediate equivalent of *furchtbar* in English is "terrible" as an adjective and "terribly" as an adverb. In most cases, this translation works fine, as when Giorgio reports Alberto's reservations about the music ensemble that was supposed to perform his compositions in Florence: "It was all set, but when he realized that the orchestra was terribly clumsy [*furchtbar ungeschickt*], he decided to have the same concert performed in Munich" (Doc. 7). Similarly, "terribly" works fine when de Chirico refers to those artists whom he once admired and that now, after the "Nietzschean turn", appear to him "terribly small and coarse" [*furchtbar klein und roh*] (Doc. 9). But the negative connotation commonly assigned to *furchtbar* seems not to be applicable in other instances. This is especially the case of the very first occurrence of *furchtbar*, i.e., in the letter dated 26 January 1910 (but, in fact, 26 December 1910)⁴ (Doc. 6), underlined in pencil. There, de Chirico writes to Gartz that what he has created in Italy is not "great" or "deep", but *furchtbar*. Actually, as he adds immediately after, he has painted the deepest paintings that exist. From these very few words and the remaining part of the letter, we learn that what de Chirico has accomplished in executing those *furchtbar* works is something extraordinary and unprecedented: "when I exhibit them, it will be a revelation for the whole world" (*ibid.*). In other words, de Chirico here is speaking of an achievement, not of a

3 De Chirico at times misspells it in *furchbare* (Doc. 6) or *furchbar* (twice in Doc. 9).

4 For a summary of the *vexata quaestio* on this date, see G. de Chirico, *Lettere 1909-1929*, edited by E. Pontiggia, Silvana Editoriale, Cinisello Balsamo 2018, p. 25 fn. 21.

setback. Therefore, in such a context *furchtbar* cannot be understood as “terrible”. Rather, a more accurate translation should take into account a different nuance of *furchtbar*, that is, a mixture of fear and reverence, a sense of unease triggered when confronting something that is impressively imposing or powerful. In this specific case, we have opted for “formidable”, which best conveys the idea, expressed throughout the letter, of a sudden discovery by the painter, which bears an unsettling, yet promising revelation. A valid alternate translation to “formidable” could be “unsettling”, “shocking” or “disconcerting”, as when de Chirico describes to Gartz his reaction to the latter’s brother: “I spent all night yesterday thinking about your brother’s psychological drama. It is truly shocking that only in Germany are there people capable of experiencing such states of mind. He was too weak! Would that more people were weak like this! What is shocking is this obtuseness, this lack of awareness in people” (Doc. 9).

The newly acquired access to the “formidable” dimension of art about which de Chirico speaks to Gartz grants his painting a level of almost unsurpassed depth, a dimension unknown to other artists (with the explicit exception of Böcklin). De Chirico’s is a recent discovery, which confers to the letter of 26 December 1910 an almost exalted tone, to the extent that he does not hesitate to write almost recklessly that “Michelangelo” is “the *dümmste* artist” (Doc. 6). The adjective used here is *dumm* in the superlative.⁵ As its English cognate “dumb”, *dumm* defines the quality of being unintelligent or intellectually challenged. Gartz himself must have been flabbergasted to see the Renaissance master labelled in such a derogatory way and, as we can infer from another of de Chirico’s letters, he demanded an explanation for the unflattering treatment of the Tuscan titan: “You did not understand me well when I said about Michelangelo that he is a *dumm* artist” (Doc. 9). This is a patent case of failed communication caused by de Chirico’s limited German writing skills coupled with his uniquely caustic spirit. In fact, what he really meant is explained in that very same letter: “To me he [*scil.* Michelangelo] seems so, because now I know a new world and everything seems to me too coarse and inexpressive”.⁶ As is becoming apparent, de Chirico’s opinion on Michelangelo does not concern the latter’s intellectual prowess but rather his sensitivity, his aesthetic receptiveness, and, ultimately, his inevitable ignorance of Nietzsche’s announcement through Zarathustra, who brought about the “new world” mentioned in the quotation. Consequently, we have decided to render *dumm* in English as “obtuse” in the sense of emotionally insensitive. Our choice

5 There are a total of six occurrences, including *dummer* and *Dummheit*.

6 Interestingly, here the German original has *stumm*, that is, “mute”, “silent”, which is synonymous with “dumb” in the sense of “speechless” and that we have rendered with “inexpressive”.

was especially corroborated by a passage contained in Doc. 9, when de Chirico, in expressing his condolences to Gartz for his brother's death, defines as *Dummheit* the people's behavior in reaction to Gartz's brother's suicide. In fact, here *Dummheit* is not just mere stupidity but something more: de Chirico qualifies it as "a lack of awareness" ("He was too weak! Would that more people were weak like this! What is shocking is this obtuseness, this lack of awareness in people"). It is apparent here that for de Chirico Gartz's brother's "weakness" was not a flaw or a deficiency of some sort, but rather a form of heightened sensitivity. Finally, in a further instance, we have found that translating *dumm* as "obtuse" suits well de Chirico's concern about the people of Munich's reaction to his brother's music compositions – "Let us hope that the people of Munich are not so insert and obtuse" (Doc. 9).

To conclude, in a few letters and in a very short period of time (26 December 1910-5 January 1911), de Chirico works out a distinction between those artists who have had access to the "formidable" dimension of artistic creation, and those who have not and have thus remained "obtuse". Even if the latter had earned the admiration of the "great spirits", they have not "drunk" from the same "fountain" from which de Chirico did: Nietzsche's Zarathustra (Doc. 9). As such, and unlike him, they were not able to create anything "deep". *Tief*, the German word for "deep", very frequently recurs in the most significant passages of the correspondence (13 occurrences). But even this word undergoes a transformation in De Chirico's vocabulary: in fact, he warns Gartz that "deep" should be intended not "in the old sense of the word" but as "formidable" (*furchtbar*) (Doc. 5). Interestingly, for de Chirico depth is not a quality exclusive to visual artists, but to creators in general, including poets – and Nietzsche to him is "the deepest poet" (*ibid.*). This reference to poets points to a specific Nietzschean source that, as far as we know, has not yet been identified, namely, the chapter "On Poets" from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: "I became weary of the poets, the old and the new; superficial they all are to me and shallow seas. They did not think sufficiently to the depths, therefore their feeling did not get to the bottom [...] *Nor are they clean enough* for me; they all muddy their water to make it seem deep. And though they gladly pose as reconcilers, to me they remain middlemen mixers and half-and-halves and *unclean!*"⁷ We believe that this quotation explains a passage of the letter that otherwise would be preposterous if not plainly obscure, i.e., the point in which de Chirico affirms that some of the "great men" at whom he is now looking at with "different lenses" "reek". Of course, we can ascribe such a disparaging comment to the Pictor Optimus' notorious sarcasm, but its philosophical background is now

7 F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, edited by A. Del Caro and R. B. Pippin, translated by A. Del Caro, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK 2006, p. 101 (Nietzsche's emphasis).

unveiled. Establishing what he meant by depth at that early moment of his career is a vast task that is far beyond the scope of these notes.⁸ Yet, we could ask why he dwelt almost obsessively on this concept, so that a turning point in his career as an artist came to coincide with the discovery of this aesthetic quality. The answer, in our opinion, is to be found in a passage contained in Nietzsche's *The Twilight of the Idols*, where the German philosopher writes: "I have given humanity the deepest [*tiefste*] book in its possession: *Zarathustra*".⁹ De Chirico may have intended these words as a program for his own art: he wanted to give mankind the deepest paintings.

8 Here it will be sufficient to recall what de Chirico wrote in the *Éluard-Picasso Manuscripts* (July 1911-May 1914): "I think that we must never forget that a painting must always be the refecation of a deep sensation, and that deep means strange, and strange means uncommon or altogether unknown" (G. de Chirico, *Éluard-Picasso Manuscripts*, in «Metaphysical Art», 17/18 [2018], p. 17).

9 F. Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, edited by A. Ridley and J. Norman, translated by J. Norman, 4th publishing, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK 2006, p. 223 (translation slightly modified).