



G. de Chirico, *Serenata*, 1910

FOR A NEW INTERPRETATION OF GIORGIO DE CHIRICO'S *SERENATA* (1910)

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In my monograph on Giorgio de Chirico,¹ I presented my interpretation of *Serenata* ["Serenade"] a work of the so called Böcklinian period, executed, as we shall see, in 1910. My reading was based on a quotation from a sonnet by the Romantic poet Mörike, but I am now urged to revise it because I have found a new source for the interpretation of the painting.

Let us examine *Serenata* and study its role in the evolution of de Chirico's Metaphysical Art. The two hills in the painting do look strikingly similar to those of Fiesole; also, at their junction there is a turret corresponding to the bell tower of San Romolo cathedral in Fiesole, while at the bottom a mythical setting has replaced the urban landscape in the valley below. On the bottom right of the painting, we can see a fountain on the pedestal of which is carved the head of Janus bifrons, framed between a staff and a key, which in the late Roman period were thought to be its symbols. Next to the fountain, there is a woman wearing a white vest, enclosed in a cloak from head to foot. Behind her, a large, leafy tree forms a crown over her figure. To the left, there are three women in ancient, multicolored dresses to the feet, which stand out against the green hills. Two of the three women are playing the mandolin, which makes them look like the ancient Muses. Finally, a large olive tree (not a vine, as Baldacci claims) with a red leaf vine twisting up around its trunk. The enigma to be solved concerns the interpretation of this whole visual apparatus. In my book, I attempted an interpretation that I have now rejected as new elements have subsequently emerged; and while I believe I can provide a new reading of this painting, in presenting his critique, Baldacci admits to being not able to offer a convincing interpretation, so to conclude that *Serenata* is a failed painting.

Baldacci's theory, according to which this work depicts the classical world of myth set on the hills of Fiesole,² and is therefore reminiscent of de Chirico's master Böcklin, entails a logic corollary that we need to accept, namely that the painting was executed in 1910. De Chirico had never been to Fiesole before 1909. Therefore, he would have

1 *Giorgio de Chirico. Immagini metafisiche*, La nave di Teseo, Milan 2018. Unless stated otherwise, all translations are by Francesco Caruso.

2 Baldacci criticized my first interpretation, stating that the landscape depicted in the painting was inspired by a postcard of Fiesole sent in 1901. Consequently, since Böcklin lived in Fiesole for the last years of his life and died there, it is logical to think that he interpreted the painting as a homage to Böcklin. Fabio Benzi had already argued that it was a Fiesole landscape: "*Serenata* [...] must have been executed between April and the summer of 1910. It is certainly a Böcklinian landscape, but with a Tuscan, Faesulan genuineness to it, so much so that it must have been painted on site" (F. Benzi, *Giorgio de Chirico. La vita e l'opera*, La nave di Teseo, Milan 2019, p. 48).

painted the scene only on the basis of the postcard shown by Baldacci. This postcard was sent on 9 April 1901, when de Chirico was still in Greece and 13 years old! When and where would he have found this postcard eight years later? The hypothesis is not plausible. We know that de Chirico settled in Florence in mid-March 1910 and stayed until July 1911: he had enough time to visit Fiesole and paint the landscape from life, or even buy a postcard (which was certainly not the one sent in 1901). The image of the two-faced Janus on the fountain's pedestal offers further evidence that the painting was executed in 1910. Janus is a citation from a passage of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in which Nietzsche expounds the principle of the eternal recurrence of the same. Now, de Chirico read *Zarathustra* in the summer of 1910, as he himself tells us in the cited letter of 26 *Januar*, the actual date of which is 26 December 1910. To maintain that the painting, which possibly contained this quotation from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, was executed in 1909 is a patent contradiction.

Concerning my first interpretation of *Serenata*, Baldacci has exposed specious criticism,³ which there is little point in discussing, also because the interpretation I formulated then has radically changed.⁴ Instead, I must respond to his criticism of the hypothesis I advanced my book, according to which the painting was inspired by Porphyry's *De antro Nympharum* [On the Cave of the Nymphs], which Baldacci describes as "a symbolic, Neoplatonic commentary to the *Odyssey*, written in Hellenistic Greek language that certainly neither de Chirico nor Mörike ever read or heard about in spite of Dottori's conjectures"⁵ In fact, Porphyry's treatise is essential to understand *Serenata*, to the extent that the painting could be considered the work's visual representation. I have come to the conclusion that the Maestro had read Porphyry's work as I found

3 See P. Baldacci, *Sull'iconografia del dipinto Serenata (Beatrice)*, in «Studi Online», 7.13 (2020), p. 10.

4 I would like to respond briefly to Baldacci's specious criticisms in order to get to the bottom of what made me reconsider the way in which I construed the painting. The first criticism concerns a slip of the tongue in referring to Mörike's sonnet as *Antike Kunst* rather than *Antike Poesie*. My mistake stems from the fact that the first stanza quoted by de Chirico contains the phrase "antike Kunst". Similarly, I am chastised for misidentifying the author of *Iphigenia* as Sophocles rather than Euripides: a high-school student's error. This mistake is due to the fact that when I think of Greek tragedy, I always think of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, in which he blames Euripides for its demise. The slip, or transference, derives from Nietzsche's conception of Greek tragedy being transferred to Mörike. Baldacci explicitly states in his article that there is no tragedy by Sophocles on *Iphigenia*, but then goes on to correct himself in a footnote, stating that there are in fact some plays written by Sophocles and Aeschylus on that character, although they have been lost. However, I do not want to absolve myself of responsibility: even when its causes are identified, a mistake remains a mistake. On the contrary, when Baldacci accuses me of mistranslating the sonnet, particularly the twelfth verse, from which he quotes both the text ("an dessen Blick sich die Höhe erquicken") and my translation ("at his glance the hills rejoice") things are different. He reads the German lyrics as "when they see him, the hills rejoice". Now, "Blick" can refer to both "glance" and "view", but "Schönblick" (as the Italian "bellavista"), always refers to our view of the hills, and not to the hills looking at us. Also, unfortunately for Baldacci, the poem reads "an dessen Blick", not "an deren Blick" (a masculine, not feminine, genitive).

5 Baldacci, *Sull'iconografia*, p. 7.

myself vis-à-vis *La partenza degli Argonauti* ["The Departure of the Argonauts"] that de Chirico executed around the same time of *Serenata*. There, a sea cave is visible near the cove where a ship approaches to pick up Castor and Pollux (i. e. Giorgio and Andrea de Chirico, who were nicknamed precisely after the two Dioscuri). After conducting some research, I realized that, in fact, Porphyry's text was very well known: since the seventeenth century, it had been at the basis of an entire libertine literature that, while retaining Porphyrian themes and symbols, overturned the allegorical interpretation into a purely sexual one, as demonstrated by the writings of three French libertines, recently reprinted in *L'antro delle ninfe*, prefaced by an introductory essay by Jean-Pierre Cavaillé bearing the title "Libertinaggio e allegoria sessuale".⁶ In the first of these three writings, entitled *Explication de l'antro des nymphes décrit par Homère au troisième livre de l'Odyssée* and originally attributed to Tubertus Ocella (in fact François de La Mothe Le Vayer), the author expressly refers to Porphyry to turn his religious allegorical exegesis of a passage of the *Odyssey* into a purely sexual allegoresis. For him, "Porphyry wrote a grand dissertation in which he claims to prove that our blind *aoidos* has put the entire world within that cave, the two doors of which would be those of life and death, and the Nymphs the souls that preside over successive generations and corruptions, then attuning the remaining narrative to this first imagination".⁷

According to Le Vayer's allegorical reading, which overturns Porphyry's interpretation, Ulysses' bow string, which none of the suitors could stretch as well as he could, represents the male sexual organ, while the cave of the nymphs represents Penelope's female sexual organ, next to which Ulysses desired to lie down after twenty years of toil and adventure. All the other elements of the poetic description of the cave, beginning with the two gates, are also interpreted sexually. The declared goal of this seventeenth-century libertine writer, who is also at the heart of contemporary libertine eroticism, is not to exalt sexuality against bourgeois moralism, but to demonstrate that, contrary to the description and practice of sexuality, the soul or mind can remain pure. Hence he aims at eliminating the false sense of shame that underpins vice. Le Vayer achieves this by showing that the descriptions of the libertines' sexual acts can be compared to those given in the scientific and medical practices. Furthermore, according to Cavaillé, Le Vayer's contemporary libertine eroticism, rooted in seventeenth-century libertinism, shows another aspect: that Renaissance unit of body and mind as well as of soul and senses that

6 *L'antro delle ninfe*, edited by R. Tomadin, with an introductory essay by J.-P. Cavaillé, Dedalo, Bari 2008. The first of the three accompanying texts (all in the Italian translation) is F. La Mothe Le Vayer, *Explication de l'antro des Nymphes* (1630), which came out just after the publication of the Latin translation of *De antro Nympharum quod in Odyssea describitur* (1630) by Lucas Holste (or Holstenius), librarian to Cardinal Barberini. The other two texts are: A. de Monluc, *Plainte de Tirsis à Cloris*, published as an appendix to *Les pensées du solitaire*, Augustine Courbet, Paris 1630, and C. Le Petit, *Histoire allegorique*, taken from *L'heure du Berger*, Antoine Robinot, Paris 1662.

7 *L'antro delle ninfe*, p. 77.

has always been marginal in the West and has practically disappeared in today's mass culture. Such a harmony-seeking unity of body and soul is one of the most ancestral themes of classical Greek culture. It appeared for the first time in the two figures flanking the Birth of Venus in the Ludovisi Throne (450 BCE), with a fully clothed woman, on one side, and a completely naked one on the other. Such a theme was later immortalized in Veronese's painting *Amore e Psiche*. All this proves the continuity of the theme of *De antro Nympharum* in philosophy, hermeneutics of myth, and modern literature.

Porphyry was an enormously well-read writer, not only in philosophy, but also in theology and theurgy, and we owe a fair share of knowledge of antiquity to him. We are indebted to him for the edition of Plotinus' *Enneads*, which would otherwise have remained a formless mass of cryptic writings, that he put together in a coherent system that, through its influence first on the Christian philosopher Marcus Victorinus' Trinitarian metaphysical thought, and then on Augustine of Hippo, was then incorporated into Italian Renaissance philosophy (Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, Giordano Bruno),⁸ and eventually into German idealism (Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel). Porphyry has also a place in the history of logic for his *In Aristotelis Categorias Commentarium* ["Commentary on Aristotle's *Categories*"], and the *Isagoge*, an introduction to Aristotle's doctrine of definition, that, starting from the high genera and through a series of subdivisions of the species, enables to isolate all genera down to the lowest species. For Aristotle, in order to carry out this operation correctly, four elements are needed: genus, property, definition, and accident ("the predictables"). Porphyry introduced a fifth element, called species. So we have five predictables: genus, species, property, difference, accident. Here definition has been replaced by two new elements, namely the species and the difference, for they constitute the specific difference, on which the definition is based. This is how the famous Porphyrian Tree is built, which according to Umberto Eco is at the root of the dictionary and the encyclopedia as literary genres.⁹ Discussions of these topics have dominated the entire history of logic since the Middle Ages. Less known were the two works that remained nearly intact in comparison to the other 77, the majority of which went lost or survived in fragments. The *De descensu animae*, obviously linked to the *De antro Nympharum*, together with another treatise entitled *De abstinentia carnibus*, are the most important works by Porphyry among those survived in their entirety.¹⁰

8 Marsilio Ficino translated the whole corpus of Plotinus' works (printed in 1492), as well as Porphyry and Proclus. Michael Psellus, an eleventh-century Eastern Greek Neoplatonist, compiled a compendium of *De antro Nympharum*, which was later edited by Boissonade in Nuremberg in 1838.

9 See U. Eco, *Dall'albero al labirinto. Studi storici sul segno e l'interpretazione*, Bompiani, Milan 2007, especially pp. 15-27.

10 I had already worked on Porphyry, translating and commenting on a chapter from his *Peri apochés empsychón* [On abstinence from meat], where he condemns the consumption of animal meat, not as a dietary one, but as an ethical principle: in fact, animals possess not only the ability for "uttered discourse" (*lógos prophorikós*), but also that for "internal discourse" (*lógos endiathetós*) – a major issue in our contemporary Anthropocenic thinking and post-human ethics.

Our question at this point is how de Chirico became familiar with Porphyry and *De antro Nympharum*. We now know that de Chirico read Leopardi's *Cantico del gallo silvestre* and therefore his *Operette morali*, the longest and most important part of which is the *Dialogo di Porfirio e Plotino*. As a result, we can only assume that de Chirico, as a classics enthusiast, must have read this dialogue. But how did Leopardi get the idea to write it? And what exactly is it about? By the age of 16, Leopardi had edited Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus* in Greek, with a Latin translation and commentary. In 1827, he composed the *Dialogo di Porfirio e Plotino*, which was included in the third edition of the *Operette morali* (the first two editions being Milan 1827, and Florence 1831) published in Naples in 1835.¹¹ This edition was withdrawn due to censorship intervention, so only a few copies remain. As a result, the most widely distributed edition is the one published in Florence in 1845.¹² In the "Manifesto dei Canti" (1831), referring to that dialogue, Leopardi speaks of an extended "new prose piece" that alludes to "a topic similar to one dealt with in the new *Canti*".¹³ This last one is speculated to be *Amore e morte*, in which there is the same death drive that we find expressed in the *Dialogo di Porfirio e Plotino* that discusses the lawfulness of suicide. In this work, Plotinus argues that suicide is against nature, whereas Porphyry sees death as the only remedy to boredom. For him, in life all is vanity: pleasure, pain, hope, and fear are tricks of the imagination and of the intellect that believes things that are neither real nor reasonable: "Only boredom, which is always the product of the vanity of things, is never vain: it is never an illusion; it is never founded on the unreal. And we may say that since all the rest is vain, whatever is substantial and real in the life of men is reduced to boredom and consists in nothing else".¹⁴

For Schopenhauer, a contemporary of Leopardi, this boredom overturns the principle according on which Hegel's metaphysics is grounded: "The rational is real and the real is rational" – where "reason" equals *telos*, the final purpose, the ultimate legitimation of the world and of life. What is real in reality is not reason, but will: but for Schopenhauer will cannot give us anything but boredom, nausea (Sartre), Angst (Heidegger), the sickness unto death (Kierkegaard), despair – which is what today we commonly refer to as "depression". Boredom, tedium – they turn reality into suffering and despair. In Leopardi this reversal does not occur affirmatively, but as the effect of a counter-argument advanced in the name of boredom, a counter-power to reason; ennui

11 See *Epistolario di Giacomo Leopardi raccolto e ordinato da Prospero Viani*, expanded and corrected fifth reprint edition in 3 vols., Le Monnier, Florence 1892, III, p. 40 (epist. no. 810).

12 G. Leopardi, *Scritti editi e sconosciuti. Spigolature di Clemente Benedettucci*, Rinaldo Simboli, Recanati 1875, containing the *Notizia* that the poet dictated for the 1835 Neapolitan edition (p. 273).

13 Id., p. 249.

14 G. Leopardi, *Essays and Dialogues*, translated with introduction and notes by G. Cecchetti, University of California Press, Berkeley; Los Angeles; London 1982, p. 447.

is on the other side of life, that of death. Since everything is boredom, and boredom is the unbearable unhappiness coming from thinking that everything is vanity, rejecting boredom becomes a rejection of life by life itself, a denial of the will to live, and a death that is not only invoked, but willed.

In Leopardi's dialogue, which opens with a quotation from the *Life of Plotinus*, written by a young Porphyry in 260 AD, Porphyry confesses to Plotinus his suicidal thoughts and receives the following advice: "My dear, you are sick. Leave, go elsewhere. Relax, take care of yourself and get better". That is exactly what Porphyry did, settling in Sicily only to return to Rome after the death of Plotinus in 270 AD to take over as head of the school. In response to Porphyry, Plotinus also discusses the contradiction of life that negates itself and its natural will to live, using life to take life away. Still, for Porphyry, or Leopardi, that is not an answer: those who no longer believe in life balk at it. It is the will to live that saves reason, not reason that saves the will to live. Nietzsche, like Schopenhauer, is willing to admit that life, qua will, is pain and suffering; however, living means accepting life and, as such, not embracing nihilism. Saying yes to life is more than just the will to live; it is a will multiplied by suffering, a feature that is not present in Schopenhauer.

Plotinus' final argument in Leopardi's fiction is based on the love for one's friends, for they do not want to be alone and would suffer as a result of his death. Such an argument is based not on one's *own* love for life – which has turned into love for death – but on *their* will to live, that is, on a conception of love grounded on a community of friends, on which the acceptance of life is based. As a result, in Leopardi's spirit, as in his eponymous poem, Love and Death collide. De Chirico, for one, was clearly sensitive to such clashes, as he writes to his friend Gartz in a 1910 letter about having painted some formidable paintings over the summer. One of these formidable paintings, which anticipate the metaphysical works, is certainly *Serenata*. In what follows, we shall see how the things stand with the *Cave of the Nymphs* and whether there is a connection between the *Dialogo di Porfirio e Plotino* and *Serenata*.

This painting is set in Fiesole, where Böcklin spent the last six years of his life and died. Therefore, the painting is both a tribute to Böcklin and a memorial to his death. As a result, the figure we see rising up toward the lit door, which Baldacci believes is without a definite form and whose gender is unknown, is Böcklin's soul. I had not noticed that above this figure, close to the lit door and the arcades, there are two other, similar very small figures that could be mistaken for two light blue spots and that no one has yet examined. They appear to be even more enigmatic due to their shape and position: one is on the left, next to the door shutters; the other is on the roof deck above the arcades, although it protrudes so far out that one cannot understand how it can stand without falling down below. If it were a statue on a pedestal placed on the second

floor roof deck, it could not stand because half of the pedestal sticks out of the deck. Hence my conclusion that these two vaguely anthropomorphic blue figures wrapped in a veil that reaches down to the feet represent two souls. Furthermore, upon careful examination of the painting, a second house is visible on the hill to the left, opposite the first house with the illuminated doors, with the arches at the bottom and immersed in darkness. Finally, besides the loggia that we have called “ruins”, also the tree on the left, on the same line with the Muses that sing and play, requires an interpretation. Baldacci, who has drawn attention to it, refers to the tree as to “the autumn vine that spreads its shoots from the thick trunk below”.¹⁵ Actually, that is an olive tree with shoots that grow around the base and fuse with the hollow trunk, as happens with all centuries-old olive trees.¹⁶ Everything seems to be truly enigmatic or, more accurately, a metaphysical enigma. I believe that its solution can be found in the Neoplatonic – and originally Pythagorean – conception of the descent of souls into the world and their ascent after death, which is briefly presented in Porphyry’s *De antro Nympharum*, a commentary to 11 verses of Book 13 of the *Odyssey*. This new interpretation of the vertical sequence of the painting pivots on the identification of the illuminated door on the right and the dark arcades above it. This the first appearance in de Chirico’s painting of the Böcklinian arcades that, starting with the *Enigma dell’ora* [“Enigma of the Hour”], will eventually become the “metaphysical” arcades. In the house on the left, however, the top of the building has no openings, and the arcades are situated on the ground floor: they are also immersed in darkness and can serve both as an exit or an entrance. There are no human figures visible in the vicinity of the second house. Based on the ancient religious concepts underlying that passage of the *Odyssey*, as well as Porphyry’s allegorical exegesis, we can speculate that the door on the left is the gate of men, from which the souls descend on earth, while the door on the right is the gate of the ascent of the souls of those righteous men who have become immortal and can thus pass through this illuminated gate, the entry of which is forbidden to all others.

We have opted for this interpretation after considering the connection between two very small, light-blue figures and the one ascending towards the illuminated door in the center-left. They will reappear in the metaphysical paintings as two silhouettes visible in the distance, on the horizon line. For some scholars, they symbolize eternity. If we turn to the portico in the *Enigma dell’ora*, after the lost Böcklin’s drawing, we can notice, in the loggia, the shadow of a head looking towards the horizon, or better, towards the cosmic emptiness. While the pensive, white-cloaked human figure in the foreground ponders

15 Baldacci, *Sull’iconografia*, p. 6.

16 This is because the roots of an olive tree are tied directly to the branches, as if they were ropes, and they resist even as the central part of the trunk decays over time.

the enigma of time, and the other, in a dark greatcoat, checks the time while waiting for the train, the barely visible figure in the loggia gazes into the cosmic emptiness of space, where time does not flow and eternity lies.

In *Serenata*, the ascending, light-blue figure is not just a memory of Böcklin, but his soul. In his *Isle of the Dead* an oarsman ferries a figure clad in white to the island: this is not the corpse or a statue, which cannot be carried in such a small boat, but the soul of the dead. Similarly, Kaspar David Friedrich, who greatly inspired both Böcklin and de Chirico, had depicted his daughter's soul in a graveyard. Similarly, in *Mistero e malinconia di una strada* ["Mystery and Melancholy of a Street"], de Chirico painted his father's soul joining his sister in the realm of light, where their souls are only shadows, or rather, in which what remains of their body is just the shadow that envelops their souls. This is our reading of the painting along its vertical axis. We must now deduce the meaning of it through the horizontal axis, by focusing on the relationship between the figures at the bottom of the painting.

We cannot commit to the idea that de Chirico simply imitated Böcklin's painting *Sieh, es lacht die Au* (1887), replacing the three women depicted there with three Muses, as Baldacci believes citing Rolf Andree's book.¹⁷ They can obviously be reminiscent of Böcklin, but this is not conducive to interpreting the otherworldly figures at the top, nor the figures at the bottom, which speak of life and death. To this purpose, we shall use the allegorical exegesis of *Od.*, 13, 102-112 conducted by Porphyry in *De antro Nympharum*. These lines along with the commentary will help elucidate what in de Chirico's painting is obscure, demonstrating that this artwork is in fact based on Porphyry's text.

The text opens as follows:¹⁸

One is inclined to wonder what on earth the cave in Ithaca means for Homer,
the one he describes in the following words:

And at the head of the harbor is a slender-leaved olive
and near by it a lovely and murky cave
sacred to the nymphs called Naiads.
Within are kraters and amphoras
of stone, where bees lay up stores of honey.
Inside, too, are massive stone looms and there the nymphs

17 See Baldacci, *Sull'iconografia*, p. 8, quoting R. Andree, *Arnold Böcklin. Die Gemälde*, Friedrich Reinhardt Verlag-Prestel Verlag, Basel/Munich, 1977.

18 Porphyry, *On The Cave of the Nymphs*, translation and introductory essay by R. Lamberton, Station Hill Press, Berrytown, New York, 1983. (References to this work will be given according to the Oxford Classical Dictionary citation criteria: Porph., *De antro nymph.*, followed the number of the section and the paragraph. Translator's Note).

weave sea-purple cloth, a wonder to see.
 The water flows unceasingly. The cave has two gates,
 the one from the north, a path for men to descend,
 while the other, toward the south, is divine. Men do not
 enter by this one, but it is rather a path for immortals.

[*Od.*, 13, 102-112]

As we can see, this text contains the themes and thus the elements of the enigma to be interpreted: the olive tree, the cave, the Nymphs or Naiads, the stone kraters, the bees, the honey, the water, the two gates, one for men and the other for the gods. But the text also speaks of “path for immortals”, which Porphyry reads in the sense that those who have earned immortality thanks to their deeds are allowed to enter through it, even if they are men. All of this must be related to Ulysses, because he is mentioned as he who hid the gifts of the Phaeacians in the cave at the head of the harbor after arriving at Ithaca. Porphyry immediately explains that the cave is not in Ithaca or anywhere else, but is the hieroglyphic of the world itself enclosed by the vault of heaven; this interpretation follows the Platonic myth of the cave.

All the elements listed above are clearly present in *Serenata*: the olive tree, the Nymphs (Naiads or Muses), the waters (the fountain with the carved Janus), the gate of men and that of the gods which correspond to the door on the left oriented to the West and the door on the right oriented to the East. But also other elements of Porphyry's narrative are included in de Chirico's painting: the bees and honey are symbols of the souls that produce sweet nourishment – pleasure – and store it in craters and cups for libations; for Porphyry, they symbolize Dionysus, since they are “baked” in the sun like grapes.¹⁹ As we shall see, Dionysus also appears in *Serenata* in the vine twisting up around the olive tree trunk. It remains to be seen where the stone looms on which the Nymphs or Naiads weave their purple garments can be identified and what they mean. According to Porphyry, the nymphs mentioned by Homer are souls who have descended into the world through the gate through which men pass, the door of generation, which faces North and is located in the Tropic of Cancer, whereas the gate through which

19 See *id.*, 65, 13.

souls pass when they rise faces South and is located in the Tropic of Capricorn, where the sun turns to the East.²⁰ The winds Boreas and Notos correspond to the two gates.²¹

The two doors in *Serenata* are the two solstitial gates: in Greek spirituality, the souls of mortals would descend in this world through the first (the small, dark one on the left), while those who had become immortal through their deeds would ascend through the second (the lit door on the right, the gate of the immortals).²² This is why, according to Porphyry, the name “Janua” was given to this second gateway and “Januarius” to “the month during which the sun is making its ascent from Capricorn, where it reversed its course, and its rising-point on the eastern horizon is moving steadily toward the North”.²³

The overall interpretation of the painting should then begin with an examination of its most important character: Janus, whose head appears on the Roman coin (*aes grave*) and is carved in relief on the fountain. The fact that Janus is the god of gateways is the most compelling reason why he appears in this painting about the gates of the world. But Janus is also the god of beginnings, of the entrance into life – and the three female figures at the bottom are indeed souls who have descended into this world. In a horizontal sequence, from right to left, after the fountain with Janus bifrons we see appear Aphrodite Sosandra turning her back to the fountain and gazing towards the descended souls, here symbolized by the Nymphs or Naiads.

But before we proceed, we should better understand the meaning and identity of Aphrodite Sosandra. She is also called Veiled Aphrodite, for she is represented completely wrapped in a heavy cloak turned over his left shoulder, as seen in the work by the Greek sculptor Kalamis, which was completed in 465 BCE and placed at the entrance of the Propylaea on the Acropolis of Athens to protect the city. The original has been lost, and its most faithful copy is that from the early third century AD, which is now housed in the Archaeological Museum of Naples. “Sosandra” literally means “savior of man” – from ancient Greek *sōzein* (“to save”) and *anēr* (“man”). Her cult, which appears to have originated in a memorial to fallen heroes, reflects her nature as a funerary goddess revered by mothers who had lost their children in battle. From the Hellenistic age to

20 Laura Simonini’s commentary to Porphyry’s work best explains and identifies the two gates: “The two celestial gates are located in Cancer and Capricorn because the first is the horoscope of the world at its origin, and the other is ‘the sunset of the world’ (Vettio Valente, I. pp. 8, 32; 11, 13; 5, 26; 10, 20 Kroll)” (Porfirio, *L’antro delle ninfe*, edited by L. Simonini, Adelphi, Milan 1986, p. 194).

21 Simonini provides us with this precise explanation in her commentary (id., pp. 193-194, fn. 78).

22 “Also, the phrases ‘door of men’ and ‘door of the immortals’ are typically associated with the Greek tradition, according to Guénon, who emphasizes the importance of zodiacal symbolism in the Pythagoreans while emphasizing that this is not a Pythagorean doctrine [...]. In fact, it can be found everywhere, regardless of Greek influence [...] it is a traditional teaching that has been passed down continuously over the centuries, and it makes little difference the possibly ‘late’ date at which certain authors, who did not invent anything, formulated it in writing” (id., pp. 194-195 *passim*).

23 Porph., *De antr. nymph.*, 72, 24.

the Roman Empire, Kalamis' statue was so popular over the centuries that many copies were made, and it served as a model for portraits of statues of Roman matrons.

As a result, it does not seem out of place to associate this image with the Maestro's mother, given how much care, solicitude, and sense of protection she always had for him and his brother. After all, works of art emerge from the heart before the imagination and intellect. With the heart we understand the original pathos that moves the artist's soul, as with the Romantics. In all of de Chirico's work, we find traces of the reverent love for his father, who showed him his life as an artist, and of the profound affection for his mother, who followed and supported him in the crucial stages of his career in Florence, Munich, and Paris. From the perspective of the artist's poetics, initially inspired by Schopenhauer, man and woman represent the two original moments of creation, that is, the "act of conceiving" the work of art. This occurs when the object, which is male, strikes the artist's soul, which is female, impregnating her so that she can conceive the work of art. They are thus to be understood as the two original cosmic forces of art, akin to Nietzsche's Apollonian and Dionysian. These are for the Maestro his *Muse inquietanti* ["The Disquieting Muses"] appearing at the peak of his Metaphysical Art, while he was in Ferrara. In the first, standing, Muse we can identify his father in a deformed portrait after the painting *Il Ritornante* ["The Returning"] and his mother sitting next to him, an image that bears a striking resemblance to the 1911 *Ritratto della madre* ["Portrait of the Artist's Mother"] from 1911. This motif returns at the end of de Chirico's novel: "Suddenly Hebdomeros saw that this woman [eternity] had the eyes of his father".²⁴

Janus bifrons is directly linked to the Muses through the image of Aphrodite Sosandra. When viewed in relation to the Muses who play and sing in a peaceful and natural setting, the stern look of the "savior of men" is tantamount to the famous warning of Baroque art: *Et in Arcadia ego*. As a result, I cannot see how Baldacci can interpret this veiled woman as an allegory of truth that must be revealed and manifested through knowledge. But even if this were the case, he must also admit that the uphill path on the hill behind her must be that of ascesis, of the soul's ascent to God and immortality through artistic creation; for this was how the ascesis of art was conceived, from the Middle Ages to Schopenhauer. However, Baldacci does not discuss this, therefore he is unable to provide a full explanation of the painting. He himself cannot explain why one can speak of an Aphrodite "savior of man", veiled and chaste, when Aphrodite is the goddess of love by definition. In fact, this is one of the oldest and most fascinating art themes. As we said before, it has been present since the depiction of the Birth of Venus on the Ludovisi Throne (circa 450 BCE). This motif inspired Titian's famous *Amor Sacro e Amor Profano*, which de Chirico saw at Villa Borghese in Rome. He was so moved by

24 G. de Chirico, *Hebdomeros*, The Four Seasons Book Society, New York 1966, p. 141.

it that he admitted he had a vision of what great painting is on that occasion, a moving experience that marked his desire to return to “classic” art.²⁵

To answer Baldacci’s question, who states that he does not understand how it is possible to give an image of Aphrodite that is linked to chastity and thus not to sexuality, despite the fact that she is the goddess of love, we must first understand how the iconographic distinction between the different versions of Aphrodite developed in art, as an ancestral manifestation of religious cult. Several were the images and the cults associated with Aphrodite, whose two opposing epithets were Aphrodite Urania or Heavenly Aphrodite, who represented female sublime beauty and the divine charm of love, and Aphrodite Pandemia,²⁶ who symbolized sexual lust, and where woman is the object of base and crude desire. Iginio Gentile, whose *Trattato generale di archeologia e storia dell’arte greca* de Chirico read at Florence’s National Library, recognized these two aspects of the Greek goddess respectively in Praxiteles’ Aphrodite of Knidos (from where the Venus of Milo now at the Louvre partially derives), and in Cleomene’s Medici Venus, the equivalent of which is the Venus of Capua, housed in Naples. De Chirico associated the two modes of representation with the evolution of Athenian and Greek mores, or, more precisely, with a loosening of morals that allows sensuality to triumph over modest beauty.²⁷ According to Paul Decharme, a historian of Greek mythology whose works de Chirico read while in Florence, aside from these two opposing views of Aphrodite and her cults, the ancient Greeks conceived of love in a broader sense.²⁸ Not unlike Iginio Gentile, Decharme expressly states that the distinction between Aphrodite Urania and Aphrodite Pandemia is based on the practical reality of the cult, not on the ethics of philosophers, and demonstrates that each city held a different view of Aphrodite. Such as with the cult of Hermione, also known as Aphrodite Nymphia, the Roman *Venus*

25 The Tiziano painting that de Chirico saw in the Villa Borghese Museum and that he mentioned in his memoirs is, without a doubt, *Amor Sacro e Amor Profano*: “It was one morning at the Villa Borghese, in front of a painting by Titian, that I had a revelation of what great painting was: I saw tongues of fire appear in the gallery, while outside, beneath the clear sky over the city, rang out a solemn clangour as of weapons beaten in salute, and together with a great cry of righteous spirits there echoed the sound of a trumpet heralding a resurrection” (*The Memoirs of Giorgio de Chirico*, Da Capo Press, New York 1994, pp. 96-97; first ed.: Astrolabio, Rome, 1945).

26 See Plato, *Symp.* 180d-181bc; 183de. Plato’s conception of these two types of love, however, does not exactly correspond to the way in which the respective cults of the two deities envisaged love.

27 “We move from Aphrodite Urania, cosmic power and generating principle, or expression of homely love, as in Phidias’ depiction of her as a clothed woman, to a half-naked but still severely beautiful Aphrodite: the Venus of Milo. Later, however, the young Athenian school emphasized Aphrodite’s physical appearance, portraying her naked but still demure and with a naive but undeniable modesty [...] However, as we progress further into the decadence of mores, the expression of the unconscious and serene modesty will be replaced by the reflective and almost exterior modesty of the woman aware of her own beauty. [...] Aphrodite Callipyge, at the Naples Museum, goes a step beyond that kindly voluptuous image, all sensual in the act and in the soft roundness of the forms” (I. Gentile, *Trattato generale di archeologia e storia dell’arte greca*, second edition completely rewritten by S. Ricci, Hoepli, Milan 1905, p. 171).

28 P. Decharme, *Mythologie de la Grèce antique*, Garnier Frères, Paris 1879, p. 195.

genitrix,²⁹ a divine power presiding over marriage and childbirth, symbolizing motherly love and protecting children. She served as an icon for the Roman matrons who prayed to her for salvation, so much so that they fashioned their personal portrait after her image. Thus, this image combines both the sense of love and the sense of death; in this second aspect, she takes the name of Aphrodite Sosandra.

It is now our turn to explain the relationship between Aphrodite Sosandra and the Muses as depicted in *Serenata*. But are they really Muses, or are they more the Naiads or Nymphs of the flowing water? To answer this question, we have to turn again to Paul Decharme. He shows the continuous development of religious beliefs and their attending visual representations in various regions and cities of the ancient world, calling into question a fixed and established iconology of the Muses. According to Decharme, whose work, as previously stated, de Chirico studied, establishing a precise identity of the Muses is impossible:

The specific characteristics of the Muses were not always as well established as one finds them clearly defined in Ausonius' poetry. Among the most ancient poets, there is no trace of the classification that prevailed later. Calliope is the only one among the Muses who stands out due to her preeminence; the other members of the group have no distinct functions, and the etymology of their names alone indicates the variation in their meaning. [...] Pausanias, who saw several groups of Muses in Helicon, says nothing about their attributes. The Muses of Philiscus of Rhodes, who were placed under the portico of Octavia in Rome, appear to have been distinguished from one another by their posture rather than their symbols. The attributes of the Muses are not evenly distributed on the ancient paintings of vases. Only the paintings of Herculaneum and the statues of the Roman period appear to us to be consistent and regular in this regard. It is on the basis of the monuments and texts of this period that we shall describe each Muse sequentially, following Hesiod's sequence.³⁰

However, even if we follow this sequence, the identification of the Muses, according to Decharme, always fluctuates depending on the historical reference period, and we cannot say that it exactly corresponds to the traditional one suggested by Baldacci for the interpretation of the painting. As a result, I have avoided establishing any correspondence between the names of the Muses and the figures in the painting – something that he

²⁹ Id., p. 196.

³⁰ Id., pp. 220-221.

criticizes, as if I thought the Muses were only three, like the Three Graces or the Three Fates.

Now, the names of the Muses that Baldacci has given to the three figures are: “Euterpe, music, Melpomene, song, Calliope, epic poetry, that represent art in its entirety, particularly melodrama, in which de Chirico was involved in many ways at the time”.³¹ But, for Decharme, Euterpe’s double flute was a Dionysian cult instrument, so she seemed to recognize Bacchus as the chorus leader rather than Apollo. This means that she was originally more representative of Thracian primitive art, and a member of the frenzied cohort of the Dionysian chorus, and that she only later came to preside over the “sapiential” music that developed in Greece, adopting the flute as her instrument.³² This fact calls into question her exact identity. In fact, no flute is visible in the painting, which could be due to Euterpe’s arm being hidden behind the other Muse. In any case, none of this has anything to do with the satiric melodrama on which Savinio was working and with which Baldacci wants to associate Giorgio de Chirico. Since the other two figures are both playing the mandolin, it is impossible to tell which represents song and which epic poetry, a task made more difficult by the fact that song can be tragic or lyric, although lyric song is represented by Terpsichore, who is often depicted holding a cithara. Decharme notes that Calliope, the most frequently invoked Muse among the poets, beginning with Hesiod’s *Theogony*, symbolizes epic poetry, but that this was not her consistent attribute. In fact, she accompanies the revered kings in the *Theogony*, which implies that she represents eloquence and rhetoric. Eventually she came to be depicted as an allegory of science.

The identification of the three figures in the painting is therefore uncertain. Still, even a more definite identification would not solve the issue, which is their relationship with Aphrodite Sosandra as well as with Janus and his symbols. To address this issue, we should revisit Decharme’s interpretation of the Muses. He argues that the Muses are Nymphs and, more specifically, Nymphs belonging in the group of the Naiads, goddesses of flowing water³³ – which is exactly what Porphyry says in his work. The Naiads pour down water into pierced vases. The water flows away and, like Sisyphus, they are condemned to a never ending burden. This is what we see in *Serenata*, where the Nymphs or Naiads are arranged in a sequence that points towards a fountain. The water constantly overflows from the basin into which it falls and continues to flow outside of it, to the point where the fount can become the beginning of an actual stream, as depicted in the mythological image of the Naiads. Janus is the source: he is the beginning of the flow

31 Baldacci, *Sull'iconografia*, p. 9

32 Decharme, *Mythologie*, pp. 220-221.

33 See id., 217-218.

of life as well as of the flow of the fount, streams, and rivers, the guardians of which are the Nymphs or Naiads. They are connected to Aphrodite Sosandra by opposition: as the guardian of children's lives, she also symbolizes what is always associated with life, namely the anguish of death and the invocation of salvation. The Naiads, on the other hand, give voice to the flow of water and life, turning it into music and singing all the joy that comes from it. Above the Muses, at center left of the painting, there are four stone columns, one of which is not visible, as the Baldacci points out, because it is hidden by the perspective. Contrary to my interpretation, for him these are not ruins but in fact would form a "loggia from which ripe grape shoots hang".³⁴ Furthermore, the vermilion red seen above the loggia is applied in small, irregular patches, which, when combined with the yellowish of the columns and the surrounding green, recalls Cézanne's volumetric technique, particularly the late Cézanne of *Mount Saint-Victoire*. For Baldacci, that red is the color of the roofing tiles from which the grape shoots hang. However, they would be tiles from a rather irregular roof that can barely fulfill its purpose, given that the last column on the loggia is shattered and does not support it. Also, the grapes should be vermilion red, which contrasts with the green grapes hanging from the tree below. It should be noted that rows of grapevines were not used until de Chirico's time, and vines were supported by trees (as it is the case here, olive tree with green bunches). If we interpret the Muses as Naiads, as de Chirico did after Decharme, we can understand the columns as stone looms where the Naiads, that is, the souls, weave their purple garments. The latter, in turn, are an allegory for the blood, with which the soul weaves the flesh around the bones and form the bodies in which they clothe themselves.³⁵ In fact, the red of these alleged bunches matches the color of the first Nymph's (or Naiad's) vest. At a closer look, these bunches resemble semi-finished clothes hanging from a loom. The stone columns in the painting perfectly match the stone looms mentioned in the *Odyssey*, where the Naiads or soul weave their purple cloth, i.e. their body. De Chirico's painting thus depicts the passage of the *Odyssey* as interpreted by Porphyry. The grape bunches beneath the loggia are not hanging from a large vine tree. In fact, it is an olive tree, not a vine tree. You do not have to be a farmer to see that. The trunk has a hollowed crack at the base, which is common in centuries-old olive trees but not in vine trees. Vines were usually planted near sturdy trees, such as elms, maples, or olive trees, to which they were let lean and climb because their shrub was too slender to support itself and the grape bunches. Farmers would say to marry the vine and the olive tree, the two Mediterranean gods. If the olive tree supports the vine instead of the vine, then things change and the interpretation of the painting changes accordingly. The horizontal sequence with the

34 Baldacci, *Sull'iconografia*, p. 7.

35 "The body surely is a cloak for the soul around which it is wrapped" (Porphy., *De antr. nymph.*, 66, 14).

three figures ends with the olive tree, which is the symbol of Minerva, that is, intelligence and wisdom. The vine shoots twist around the olive tree, whose dried leaves stand out for their red color, which slightly contrasts with the bunches of green grapes hanging from its branches: it is the presence of Dionysus, inextricably linked with the olive tree, with Athena, his sister.

So, what is the significance of the olive tree and the vine taken together? Simply put, there is no *phrónesis* without *hedoné*, and vice versa. Pure intelligence and scientific knowledge are not possible without pleasure, because there would be no happiness, *eudaimonia*; and conversely there would be no *eu dzén*, the good living, without *phrónesis*. This is the conclusion of the *Philebus*, the *Phaedrus*, and of Plato's entire philosophy, particularly with regard to the enhancement of sensibility represented by art. Athena and Dionysus are children of Zeus, which represents their inseparable unity and, according to the historian of Greek mythology Károly Kerényi, universal History. Hegel had told us so: the sense of the Greek tragedy, of the struggle between gods and men lies in their returning to Zeus, incorporated into universal History. In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel argues that "universal history is universal judgment" ("Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht"). Zeus is present in *Serenata*. More precisely, he is in the large oak tree surrounding Aphrodite Sosandra, next to Janus' fountain. The oak tree is Zeus' attribute, which raises the issue of the relationship between Janus, the god of beginnings, and Zeus, the god of universal History. Janus is also the god of beginnings and the source of life. But Time is not the same as History: the latter is more than Time. Accordingly, Zeus towers over and surrounds Aphrodite Sosandra, the image and representation of Love and Death: their struggle is universal History, which Zeus towers over as its beginning, fulfillment, and end.

We are getting close to the end of our reading of the painting. According to our cultural tradition, which has been passed down to us by the doxographers and many others, including Porphyry with his allegorical interpretation of a passage of the *Odyssey*, the olive tree is sacred to Athena, and thus it is the symbol of intelligence, which is both the principle on which the universe was created and also its ultimate goal. As Porphyry writes:

In view of the fact that the goddess was born from the head [of Zeus], the theologian found an appropriate place when he enshrined the tree at the "head" of the harbor and he indicated through this tree the fact that the universe did not come to be spontaneously nor was it the work of irrational chance, but rather that it is the result of noetic nature and of wisdom. At the same time, the tree is

something separate from the cave [as divine wisdom is something separate from the world], but set nearby at the head of the entire harbor.³⁶

This is the meaning of Ulysses' journey, which is the journey of the soul's experience, which must free itself from passions and face all the dangers of the sea and life in order to obtain wisdom. This is further evidence that de Chirico read Porphyry. Of course, he certainly read the *Odyssey*, so he could have been already familiar with this passage and directly inspired by it. This is demonstrated by de Chirico's two paintings featuring Ulysses (1922 and 1924). In the first, we see the Greek hero seated next to a broad-branched tree, which for Homer is an olive tree. In the second, we see him seated next to the sail of the boat that has just arrived in Ithaca, at the cave of the Nymphs. He has his arm raised, as if to disallow the ordeals and passions that eventually led him to the cave where he hid the Phaeacians' gifts. This second painting appears to have been executed following Porphyry's commentary on the passage with Ulysses sitting down upon his arrival at the port's cavern. Once one has reached the cave, "Homer says that all outward possessions must be deposited in this cave and that one must be stripped naked and take on the persona of a beggar and, having withered the body away, and cast aside all that is superfluous, and turned away from the senses, take counsel with Athena, sitting with her beneath the olive, to learn how he might cut away all the destructive passions of his soul".³⁷ If we consider that after this artwork de Chirico created what is considered the first metaphysical painting, *L'enigma dell'oracolo* ["The Enigma of the Oracle"], under the sign, or icon, of Böcklin's *Odysseus und Kalypso*, we can see a linear development unfold from the so-called Böcklinian paintings to the actual metaphysical paintings, precisely on the basis of this interpretation of the *Odyssey* as commented by the celebrated Porphyry.

Finally, the lower section of the painting can be read horizontally as follows: from the fountain with Janus' head, which is the beginning of time and life, to the augurs' staff, symbolizing the fatherly guide that the painter foresees, to Aphrodite Sosandra, representing protective motherly love and the anguish of death. Then come the Naiads, the souls descended from the gate of Capricorn, who have taken on a body and form and sing the story of life, the beauty of the world and the sweetness of its fruits. Finally, there are the vine and the olive tree, namely, Dionysus, who is inextricably linked to Athena, that is, *phrónesis*, divine intelligence guiding the world according to ultimate purpose. But what ultimate purpose? It is linked to the beginning, but not through Janus, but through the plant that dominates the entire horizontal series of images: the oak, Jupiter's

³⁶ Id., 78, 32.

³⁷ Id., 79, 34.

tree. Now, if we look closely at this mighty plant, we can see that its base is similar to that of the olive tree, but its leaves are unmistakably those of the oak. This means that Jupiter is also intelligence, and Athena is unmistakably from Jupiter, but the meaning of this mighty plant lays in Jupiter's supreme power. The intertwining of intelligence and suffering, of love and death, all point to a higher power that not only determined the beginning of life and the world, but also their ultimate purpose.

It is worth noting what Augustine says about the relationship between Janus and Jupiter. Augustine belonged to the same cultural milieu as Porphyry and argued with him, having been a Neoplatonist before converting to Christianity, whereas Porphyry had been a Christian before converting to paganism, primarily due to mistreatment by Christians. In the first part of *De civitate Dei*, where he criticizes the pagan beliefs, Augustine gives us a philosophical exposition of pagan theology imbued with Neoplatonic philosophy that he had thoroughly learned and eventually turned into Christian theology:

But they also show whom they would have Jove (who is also called Jupiter) understood to be. He is the god, say they, who has the power of the causes by which anything comes to be in the world. And how great a thing this is, that most noble verse of Virgil testifies: "Happy is he who has learned the causes of things". But why is Janus preferred to him? Let that most acute and most learned man answer us this question. "Because", says he [i.e. Varro], "Janus has dominion over first things, Jupiter over highest things. Therefore Jupiter is deservedly held to be the king of all things; for highest things are better than first things: for although first things precede in time, highest things excel by dignity". Now this would have been rightly said had the first parts of things which are done been distinguished from the highest parts; as, for instance, it is "the beginning of a thing done to set out, the highest part to arrive. The commencing to learn is the first part of a thing begun, the acquirement of knowledge is the highest part. And so of all things: the beginnings are first, the ends highest. This matter, however, has been already discussed in connection with Janus and Terminus."³⁸

This passage seems to illustrate the whole meaning of our painting's horizontal sequence of images, which represents a cyclic conception of life in which the two gods are taken in their unity. The beginning and end of the life process require a principle that has an end in itself and can serve as a lead from the beginning to the final conclusion; in other words, the guiding power of the entire process. The image of Janus bifrons expresses this cyclic

³⁸ Aug., *civ.*, 7, 9, 1.

conception of life. Passing through the gateway means to begin a journey that will lead us back to re-enter the gateway itself: the eternal recurrence of the same, as de Chirico wrote to Carrà in 1923. It is a momentous eternal recurrence, according to which the will of eternity is the full acceptance and legitimization of life. In the final part of *On the Cave of the Nymphs*, Porphyry illustrates the hermeneutic principle of interpretation applicable to myths as well as literary texts and works of art that speak through signs that they reveal and hide. This is what de Chirico will do in his paintings, although his signs, as eternal signs or icons, visually express what has a divine character. He will speak about the signs, which are moral principles that govern our actions. The passages of Porphyry's text are essential for understanding all of the Master's metaphysical paintings.

Returning to *Serenata*, one cannot say, as Baldacci does, that its architecture is lacking: the upward tension, indicated by the two doors, one of which is barely visible, is counterbalanced by the stone looms, which are on the same line as the rising figure and therefore visually hold the empty space in the central part of the painting. But the sequence of images at the bottom contains all the pathos stemming from pondering on the meaning of life and condenses the wisdom of our Mediterranean civilization's most ancient myths: the olive tree and the vine, beauty and song, life and death, and finally the pathway to the descent into the world and ascent to the gate of the immortals. Everything can therefore be said about this painting except that it is a failure.