

## Giorgio de Chirico and surrealist mythology

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What is most modern in our time frequently turns out to be the most archaic.

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It has long been a sore point in the history of surrealism that the poets of the early Paris group should have heaped praise on Giorgio de Chirico as the inventor of a revolutionary approach to painting, only to revile him as a traitor to their cause just a few years later. The deep disappointment caused by the artist's supposed lapse from grace in around 1924–25, which André Breton voices in his pioneering essay on visual surrealism, *Le Surréalisme et la peinture*, is an index of the high stakes underlying the aesthetic debates of the time. Yet it is possible that the surrealists had misunderstood De Chirico from the very start, and that those elements of his art which he began to discard in the mid-1920s were in fact marginal to what could be seen as his uninterrupted original project, that of re-activating archaic myth in the modern period.

De Chirico's election to the surrealist pantheon was certainly facilitated by the foremost critic of the early avant-garde, Guillaume Apollinaire, who befriended the Italian artist (and his musician brother Savinio) during his first Paris stay, provided him with ideas for titles for his pictures, and lent him support in exhibition reviews in 1913 and 1914. It was a year or two later, at one of those legendary Saturday *soirées* which Apollinaire held in his attic apartment on the Boulevard Saint-Germain, that André Breton, at the time a young medical student, first came across canvases by De Chirico, crammed amid the many accumulated novelties that had caught Apollinaire's multi-faceted fancy. Breton at once succumbed to their hypnotic spell, 'so much did they project of breadth and of depth onto the mental horizon.'<sup>1</sup> Breton's devotion to De Chirico's mysterious art was to be profound, and the superlative value he placed upon such paintings as *The Child's Brain* (1914) or *The Enigma of a Day* (1914) would influence a whole surrealist generation.

Although one might guess that the prestige which Apollinaire enjoyed in Breton's eyes helped to hasten the latter's interest in De Chirico, it is curious to note how little there is in Apollinaire's own published commentaries that could be described as unreserved advocacy. The most significant element in his appraisal is that he associates the strangeness of De Chirico's style with that hallmark of modernism, the capacity to surprise: 'It is surprise which is the most modern device to which one can have recourse in order to depict the fatal character of modern things.'<sup>2</sup>

Yet the typical tone of Apollinaire's observations is urbane and relatively non-committal. One anonymous notice he published speaks of the painter being exasperated by the planting of rows of trees on the Place de Rennes, since De Chirico is known to be 'an enemy of trees and a devotee of statues.'<sup>3</sup> It is hard to take seriously Breton's earnest report, in the *Manifeste du*



*surréalisme* of 1924, that Apollinaire had assured him that the artist's early paintings had been inspired by migraines and colics. Another Apollinairian notice delivers a further feeble joke:

Monsieur Giorgio de Chirico has just acquired a pink rubber glove, one of the most impressive pieces of merchandise one could wish to see for sale. Once copied by the artist, it is destined to make his future works even more moving and fearsome than the pictures he has produced in the past. And if one quizzes him about the terror that this glove might provoke, he immediately switches the subject to the even more terrifying toothbrushes which have recently been devised by dentistry, that most recent and perhaps most practical of all the arts.<sup>4</sup>

It would seem that, while sensing the power of De Chirico's work, Apollinaire was less inclined to grapple with its deeper mysteries than to take refuge in ironic allusions to its surface features, and more especially those which could be characterized as both modern and quaint. There is evidence that, ultimately, Apollinaire felt uncomfortable about the Italian's artistry, as witness the letters he wrote from the front line in 1915 which joke uneasily about the portrait De Chirico had painted of him in the previous year, calling it a 'target-figure' ['l'homme-cible']. The painting (which also exists in a woodcut version made to illustrate Apollinaire's *Et Moi aussi je suis peintre*) does indeed depict the poet in profile with a circle marked on his head which – to the subsequent delight of the surrealists – corresponds to the position on the poet's cranium where he was to wear a protective leather disc after his shrapnel wound of 1916. Other elements in the picture are a fish and a sea-shell suspended beside a gloomy arch, and a classical bust wearing dark glasses.

Now, there is a well-attested category of poetic reference which became indispensable to the surrealist lexicon: that of enigmatic or otherwise striking industrial artefacts. I suggest that one should add De Chirico's rubber gloves, dark glasses and tailor's dummies to the same inventory as Comte de Lautréamont's sewing-machine, Alfred Jarry's bicycle, Apollinaire's telegrams, Marcel Duchamp's bottle-rack, Francis Picabia's cog-wheels, Jacques Vaché's revolver, and so forth, as forming a collection of talismanic embodiments of the twinned novelty and absurdity of modern life. By deliberately fetishising the bric-à-brac of twentieth-century urban culture, surrealism was able to draw up a formula for the surrealist Marvellous and to elicit a striking mythology out of the banalities of the contemporary world.

Nowhere is the surrealist commitment to an explicitly *modern* mythology more extravagantly articulated than in the programmatic meditations of Louis Aragon's 1926 masterpiece *Le Paysan de Paris*. Insisting on the necessity of the link between fantasy and concrete fact, Aragon broods interminably on the contents of shop-windows in the (by then defunct) Passage de l'Opéra, finding in their incongruous accumulations of top hats, postage stamps and walking-canes a kind of archaeology of the contemporary unconscious and an implicit network of poetic allusion. Ruminating on these arbitrary collocations, he bathes in the greenish light of the arcade, that privileged habitat of the urban stroller, and finds his thoughts



dissolving into what he calls 'the vertigo of the modern' ['le vertige du moderne'].

The surrealist predilection for decisive, because irreducible, collisions between separate orders of things finds further expression in Aragon's subsequent description of a window display on the Rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette, where an optician had seen fit to advertise his wares in the form of a small female bust, multicoloured and with hair done up in the 1907 style, and sporting a pair of eyeglasses. Aragon reveals the nickname (the talismanic motto-phrase) which the group gave to this figure: *The Beauty of the Future* ['*La Beauté future*']. One would be justified, I believe, in positing a link between this reference and such images by De Chirico as *The Serenity of the Scholar* (1914), with its huge pair of opaque spectacles (a dismantled shop sign?), or indeed the gnomonic Apollinaire portrait already mentioned.

It is not hard to see why De Chirico's technique of outlandish juxtaposition should have so impressed the surrealist generation in the 1920s. Breton especially was addicted to such surprises, experiencing them as visual correlatives to the stunning verbal imagery he admired in writers like Lautréamont and Apollinaire. In his essay *Giorgio de Chirico* (first published in 1920), Breton foregrounds the new mythology which is in the process of being created by the modern poetic sensibility, identifying De Chirico as the leading exponent of a myth-making process designed to 're-appraise the basic perceptions of time and space' ['réviser les données sensibles du temps et de l'espace']. Henceforth, he writes, a peculiar light will fall upon such tell-tale objects as the public statue and the tailor's dummy ['le mannequin']. Breton's prophetic conclusion admits no reservation: 'I believe that a truly modern mythology is being formed. It now falls to Giorgio de Chirico to memorialize it in indelible form.'<sup>5</sup>

In the circumstances, it is entirely understandable that Apollinaire and the surrealists, those conscious adepts of novelty and surprise, should have been inclined to isolate in De Chirico's *pittura metafisica* those elements which struck them most deeply, while ignoring elements they found familiar or less seductive. Yet this loyalty to the spirit of modernity, which De Chirico's early pictures appeared so perfectly to corroborate, led them to overlook the simple fact that his rubber gloves and dark glasses are only surprising and suggestive in so far as they are interpolated within a wider system whose fundamental axis of reference is the exact opposite of the modern: that is to say, the *archaic*. The impact of a painting like *The Song of Love* (1913) has to do with the spectacular anachronism of hanging a rubber glove beside a classical bust, just as in *The Philosopher and the Poet* (c. 1915) the painter balances a twentieth-century tailor's dummy against the statue of a classical hero. As for placing dark glasses upon an antique bust, one might argue that De Chirico's real point was not to create a giddy *beauté future* but to confirm a continuity of meaning, in so far as the implication of blindness is nothing less than a *classical* allusion (whether it be to Homer or Tiresias, or to the seer-poet Orpheus – with whom Apollinaire, after all, claimed an affinity).

It has to be said that, for all the surrealists' desire to convert him to their Parisian viewpoint, De Chirico's most characteristic locales remain undeniably Italian and classical. For all its fantasticality, the novel *Hebdomeros* is only a distant cousin to *Le Paysan de Paris*. And the paintings, despite an occasional tribute to landmarks like the Gare Montparnasse, construct



for us an imaginary city which has little connexion to those actual spaces where Apollinaire and Breton loved to wander. Within quite specific limits of architectural reference – the general tenor of his architecture is Italianate, and there are fairly explicit allusions to arcades and piazzas in Florence, to the Castello Estense in Ferrara, and to public statues typical of Turin – De Chirico orchestrates his emblems of modernity with a strong emphasis upon the archaic and the mythic. His atmosphere is Mediterranean and nostalgic, and his system of tacit implication presupposes a world steeped in the associations of classical mythology. Adapted from Heraclitus, his dictum that ‘the daemon in everything must be discovered’ occurs in a text entitled *Zeuxis the Explorer* (1918); and when in that same text he speaks of his Paris studio on the Rue Campagne-Première and consciously trails his surrealist coat by invoking a zinc shop-sign in the form of a great glove, or a *papier mâché* skull in a hairdresser’s window, we should be aware that, while he may be having fun mimicking the ultra-modern poet tracking through the Paris labyrinth, he remains deep down the nostalgic, ever eager to close the gap between contemporary life and the myths of antiquity. (We may recall that the paintings of the original Zeuxis were depictions of Zeus, Pan, Hercules, and the Centaurs.)

It can indeed be argued that, far from its being a later revelation, De Chirico’s susceptibility to classical impulses was decisive from the very outset of his work, as perhaps the early *Enigma of the Oracle* (1910) portends: for if oracles articulate the future, their obscure efficacy is a function of their origin in a tradition of belief dating back to the remote past. Within the cycle of the artist’s ‘metaphysical’ works, the mythic figure of Ariadne is surely one of the most potent presences. Invariably she appears in the form of a statue, that of the sleeping Ariadne, the Ariadne whom Theseus abandons on Naxos. Seeing her asleep, we may recall the Ariadne whose cunning use of a length of thread had enabled Theseus successfully to negotiate the Minotaur’s maze and return unharmed to the outer world; but now she is lost in fevered dreams, incapable of controlling her own destiny. Allegorically, she embodies a certain tragic fatalism; while the fact that she is a *statue* might correspond to the temporal distance of what has become for De Chirico a stylised memory, an uncanny passion for something with which real contact is absolutely denied. However we interpret it, I submit that the fundamental bearing of this familiar reference is more classical than it is surrealist. (One might note that, elsewhere in *Le Paysan de Paris*, Aragon makes a case for envisaging the dozens of statues dotted around Paris as an intrinsically surrealist phenomenon: but this is no doubt because of their erotic connotations and their haphazard placements, which make them seem *unfamiliar*).

We do not have to look very far in De Chirico’s work to find ample and assured mention of classical figures like Andromache and Hector, Odysseus and Calypso, Orestes and Electra, the Argonauts, the Dioscuri, and others. Equally, we would have to concede that, throughout, De Chirico’s classical allusions are, somehow, never quite without ambiguity. It is as though the mechanism of reference were itself shrouded in some sort of poetic uncertainty – as if voicing a long-loved name too distinctly might unleash negative forces. A certain *wistfulness* is perhaps inseparable from mythic thinking, and it may be that this is one of De Chirico’s most persuasive insights. Certainly it is a factor in the tonality of his novel *Hebdomeros*, a text steeped in



puzzlement and ill-defined yearning. Across De Chirico's 'metaphysical' years, and even beyond, the drawings and paintings seem incapable of taking shape within a discourse of innocent reference, uninhibited and luminous. There must, it seems, always be a shadow falling across the brightest street; or if there is no shadow, then the explicitness of a reference must be qualified by indirectness, or by hints of a guardedness, a harbouring of second thoughts. When the artist draws up oracles and constructs enigmas, toying with 'the signs of the metaphysical alphabet,' it is as though he were at once confident of the archaic meanings he is gathering yet, embarrassingly, inclined to let them slip his grasp.

Arguably, it was these very qualities of nostalgic hesitancy and clumsy ambiguity which brought about the surrealist misunderstanding. And no doubt De Chirico himself was party to that misunderstanding, in so far as he willingly provided hints which the surrealists were eager to accommodate to their own system of reference. This is attested in the semi-apocryphal tale which Breton relates about De Chirico being asked to identify a young boy selling flowers one evening on the Place Pigalle: rather than turn his head, the painter examines the boy in a pocket-mirror and then solemnly declares that he is a phantom. Where De Chirico's reading of Arthur Schopenhauer might confirm an attunement to the logic of evanescence and idealization, these are concepts strictly foreign to the surrealist sensibility, and notions of haunting must surely have meant something quite different to Breton for him to have been so keen to swallow this little mystification.

Surrealist support of De Chirico had collapsed by 1926, and this was signalled publicly when a reproduction of the artist's *Orestes and Electra* (1923) was printed in *La Révolution surréaliste* [No. 6, 1 March 1926, 32] as an illustration to Breton's essay *Le Surréalisme et la peinture*: the image was emphatically crossed-out. For his part, De Chirico claimed in his *Memoirs* that the surrealists had never understood his work and dismissed them as 'the leaders of modernistic imbecility'. The curious fact is that, while the break was total and unforgiving, De Chirico's actual paintings were to haunt the imagination of practically every surrealist artist thereafter. Perhaps one explanation for the depth of their frustrated passion is that, all along, the surrealists had idolized a chimera, or at least something which they had badly misconstrued. It is true that, from the very beginning, De Chirico had embraced enigma (the motto 'ET QUID AMABO NISI QUOD AENIGMA EST?' appears in a self-portrait of 1911): yet this enigma sprang not so much from a taste for the absurdist curios of modernity – the dark glasses, the shop signs, the tailor's dummies – as from the poignant revelation of the irreducible distance separating contemporary reality from the golden age of antiquity. De Chirico's true fixation was not on rubber gloves, but on the ancestral narratives of classical mythology which rubber gloves could never grasp – except in so far as they might serve to lay out a corpse too cold to be revived.

Yet if my interpretation is valid, it needs to be modified by a final thought: namely that, if only they had realized it, Apollinaire, Breton and the rest were themselves shaped by the same classical traditions which, ostensibly, they sought to deny or transcend. 'In the end you are fed up with that ancient world,'<sup>6</sup> Apollinaire told himself in the poem *Zone*. Yet did not Apollinaire



deliberately choose his pseudonym in homage to the Greek god of the sun? Did he not delight in his image as a latterday Orpheus? And was not the myth of the Cretan labyrinth and Ariadne's thread crucial to Breton's understanding of his own poetic vocation? Even the ultra-modern sophisticate Aragon visualises Paris as an all-encompassing space of metamorphosis, basking in 'a mythic nature which ceaselessly multiplied itself,'<sup>7</sup> a conception which strikes me as perfectly consistent with the spirit of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. And, almost inadvertently, Aragon confirms my suspicion when he lets slip the admission that, even if his modern myths refute those of antiquity, there is really no essential difference between them: 'Though substituted for the natural myths of antiquity, [the new myths] cannot be truly opposed to them, for they derive all their strength, all their magic, from the selfsame source.'<sup>8</sup>

NOTE: This is the hitherto unpublished English original of a text first published in French as 'Giorgio de Chirico et la mythologie surréaliste' in *Giorgio de Chirico et le mythe grec*, Turin and London, 1995.

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<sup>1</sup> 'tant ils reculaient, tant ils approfondissaient l'horizon mental'.

<sup>2</sup> 'Pour dépeindre le caractère fatal des choses modernes, la surprise est le ressort le plus moderne auquel on puisse avoir recours.'

<sup>3</sup> 'l'ennemi des arbres et l'ami des statues', *Paris Journal*, 24 May 1914.

<sup>4</sup> 'M. Giorgio de Chirico vient d'acheter un gant de caoutchouc rose qui est une des marchandises les plus impressionnantes qui soient à vendre. Il est destiné, copié par l'artiste, à rendre plus émouvants et effroyables que ne le sont ses tableaux passés, ses oeuvres de l'avenir. Et si on l'interroge sur l'épouvante que pourrait susciter ce gant, il vous parle aussitôt de brosses à dents plus effroyables encore qu'a inventées récemment l'art dentaire, le plus récent et peut-être le plus utile de tous les arts.' *Paris Journal*, July 1914

<sup>5</sup> 'J'estime qu'une véritable mythologie moderne est en formation. C'est à Giorgio de Chirico qu'il appartient d'en fixer impérissablement le souvenir.'

<sup>6</sup> 'A la fin tu es las de ce monde ancien'.

<sup>7</sup> 'une nature mythique qui allait se multipliant'.

<sup>8</sup> 'Substitués aux antiques mythes naturels, [les mythes nouveaux] ne peuvent leur être réellement opposés, car ils puisent leur force, leur magie à la même source.'

