

Urban Metaphysics versus Metropolitan Dynamisms: The Italian Vision Before the First World War

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A surprising creative impulse reverberated in Europe, from capital to capital, on the eve of the first dramatic conflict that would involve the great overseas economic powers in a war which, in its bitterness and virulence, was to redesign national borders and the geopolitical maps of the old continent. Attempting to sketch out graphically the origins and evolution of the arts of the period would lead to a treelike form with a thousand branches and its roots sunk in highly fertile soil. Poetry, literature, music, philosophy, in a word all the arts, nurtured by the extraordinary culture of entire centuries, at that particular moment spurred a great energy of lively and innovative languages. The youth of that generation, artists especially, caught between past and future, driven by a decisive and so often radical reaction against former poetics and by an equally powerful tension between spirituality and patriotism, expressed and symbolized that same ethical and moral conflict which lacerated Europe. But if those were the years of the threatening and in a certain sense prophetic interpretation of the future and the destiny of western civilisation, whose decline was foretold by Oswald Spengler in a book published at the end of the First World War, there were also contrary voices, such as that of Ernst Bloch, which

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23 opened up to the mirage of a new humanity, a “different anthropological
24 state” in the name of total rebellion. Written in the same period, *The*
25 *Spirit of Utopia*, in the wake of Marxist pragmatism, manifested an anxiety
26 common to entire masses of young people, and called for active forms of
27 rebellion into which they might channel their élan vital, a subversive and
28 revolutionary tempering of their energies. The aim was a new order, which
29 would transform society and free it from the logic of authoritarian powers.

30 Many artists had promptly grasped the menacing and sinister aspect of
31 this modern civilisation, taking refuge in the irrational intuition that free-
32 dom could be secured only through art and its language. But this anxious
33 and exasperated tension towards colour or form, taken outside social or
34 political themes, concealed the effort, behind the apparent obsession with
35 chromatic notes or fixation on the “object”, of evading a direct relation-
36 ship with the external world. The cubism of 1912–1914 unfolded simply
37 on the surface of the canvas, with the insertion of fragments, and pieces of
38 information like letters taken from newspapers, in such a way as to circum-
39 scribe the plane of reality with that of the work, idealizing and ennobling
40 the object in pure phenomenological speculation. These signs taken from
41 everyday life could bear witness to its own autonomy and thus interpose a
42 decisive distance from the dramatic truth of the age. But if many removed
43 themselves from the material world, cause of restrictions and miseries, and
44 found shelter in an individual universe, there were others who reclaimed
45 through art the need to elaborate those material ideas from the outside
46 and use them as pure source of inspiration.

47 This age signalled the fall of positivist ideologies on which an entire
48 middle class stood, and fought to consolidate them. Behind the marvels of
49 science and all the epistemological categories that reshaped the very per-
50 ception of the universe in positivist terms there was a concealed malaise of
51 doubt and uncertainty. The tragic premises of the future remained veiled,
52 hidden from the eyes of a world that celebrated the new urban spectacle
53 with carefree lightness. It is not easy to ascertain how much awareness of
54 this dramatic contrast was present in the young generation, apparently full
55 of energy and inventive force. As in an orchestra improvising along the
56 lines of discordant notes, many artists guided by a shared impulse of hope,
57 taken by a *zeitgeist* inexplicably tuned to the same motif, would see in the
58 city a place where aspects and forms of the modern were concentrated in
59 their multiple manifestations. This is how the non-place of utopia para-
60 doxically became very tangible territory of the most diverse expectations
61 and reveries.

The physical place of the city was the site of the most strident contradictions which gave rise to powerful illusions of transformation and grandiose dreams of progress: the city of the industrial age with its antinomies enabled an experimental verification of a new dialectic that tied the work to the world and to modern technologies. And if Baudelaire had sung in *Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne* of the solitude of the city man, infinitesimal number of a formless multitude of uncertain and indefinable outlines, in that obscure mass, confused and indeterminate, just like the poet, so would the avant-garde artist find motifs of beauty and deep inspiration:

[...] pour l'observateur passionné, c'est une immense jouissance que d'élire domicile dans le nombre, dans l'ondoyant, dans le mouvement, dans le fugitif et l'infini. [...] L'observateur est un *prince* qui jouit partout de son incognito. [...] Ainsi l'amoureux de la vie universelle entre dans la foule comme dans un immense réservoir d'électricité. On peut aussi le comparer, lui, à un miroir aussi immense que cette foule; à un kaléidoscope doué de conscience, qui, à chacun de ses mouvements, représente la vie multiple et la grâce mouvante de tous les éléments de la vie. C'est un *moi* insatiable du *non-moi*, qui, à chaque instant, le rend et l'exprime en images plus vivantes que la vie elle-même, toujours instable et fugitive. (65)¹

In the spasmodic search for sensational effects, external collusions of objects and impressions, paradoxical thrills and clamorous declarations there was someone who, in a more silent manner, in the solitude of his studio and under the duress of a hypochondriac nature, would create new models of identification and knowledge in painting. This young man, having lived between the Greece of his birth, the Italy of his lineage, the Germany of his recognition as an artist, and the France of his first successes, would invent, in the composed and imperturbable alphabet of an ancient tradition, the forms of a reality which would prove paradoxically sensational and unimaginable. Simple in appearance, linear and clear, the paintings of the so-called metaphysical period would gradually reveal their

¹“For the impassioned observer it is a limitless joy to take up residence in the number, in the undulating, in the movement, in the fugitive and in the infinite. (...) The observer is a *prince* who enjoys anonymity everywhere. (...) Thus the lover of universal life enters into the crowd as into a great electric power station. It might be compared to a mirror as immense as the crowd, to a kaleidoscope with a conscience which, at each movement, depicts the multiple life and mutable grace of all the elements of life. It is an insatiable *I* of the *not-I* which, at every instant, renders and expresses it in more alive images of life itself, always unstable and fleeting”.

92 true essence, a disconcerting plunge into the labyrinthine ways of the
93 unconscious, necessary and ineluctable source of inspiration, according to
94 the protagonists of the first phase of Surrealism. In the chaotic confusion
95 of signs, in the swirling search for new directions, the rigid and structured
96 vision of architectures recomposed by De Chirico, in accordance with the
97 logic of an illusory plane of reality, does not sink into a dialectic of nega-
98 tion, at least in its external appearance, nor into its contrary logic, which
99 would presume the use of those self-same signs in a dynamic function, at
100 the rhythm of modern innovations.

101 De Chirico's vision was instead firmly rooted in that perception of the
102 world which a few years later Theodor Adorno imparted to his friend
103 Walter Benjamin, with a sensibility rich in emotive tension: "just as the
104 modern is the most ancient, so too the archaic itself is a function of the
105 new: it is thus first produced historically as the archaic, and to that extent
106 it is dialectical in character" (5 April 1934). Far away, then, from the hub-
107 bub of the modern town—the city still representing an ideal paradigm—
108 De Chirico rediscovered exemplary contemporary models in the passages
109 and fragments handed down from distant epochs, marked with the great-
110 ness of a creative genius.

111 De Chirico's metaphysical cities are spectral cities crossed by shadows,
112 landing on the canvas from distant and authoritative epochs to recompose
113 in a kind of mnemonic collage the image of an apparently harmonious
114 world, directed to the sources of the highest classicism. They are hermetic
115 cities that nonetheless deeply belie their true semblance, cities to be cut
116 out in their constituent elements held together by a perceptual act and
117 by the adroitness of deception. It is an artifice founded on a vision that
118 would appear to belong to the past, whose iconographic principles seem
119 to take no part in modernity but refer to ancient or far-off exemplars. It is
120 in the montage of fragments that the temporal dislocation comes about.
121 In the spatial relocation of the architectonic or archaeological elements an
122 immaterial inversion takes place, which makes the piazzas of Italy appear
123 as habitable lands. Yet, in the perverse abstraction of the very concept of
124 the city, this overturning of spatial and temporal categories is produced
125 with the same "classical" means that ought to have drawn the eye to a
126 single vanishing point. The ordered appearance of reality, instead of being
127 concentrated in a single place, is first multiplied and refracted, and then
128 reorganized in a single image of isolated fragments, like mosaic tesserae
129 put together with extraordinary mastery. It is a sort of restructured col-
130 lage, not dissected in the cubist manner, an exercise opposite to what has

been interpreted to date by the yardstick of a revolutionary language par excellence. The city, a theme of little interest to the cubists—excepting Delaunay who was highly influenced by Futurist thought—became for De Chirico (unlike his German contemporaries Kirchner and Grosz) the fulcrum of meditation around a new aesthetic. The assembled units of mass seem like a reversed telescopic view amplifying details and objects, occasionally reintroducing a perspectival view. This new aesthetic is also rooted in the literary city, which is present in a rich tradition from Verhaeren to Benjamin (right down to Calvino), but also in a maniacal technical precision, whereas the breaking up of perceptive planes derives to the language of modernism at large.

Everything in his paintings originates in a series of enigmas: *The Enigma of the Oracle* (1910), *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon* (1910), *The Enigma of the Hour* (1911), three different moments that mark an itinerary, in successive steps, from a world tinged with irrationality and ferocity to a universe opened up to the logical clarity of remote and atemporal architectonic structures. The feral and violent world of primordial instincts in the *Dying Centaur* (1909), in *Triton and Siren* (1908–1909) and in *The Battle of Centaurs and Lapiths* seems to open up little by little to an awareness of an ordered reality, to reason and to the wisdom of great philosophers, in particular that of De Chirico’s unconditionally beloved Heraclitus. Heraclitus had glimpsed with a boundless and infinite capacity of foresight at the design of a cosmic logos, seeking a unique and universal ordering principle. Heraclitus “the obscure”, the first to have intuited, behind the deep shadows of his aphorisms, the existence of a supreme reason that only superior beings were able to recognize. And if “nature loves to hide”, as the thinker of Ephesus declared, in that hiding was concealed all the truth of the absolute mystery of things and of the creation, a mystery which only the elect might approach. “The wind rustles the leaves of an oak: it is the voice of a god making itself heard; and the trembling prophet listens with head bowed down” (qtd in *Il Meccanismo* 22–23) (Fig. 10.1).

This is key in understanding some of De Chirico’s paintings. To quote from De Chirico’s manuscript (qtd in *Il Meccanismo* 22–23):

Thinking of those temples consecrated to marine deities along the arid coasts of Greece and Asia Minor, I have often imagined soothsayers attentive to the lament of the waves retracting from the Adamitic earth in the evening hour; I have imagined them with head and body enveloped in a mantle,



Fig. 10.1 Giorgio De Chirico. *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon* [1910], private collection

169 awaiting the mysterious and revelatory oracle. Thus I once also imagined the
 170 Ephesian, meditating at the first light of dawn in the peristyle of the temple
 171 to Artemis of the hundred breasts. [...] What is the tremor that the mystical
 172 priest feels when he approaches the sacred oak on a stormy night? In Rome
 173 the sense of prophecy is somehow deeper: there is a sense of infinite and
 174 distant grandeur, the same sense with which the Roman builder imbued his
 175 arches; a reflection of that stretching towards the infinite which the heavenly
 176 vault so often generates in man.

177 De Chirico's enigmas are masked by elements drawn from Templar models
 178 of the ancient Greek architectural repertoire, initially put forward as subjects
 179 to glimpse at the concealed image through few revelatory signs. But here we
 180 are still in that pre-Socratic dimension which had inspired the young artist
 181 in his period of fascination with the great Swiss painter Arnold Böcklin. The
 182 combinatory element of De Chirico's poetics is drawn to those mythologi-
 183 cal figure towards which De Chirico had turned his initial curious glance.

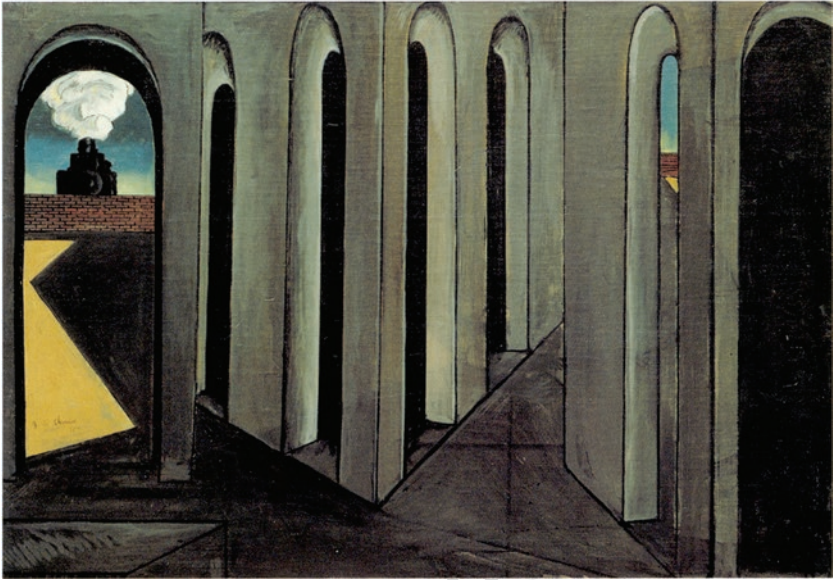
If centaurs, tritons and mermaids lived a double nature, instinctive and animal together with a more deductive and logical rationality, in the same way the construction of the works, from 1909, would be based on a stylistic grafting of different elements—from human and animal worlds—and on the temporal superimposition of elements which over the ages have undergone various iconographic mutations. These are accidental signs of a contiguity between the human and the divine, although still appearing as universal archetypes and witnesses of an impenetrable truth. The first expression of this slippage, with *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon* (1910) [Fig. 10.1], appears as the announcement of a transfiguration, the passage from perception of a real thing to the sensation which that vision may arouse and transmit: “The one resembles the other”—states De Chirico in *Que pourrait être la peinture de l’avenir* (qtd in *Il Meccanismo* 32–33)—“but in a strange way, as two brothers are similar or rather as in how the image of someone we know, having seen him in a dream, resembles the real person; yet at the same time it is not the same person; as if there had been a slight and mysterious transfiguration of the features”. It seems to be as if that vision, powerfully rooted in the domain of dreams, were the proof of the metaphysical existence of that same person and could simultaneously release an unexpected surprise and a sudden happiness. This hybridity also spells an anti-naturalistic metamorphosis in which illegitimate crossbreeds have given way to minute, disproportional figures at the foot of the gigantic statue in the centre of the deserted piazza. The sudden passage from a not yet revealed dimension, violent and human, to a representation built on right angles is juxtaposed on the far horizon, beyond a barrier of bricks, to the surprising appearance of a sail in the wind. Dissolved in comparison with the first full-bodied mythological images, these images take on the transparency of the glossy uniform surface of an ochre toned photograph.

Schopenhauer and Nietzsche are the spiritual ferrymen of this renewed iconographic trajectory. The philosophers, in the line with seductive Heraclitean oracularity, guide De Chirico towards the new perception of a world, which is still enigmatic but now comprised of objects and things that belong to the cosmogony of the real. It appears first and foremost as a universe of primary impulses, then in the sudden delineation of cities with schematic and rigid views, structures without volume, with the weight of papier mâché; then again in the epiphany of hyperbolic objects, dilated and without a clear relationship to each other. The artist retraced the steps of his own journey in search of a consolatory *topos* in an article published in *Valori Plastici* in 1919, “Sull’Arte Metafisica” [On Metaphysical Art] (qtd in *Il Meccanismo* 84):

223 **A nation at the dawn of its existence** loves myth and legend, the surpris-
 224 ing, the monstrous, the inexplicable, and it takes refuge therein; with the
 225 passing of time, maturing into a civilisation, it tones down the primitive
 226 images, reduces them, moulds them in accordance with the needs of its
 227 clarified spirit and writes its own history arising from the original myths.
 228 A European epoch like our own, which bears within itself the enormous
 229 weight of many, but many civilisations and the maturity of many spiritual
 230 periods, is destined to produce an art which in a certain way resembles that
 231 of mythical apprehensions. This art arises at the hands of the few who are
 232 gifted with a special clairvoyance and sensitivity.

233 Those few, for young De Chirico, are poets, philosophers, those with the
 234 extraordinary faculty of seeing without looking, of turning their glance
 235 inwards, of glimpsing the vastness of the mystery of creation, of grasping
 236 “the profound non-sense of life”. But they are also gifted with the faculty of
 237 “seeing” how all this may be transformed into art and the ability to create
 238 the framework of a contemporary vision, “new, free and profound”. So it is
 239 precisely on the different perspective of seeing, on the overturning of spatial
 240 coordinates—apparently perfectly cohesive and logical—that the different
 241 idea of the very identity of the city plays out. Crowded, dynamic, full of life
 242 and lights, in continuous fibrillation for the Futurists, impending, hostile,
 243 tough and inhospitable for the German expressionists, for De Chirico the
 244 city concealed a threat. A threat subtended by the silent stillness of its piazzas.

245 If there was no longer any sense in the artificiality characterizing the tra-
 246 ditional representation of reality—and all the avant-garde artists agreed on
 247 this point—it is to a metaphorical interpretation, similar to the language of
 248 mythology, that De Chirico shifted his point of view, mixed with the sug-
 249 gestions emerging from an unconscious abyss of bewilderment and pertur-
 250 bation. Stylistically, it is a matter of few traits, few elements, few colours,
 251 few tonal whims. The fullness of the idea is played out in the paradox of
 252 emptying out of the elements of style. The visible realm held within itself
 253 the same secrets as in the literary one, the hermetic dissimulation of what
 254 can never be said. In this absence the actors in the play are set: the scene
 255 evokes a sense of the antique in a formally classical language, the statues
 256 recall other statues seen in museums or print repertoires, the architectures
 257 flaunt spacious porticoes. But both the architectonic figures and the char-
 258 acters are spectral actors, actors that play a part where there is no drama
 259 and where there are no gestures. They are apparitions that return from
 260 distant worlds. Like the locomotive (Fig. 10.2), they are a bodiless pres-
 261 ence that is limited to marking the confines of the composition by closing



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Fig. 10.2 Giorgio de Chirico. *Le Voyage emouvant* [1913]. MOMA, New York. © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SIAE, Rome

the view without opening up breaches to somewhere beyond the horizon. 262
 In the breadth of the deserted and sunny piazzas, in the vast backgrounds 263
 that define the planes of colour taken to the height of smoothness, where 264
 few diagonal signs allude to a chiaroscuro that does not mould volumes, 265
 the spaces get confused, complicated, they are thrown into disarray with- 266
 out apparent reason. Perspective becomes the painter's instrument for 267
 mounting the image, for defining an occasion of contact between the real 268
 and virtual spaces on the canvas. 269

The Preparation of these pictures is carried out with the usual techniques. 270
 Beneath the skin of paint one makes out the traces of the pencil delineat- 271
 ing the sign of an idea, and, farther beneath, on the priming of the canvas, 272
 one glimpses at the squaring of a surface predisposed to accommodate the 273
 representation. In spite of this, the representation is not set out in accord- 274
 ance with the rules of construction by planes, nor of an ordered grading 275
 of distances. Perspective no longer serves to fix the illusion of the real and 276
 not even to focus on a conceptual point. There are no lines that lead into 277
 the picture. It is as if on the flat area the points of view were multiplied and, 278

279 instead of referring to a rationalized depth, each one independently over-
 280 turned vision in an unexpected direction. So there is a form of trickery, but
 281 it is corrected and guided in a sense different from what one would expect
 282 to find. And contrarily to the exorcistical act openly staged by Picasso on
 283 the faces of the *Demoiselles*, De Chirico builds his exorcism in a deferred
 284 distancing of vision. The glance does not set on the object, does not seek
 285 inspiration or response there.

286 It is in this eccentric perspectival madness then, in these deceptively
 287 coherent and solid morphologies, that immoderation simulates a close
 288 interweaving between the objects and the other aspects of reality. Why,
 289 one may ask, those sunny Mediterranean piazzas bathed in light and in
 290 the same picture a sundial points to a time that does not coincide with
 291 the long projection of shadows in the picture? Why those walls and flat,
 292 crushed porticoes that suggest inexistent depths? Why that drying up of
 293 forms and energies in an unliveable scenario of classical appearance? Is this
 294 not perhaps a way of preserving the remains of an extraordinary civilisa-
 295 tion built on the impossibility of understanding the deep meaning of exist-
 296 tence? Or perhaps, glance that betrays a feeling of profound alienation,
 297 as Walter Benjamin would write some decades later in his notes written
 298 between 1927 and 1940, in a fine text dedicated to Baudelaire's Paris, to
 299 the figure of the flâneur and his melancholic glance. And in this operation
 300 of decomposition and recomposition, deriving from the Paris "passages"
 301 and the artifice of citationism, the German critic in *The Arcades Project*
 302 took on the task of putting forward a new reading of history:

303 To raise in a word great constructions on the basis of minuscule elements
 304 cut out with clarity and precision. Indeed to discover in analysis of the brief
 305 particular moment the crystal of the overall occurrence. To break therefore
 306 with vulgar historical naturalism. To grasp the construction of history as
 307 such. In the structure of comment. (461)

308 The above delineated system can bring, with a critical act, the past back
 309 to the lucidity of consciousness and identify in it new significant con-
 310 stellations. "Memory by itself adorns the aspects of forms", De Chirico
 311 declared, "it dilates them, so to speak, before and beyond their present
 312 state. Thanks to memory we, pondering on images, see what these images
 313 were and what they will be, it is the poetry of the glance. The images of
 314 dreams are instead naked: naked and without history". So memory is the
 315 means for penetrating the obscure inhabited profundity of things, to make

the terrifying emerge, so masterfully evoked by the ancient Romans with their aesthetics breaking the relationship with nature which was still so alive in great, solemn Greek architecture. But it is also the means for interpreting and feeling **which still present the** value of mystical and magical doctrines to which certain geometrical figures allude. And that frightening sense of the unknown is then aroused by the “dread nature of lines and angles”. De Chirico, in the guise of the deity of metaphysics, can state: “we who know the signs of the metaphysical alphabet know what joys and pains are enclosed within a portico, a street corner or, again, in a room, on a tabletop, within the sides of a box”. Images which might appear literary but which, with their clarity and precision of drawing, belong concretely to the universe of the visual. And yet in their visionary nature they remain far from the great pen of the labyrinthine Calvino.

In his *Journey in De Chirico's Cities* (1982), in the footsteps of Borges' temporal ramifications, Italo Calvino, like Kurosawa's Japanese art student who enters into the world of Van Gogh—in the episode *Crows*, part of the film *Dreams* (1990)—enters the metaphysical grids of painting without resolving the aporia between the interior and exterior of vision. “I don't know for how long I have been wandering through this city: I no longer know who I was when I entered its walls, nor how much I have changed since I learned to consider everything I see as a cast-off skin that I must leave behind me, wreckage of a world from which the mind must free itself to achieve exactness, impassibility, transparency” (405). But for Calvino, penetrating that world becomes an excuse for freeing himself of ghosts of the real and for reappropriating experienced reality. Almost an inverse itinerary in comparison with Baudelaire's apocalyptic vision of Paris or the lyrical bewilderment of Verhaeren's tentacular cities. For Calvino crossing these empty squares, passing through those maze-like architectures, represents an initiatory journey in which he follows a path, a paradoxical rational path which could certainly not be linear, if at all possible.

De Chirico accomplishes in radical form a ramshackle, shifting, unhinged passage to a place fraught with threats and risks for the reconfiguration of vision. It is a silent revolution of a spatiality that overturns the classical in the modernity of its opposite. That spatiality harks back to the memory of a world of pure self-referentiality within which the sense of the classical is the foundational concept but it is paradoxically through the artifices of the classical that De Chirico dismantles its very principles. The best years of the “true” metaphysical period are proof of this manner, of this overturning of the mechanism set in motion: everything that

355 is needed and used for constructing an illusion of reality becomes, at the
 356 same time, a means for destroying a solidity closely related to the surface
 357 of the painting. Perspectives, depths, gradations, successions of planes,
 358 backgrounds and magnitudes are held together by an overall logic; if the
 359 plan were dismantled and each element analysed individually, the architec-
 360 ture would reveal a total incoherence.

361 It is no accident that De Chirico's first theoretical contribution to
 362 the first issue of the periodical *Valori Plastici* in 1918 was entitled *Zeuxi*
 363 *l'espploratore* [Zeuxis the Explorer]: a precise statement of intent and at the
 364 same time a personal stance taken up with regard to his own credo as an
 365 artist. Evoking Zeuxis, a great figure of the antique world who passed into
 366 history for his extraordinary precision in rendering the external forms of
 367 the real world in painting, denotes the same conviction of that metaphysical
 368 principle which he had followed in the previous decade. Questioning
 369 the very objects and forms of reality, while remaining committed to an
 370 exact and truthful technique, leads to a demonstration of the absolute
 371 unreasonableness of their being. In a place of the spirit not assimilable to
 372 the idea of immediacy, De Chirico finds a place that invokes a superior
 373 mastery and an acute faculty of analysis proper only to those who do not
 374 wish to stop the flow of time by breaking it up or circumscribing it.

375 When Lucian of Samosata expresses admiration for the work of Zeuxis,
 376 which he knew only through copies, he nonetheless exalts the power of
 377 visual representativeness.² Above all, he acknowledges the greatness of
 378 thematic invention, outside of all the more classical genres, in the amazing
 379 ability to render the various characters and the individual figures painted.
 380 So when Zeuxis himself realized that highlighting the novelty of the
 381 subject, which is what struck everyone, came at the expense of a consider-
 382 ation of the technical aspects of the work, with the result that the accuracy
 383 of the details took second place, he said to his pupil, to pack it up take it
 384 home: "These people praise only the raw material of my art, they don't
 385 care at all about how the lighting effects are rendered and whether they
 386 are masterfully done, but only the novelty of subject is praised more than
 387 the perfect execution of each detail" (25–27).

388 De Chirico built his conceptual substratum on that exemplarity, put-
 389 ting his faith in an immersion in the same matter of painting; knowledge
 390 and expertise would be drawn from the past for an in-depth enquiry into
 391 the foundations of reality meaning. From metaphysical visions, benumbed

² Roman rhetorician and satirist who lived in the second century AD and wrote in Greek.

and equivocally logical in the tight construction of the perspectival lines, so 392
 irrational in the oxymoronic merging of heterogeneous objects and over- 393
 lapping architectures that would clash if developed in a three-dimensional 394
 reality, the step towards what in the appearance of the picture is real— 395
 although actually illusory for its fallacy—is a very short one. 396

The model for this plunge into the concreteness of painting was once 397
 more the past, as in the earlier phase, more mysterious, more impene- 398
 trable, more enigmatic, more sensational. The past as instrument for a 399
 simulation of truth, but also as stimulus for **scaling the meanderings of** 400
memory. Worlds reflected in the mirror? Phantasmal worlds stolen from a 401
 dreaming mind? Or rather relics of primitive memories; relics that suggest 402
 a point of contact, an encounter between subject and object? Evoking the 403
 image of that which has been and, now sedimented, rests at the bottom 404
 of an interiority without duration. Is De Chirico not attempting perhaps 405
 to give an interpretation of the unrepresentable, using as a tool the arti- 406
 fices of representation? And almost by an act of magic, maybe of predesti- 407
 nation, a coherent link knits moments of a lifetime and resounds in the 408
 verse of a primary spell, nostalgic in the precision of manifesting itself. 409
 The “Clear painting”, “transparent colour”, “that dry sense of paint” to 410
 which the artist aspired in the twenties are technical precepts of the past. 411
 If reiterative logic did not belong to a different place of the spirit, it would 412
 be hard to understand that return to discipline, the desire for initiation, 413
 the will to enter the museum, the need to leave the territory of “painted 414
 images”³ in order to penetrate—he was now over 30—the field “of the 415
 phenomenon” of true painting. Lorenzo Lotto, Michelangelo, Raphael 416

³ De Chirico describes this interesting period in his book *Memorie della mia vita* (105–107). I cite the most significant passage (106): “I understood that something vast was taking place within me. Formerly, in museums in Italy, France and Germany, I had looked at the Masters’ pictures and had always seen them just as everyone sees them. That is, I saw them as *painted images*. Of course what was then revealed to me at the Villa Borghese Museum was nothing but a beginning; subsequently, with study, work, observation and meditation I made giant-step progress and, just as I understand now, painting is such a phenomenon that when I see others, those who still don’t know, those who are still plodding in the dark and toiling to save their face, to deceive their neighbour and themselves and not succeeding in anything are unhappy, and being unhappy are ill-natured, then, I say, when I see this sad and distressing spectacle I am taken by a great pity for those unfortunates and would like to be able to offer myself as a sacrifice, to bare my breast to those forlorn people and shout at them: ‘Strike me! Strike me! Let yourselves go!’, would like to embrace and kiss them and weep and sob with them, and between one sob and the next, to make them happy, solemnly swear *to paint no more!*”

417 and Mantegna, introjected for the purity of line, the tones and nuances
 418 of a prodigious depth, the ingeniousness and masterly invention, would
 419 thenceforth become his simulacra of fiction.

420 But in the “pure” years of metaphysical art, at the time of the drying up
 421 of painting and its very concept, when the choice was not yet fixed on the
 422 museum and the material had not yet touched that paradox of fiction for
 423 which he would become famous, this turn may not be simply random but
 424 rather an intellectual necessity, I want to argue, if one considers that the
 425 author who inspired the artist for iconographic sources, Reinach, Salomon
 426 of *Répertoire de la statuaire grecque et romaine*, was also the interpreter-
 427 translator French Arthur Schopenhauer’s essay *Über die Freiheit des men-*
 428 *schlichen Willens (On the Freedom of Human Will)*, one of the formative
 429 philosophical texts for De Chirico. Schopenhauer and Nietzsche are the
 430 genesis of those first perturbing images spelling his moment of awareness
 431 coupled with doubt.

432 Time and space, abstract notions around which to unite one’s intellec-
 433 tual forces, were at the centre of the great scientific debate of those years.
 434 The intellectual and cultural world appropriated those terms to state a new
 435 logic in the visual arts. So if on the one hand Apollinaire could declare the
 436 overcoming of Euclidean theories themselves and artists’ intuitions of a
 437 fourth dimension—that of space, dimension of the infinite—on the other
 438 hand the Futurists, in the text of the 1912 exhibition at the Bernheim-
 439 Jeune gallery, had vehemently proclaimed the need for: “simultaneity of
 440 states of mind in the work of art: this is the intoxicating destination of
 441 our art”. And they, the Futurists, had made it explicit, recalling the idea
 442 of simultaneity pointed out by Einstein in his first theory of relativity, in
 443 relation to two events produced in the same space:

444 Once more we explain ourselves by way of example. Painting someone on a
 445 balcony, seen from indoors, we don’t confine the scene to what the square
 446 of the window allows us to see but make the effort to give the overall plastic
 447 sensations felt by the painter at the balcony: sunny swarming of the street,
 448 double row of houses extending to right and left, flowery balconies etc.,
 449 which means simultaneity of environment and therefore dislocation and
 450 breaking up of objects, scattering and fusion of details, freed from ordinary
 451 logic and independent one from the others. [...]

452 To make the beholder live at the centre of the picture, in accordance with
 453 the expression of our manifesto, the picture must be the synthesis of *what is*
 454 *remembered and what is seen.*

One must render the invisible that acts and lives beyond the depths, what we have to the right, left and back of us, and not a little slice of life artificially closed as if in a stage set. 455
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In our manifesto we stated that the *dynamic sensation* must be given, meaning the special rhythm of each object, its tendency, its movement or, to put it better, its interior force.⁴ 458
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The revolutionary spirit of the Futurists certainly resounded with new ideas, but for all the vehemence of the words, in painting this ideological and speculative restlessness was softened in the filaments of colour or in the force lines of trajectories. The “revolutionary” force turned on the hypothesis of a space-time crossing of the image in view of opening up horizons to the incommensurable dimension of consciousness. How then to represent reality in continuous becoming by painting in one and the same space the dynamic concreteness of being and the intangible truth of interior worlds and feelings? And if modern physics, and in parallel philosophical speculation, altered the very system of thought and its coordinates, the Futurists pursued the illusion of redesigning the landscape of aesthetic doctrines at the rhythm of denial of what had been, the rhythm of refusal of an obsolete historical past lacking all vitality. To the élan of creative energy, to temporal abstraction, to time and duration experienced in consciousness, in accordance with the new Bergsonian principle, the Futurists, and especially Boccioni, reacted by pursuing a visual synthesis of reciprocally dissonant fragments, yet without discrediting the plane of a sensorial perception deeply rooted in the objectivity of things. 461
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Modernism clashes with the past but cannot ignore the human dimension. So if the cubists, in particular Picasso in his years of analytic exploration, decomposed and dismantled systems and genres of painting from within, the Futurists were still moving rather in the direction of echoing the intimate resounding of the forces of nature. The aim was to couple sensitivity and emotions with frenetic signs of cities in their rapid mutation and with convulsive traces of metropolises pierced by the dynamic flow of tramlines and new means of locomotion.⁵ 479
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⁴From the programme text published in the catalogue of the exhibition of Futurist painters, signed by the same artists, at the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune in Paris, February 1912.

⁵With the years and a greater lexical and stylistic mastery the Futurists’ interest in a new dimension of reality extended to hypothesizing actual construction projects, as in the case of Boccioni’s 1914 *Manifesto of Architecture*, while leaving the same revolutionary intentions concerning architectonic discipline to seep amply through: “We have said that in painting we

487 That chaotic interlocking of fragments in sharp jumbles is in keeping
 488 with the infinite stimuli that hark back to the inseparability of conscious-
 489 ness and psyche, to an interaction between the universes of mind and mat-
 490 ter. The aim is to raise motion to a pure category of the spirit. As in the
 491 rhythms of fullness and emptiness on which the planes of the object and AUS
 492 its environment interweave and interpenetrate, in the energy thickening at
 493 the centre, in the opposition? to gravity from which the forces that propa-
 494 gate in the atmosphere of plastic concepts are freed. Images arising, like
 495 *Forme uniche della continuità nello spazio* [*Unique Forms of Continuity in*
 496 *Space*], at that precise historical moment in the wake of what was already
 497 in the air, elaborated in Henri Bergson's philosophical theories on vitalism
 498 to the epistemological studies of Henri Poincaré, in scientific investigation

shall place the spectator at the centre of the picture, making him the centre of emotion rather than simply a spectator. Also the city's architectonic environment will be transformed in an enveloping sense. We are living in a spiral of architectonic forces. Until yesterday building took place in a successive panoramic sense. One house was followed by another house, one street by another street. Today we are beginning to have around us an architectonic environment that develops in all directions: from the bright basements of the great stores, from the various levels of tunnels of the underground railways to the gigantic rise of American skyscrapers". But it was still and above all in the perceptual dimension that these images of irrepressible dynamism and laceration of the static nature were being carried out and taking form. In Mario Sironi's work of those years, close to the programmatic tensions of the Futurists, the city instead appears gloomier, plastically constructed in accordance with a solitary and meditated dimension. It would be Antonio Sant'Elia who recalled and interpreted the sense of movement and speed as a vital subject, as against the tradition of the monumental and heavy, in the manifesto he signed on 11 July 1914, published in the August number of the magazine *Lacerba* the same year: "We must invent and rebuild the futurist city like an immense tumultuous site, agile, mobile, dynamic in every part, and the futurist house like a gigantesque machine". And the new metropolis rises in his projects: cities with gigantic interconnections between one building and the next, in an exceptional thrust of upward verticalism. Mere semblances of a dream transposed in the calculations and in its balances without reality ever seeing them transformed into inaccessible heights. From that magical moment on there was a flourishing of planning proposals that replaced the sensitive vision, the extraordinary pictorial representations of the early years. Mario Chiattoni's "proto-rationalism" was echoed by the imaginary and lively propositions of Balla or, again, of Fortunato Depero (1916) in his plastic-mechanistic conception, or of Enrico Prampolini (1913–1914) more aimed at dynamic decomposition. Towards the end of the 1910s the architecture of Virgilio Marchi's visionary city would approach expressionist models and typologies and, in subsequent decades, new proposals would follow after the inevitable intermingling of languages (Fillia [Luigi Colombo], Prampolini, Alberto Sartoris, Tullio Crali, Nicolaj Diulgheroff, Nicola Mosso and Angiolo Mazzoni) until they wholly consumed the original utopian tension to become fully immersed in reality or, with the second generation of Futurists, until they raised and lost themselves in the dimension of a new aerial mythology.

and in the spread of interest in the phenomena and doctrines of the para- 499
 normal and spiritualism, right down to the astonishing repercussions they 500
 had in the field of literature. 501

If experimentation drew the Futurists towards the thresholds of the 502
 impossible, and with them innumerable other artists, particularly Russian 503
 ones, contemporaneously the theme of a succession of movement and 504
 its repercussion in space would captivate Marcel Duchamp, fascinated by 505
 Balla's linear sequences, and lead to his ingenious invention of the *Bicycle* 506
Wheel. Synthesis and concreteness of dynamic representation in an object 507
 that could potentially be set in motion in accordance with a logic based 508
 on the progress of a sequence. For Balla, however, the simplification of a 509
 surface in straight lines, diagonals and curves, geometrical sketches, punctu- 510
 ates a space multiplied to the infinite by the diffraction and reflection 511
 of light, the echoes of sounds, the transfiguration of volumes and simple 512
 abstract quantities of energy. It is a matter of forceful lengths in hori- 513
 zontal, vertical and undulating progression. Measurement of the real, not 514
 simultaneous analysis of interpenetration between figure and space but 515
 stratigraphic survey of the elementary entities of the tangible. Purification 516
 of primary sounds and colours as a synaesthetic verification of painting pic- 517
 tures, of drawing new groupings, of representing the world. A world built 518
 up through the glance, a selective eye that scrutinizes the prime causes of 519
 the perceptible, a glance increasingly lenticular, like a powerful lens aimed 520
 at the intersections, the grafts of space, at the appearance of the image in 521
 the spectral interval of the visible. 522

If for Balla the visible is in the flow of a force and in the scanning of 523
 its pauses, and for the Futurists in general it lays in the different percep- 524
 tion of the very concept of motion, for De Chirico—in the midst of the 525
 climate of the international avant-gardes—this visible is instead the source 526
 of an archetypal revisitation of contemporaneity. And the city celebrated 527
 by many as expression of enchantment and marvel, of growth and prog- 528
 ress seems, in the tight control of segments and passages staged by De 529
 Chirico, to block and retain all the tensions of a conflict that has not 530
 yet exploded. His paintings offer subjects charged with presages, beyond 531
 which is concealed the threat of nothingness, where only the presence of 532
 a cannon, a ponderous figure in an increasingly decomposed yet ordered 533
 foreshortening, would mark the beginning of the battle in that age of 534
 enthusiasms and sensationalisms. 535

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⁶While there is one unique sculpture in plaster, several casts in bronze can be found in important museums in the world.

Author Queries

Chapter No.: 11 0002804837

Queries	Details Required	Author's Response
AU1	Please confirm if the change to “the First World War” as used in the text is okay.	
AU2	Please check if the affiliation is presented correctly.	
AU3	Please check if the sentence “Heraclitus “the obscure”, the...” is okay as written.	
AU4	Please check the citation of “Fig. 10.1” is okay or amend if necessary.	
AU5	Please check if this citation is correct.	
AU6	Please clarify if the use of boldface in the sentence “But it is also the ...” may be changed to normal italics.	
AU7	Please clarify if the boldface may be changed to normal italics: scaling the meanderings of memory.	
AU8	Please check if the sentence “As in the rhythms of fullness and emptiness on which the planes ...” is okay as written.	
AU9	The sentence “Synthesis and concreteness of dynamic representation ...” seems to be incomplete. Please check.	