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“Il faut méditerraniser la peinture”:

Giorgio de Chirico’s Metaphysical Painting, Nietzsche, and “the Obscurity of Light”

Ara H. Merjian

From their first unveiling in Parisian salons in the early 1910s, Giorgio de Chirico’s Metaphysical paintings (1909-1919) set off a discursive pursuit of their ostensible geographic origins. Writing on de Chirico’s solo exhibition of 1913, the critic Maurice Raynal compared his painting to the (notably Italian) archaeological nostalgia of Gabriele D’Annunzio, yet deemed de Chirico “a consciously ‘French’ artist.” While Giovanni Papini and Ardengo Soffici argued for a particularly Italian redolence about the images, other Italian writers dismissed de Chirico’s art as entirely exogenous: a product of the “*cloaca maxima* of Paris’s Alexandrian snobberies,” according to Roberto Longhi, one of Italy’s most eminent art historians.¹ The American art historian James Thrall Soby described de Chirico’s paintings as “unmistakably Italian,” whereas the French salon critic André Billy called these same works “lugubriously Germanic,” and the notable Parisian pundit Nino Frank identified in them a “very Nordic” poetry.² Despite the increasingly received notion of the Metaphysical paintings as betraying a fundamentally Italian sensibility, de Chirico was himself disparaged in Italy after World War One as “il greculo.” More recently, one Italian critic reckoned the images as “oppressively Teutonic.”³

The collective discrepancies of such accounts recapitulate the elusive pith of the Metaphysical cityscape: a confusion and conflation of geographical allusions. Each image reveals a fractured pictorial topography, shot through with numerous, simultaneous evocations, but stripped of any precise locale. Consider, for example, de Chirico’s *Gare Montparnasse* (1914) – perhaps his most “French” painting, in both title and style. As his only canvas to name an actual place, it invokes a specifically Parisian one. [Fig. 1] Yet the preparatory drawing for the canvas is catalogued at the Musée Picasso under the title “*Place d’Italie avec bananes.*” [Fig. 2] If the painting’s architectonics conjure up the iron and concrete modernity of the original Gare Montparnasse’s side porch, they also evince the spare trabeation of an Athenian stoa; if the canvas’s deep perspective cites the Italian *Quattrocento*, its radical flatness owes an equal, and undeniable, debt to Cézanne.

On the occasion of a 1927 exhibition, the prominent Parisian critic, Waldemar George, suggested a new rubric under which to file de Chirico’s images – a way, perhaps, to reconcile

My thanks to Claudio Fogu and Lucia Re as well as to the two anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments and criticisms. Any errors or oversights that remain are my own, as are, unless otherwise noted, all translations.

¹ Maurice Raynal, “Exposition G. de Chirico,” *Gil Blas*, October 16, 1913. Reviewing the Salon d’Automne of the same year, Louis Vauxcelles mentions the “mystérieux et racé Georgio [sic] de Chirico”; while Vauxcelles’ “racé” here may simply mean “distinguished,” it also bears a certain racial connotation. Vauxcelles, Supplement to *Gil Blas*, review of Salon d’Automne, Nov. 15-16, 1913. Roberto Longhi, “To the Orthopedic God,” review of the exhibition of Giorgio De Chirico’s works at the Galleria Bragaglia; published in *Il Tempo*, February 22, 1919.

² James Thrall Soby, *The Early Chirico*, (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1941) 65; André Billy, *Apollinaire, Critique d’art* (Paris: Paris-Musées/Gallimard, 1993) 101; Nino Frank, “Giorgio de Chirico et Alberto Savinio,” in *Cahiers de Belgique* n. 4 (April 1929), 131.

³ Carlo Carrà, *Il Selvaggio*, Dec. 30, 1927 [“Il greculo Chirico”]; Umberto Barbaro, *Le Ricche Miniere della Pittura Contemporanea* (Rome: Edizioni dell’Ateneo, 1948), 54.

their incongruities into one fold: “réalisme méditerranéen.”⁴ Here was a category at once delocalized and geographically precise, generic and specific, in equal measure. George invoked this same theme the following year, in a brilliant, lyrical monograph on the artist; insisting upon de Chirico’s attention to “the limpid light of the Mediterranean coasts,” George titled his essay “Chirico et les appels du sud.”⁵ A half-century later, a major exhibition, *Giorgio de Chirico and the Mediterranean*, reprised and expanded this same aegis, setting de Chirico’s entire oeuvre – from his early Metaphysical canvases up through his last, fraught efforts – in dialogue with all manner of ancient Mediterranean artifacts.⁶ His work has since anchored various surveys of Mediterranean culture, from exhibitions of European painting between the World Wars to analyses of the region’s role in a globalized economy.⁷ [Figs. 3, 4]

In the wake of widespread confirmation of his “Mediterraneanness,” however, the artist himself insisted otherwise. Writing in 1941, by which time his early Metaphysical imagery had long been absorbed to the marrow of Italy’s modernist-Fascist cult of *mediterraneità*, de Chirico remarked with characteristic spleen: “[W]ith regard to my art, it is a commonplace, both in Italy and abroad, to trot out ‘Mediterranean spirit.’ I have never asked myself whether my spirit is Mediterranean, Adriatic, Atlantic, or Baltic.”⁸ Of course, such a disavowal flies in the face of de Chirico’s actual images, steeped as much in the myth of Mediterranean antiquity as they are structured by its environmental commonplaces: crisp light, stuccoed façades, arcuated porticoes and *piazze*. His earliest canvases, painted after three years’ residence in Munich, follow in the vein of Arnold Böcklin’s Symbolist figurations and treat specifically Greco-Roman themes, from *Prometheus* and *The Sphinx* (both Winter 1908-09) to *Battle of Centaurs* (Spring 1909) and *The Departure of the Argonauts* (Summer 1909). While his subsequent, Metaphysical images (c. 1909-1919) empty out the specificity of these mythical narratives in favor of a spectral architectonics, they still evoke the Mediterranean as their unnamed – but indubitable and unwavering – setting. What, then, prompted this umbrage at the notion of his art as quintessentially Mediterranean? Why this refusal of a category to which his work clearly lends itself – indeed, of which it appears emblematic, even somehow formative, in the history of twentieth-century modernist painting?⁹ It was, it seems, a particular *kind* of Mediterraneanism at which de Chirico took offense and from which he intermittently sought to distinguish his own work.

⁴ Waldemar George, *Giorgio de Chirico* (Galerie Bucher, Paris, May-June, 1927).

⁵ Waldemar George, *Chirico: avec des fragments littéraires de l'artiste* (Paris : Chroniques du jour, 1928), xxiii. To be sure, George’s championing of de Chirico’s works served his own (increasingly fraught) politics, which sought to reconcile aspects of Parisian modernism with the rise of Fascist culture. See Matthew Affron, “Waldemar George: A Parisian Art Critic on Modernism and Fascism,” in *Fascist Visions: Art and Ideology in France and Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) 171-204.

⁶ Jole de Sanna, ed., *Giorgio de Chirico and the Mediterranean* (New York: Rizzoli, 1998).

⁷ See, for example, *Mediterraneo d'art. Il mare e la pesca da Giorgio De Chirico all'era della globalizzazione* (Rome: Erreciemme Edizioni, 2005); *Mediterraneo. Mitologie della figura nell'arte italiana tra le due guerre* (Selerio, 2008).

⁸ De Chirico, “Perché ho illustrato l’Apocalisse” (1941), reprinted in *Il meccanismo del pensiero. Critica, polemic, autobiografia* (Turin: Einaudi, 1985) 379 (hereafter *Meccanismo*). [“A proposito della mia arte, tanto in Italia che fuori, è un luogo comune tirare in ballo ‘lo spirito mediterraneo.’ Non mi sono mai chiesto se il mio spirito è mediterraneo, adriatico, atlantico o baltico.”]

⁹ See, for example, Werner Helwig, *De Chirico: Peinture Métaphysique* (Paris: Hazan, 1962) n/p: “A l’encontre du Greco qui avait transplanté l’esprit crétois dans la Péninsule pour l’y concentrer dans des oeuvres d’une manière quasi invisible mais sensible, Chirico s’est approché de l’esprit grec avec une mentalité italienne, unissant les éléments antiques et moderne de la Méditerranée dans un seul et même révé.”

During the same years that de Chirico painted his first Metaphysical canvases, the Catalan modernist, Joaquim Sunyer, sought to reconcile a modernist idiom with timeless Mediterranean idylls, exemplified in his paintings, *Mediterráneo (Mediterrània)* (1910-1911) and *Pastoral* (1911-12). [Fig. 5]. Sunyer's languishing female bodies are easily confused as counterparts to de Chirico's recurrent Ariadne figures, which appear in numerous canvases from 1912 and 1913. [Fig. 6]. Eugeni d'Ors, the Catalan critic and theorist who had helped to launch the career of artists like Sunyer, would later declare de Chirico an exponent of "rational, lawful, tectonic" principles in the Mediterranean tradition, a producer of images "in honor of Logos."¹⁰ But such claims to de Chirico's paintings disavowed (or ignored) the less rational origins of his Ariadnes, the disquieting underside of their literary roots, and their stubborn semiotic circuitry: thrice removed from reality, as painted likeness of a stone representation of a mythical/literary figure. Furthermore, while the Mediterranean aspects of Sunyer's *Noucentiste* paintings aim to revive Catalan culture in terms of millennial, classical tradition, de Chirico's fitful invocations of Greek and Italian elements eschewed any specific cultural or national(ist) agenda. Their Greco-Roman sensibilities, which are themselves shot through with aspects of pre-classical culture and pre-Socratic philosophy, are put in the service of a singular, even solipsistic, vision. If we find the Mediterranean in the Metaphysical images, it is only as a skeleton, stripped of its descriptive particulars, impossible to distill to any particular national tradition or ideological application.

Unlike Sunyer's paintings, de Chirico's Metaphysical cityscapes are not timeless, but rather "untimely"; they are not eternal, but eternally recurring. My Nietzschean allusions here are as tendentious as de Chirico's own. "To make wholesome art! Worse still: to make Mediterranean art! (May the soul of Nietzsche absolve them of their innocence!)" ["Fare dell'arte sana! Peggio ancora: far dell'arte mediterranea! (Che i mani di Nietzsche perdonino loro cotanta innocenza.)"]¹¹ His remarks here, in a 1924 essay on Gustave Courbet, provide an apt touchstone for examining his particular version of *mediterraneità*. For, it was Nietzsche's writings from which de Chirico drew his notions of the Mediterranean – notions that exceeded geographic resonances in their metaphorical import, but fell willfully short of any collective or political application. In the period between the World Wars in Europe, numerous figures, including de Chirico himself, championed the so-called "Return to Order" – a sober redressment of the Great War and its devastations, of which the pre-war avant-gardes had come to seem both symptom and cause. De Chirico's Metaphysical images, which had already reconciled modernist and classical elements, appeared as models for a range of interwar efforts at recapturing "plastic values" while not entirely renouncing modernism.

Even as de Chirico's own painting ossified after World War One into an increasingly conservative and rigidly neoclassical idiom, his writings clung to many of the paradoxical aspects of his early work.¹² In particular, he refused the valences of "health" and "innocence" often ascribed to, or identified in, his particular evocations of Mediterranean culture. It is on the

¹⁰ Eugeni D'Ors, "Giorgio de Chirico y la inteligéncia sarcástica," *La Gaceta Literaria*, Madrid, n. 79 (January 4, 1930).

¹¹ De Chirico, "Gustave Courbet" (1925); reprinted in *Il meccanismo*, 250. De Chirico explains earlier in the essay, "Oggi in Italia la pittura senza fantasi va sotto la demominazione di *arte sana*. Privato della fantasia un quadro si presenta sotto l'aspetto della noia e dell'inutilità; inoltre, conseguenza diretta della mancanza di fantasia è la mediocrità e spesso brutezza assoluta della tecnica e della materia pittorica."

¹² Despite the reactionary shift in de Chirico's compositions, his writings reveal a striking continuity in terms of his aesthetic and ideological ethos. His essays and novels from the 1920s, 30s, and 40s continued the defiant spirit of his early paintings and writings, often elaborating previous themes, increasingly at odds with the conservatism of his image-making. His novel *Hebdomeros* (1929), for example, remains a decidedly "Metaphysical" work of art.

significance of that refusal, and its roots in de Chirico's close study of Friedrich Nietzsche's writings, that I hope to shed some light. It is, in fact, light itself – as both a formal strategy and a philosophical metaphor, a mode of ostensible transparency and coded obscurity – that most poignantly articulates the fraught place of the Mediterranean in de Chirico's oeuvre.

Nietzsche and the “Stimmung des Sudens”

“I will now whisper something in your ear: I am the only man to have truly understood Nietzsche – all of my work demonstrates this.”¹³ After moving from Munich (where he had studied for three years) to Italy, de Chirico penned these lines to his friend Fritz Gartz in 1910, when his paintings first assumed the architectonic dimensions that would mark his work over the next decade. As he moved away from the formative influence of Böcklin's Symbolist canvases, Nietzsche's writings came to exercise the greatest single influence upon the development of de Chirico's Metaphysical venture.¹⁴ As with his interest in Böcklin, a great part of de Chirico's attraction to Nietzsche derived from the latter's demonstrative rapport with Mediterranean culture, which helped de Chirico navigate the tensions between his own origins and his extensive residence in northern European cities. As an Italian born and raised in Greece, between Volos (ancient Iolchos, mythical launching site of Jason and the Argonauts) and Athens, de Chirico incarnated – quite literally – a modern Greco-Roman sensibility. Rather than an elective affinity, his connection to both Italy and Greece fueled his self-appointed identity as Nietzsche's latter-day disciple. Nietzsche had declared himself a “Man of the North in the South,” a southerner “a southerner, not by descent, but by *faith*.”¹⁵ De Chirico thus considered himself, in a sense, Nietzsche's chiasmic counterpart: a man of the Thessalian “south,” displaced in Munich and Paris. It was Nietzsche, a German notably at odds with his own cultural inheritance, who mediated de Chirico's (re)discovery of the “South” as a philosophical and aesthetic trope.

Nietzsche mined ancient Greece for some of his most prominent conceits, from the Apollonian/Dionysian dialectics of *The Birth of Tragedy*, to his extensive writings on the Pre-Platonic philosophers, to his final, mad letters, signed “Dionysus.” Even in his pronouncements on contemporary (German) culture's overweening historical proclivities, Nietzsche declared

¹³ De Chirico, Letter to Fritz Gartz, dated “Florence 26 Januar 1910”; reprinted in Gerd Roos, *De Chirico e Alberto Savinio. Ricordi e documenti (Monaco, Milano, Firenze, 1906-11)* (Rome: Edizioni Bora, 1999) Appendix I, v, p. 422. Thanks to the extensive archival research of Gerd Roos, who discovered many of de Chirico's extant letters to his friend Fritz Gartz, we know for certain that by the summer of 1909 Giorgio and his brother Alberto had read at least *Ecce Homo* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in addition to French translations of *The Birth of Tragedy*, *The Case of Wagner*, and probably *The Gay Science*. See Paolo Baldacci's discussion of Roos's findings and of de Chirico's early readings of Nietzsche, in Baldacci, *Giorgio De Chirico: The Metaphysical Period, 1888-1919*, trans. Jeffrey Jennings (New York: Bullfinch, 1997), especially 67-74.

¹⁴ On de Chirico's uses of Nietzsche, see Baldacci, *Giorgio de Chirico* and “The Function of Nietzsche's Thought in de Chirico's Art,” *Nietzsche and “An Architecture of Our Minds”* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 1999); Ara H. Merjian, *Urban Untimely: Giorgio de Chirico and the Metaphysical City* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2006). Baldacci's monograph is a model of both historical diligence and theoretical sophistication, and he is the first scholar to pay sustained attention to de Chirico's reading of Nietzsche (and to a lesser extent Schopenhauer and Heraclitus). Baldacci's book serves as both a comprehensive monograph and a catalogue raisonnée of the Metaphysical period.

¹⁵ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, “Peoples and Fatherlands,” in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kauffmann (New York: The Modern Library, 1968), 385.

himself “a student of more ancient times, particularly the Greeks.”¹⁶ The Italian cities where Nietzsche lived and worked during the late 1870s and 1880s also influenced the philosopher’s writings in both topic and tenor, a fact that Nietzsche frequently emphasizes in his texts, from his letters to Peter Gast (Heinrich Köselitz) to the his poems in the *Gay Science*, up through his last, frenzied decrees in *Ecce Homo*. His travels to Genoa, Rome, Sorrento, and other Italian locales coincided with – and to a great extent fueled – his gradual split with Wagner, his rejection of German Romanticism, and his development of an increasingly clipped and aphoristic style of writing.¹⁷ Though inland from the Mediterranean shores that had “cured” him of deleteriously German proclivities, the city of Turin – where his mental illness set in over the winter of 1888 – stood for Nietzsche as the summation of the “southern” sensibility that revolutionized his thinking and his body. “[Turin is] the first city where I am possible,” Nietzsche wrote to Gast. “It’s the air that does it – dry, energizing, jolly.”¹⁸

Several of de Chirico’s early Metaphysical images allude to the philosopher’s famous mental breakdown in Turin and to the enduring association of his madness and his genius with that city’s particular pathos.¹⁹ That Nietzsche’s dawning madness coincided with the artist’s own birth, that same fateful year, formed an origin myth for de Chirico – one to which he would make recourse in claiming the privileged mantle of Nietzsche’s philosophical insight. “The beauty of Turin,” de Chirico writes decades later, “is difficult to apprehend – so difficult that aside from Nietzsche and myself, I know of no one who has concerned himself with it until now.”²⁰ His early Metaphysical paintings already form more tacit, pictorial declarations of the same ilk. *Still Life: Turin Spring* (1914) [Fig. 7], for example, restages the view from Nietzsche’s hotel room on Turin’s Piazza Carrignano, conceptually merging that vision with de Chirico’s own. In his paintings or writings de Chirico often transcribes Nietzschean passages almost literally: incorporating esoteric symbols mentioned by Nietzsche, painting Turin’s “aristocratic calm” and “yellow or reddish brown.”²¹ With their *piazze* adorned with Turin’s Risorgimento monuments and their perspectives plunging to surrounding mountains visible from a city center, some of the images seem directly to invoke Nietzsche’s descriptions of “the Piazza Carlo Alberto and the hills beyond.”²²

¹⁶ Nietzsche, preface to “On the Use and Abuse of History for Life,” *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

¹⁷ Writing from Turin in 1888, Nietzsche informs his readers that *Daybreak* was “first thought, caught among that jumble of rocks near Genoa”; *Human, All Too Human*, he relates, “was written in the main in Sorrento,” while he traces *Zarathustra*’s conception back to Genoa, Rome, and specifically to the Piazza Barberini. See Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, in *Basic Writings*, 744. *The Antichrist*, he notes, was completed in Turin, as was *Twilight of the Idols* – in between strolls “along the Po river” and sessions in his apartment on “Via Carlo Alberto 6, fourth floor, opposite the imposing Palazzo Carignano.” Ibid, 771. See also *The Gay Science*, “Songs of Prince Vogelfrei,” “In the South,” Appendix, 355: “Accept me southern innocence! . . . Is German, not life – a disease . . . Southward I flew, across the seas.” See also Nietzsche’s letter from Turin to Peter Gast, Aug 9, 1888: “Today an incredibly beautiful day, colors of the south!”

¹⁸ Nietzsche, Letter to Peter Gast, April 20, cited in Lesley Chamberlain, *Nietzsche in Turin: An Intimate Biography* (New York: Picador, 1996), 44.

¹⁹ See Wieland Schmied, “Turin als Metaphor für Tod und Geburt,” in *De Chirico und seine Schatten* (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1989); Paolo Baldacci, *Giorgio de Chirico*.

²⁰ De Chirico, “Paola Levi-Montalcini” (1939), reprinted in *Meccanismo*, 362. [“La bellezza di Torino è difficile a scorgere; talmente difficile che fuori Nietzsche e di me stesso non conosco nessuno che se ne sia preoccupato finora.”]

²¹ Nietzsche, Letter to Heinrich Köselitz, April 7, 1888, in *Briefwechsel, Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 5: 285.

²² Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kauffmann (New York: The Modern Library, 1968), 772.

Yet such apparent, pictorial equivalences get us only so far in considering what, precisely, de Chirico distilled from Nietzsche's writings. His uses (and abuses) of Nietzsche are not simply – nor, for that matter, chiefly – iconographic, literal, or topographical. On the whole, de Chirico does not translate his uses of Nietzsche into a set of places or objects, but rather a way of seeing, a strategy of representing. By de Chirico's consistent admission, it was Nietzsche's work that led him to paint the particular "*Stimmung*" of space – "atmosphere in the moral sense,"²³ as de Chirico would later gloss the term. In his memoirs, he describes this *Stimmung* both temporally and spatially, as a season and a region: "the Mediterranean autumn . . . [the] terrible beauty of the autumn discovered by Nietzsche."²⁴ In what follows, I address how Nietzsche's insistence upon the Mediterranean as a philosophical trope – rather than a mere subject or site – influenced the development of de Chirico's Metaphysical paintings, as well as marked his writing long after he abandoned his early mode of painting.

"Il faut méditerraniser la peinture": Nietzsche, de Chirico, Wagner, Weather

Nietzsche launched his career with a controversial paean to the operas of Richard Wagner. *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) posited art, and music in particular, as the sole means of revivifying myth in contemporary culture. After his fateful break with Wagner in 1876, Nietzsche insisted again and again upon climate and geography as the source of their irreconcilable differences, aesthetic and ideological. Again and again, he insisted upon these differences as indicative – or propitious – of specific intellectual and cultural tendencies, both good and bad, healthy and sick. Nietzsche casts the Christian histrionics of his former mentor as the inexorable product of the Teutonic grove, the fog-ridden forest. Wagner's art, he claimed, resounded with "muted thunder." It was "gray, gruesome, and cold." It was an art of "bad weather, German weather!"²⁵ As an antidote, he championed "the colors of the south" and a "Music of the South"; "We need the south, sun 'at any cost,'" he wrote to Erwin Rohde.²⁶

Even Nietzsche's praise for the Georges Bizet's opera *Carmen* (1875) – made in no uncertain terms at the expense of Wagner – is rendered in a language in which aesthetics, identity politics, and dilettante meteorology are difficult to tease apart. With Bizet's work, Nietzsche writes in *The Case of Wagner*,

one takes leave of the *damp* north, of all the steam of the Wagnerian ideal . . .
[instead we find] the shortest line, the harsh necessity; above all it has what goes
with the torrid zone: the dryness of the air, the *limpidezza* in the air. In every

²³ De Chirico, *Memoirs*, trans. and ed., Margaret Crosland (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994 [1945]), 55.

²⁴ De Chirico, "Gustave Courbet," in *Meccanismo*, 252 ["l'autunno mediterraneo . . . la] terribile bellezza dell'autunno scoperto da Nietzsche"]. This phenomenon is found almost exclusively, he writes elsewhere, "in Italian cities and in Mediterranean cities like Genoa or Nice; but the Italian city par excellence where this extraordinary phenomenon appears is Turin." (*Memoirs*, 55). See also "Vale Lutetia," in *Meccanismo*: "Torino è ancora una città italiana e, malgrado certi aspetti ingannevoli nordici e occidentali, una città mediterranea" (267). "Nietzsche's books gave me a taste for those Italian cities with their many porticos." Cited in Pierre Mazars, "Giorgio de Chirico," *Yale French Studies* 31 (May 1964): 112-67.

²⁵ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, "The Case of Wagner," Section 3.

²⁶ Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Briefe, Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin Walter de Gruyter, 1967–88).

respect, the climate is changed . . . southern, brown, burnt sensibility . . . *Il faut méditerraniser la musique*: I have reasons for this formula.²⁷

According to Nietzsche, Wagner's music evinced a decomposition of both musical integrity and bodily health. The only remedy was the dry air of Mediterranean clarity – "*limpidezza*" as he put it, not coincidentally, in Italian (just as he would render *gaya scienza* in Provençal – implying that it was as much a southern landscape and language that "cured" him of Wagnerian pomp as any philosophical revelation). Nietzsche goes so far as to deem the environmental qualities of Bizet's work "African," as reminiscent of a "Moorish dance,"²⁸ pushing the envelope of his music's austral associations even further south. Nietzsche calls his new philosophy "the great health," the "ideal 'Mediterranean,'" and deems those who choose to join him the "Argonauts of the ideal."²⁹

Such a call resounded for de Chirico as a personal address. It confirmed his sense of Nietzsche's philosophy as intended only for a select group of like-minded initiates; and it bolstered his self-styled mythography as a latter-day Argonaut, hailing (quite literally) from the city of the Argos' mythical departure. The weather – or lack thereof³⁰ – in de Chirico's paintings after 1910 makes clear that Bizet's breezes reached his work during the same time that he was reading Nietzsche assiduously. Sharp lines and horizons, burnt tones and architectonic clarity: these become the building blocks out of which de Chirico constructs his cityscapes. Compare one of his earliest compositions from 1909, *The Sphinx*, with *The Soothsayer's Recompense*, painted four years later [Figs. 8, 9]. The hazy skies, frenzied brushwork, and morose subject matter of his earlier imagery have evaporated in the later canvas, revealing a limpid, fresco-like aridity of sun-baked porticoes and *piazze*. Tempestuous, murky skies have given way to crisp delineations of light and shadow; a foreground littered with the morbid details of bloody bones and skulls has been replaced by a clear swath of sun-baked ground. A few paintings and drawings after 1913, including *The Soothsayer's Recompense*, go so far as to include palm trees and demonstrably "southern" (even "African") bananas.³¹ But it was the more comprehensive evocation of dryness, clarity, and linear definition by which de Chirico applied Nietzsche's "formula," almost to the letter. He used Nietzsche's philosophy to "Mediterraneanize [sic]" his own aesthetics.

Writing on Nietzsche's notion of a "Southern music," Walter Frisch argues that it refers

not to music that is necessarily composed in Italy, Spain, or Provence, but to the ideal qualities of music. Music of the South is 'effectively a private tag for music that has agreed' with Nietzsche physically and emotionally. When Nietzsche is more specific about what such music is, he uses terms similar to those he uses to describe his own literary style: in Love's account, 'deceptive naiveté combined with great subtlety (*heiter und tief*); refined awareness of its own modernity and a

²⁷ Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*, Section 2.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Section 382, "The great health"; 346: "the coasts of this ideal 'Mediterranean.'" *Ecce Homo*, 754: "ideal 'mediterranean'; "argonauts of the ideal."

³⁰ I would note here the significant overlap, in French and Italian, of the denotations "time" and "weather" in the word *temps/tempo*.

³¹ De Chirico, "Paulhan MSS" (c. 1911-13) in *Hebdomeros and Other Writings*, ed. John Ashbery (Cambridge: Exact Change, 1992), 210-11. ["African sentiment. The arcade is here forever . . . The happiness of the banana tree . . . Palm trees."]

conscious delight in the deliberate exploitation of tradition.³²

For Nietzsche, a renewed gravitas and mystery could only take root in an art which *appeared* – on the surface of things – light, linear, and logical. Even if that aesthetic concealed a fundamental illogic and terror, it must not wear that affect – like Wagner’s music in particular, and Romantic culture in general – on its proverbial sleeve. It must appear, instead, light, cheerful, rational, and clear.³³ In de Chirico’s own subtle “exploitations of tradition” after 1912 – when he begins inserting modern smoke stacks and trains into the background of seemingly ancient cityscapes – he avails himself of similar strategies. In the same spaces, he increasingly conflates affects of joy and anxiety, lightness and solemnity, apparent simplicity and recondite sophistication. Moreover, the images short-circuit the ascription of such sentiments to any specific geography or tradition, appealing as much to German Symbolist and Romantic morbidity as to the apparent insouciance of Mediterranean tranquility.

More specifically, we find in these images the frequent juxtaposition of elements both innocent and anxious, whether a young girl rolling a hoop near an empty hearse (in *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street*, 1914) or else the brooding furrow of ubiquitous arcades that often loom alongside bright, toy-like objects (*The General’s Illness*, *The Sailors’ Barracks*, *Metaphysical Composition with Toys*, 1914 [Fig. 10]). This last painting invokes not simply the harmless play of children’s toys, but also alludes to the organs assembled on the sacrificial altars of augurs in ancient Rome and Etruria.³⁴ De Chirico’s ostensible naïveté, then, is as willfully “deceptive” as Nietzsche’s. And perhaps here we sense why – and to what end – de Chirico’s own conception of the Mediterranean refused the “wholesome” and “innocent” (to recall his own disparaging words) labels applied to his paintings after World War One. Though the *Metaphysical* canvases after 1912 appeared increasingly dry, clear, even “jolly,” other valences lurk in the same crisply delineated spaces and surfaces. Even de Chirico’s earliest extant writings – penned in Paris from around 1911 to 1913 – evoke, in their strange combination of sentiments, the sense that his serene *piazze* belie other, more anxious resonances: “in spite of its afternoon warmth, it is icy.”³⁵

Looking south, writing south

Indeed, no less striking than his painted “Mediterraneanizations,” and inextricable from them, are de Chirico’s adoption of Nietzschean rhetoric in his writings, during and after the *Metaphysical* years. In a series of essays culminating in the late 1910s, he recapitulates the principle tenets of his *Metaphysical* theories, even as his painting adopts an increasingly rigid and conservative tack. In his crusades against the (modernist) use of painterly imprecision to generate a sense of wonder or marvel, de Chirico employs the same terms that Nietzsche had used in his polemics against Wagner. He condemns the modernist penchant for formal deformation, for example, in psycho-pathological and corporeal terms such as hysteria,

³² Walter Frisch, *German Modernism: Music and the Arts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 25.

³³ The *Genealogy of Morals*, 457: “[C]heerfulness – or in my own language *gay science* – is a reward: the reward of a long, brave, industrious, and subterranean seriousness, of which, to be sure, not everyone is capable.” See also the preface to *The Genealogy of Morals*, on Zarathustra: “the halcyon element out of which that book was born . . . in its sunlight clarity, remoteness, breadth, and certainty” (458).

³⁴ See Ara H. Merjian, “Untimely Objects: Giorgio de Chirico’s *The Evil Genius of a King* (1914) between the Antediluvian and the Post-human,” to *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, forthcoming Spring 2010; and Maurizio Calvesi, “L’incontro di de Chirico con Apollinaire,” *Storia dell’arte* 102 (May/August 2002).

³⁵ De Chirico, “Eluard MSS” (c. 1911-13) in *Hebdomeros and Other Writings*, 184.

effeminacy, and hypersensualism. In plain imitation of Nietzsche's anti-Wagnerian rhetoric, he also couches certain aesthetic invectives in meteorological and environmental metaphors, such as murkiness, mistiness, cloudiness and haze. Conversely, he uses decidedly Nietzschean turns of phrase to exalt favorable qualities and tendencies: dryness, clarity, "spectrality," linear precision. And, like Nietzsche, in praising these qualities in other artists, he essentially describes his own style.³⁶

In his 1919 essay, "We Metaphysicians," a kind of retrospective manifesto (whose title recalls Nietzsche's "We Philologists," [1874]), de Chirico credits "the Pole Nietzsche [sic]" as a vital forerunner of his ventures in painting, before proceeding to clarify that painting's seemingly rarefied designation:

In the word 'metaphysical' I see nothing tenebrous; it is the tranquil and senseless beauty of matter that appears to me 'metaphysical,' and even more metaphysical to me are all those objects which, in the precision of their color and the exactness of their dimensions, represent the antipodes of all confusion and nebulosity.

His essays on Courbet, Max Klinger, Böcklin, and "The Architectonic Sense in Ancient Painting" all form thinly veiled eulogies to his own painting in this regard.³⁷ He writes of Klinger's imagery, for example, that it evokes "a sun that does not burn," a "sweet and Mediterranean tranquility."³⁸ Böcklin and Wagner, he writes, "were antipodes in spirit. In Wagner everything remains undefined; it murmurs and runs together . . . In Böcklin, by contrast, the metaphysical power always derives from a specific phenomenon that is exact and clear."³⁹ Expounding on the paintings of Nicolas Poussin and Claude Lorrain, de Chirico lauds their "arcane joys of mysticism and of the metaphysical, in stripped and geometric surroundings."⁴⁰ Not coincidentally, Claude is one of the few painters that Nietzsche praises in his entire body of writings, remarking upon his images on several occasions as examples of Italy's "halcyon" perfection and invoking Claude's imagery to describe the environs of Turin.⁴¹

It is significant that all of the artists whom de Chirico praises for their Mediterranean sensibilities hail from the North. The distance between their culture and the "Middle Sea,"

³⁶ "In Munich I was very much a Wagnerian," de Chirico writes years later in his memoirs, describing his days before his conversion to Nietzsche's philosophy, and its profound consequences on his aesthetics. (*Memoirs*, 64); I have here availed myself of the translation offered in Baldacci, *Giorgio de Chirico*, 71. Baldacci was the first to address this aspect of de Chirico's thought – and its roots in his study of Nietzsche.

³⁷ When speaking of Hans Thoma's scenes "deprived of any human presence," or of Klinger's "extraordinary comprehension of the metaphysicality of cities" de Chirico is describing his own imagery as much, if not more, than that of the artists at hand. Giorgio de Chirico, "Osservazioni su una mostra d'arte tedesca," undated manuscript in the collection of the Fondazione de Chirico; reprinted in Giorgio de Chirico/Isabella Far, *Commedia dell'arte Moderna* (Milan: Abscondita, 2002), 128. ["Bellissime anche le incisioni di Hans Thoma . . . si vede una scena priva d'ogni umana presenza"; "Straordinaria era pure la sua comprensione della metafisica delle città"].

³⁸ De Chirico, "Max Klinger" (1921), reprinted and translated in Massimo Carrà, ed., *Metaphysical Art* (New York: Praeger, 1971), 98.

³⁹ De Chirico, "Arnold Böcklin," (1920), in M. Carrà, ed., *Metaphysical Art*, 138. I am here indebted to Paolo Baldacci's incisive discussion of de Chirico's opinions on Wagner and Wagnerism, particularly following his study of Nietzsche. See Paolo Baldacci, *Giorgio De Chirico: The Metaphysical Period, 1888-1919*, trans. Jeffrey Jennings (New York: Bullfinch, 1997), 71-74.

⁴⁰ De Chirico, "The Architectonic Sense in Painting," in Carrà, ed., *Metaphysical Art*, 95.

⁴¹ See Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, "Why I Write Such Good Books,"; *Twilight of the Idols; Nietzsche Contra Wagner*; and various letters to Peter Gast, Franz Overbeck, and Meta von Salis (KSA, 6.356).

according to de Chirico, occasioned a specific – and more admirable, because hard-won – apprehension of the Mediterranean spirit on their behalf. He writes, “Germany is situated in the middle of Europe. Such a fate places a barrier between her and the Mediterranean and Eastern countries . . . [this] means that when her men of genius want to look deeply into these worlds, they have to lean out like prisoners between the bars of high windows.”⁴² Once again, de Chirico implicated himself in the fold of said artistic genius. We should recall here, too, Nietzsche’s insistence, in the “Peoples and Fatherlands” section of *Beyond Good and Evil*, on his own identity as a “southerner, not by descent, but by faith.”⁴³ Before de Chirico settled definitively in Italy after 1915, he had spent far more time in Munich and Paris than the country of his ethnic origins. His vision of the Mediterranean, and of Italy in particular, was thus conditioned by the same “barrier” to which he refers here and which, like Nietzsche, he duly overcame.

But while the luminous clarity of de Chirico’s Metaphysical paintings came expressly to defy “northern” histrionics, cured of Wagnerian intemperance, their light must not be mistaken as a transparent illumination of idealized truths. For, even (or, especially) in its pretensions to Nietzsche’s “great health,” de Chirico’s deployment of light refracts less wholesome valences; while it conveys the integrity of spaces and objects, it seeks to put their presence and visibility to less transparent ends, both semantically and philosophically.

Metaphysical painting and “the obscurity of light”

Like many German authors before him, Nietzsche used the Mediterranean as a mirror in which to discern more clearly the specifically German character of himself and his nation. When he asks “what is German” in various texts (such as *The Gay Science*), he consistently measures his answers vis-à-vis Greek and “Latin” sensibilities (in defiant riposte, notably, to Wagner’s tendentiously nationalist rhetoric in the 1878 essay, “Was is deutsch?”).⁴⁴ Yet, importantly, it was a particular aspect of Greek and Roman antiquity to which Nietzsche made recourse – one notably ignored and repressed by Winckelmann, Hegel, and Goethe in their own (German) versions of “the classical ideal.”⁴⁵ Appealing particularly to the enigmatic and often unfathomable aphorisms of Heraclitus, Nietzsche aimed to recuperate pre-Socratic Hellenism as the basis of his “Philosophy of the Future.” The obscured legacy of Heraclitus exemplified for Nietzsche a Greek world prior to the ratiocinations of Socrates and *sophrosyne*, of what Nietzsche disparagingly refers to as “Greek cheerfulness.” The short, terse aphorisms of Heraclitus’s writings appeared to him more mysterious and inscrutable than the most overwrought Romantic elucubrations. In Heraclitus’s writing, Nietzsche found a strangeness tantamount, despite its ostensible familiarity, to the most extrinsic of exotic orientalisms.⁴⁶ Or, rather, it was *precisely* the ostensible familiarity of this aspect of classical world that afforded a covert, privileged use by the philosopher-genius. It is *this* Greece, Ernst Bertram writes, that

⁴² De Chirico, “Max Klinger,” in Carrà, ed., *Metaphysical Art*, 98-99.

⁴³ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, #255, 385.

⁴⁴ Nietzsche, “On Germans as artists,” *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kauffmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 130-32.

⁴⁵ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), 849. [“Future things. – Against the romanticism of great ‘passion.’ – . . . It is an amusing comedy at which we have only now learned to laugh, which we only now see: that the contemporaries of Herder, Winckelmann, Goethe, and Hegel claimed to have *rediscovered the classical ideal* - and at the same time Shakespeare!”]

⁴⁶ See Sara Kofman, “Nietzsche and the Obscurity of Heraclitus,” *Diacritics* 17:3 (Fall 1987), 39-55; and Baldacci, *Giorgio de Chirico*, 92-97.

represented for Nietzsche “a secret, interior Orient.”⁴⁷ I want to address here how de Chirico came to use even the seemingly familiar and reassuring quality of Mediterranean light as a vehicle for representing more disturbing apprehensions and arcane meanings.

Despite the superficially classical trappings of de Chirico’s Metaphysical canvases, they in fact incorporate a range of ignored and abjured strains of the pre-Socratic world – a world not of Periclean or Platonic order, but rather of oracles and soothsayers, augurs and seers. Following Nietzsche’s lead, de Chirico engaged most consistently and assiduously with what he called Greek “prehistory,” leavening his imagery with subtle allusions to the various cultures and proto-classical traditions from the Mediterranean basin. In an autobiographical text, published in Belgium in 1929 under the pseudonym “Angelo Bardi,” de Chirico makes plain what kind of Greco-Latin world he sought to evoke in his painting from the early and mid-1910s. Bardi/de Chirico declares that during his Metaphysical period, “he had discovered an enigmatic Greece quite different from the Greece illustrated in schoolbooks, just as, after reading Nietzsche’s *Ecce Homo*, [he] set about discovering the ‘mystery of Italy’ [‘le mystère italien’].”⁴⁸ The enigmas of *Metaphysical Composition with Toys* and *The Evil Genius of a King* (1914), for example, lie in their conflation of modern and ancient temporalities in the same space and iconography, confusing the commodities in a modern shop window with the sacrificial objects of a Roman or Etruscan altar. But another aspect of that same “mystery” lay in the treatment of “Southern” light as both a condition of vision and a metaphor of knowledge (and non-knowledge).

In particular, Nietzsche’s celebration of “cloaks of light” (*Beyond Good and Evil*), his anthem to “We somnambulists of the day!” (*The Gay Science*), and his insistence upon “wide-awake day-wisdom” (*Zarathustra*) influenced de Chirico’s exploration of light, clarity, and linear precision as paradoxical sources of obscurantism throughout the 1910s.⁴⁹ As a self-declared “photomaniac,” de Chirico declares at the conclusion of his Metaphysical period: “As far as I am concerned, there is more mystery in a fossilized *piazza* in the clarity of midday than in a dark room in the heart of the night, during a spiritual *séance*.”⁵⁰ In his novel *Hermaphrodito* (1916-18), Giorgio’s brother and closest collaborator, Alberto Savinio, describes their pre-war activities in Paris, “We even had a philosophy; – that is, the principles of antiphilosophy. Latin philosophical spirit, nourished by the profound obscurity of light: – an unprecedented fact. – Nietzsche would have cried with joy.”⁵¹ Glossing this same notion years later, Savinio writes,

⁴⁷ Ernst Bertram, *Nietzsche: Essai de mythologie*, trans. Robert Pitrou (Paris: Éditions du Félin, 1990 [1932]), 330, 334. Importantly, Bertram discusses how Turin served for Nietzsche as a kind of “transition” back to this “internal Orient.”

⁴⁸ Angelo Bardi [pseudonym of Giorgio de Chirico], “La vie de Giorgio de Chirico,” in *Sélection: Chronique de la vie artistique*, cahier n.8, Éditions Sélection (Antwerp, 1929), 23.

⁴⁹ In *Beyond Good and Evil*, for example, Nietzsche invokes a world “concealed under cloaks of light . . . occasionally night owls work even in broad daylight.” Nietzsche, *BGE*, 245.

⁵⁰ De Chirico, “Arte Metafisica e Scienze Occulte,” in *Meccanismo*, 62. [“Per conto mio credo che ci sia molto più mistero in una piazza fossilizzata nel chiarore del meriggio che non in una camera buja, nel cupre della notte, durante una seduta di spiritismo.”]

In a typically self-referential description, de Chirico writes of the Ferrarese painter Gaetano Previati that he “succeeded in rendering the nocturnal sense of light, the sense of midnight at midday” – a quality that clearly resonates with his own painting. “Gaetano Previati,” in *Meccanismo*. [“. . . riuscì a rendere il senso notturno della luce, il senso della mezzanotte a meriggio...”]

⁵¹ Alberto Savinio, *Hermaphrodito* (1914-1918) reprinted in *Hermaphrodito e altri romanzi* (Milan: Adelphi, 1995), 16.

“[I]n order to rehabilitate light, to save it from the compromise of too-closeness, Nietzsche invented the ‘obscurity’ of light, of a midday light more profound than midnight.”⁵²

But how did Metaphysical painting rescue its objects – say, *Gare Montparnasse*’s [Fig. 1] bananas offered up for the taking – from the compromising “too-closeness” of legibility, of clear light (and of positivist “enlightenment”)? For, this was precisely the purpose to which the Impressionists had put light, whether that of Paris, Normandy, or the Mediterranean: a registering of the contingent and the everyday; a vehicle of immediacy, purged of verbal encumbrances and allegiances; a cipher of the present and of pure presence. And, as much as Nietzsche (and de Chirico) disparaged Romanticism for its mawkish storminess, the qualities of immediacy, presence, and the coarse texture of the present were equally inimical to both Nietzsche’s philosophy and de Chirico’s painting. How, then, could the crisp light of the Mediterranean be used both to expose objects – in the common place of the *piazze* – and at the same time conceal them from “common” knowledge? In other words, how could de Chirico’s sunlight squares be at once eminently public, yet at the same time – following Nietzschean imperatives – jealously esoteric and exclusive?

The Nietzschean essence of de Chirico’s Metaphysical painting, and indeed the essence of Nietzsche’s own esotericism, hinges precisely upon a concurrence of ostensible intelligibility and coded obfuscation.⁵³ It is that seeming contradiction to which Savinio gives voice in his trope of “the obscurity of light.” Even Heraclitus’s appeals to light and dryness – what T.M. Robinson calls Heraclitus’s “dryness-criterion” – informed Nietzsche’s transvaluation of his own philosophy to this end.⁵⁴ Dryness, clarity, and terseness in fact concealed an even more elitist withholding of meaning from the commonplace. In this vein, if the significance of *Gare Montparnasse*’s looming bananas is indecipherable, the fruit’s surface, its pictorial presence, appears eminently legible. If the fruit’s untimely inappropriateness contributes to the painting’s psychological suspension and estrangement from common sense, it does so in undisguised form. Eschewing the facile portent of haze and darkness, but also rejecting the wholesome transparency and immediacy of Impressionism, de Chirico pursued the more unlikely profundity of Nietzsche’s “Great Noon,” with its mysteries displayed in the plain sight. The crisp outlines and ostensible wholeness of objects in Metaphysical painting belies the more insidious nature of presence in these images – a presence that is always also an absence (of sense, of teleology, of

⁵² Alberto Savinio, “Apollo,” *Nuova Enciclopedia* (Milan: Adelphi, 1977) 50. Sara Kofman notes in *Nietzsche et la scène philosophique* that while Apollo is generally considered “précis, limpide, lumineux,” that in fact “la surface apollinienne solaire dissimule une force potentielle cachée, l’horrible tréfonds de la nature, la nuit terrifiante [i.e. Dionysianisme].” See Kofman, “Apollo/Dionys, Frères Enemis,” in *Nietzsche et la scène philosophique* (Paris: Union Générale, 1979) 72. Kofman’s discussion of Nietzsche’s “autre ‘version du soleil’” is precisely what Savinio and de Chirico articulate in their discussions of the role of light in Nietzschean philosophy.

⁵³ In evident reflection of Giorgio’s application of this philosophy to his own *mises-en-scene*, Savinio’s contemporary experimental drama, *Les Chants de la Mi-Mort* (1914) specifies the setting for Act II as: “A red piazza. A wall [. . .] the dead of night, but the sky is blue.” [“Une place rouge. Un mur . . . Nuit complète, mais le ciel est bleu.”] First published in *Les Soirées de Paris* n. 24, 1914, 420.

⁵⁴ “A flash (or: ray) of light <is> a dry soul, wisest and best (or: most noble).” Heraclitus, Fragment #118, (John Stobaeus 3.5.8), in Heraclitus, *Fragments*, ed. and trans., T.M. Robinson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987). Robinson glosses this aphorism: “for Heraclitus the most rational and most nible (human) soul is one composed, sequentially, of (a) the driest form of *air*, and (b) (after death) of *aether*, the clear, hot and dry upper atmosphere that he took to be divine, and home of the gods of fire, the stars . . . At the extreme ends of the spectrum are (a) those other souls (the majority) who inhabit the dank atmosphere that surrounds us and who (because also constituted of it) are forever running the risk of death by condensation.” Robinson calls this hierarchy his “dryness-criterion” (p. 159).

meaning). *Gare Montparnasse* and *The Soothsayer's Recompense* intend a mystery no less obscure, arcane, and morbid than that evinced in *The Sphinx* and his earlier Böcklinian and “Wagnerian” paintings. But the portentous mystery of a “spiritual séance” now takes place in the light of day and appears as flippant as a wayward clump of fruit.

Pictor mediterraneus sum?

“I decorate myself with three words that I wish to be the seal of all my work: *Pictor classicus sum*.”⁵⁵ In a painting from 1923, it is not de Chirico who decorates himself with such an honor, but the god Mercury himself [Fig. 11]. With his (in)famous “Return to the Craft” after 1920, de Chirico began copying old master paintings at the Galleria Borghese in Rome, declared himself “*Pictor Optimus*,” and returned to the literary specificity of Greco-Roman myth and history – from Orestes and Electra, to Tibullus and Mesalla, to Telemachus and Penelope. The formerly elliptical, disembodied iterations of myth in Metaphysical painting returned – like Mercury bearing his laurel wreath – in the guise of more explicitly narrative forms. De Chirico increasingly depicted the artefactual details that his images had long held at bay: ruined columns and capitals, images of Ajax and ancient horses, indolent archaeologists and minotaurs, Oedipus and Aesclepius, sibyls and trophies. “From the geographical point of view,” de Chirico proclaimed in 1919, “it was inevitable that the initial conscious manifestations of the metaphysical movement should have been born in Italy.”⁵⁶ Declaring Metaphysical painting a “*Geographic destiny*,” he thus conveniently disavowed the geographic, philosophical, and cultural cocktail (of Greek myth, German Romanticism, and Parisian modernism) from which his imagery had derived.

If Ardengo Soffici felt obliged to offer an “*Apologia del futurismo*” on the pages of his journal, *Rete Mediterranea*, renouncing the violence of Futurism and the pursuit of aesthetic novelty for novelty’s sake, de Chirico’s pre-War pictures owed no such justification. They seemed, in fact, to have anticipated and invited the revival of classical principles on modernist terms. The widespread pursuit of “*valori plastici*” during this period brought de Chirico’s painting to the fore of contemporary Italian aesthetics. Prominent figures like Vincenzo Cardarelli vaunted “our Olympian, Latin clarity”⁵⁷ in his new journal *La Ronda* (1919-1922), to which de Chirico and Savinio were prominent contributors. But as I hope to have shown, the ostensible clarity of the Metaphysical canvases belies a more complex and insidious etiology – one that defies the too-neat categories of “Olympian” or “Latin,” or even “Mediterranean” as it was commonly deployed in the post-War period. On the surface of things, these terms seemed to resonate with de Chirico and Savinio’s early appeals to a “*latinismo moderno*.”⁵⁸ Yet it was precisely the ostensible transparency of surface – and the attendant valences of intelligibility, public presentation, and straightforwardness – that de Chirico’s Metaphysical images sought to complicate. De Chirico’s Metaphysical paintings undertook a transvaluation of both national specificity and of classicism, rather than simply an unqualified revivification of their “values” – whether plastic or moral. Discussing the role of the Mediterranean in art between the World Wars, Elizabeth Cowling writes, “Perhaps the most potent myth of all is that of the Mediterranean world as Arcadia – an earthly paradise protected from the sordid materialism of

⁵⁵ Giorgio de Chirico, “The Return to the Craft,” (1920), translated and reprinted in Carrà, ed., *Metaphysical Art*.

⁵⁶ Giorgio de Chirico, “On Metaphysical Art,” translated and reprinted in Carrà, ed., *Metaphysical Art*.

⁵⁷ Vincenzo Cardarelli, *Viaggi nel tempo* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1920).

⁵⁸ Savinio, *Hermafrodito*, “Epoca Risorgimento,” 14.

the industrialized world, free from strife and tension, pagan not Christian, innocent not fallen, a place where dreamed of harmony is still attainable.”⁵⁹ With their interruption of antiquity by factories and trains, their mannequins recalling the prosthetic limbs and masks of the Great War, and the conflicting perspectives and raking light of their anxious spaces, the Metaphysical paintings hardly evoke the Mediterranean as a site of unqualified Arcadia.

Nevertheless, the painter’s own equivocations and *voltes faces* after the war abetted various (mis)interpretations of his work, particularly the resonances of its Mediterranean qualities. In “We Metaphysicians” (1919), de Chirico dissociated his own painting from the nostalgic palliatives of a facile neoclassicism: “Still less shall I play the fakir swooning at the Olympian evocation of golden ages buried for all time,” he writes in “We Metaphysicians.”⁶⁰ Yet, just two years later, in a text from 1921, he remarked that his “most recent canvases, such as *Oedipus*, [the] *Salute of the Departing Argonauts*, and the two versions of *Statue of Mercury who Reveals the Metaphysicians the Mysteries of the gods*, one finds a tendency toward clear painting and transparent color, a dry sense of pictorial material, which I call Olympian.”⁶¹ Only one of de Chirico’s titles nominally invokes the Mediterranean: his 1927-28 *La mia camera mediterranea*; he later painted a different version of the image, which he titled *Ma chambre dans l’Olimpe* – revealing that he, too, casually slipped between Mediterranean and “Olympian” registers. De Chirico thus wanted it both ways. On the one hand, he let his increasingly conservative forms resonate conveniently with utopian (and increasingly Fascist) ideals of national unanimity; at the same time, through a shifting and frequently disingenuous rhetoric, he sought to liberate his work from any idealist purpose or collective cultural agenda.

For the young de Chirico, the Nietzschean “ideal ‘Mediterranean’” signified a space of solitary exploration. The yoking of its commonplaces to anything smacking of grand, communal ideals would have travestied the claim to the Mediterranean as a *Stimmung* of irreducible mystery and prophecy, placed – like the inorganic and inert spaces of his *piazze* – into the temporal, spatial, and semantic abeyance of quotation marks. When his imagery began to serve as a touchstone for certain fusions of modernity and *romanità* in Fascist urbanism,⁶² de Chirico refused (at first) to oblige the meliorist and collective aspects of such uses:

What of all those sublime and stupid resolutions of going back to the land, of folk art, of sincerity, of abnegation, of honesty, of probity, of simplicity, of bowing down before nature, of the cult of the beautiful, of health in art . . . of the Mediterranean spirit, of victory over oneself? Twaddle and utopias? Utopian fancies . . . ? Pure utopias! And of all that, nothing now remains; nothing but a handful of ashes.⁶³

The ends to which de Chirico had originally “mediterraneanized” his aesthetics before the war were not the same to which painting was being submitted during the 1920s and ‘30s. He thus recoiled from the notion of the Mediterranean as a metaphor for collectivity, whether cultural or

⁵⁹ Elizabeth Cowling, *On Classic Ground: De Chirico, Léger, Picasso and the New Classicism* (London: Tate Gallery, 1991), 12.

⁶⁰ De Chirico, “Noi Metafisici” (1919) in *Meccanismo*, 70.

⁶¹ De Chirico, “Prefazione” (1921), in *Meccanismo*, 223.

⁶² See, for example, *Metafisica Costruita: Le città di fondazione degli anni Trenta dall’Italia all’Oltremare*, (Milano: Touring Editore, 2002).

⁶³ De Chirico, “The Survivor of Navarino” (1928), in *Hebdomeros and Other Writings*, ed. John Ashbery (Cambridge: Exact Change, 1992), 131-32.

ideological; he feared that it confused his esoteric genius with the exoteric populism that proudly bore the stamp of Mediterraneanism.⁶⁴ A decade later, however, he changed his tune. In a 1938 interview in Italy, de Chirico's pronouncements on Mussolini's Third Rome cast a tendentious light back on his Metaphysical paintings: "The Via del Impero has surprised me with its beauty. The rebirth of Italy is by now a great conquest."⁶⁵ The painter clearly recognized aspects of his own aesthetics in the new Imperial Way, with its ruthless eviscerations of history and archaeology. More specifically, he appeared at ease with the increasing slippage between his own "ideal 'Mediterranean'" and the explicit imperatives of *Italianità*.

Indeed, just as they had served the tectonic *logos* of Eugeni D'Ors and the *réalisme méditerranée* of Waldemar George, de Chirico's scenes came to inspire, in turn, aspects of Fascist urbanism, most notably the subtractive practices of *sventramento* (disemboweling) and *isolamento* (isolation). During the very same years, however, his images also inspired the active *subversion* of rationalism and nationalism by Surrealist activity in France and other countries.⁶⁶ In a similar vein, while his pre-war pictures served painters between the world wars as models of *Italianità*, Metaphysical painting was accused by some critics in Italy of evoking a "sick and evil air of the north."⁶⁷ The architectonics of the Metaphysical canvases – at once generic and specific – are always undermined by subtle, but seismic, destabilizations of geographic and semantic propriety. This is why they afforded (and still afford) the projection of shifting claims onto their reticent spaces. The Metaphysical cityscapes may be read as either consummate expressions of health or as a portentous evocation of sick morbidity; as either public addresses or solipsistic withholdings; as models of *romanità* or as thinly veiled "nordic" vision. Of course, the images combine and conflate these aspects in equal measure. It is not simply their titles (to wit, *The Joy of Return/The Anxious Journey; The General's Illness/The Gentle Afternoon*) or their paradoxical iconography that perform such conflations and equivocations. As I hope to have shown, the more ineffable alchemy of light and "obscurity" in the pictures strikes the same unresolved tension. And it is to that extent that they served various, contradictory agendas: both aesthetic and ideological, by both de Chirico and others.

In an essay from 1916, after the de Chirico brothers had moved from Paris to Ferrara, Giorgio's brother, Alberto Savinio, exclaimed in a characteristically weird lyricism: "From this ferment will spring the prototype of Mediterranean genius – the man in the wings, the religious man, the pellican-man who rips open his chest from which lightening and shade will spray, as well as a flaming heart . . . But where is this man? Who is he?"⁶⁸ In Nietzsche's writings, de Chirico had found the "formula" for distilling such genius, one inflected by "lightening and shade" in equal measure. For a while, he believed that Metaphysical painting could serve as its

⁶⁴ Ricciotto Canudo's use of the Mediterranean as the model for a new "Latin cinema" – in the service of a universalist, utopian aesthetics – exemplifies such phenomena, even before World War One. Canudo's prominence in the Parisian avant-garde, particularly the circle of Guillaume Apollinaire, would have made his theories quite available to de Chirico. See Giovanni Dotoli, *Lo Scrittore Totale. Saggi su Ricciotto Canudo* (Fasano: Schena, 1986).

⁶⁵ De Chirico, interview with Leonida Repaci, *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, 13 february, 1938; reprinted in part in *Meccanismo*, 477. ["Il risveglio dell'Italia ormai è una grande conquista"].

⁶⁶ On the simultaneity and ironic commensurability of these uses, see Ara H. Merjian, "The Architectonic Afterlives of Giorgio de Chirico," in *Architecture & Arts 1900 – 2004: A Century of Creative Projects in Building, Design, Cinema, Painting, Sculpture* (Milan: Skira, 2005).

⁶⁷ Carlo Carrà, *La mia vita*, in *Tutti gli scritti* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1978). ["aria malata e cattiva del Nord"]

⁶⁸ Alberto Savinio, "La Realtà dorata," *La Voce*, VIII, n. 11-12, (December 1916), 90. ["Da quel lievito scaturirà il prototipo della genialità mediterranea – l'uomo a' coulisse, l'uomo religioso, l'uomo-pellicano che si dilania il petto d'onde schizza la folgore e l'ombra, ed il cuore fiammeggiante! . . . Ma quell'uomo ov'e'? . . . Chi e'?"]

prototype. Yet after settling in Italy definitively, he shrugged off the epithet of “Mediterranean genius” just as often as he claimed it outright. A portrait of de Chirico by the photographer Irving Penn from 1944 perhaps unwittingly evinces something of de Chirico’s eccentric place in the echelons of Mediterranean aesthetics, or else the unstable place of the Mediterranean in his oeuvre [Fig. 12]. The wreath of laurel, with which Mercury once crowned the *Pictor classicus*, sits oversized and askew. The artist’s eyes shift off scene, askance. At the height of his plodding and pedantic philippics against the decadence of Modernism and its betrayal of classical ideals, the garlanded de Chirico appears ill at ease here, even – or especially – as the self-styled laureate of Mediterranean glory.



Figure 1. Giorgio de Chirico, *La gare Montparnasse*, 1914, oil on canvas, 140 x 184.5 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York; Figure 2. De Chirico, *Place d'Italie avec bananes*, preparatory drawing for Gare Montparnasse, pencil on paper, 21.3 x 16.4 cm., Musée Picasso, Paris.



Figure 3. *De Chirico: La Metafisica del Mediterraneo*; Figure 4. *Mediterraneo d'arte: Il mare e la pesca da Giorgio De Chirico all'era della globalizzazione*, Rome, Erreciemme Edizioni, 2005.



Figure 5. Joaquim Sunyer, *Pastoral*, 1911-12, oil on canvas, 106 x 152 cm, Generalitat de Catalunya, Departament de Cultura, Barcelona.



Figure 6. Giorgio de Chirico, *Ariadne*, 1913, oil and graphite on canvas, 53 3/8 x 71 in. (135.6 x 180.3 cm) Bequest of Florene M. Schoenborn, 1995 (1996.403.10).



Figure 7. Giorgio de Chirico, Still Life: Turin Spring, March-May, 1914, oil on canvas, 125 x 102 cm, private collection.



Figure 8. Giorgio de Chirico, *The Sphinx*, 1908-09, oil on canvas, 76 x 120 cm, private collection, Milan.



Figure 9. Giorgio de Chirico, *The Soothsayer's Recompense*, 1913, oil on canvas, 135.5 x 180.5 cm, The Philadelphia Museum of Art.



Figure 10. Giorgio de Chiricio, *Metaphysical Composition with Toys*, summer-autumn 1914, oil on canvas, 55 x 46.5 cm., The Menil Collection, Houston.



Figure 11. Giorgio de Chirico, *Self-Portrait with Bust of Mercury*, 1923, private collection.



Figure 12. Irving Penn, *Giorgio de Chirico*, Rome, 1944; Figure 13. Sandro Botticelli, *Portrait of Dante*, c. 1495, Tempera on canvas, 54,7 x 47,5 cm, Private collection.

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