

ON METAPHYSICAL ART³

A continuous control is needed of our thoughts and of the images that appear in our mind even when we are awake, but which also have a close relationship to what we see while dreaming. It is intriguing that in dreams, no image, as strange as it might seem, strikes us for its metaphysical strength and this is why we avoid looking at dream as a source of creativity. Thomas de Quincey's methods do not interest us. And yet, though dreaming is a very strange phenomenon and an inexplicable mystery, the aspect our mind confers to certain objects, certain features of life, is even more so. Psychically speaking, the mere fact of discovering mysterious aspects in objects will seem like a symptom of cerebral abnormality akin to certain forms of insanity. I believe that such abnormal moments can occur in every person and it is particularly lucky when they manifest themselves in individuals possessing creative talent and clairvoyance. Art is a fatal net that catches, like mysterious butterflies in flight, moments that the innocence and distraction of the common run of men allow to escape.

Moments of inspired (yet not consciously carried out) metaphysical occurrences can be observed as much in painters as well as in writers; speaking of writers I want to mention an old provincial Frenchman whom, just to be clear, we will call an explorer in slippers: Jules Verne, who wrote books on travel and adventure and is considered a writer *ad usum puerum*.

But who could more cunningly than he grasp the metaphysical aspect of a city like London with its houses, streets, clubs, piazzas and squares, the spectral atmosphere of a Sunday afternoon in London, the melancholy of a man, a walking phantasm, such as Phileas Fogg appears in *Around the World in 80 Days*?

The work of Jules Verne has many such happy and consoling moments; I also wish to call to mind the description of a steamship departing from Liverpool in *A Floating City*.

New Art

The restlessness and complicated condition of new art is not due to a caprice of destiny, a longing for novelty or a desire for success of a few artists, as some people innocently believe. It is, rather, a state proper to the human spirit which, guided by mathematical laws, is subject to the ebb and flow of tides, departures, returns and renewals, in the same way all elements manifest themselves on our planet. A people at the dawn of its existence love the mythical, the legendary, the surprising and the monstrous, and seek refuge in these; but with the passing of time and the ripening of civilization, they refine, reduce and model these primitive images in accordance to their clarified spirit and write their history born of original myths. Our current epoch in Europe, which carries the overwhelming weight of many civilizations and the maturity of numerous spiritual periods, must inevitably produce an art which in certain ways resembles that of its mythical unrest; such art is the work of those few who are endowed with special gifts of clairvoyance and sensibility. Naturally, a return of this kind will bear the signs of antecedent epochs from which an art will be born that is enormously complicated and polymorphous in the various aspects of its spiritual values. Hence new art is not some kind of trend. Nevertheless it is of no use to believe, as some deluded utopians are inclined to do, that art can redeem and regenerate humanity, that it can give humanity a new 'meaning' of life, a new 'religion'. Humanity is and will forever be what it has always been. It accepts and will increasingly accept this art; the day will come when it will go to museums to see and study this art. One day it will be spoken of freely and naturally as are the

³ G. de Chirico, *Sull'arte metafisica*, in "Valori Plastici", Rome, a. I, n. 4-5, April-May 1919, pp. 15-18; republished in *Commedia...*, cit., pp. 20-23.

champions of more or less remote arts, which listed and catalogued, have now found a sure place and pedestal in the museums and libraries of the world.

The question of understanding causes us unrest today but will do so not tomorrow. To be understood or not is a problem of today. A time will come for men when the aspect of folly in our work will have died off, that is, the folly that they see in it, for the great folly which is not apparent to all, will always exist and will continue to gesticulate and make signs behind the inexorable screen of matter.

Geographical Fatality

From the geographical point of view it was inevitable that the first conscious manifestation of great metaphysical painting be born in Italy. This could not have happened in France. The careless, laid-back talent and cultivated artistic taste mixed with a dose of *esprit* (not only in their exaggerated use of puns), which 99 percent of Parisians are prone to, obstruct and suffocate the development of a prophetic spirit. Our land, on the contrary, is more propitious to the birth and development of such animals. The weight of our chronic sadness plays a direct role in our inveterate *gaucherie* and the continuous effort we must make to accustom ourselves to spiritual lightness. So it appears to be true that only among such a flock do great shepherds arise, just as the greatest prophets mankind has ever known appeared among tribes and people whose fate was the hardest. Hellas, aesthetic both in art and nature, could not bring forth a prophet, and the profoundest Greek philosopher I know, Heraclites, meditated on other, less happy shores that were nearer to the inferno of the deserts.

Insanity and Art

That insanity is inherent to every profound manifestation of art is an axiomatic truth. Schopenhauer defines a madman as one who has lost his memory. This definition is full of acumen seeing that the logic of our normal acts and our normal life is a continuous rosary of memories, of relations between things and ourselves and vice versa.

Let us take an example: I enter a room and see a man sitting on a chair; a cage with a canary hangs from the ceiling; I see pictures on the wall and bookshelves full of books. All this does not seem strange to me. It does not surprise me because the chain of memories linking one thing to the next explains the logic of what I see. But if we admit for a moment that for some inexplicable reason, independent from my will, this chain should break, who can tell how I would see the man, the cage, the picture, the books? Who can tell then the astonishment, the terror, perhaps even the gentleness and consolation I would feel at this change of scene?

The scene itself would not have changed; it is me who would be seeing it from a different angle. This is the metaphysical aspect of things. One can deductively conclude that every thing has two aspects: a current one, that we see almost always and what people in general see, and another spectral or metaphysical one, which only rare individuals can see in moments of clairvoyance and metaphysical abstraction, like certain bodies, the impenetrable material of which the sun's rays cannot enter, can only appear under the strong artificial light of X-ray for example.

But for some time now I am inclined to believe that, besides the two aspects mentioned, objects can also have others (a third, fourth, fifth aspect) all different from the first but narrowly related to the second or metaphysical one.

Eternal Signs

I remember the strange and profound impression made upon me as a child by a picture seen in an old book bearing the title *The World before the Deluge*.

It represented a landscape of the tertiary period. Man had not yet appeared. I have often meditated on the strange phenomenon of the 'absence of the human' in metaphysical aspects. Every profound work of art contains two solitudes: one which could be called its plastic solitude which is the contemplative beatitude given us by the exceptional construction and combination of shapes (materials or elements dead-alive or alive-dead; the second life of 'still life' taken, not in the sense of the subject painted, but in its spectral aspect, which might also be that of a supposedly living figure); the second solitude would be that of dreams, an eminently metaphysical solitude which excludes *a priori* all possible logic of a visual or educational origin.

There are paintings by Böcklin, Claude Lorrain and Poussin that, although inhabited by human figures, are nevertheless closely related with the landscape of the tertiary period. Absence of the human in man. Some portraits by Ingres attain this extreme. But it is to be observed that in the abovementioned works (excepting perhaps some of Böcklin's) only the first, plastic solitude exists. It is only in the new Italian metaphysical painting that one can perceive the second solitude: the solitude of signs, or metaphysics.

As far as its appearance is concerned, metaphysical artwork is serene, yet it gives the impression that something new is about to happen in that very serenity and that other signs, besides those that are already evident are about enter into the rectangle of the canvas. This is the revelatory symptom of 'inhabited depth'. Thus the flat surface of a perfectly calm ocean troubles us not so much by the idea of distance of kilometres between us and the ocean bed but by the idea of all the unknown hidden from us in those depths. Were it not so, the idea of space would give us the same sensation of giddiness we feel at great heights.