

Important emotion is a menace to those who live for their own selfish interest; so they have invented the philanthropic lie, and with that philanthropic lie have reduced the artist to the condition of a hostage. They have instituted an "Art Police," a police which operates against deep-rooted human emotion.

I identified myself with this hostage. The philanthropist-masters' comfort is menaced and they "shoot" the hostage.

This new poet-hostage is always conspiring against their selfishness.

To be this hostage one must put poetry at the center of one's life.

True poetry is deeply human. And the true poet is stubborn about not forgetting that "man" is at the center of everything and that all deviation towards anti-human action should be denounced.

To revive the kind of man that a poet always was. (Byron died for the liberty of the Greeks.)

I know that an artist will only be actual if his work enters the two-way traffic of receiving from his people the consciousness of needs they have detected in themselves, and, as an artist, charges this consciousness with an intuition of important emotion, thus sending it back to widen their picture of reality.

For the conscious painter the "subject" is the same as for Cimabue—to make the man of his time think with sentiment.

INTRODUCTION: Scuola Metafisica by Joshua C. Taylor*

In 1915, Giorgio de Chirico (b. 1888) returned to Italy for military service and was assigned to garrison duty in Ferrara. Born in Greece of Italian parents, De Chirico studied in Munich from 1906 to 1908, and then went to Paris where he began his strange, evocative paintings, quite untouched by the new movements in painting around him. In January 1917, Carlo Carrà, who had more than a year before turned his back on Futurism to find a more stable and monumental art based on the early Italian tradition, was assigned to the military convalescent hospital at Ferrara, and quickly saw in De Chirico's painting the expression he himself was working toward. Both Carrà and De Chirico were eager theorists of art, and they, with De Chirico's brother, who worked under the name of Savinio, formulated the principles of a new "school" of painting which they called the *Scuola Metafisica* (Metaphysical School).

Carrà was the first to exhibit paintings of this sort in Italy, exhibiting in Milan in the spring of 1917. De Chirico first exhibited in Italy in Rome in

* All translations in this section are by Joshua C. Taylor.

1919, but his work was already known in Paris, having been noted with interest by Apollinaire in 1913 and 1914.

In January 1919 the first issue of *Valori Plastici*, a magazine edited by Mario Broglio in Rome, was published, clearly dominated by the *Metafisica* idea. The double issue, Nos. 4 and 5, for April and May 1919, contains the most complete statement of the *Scuola Metafisica* point of view with articles by Carrà, Savinio, and De Chirico.

As a movement, the *Scuola Metafisica* lasted only a few years and attracted few direct adherents, notably Giorgio Morandi and, briefly, Filippo de Pisis. De Chirico and Carrà soon quarreled over the authorship of the movement, and De Chirico returned to work in France. The general influence of the movement, however, was considerable, especially upon the Paris movement of Surrealism. It had also an effect on some aspects of the Italian *Novecento Italiano* movement.

The *Scuola Metafisica* as formulated in Ferrara between 1917 and 1919 had two main principles: to evoke those disquieting states of mind that prompt one to doubt the detached and impersonal existence of the empirical world, judging each object instead as only the external part of an experience which is chiefly imaginative and enigmatic in meaning; and to do this through solid, clearly defined constructions which, paradoxically, seem entirely objective. The artists spoke often of "classical" compositions, of avoiding spontaneous self-expression. They were not interested in dreams but in the more puzzling phenomenon of associations growing out of everyday observations.

But there is a divergence between De Chirico and Carrà. While De Chirico was fascinated by an awareness of a haunting, threatening force generated by the unknown, Carrà's imagery tended towards a rather sweet melancholy, a passive kind of rumination. In their writings, too, it can be noted that Carrà emphasizes the impersonal perfection of ordered forms, whereas De Chirico speaks always of enigmatic obsessions. Clearly, De Chirico, not Carrà, was most readily allied with the group around Breton, well versed in the new psychological studies.

*Giorgio de Chirico, "Zeus the Explorer," 1918**

Once the gates in the idiotic stockade that enclosed the various bleating or lowing "groups" have been breached, the new Zeuses take off alone to discover the curiosities that nestle like moles throughout the crust of the terrestrial globe.

* Originally published as "Zeus l'esploratore," *Valori Plastici* (Rome), I, 1 (January 1919), 10.

"The world is full of demons," said Heraclitus of Ephesus,¹ walking in the shade of the porticoes at the mystery-fraught hour of high noon, while within the dry embrace of the Asiatic gulf the salty water swelled under the warm south wind.

One must find the demon in every thing.

The ancient people of Crete painted an enormous eye in the middle of the narrow bands that circled their vases, on their household utensils, and on the walls of their houses.

Even the fetus of a man, a fish, a chicken, a snake in its first stage is exactly an eye.

One must discover the eye in every thing.

Thus I thought in Paris in the years just before the explosion of the war.

Around me the international set of *modern* painters strove stupidly with over-exploited formulas and sterile systems.

I alone, in my squalid studio in the Rue Campagne-Première, began to glimpse the first shades of a more complete, more profound, more complicated art, or, in a word—at the risk of provoking a liver attack for a French critic—*more metaphysical*.

New land appeared on the horizon.

The great zinc-colored glove with frightening gilded fingernails, swinging over the door of the shop in the woeful currents of the urban afternoon, with its index finger pointing at the slabs of the sidewalk indicated to me the hermetic signs of a new melancholy.

The cardboard head in the barber's window, cut out with the strident heroism of shadowy prehistoric times, burned in my heart and brain like a remembered song.

The demons of the city opened the way to me.

When I returned home, other heralding phantoms came to meet me.

I discovered new zodiacal signs on the ceiling as I watched its desperate flight, only to see it die in the depths of the room in the rectangle of the window which opened onto the mystery of the street.

The door half opened on the night of the hallway had the sepulchral solemnity of the stone rolled away from the empty tomb of the resurrected.

And the new annunciatory paintings took form.

Like autumn fruit we are by now ripe for the new metaphysic.

The powerful breezes come from out there, from troubled seas.

Our cry reaches the populous cities of faraway continents.

We must not grow soft, however, in the pleasure of our new creations.

We are explorers ready for new departures.

Under the sheds echoing with metallic shocks the signals are set at the sign for departure.

¹ Heraclitus of Ephesus (ca. 540-ca. 480 B.C.) was a Greek philosopher who detached himself from society and sought to discover an all-pervading spirit as manifest in the continuous conflict of opposites in nature. J. C. T.

In the wall-boxes the bells ring.
It is time . . .
“Gentlemen, all aboard!”

Giorgio de Chirico, “On Metaphysical Art,” 1919*

A continuous control is needed of our thoughts and of all those images which come to our minds even when we are awake but which have, none the less, a close relationship to those we encounter in dreams. It is a curious fact that no dream image, strange as it may seem, strikes us with metaphysical force. We therefore refrain from seeking the source of our creation in dreams; Thomas de Quincey's theories do not tempt us.¹ Although the dream is a very strange phenomenon and an inexplicable mystery, far more inexplicable is the mystery and aspect our minds confer on certain objects and aspects of life. Psychologically speaking, to discover something mysterious in objects is a symptom of cerebral abnormality related to certain kinds of insanity. I believe, however, that such abnormal moments can be found in everyone, and it is all the more fortunate when they occur in individuals with creative talent or with clairvoyant powers. Art is the fatal net which catches these strange moments on the wing like mysterious butterflies, fleeing the innocence and distraction of common men.

Happy but unconscious metaphysical moments can be detected both in painters and writers. With regard to writers, I wish to recall an old provincial Frenchman whom we shall call, in order to be understood, the explorer in house slippers. To be precise, I want to speak of Jules Verne who wrote travel and adventure novels and who is considered a writer *ad usum puerum*.²

But who knew better than he how to hit upon the metaphysic of a city like London in its houses, its streets, its clubs, its parks and squares? The ghostliness of a London Sunday afternoon, the melancholy of a man—a true walking phantom—like Philéas Fogg in *Around the World in Eighty Days*.

The work of Jules Verne is filled with these felicitous and consoling moments. I still remember the description of the departure of the steamer from Liverpool in *A Floating City*.

* Originally published as “Sull’arte metafisica,” *Valori Plastici* (Rome), I, 4–5 (April–May 1919), 15–18. This translation by Joshua C. Taylor.

¹ Thomas de Quincey (1785–1859) published his *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* in 1822. It included lengthy descriptions of dreams experienced under the influence of drugs. J. C. T.

² Jules Verne (1828–1905) first published his *Around the World in Eighty Days* in 1872. His many books on imaginary travels were inspired by advances in modern science, but combine a high degree of fantasy with seemingly plausible scientific data. J. C. T.

NEW ART

The uneasy and complicated state of the new art is not owing to the caprice of fate, nor is it a longing for novelty and notoriety on the part of a few artists, as some people innocently believe. It is instead a destined state of the human spirit which, regulated by mathematically fixed rules, has its ebb and flow, its departures and returns and rebirths, like all other elements on our planet. A people, from its very beginnings, loves myth and legend, the surprising and monstrous, the inexplicable, and takes refuge in them. With the passage of time and the maturing of a culture, it refines and reduces the primitive images, molds them to the requirements of its clarified spirit, and writes its history flowing from the original myths. A European epoch like ours, which carries within itself the overwhelming burden of so many civilizations and the maturity of so many spiritual periods, is fated to produce an art that, from a certain viewpoint, seems to be like one of mythical uneasiness. Such an art arises through the works of those few who are gifted with particular clarity of vision and sensitivity. Naturally such a return will bear within it the signs of successive preceding epochs, from which an art is born that is enormously complicated and polymorphous in the various aspects of its spiritual values. The new art, then, is not an error of the times.

It is useless to believe, however, as do some deluded and utopian people, that the new art can redeem and regenerate humanity, that it might give humanity a new *sense* of life, a new *religion*. Humanity is and will continue to be just what it has been in the past. It accepts and will increasingly accept this art. The day will come when people will go to museums to look at it and study it! One day they will talk about it easily and naturally as they talk now about the champions of an art which is more or less remote, artists who are now listed and catalogued and have their fixed places and pedestals in the museums and libraries of the world.

The matter of comprehension bothers us much today; tomorrow it will no longer disturb. To be or not to be understood is a problem for today. Also, one day our work will lose for the public its look of madness, that is, the madness the public sees in it, because the great madness, precisely that which is not apparent to everyone, will always exist and will continue to gesture and show itself behind the inexorable screen of matter.

GEOGRAPHIC DESTINY

From the geographical point of view, it was fated that a first conscious manifestation of great metaphysical painting should be born in Italy. It could not have happened in France. The facile virtuosity and well-cultivated artistic taste, mixed with such a dose of "*esprit*" (not only in the exaggerated punning sense) as powders 99 percent of the inhabitants of Paris, would suffocate and impede a prophetic spirit. Our terrain, on the other hand, is more propitious for the birth and development of such animals. Our inveterate *gaucherie* and the effort we have continually to make to accustom ourselves to a concept of spiritual lightness,

have determined the weight of our chronic sadness. However, it would seem true that only amid such herds do great shepherds arise, and so the most monumental prophets who turn history into new channels arise amongst the tribes and populations with least happy destinies. Hellas, aesthetic in art and nature, could not produce a prophet, and the most profound Greek philosopher I know, Heraclitus, meditated on other shores, less fortunate because of their proximity to the desert infernos.

MADNESS AND ART

It is an axiomatic truth that madness is an inherent phenomenon in all profound artistic manifestations.

Schopenhauer defines the madman as a person who has lost his memory.¹ It is an apt definition because, in fact, that which constitutes the logic of our normal acts and our normal life is a continuous rosary of recollections of relationships between things and ourselves and vice versa.

We can cite an example: I enter a room, I see a man sitting in an armchair, I note a bird cage with a canary hanging from the ceiling; I notice paintings on the wall and a bookcase with books. None of this startles nor astonishes me because a series of memories which are connected one to the other explains to me the logic of what I see. But let us suppose that for a moment, for reasons that remain unexplainable and quite beyond my will, the thread of this series is broken. Who knows how I might see the seated man, the cage, the paintings, the bookcase! Who knows with what astonishment, what terror and possibly also with what pleasure and consolation I might view the scene.

The scene, however, would not be changed; it is I who would see it from a different angle. Here we meet the metaphysical aspect of things. By deduction we might conclude that everything has two aspects: a normal one that we almost always see and which is seen by other people in general; the other, the spectral or metaphysical which can be seen only by rare individuals in moments of clairvoyance or metaphysical abstraction, just as certain bodies that exist within matter which cannot be penetrated by the sun's rays, appear only under the power of artificial light, under X-ray for example.

For some time, however, I have tended to believe that things might have other aspects than the two we have mentioned (a third, fourth, fifth aspect), all different from the first but closely related to the second or metaphysical.

THE ETERNAL SIGNS

I remember the strange and profound impression made on me as a child by an illustration in an old book which bore the title, *The Earth before the Flood*.

¹ Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) a German philosopher, published his influential work, *The World as Will and Idea* in 1819. De Chirico was much interested in Schopenhauer's ideas, notably those which gave inner, intuitive knowledge supremacy over the perception of external things. J. C. T.

The illustration represented a landscape of the Tertiary Period. Man did not yet exist. I have often meditated on this strange phenomenon of *human absence* in the metaphysical aspect. Every profound work of art contains two solitudes: one which can be called "plastic solitude," which is that contemplative pleasure derived from the happy construction and combination of forms (dead-live or live-dead elements or materials; the second life of the *nature morte* still-lives [literally "dead nature" painting, the Italian term for "still-life"] considered not in the sense of a pictorial subject but as the spectral aspect, might apply as well to a supposedly living figure). The second solitude is that of signs,¹ an eminently metaphysical solitude for which all logical possibility of visual or psychological education is automatically excluded.

There are paintings by Böcklin,² Claude Lorain, Poussin which although inhabited by human figures, are closely allied to landscapes of the Tertiary Period: man as a human being is absent. Some portraits of Ingres reach this limit. It is worth noting, however, that in the above works (with the possible exception of some paintings by Böcklin) only the first solitude exists, the plastic solitude. Only in the new Italian metaphysical painting does the second solitude appear, the solitude of signs or the metaphysical.

The metaphysical work of art is rather serene in aspect, yet gives the impression that something new must happen in this very serenity and that other signs, beyond those already manifest, must find place within the square of the canvas. This is the revealing symptom of the *inhabited depth*. The flat surface of a perfectly calm ocean, for example, disturbs us not so much by the idea of the miles that extend between us and its end, as by all the unknown that is hidden in the depth. If this were not our idea of space we would experience only a feeling of vertigo as when we are at a great height.

METAPHYSICAL AESTHETIC

In the construction of cities, in the architectural form of houses, squares, gardens and public walks, ports, railroad stations, etc., exist the fundamentals of a great metaphysical aesthetic. The Greeks had a particular scruple in such constructions, guided by their aesthetic-philosophic sense: porticoes, shaded walks, terraces erected like auditoriums before the great spectacles of nature (Homer, Aeschylus); the tragedy of serenity. In Italy we have wonderful modern examples of such structures. So far as Italy is concerned, their psychological origin remains obscure to me. I have thought much about this problem of the Italian architectural metaphysic and all my painting of the years 1910, 1911, 1912, 1913, and 1914 was concerned with it. The day will come, perhaps, in which such an aesthetic, left

¹ "Sign" is here used in the general sense of "symbol." J. C. T.

² Arnold Böcklin (1827-1901) was a Swiss painter who worked in Germany and Italy. De Chirico was much impressed with his evocative paintings and prints of mythological subjects when he was studying in Munich. J. C. T.

for now to the caprice of chance, will become a law and necessity for the upper classes and the directors of public affairs. Then possibly we shall be able to avoid the repugnance of finding ourselves pushed aside in favor of monstrous apotheoses of bad taste and invading imbecility, such as the white monument to the Great King in Rome, otherwise known as the Altar of the Fatherland,¹ which stands in relation to the architectural sense much as the odes and orations of Tirteo Calvo² stand with regard to a sense of poetry.

Schopenhauer, who had a long acquaintance with this kind of thing, counseled his contemporaries not to put the statues of their illustrious men on columns and pedestals that were too high, but to place them instead on low bases "as used in Italy," he said, "where some men of marble seem to be on the level of the passer-by and to walk along with him."

The imbecile, that is, the man without metaphysical sense, is instinctively drawn towards an effect of mass and height, towards a kind of architectural Wagnerism. It is a matter of innocence. They are people who do not know the terror of lines and angles but are drawn towards the infinite. In this they find support for their limited psyche, closed within the same circle as femininity and childishness. But we who understand the signs of the metaphysical alphabet, know what joys and sorrows are hidden within a portico, the angle of a street or even a room, on the surface of a table between the sides of a box.

The limits of these signs constitute for us a kind of moral and aesthetic code of representation; further, in painting with clairvoyance we construct a new metaphysical psychology of things.

The absolute consciousness of space which an object must occupy in a painting and of the space that separates objects from each other, establishes a new astronomy of things which are attached to the planet by the fatal law of gravity. The minutely accurate and carefully determined use of surface and volumes constitutes the canon of the metaphysical aesthetic. It is useful here to consider some of Otto Weininger's profound reflections on the geometrical metaphysic.³ "... The arc of a circle can be beautiful as ornament: this does not mean perfect completion, which no longer lends its support to some critic like the serpent of Midgard that surrounded the world.

"In an arc there is still something incomplete, that needs to be and can be completed—*this makes for a presentiment*. For this reason even a ring is always a symbol of something either amoral or immoral." (This idea clarified for me the

¹ The huge monument to Victor Emanuel II in the center of Rome was begun in 1885 and dedicated in 1911. The architect was Giuseppe Sacconi. On the second level is the Altar to the Fatherland with sculpture by Angel Zanelli. J. C. T.

² Possibly De Chirico is referring to Tyrtaeus, an early Greek poet famous for his military verses. J. C. T.

³ Otto Weininger (1880–1903) an Austrian philosopher, published his controversial book, *Geschlecht und Charakter* in 1903 (Italian translation, 1912). J. C. T.

eminently metaphysical impression that porticoes and arches in general have always made on me.) Symbols of a superior reality are often to be seen in geometrical figures. For example, the triangle has served *ab antico*, and still serves today in Theosophical doctrine, as a mystic and magical symbol and certainly often awakens in a person who looks at it, whether he knows the tradition or not, a sense of uneasiness and almost fear. (Draughtmen's triangles have obsessed and continue to obsess my mind in this way; I have always seen them shining out like mysterious stars from behind every one of my pictorial figurations.)

Taking off from such principles, we can look about us at the surrounding world without again falling into the errors of our predecessors.

We can still follow every aesthetic, including that of the human figure, because so long as we work and meditate on such problems, facile and false illusions are no longer possible. Friends of a new understanding, new *philosophers*, we can finally smile with pleasure on the graces of our art.

Carlo Carrà, "The Quadrant of the Spirit," 1919*

I know perfectly well how little importance vain philosophizing is, but people always tend to attribute qualities to us that are quite aside from what we are aiming at.

I know perfectly well that only in happy instants am I lucky enough to lose myself in my work. But this thought produces a feeling in me that is quite the opposite of what others imagine. Since I have now become one with my conscience, the statement that coldness is more necessary in the conquest of art than blind devotion or untrammelled passion seems right to me.

Look how the colors flow in masses up to the exact limits of the new architectural essences that rest upon the surface of the canvas.

The painter-poet feels that his true immutable essence comes from that invisible realm that offers him an image of eternal reality. His infatuation is not a passing state because it does not derive from the physical realm, rather, his sensory faculties are only accessory.

He feels himself to be a plastic microcosm in direct contact with everything.

Matter itself has existence only in the degree to which it provokes a response within him.

Thus, in this somnambulistic voyage, I return to that infinite particle of eternity that is within me, by means of which I feel in contact with my truer self, and I try to penetrate the recondite intimacy of ordinary things, which are the last to be conquered. I feel that I do not exist in time, but that time exists in me. I can also realize that it is not given to me to solve the mystery of art in an absolute

* Originally published as "Il Quadrante dello Spirito," *Valori Plastici* (Rome), I, 4-5 April-May 1919), 1-2.

fashion. Nonetheless, I am almost brought to believe that I am about to get my hands on the divine. Quite aside from seeming a reprobable thing, such an act may make me look unforgivably frivolous.

I feel as if I were the law itself, not a simple rendezvous of elements. How could the advocates of naturalism ever make me believe that all art is reducible to things constructed by manual skill? So it happens that at my every internal quiver I ask for the whole and not a conditioned part. Because I do not work by addition, the distinctive criterion of the real is revealed within me as indivisible and fundamental. I quickly objectify the idea-mother of the form and bestow a value that is other than relative on every external thing.

The question of art, which engages the supreme part of man, is very troublesome.

Now it seems that my spirit is moving in an unknown matter or is lost in the whirlpools of a sacred spasm. It is knowledge! It is a sweet dreaming that dissolves all measure and broadens my individuality in relationship to things. Even the periodicity of times, their principle, their continuity, is broadened. In this moment I feel myself withdrawn from the social order.

I see human society below me.

Ethics is there submerged.

The universe appears to me wholly in terms of symbols, ranged at the same distance, as if I were looking down on a city plan.

But I see the boundary which is far away, very far, and the way to God remains as always long.

Here am I, doubtful of reaching that absolute intensity of expression that a short while ago was sought, not even that imperfect perfection that an organism living for itself can realize.

From two, the one has not yet emerged—that one which is no longer I and yet no longer nature.

Alas! Now I see that I have been the blind man for whom the enchantments of life were destroyed when his sight was restored. My idea runs the risk of being upset if it outstrips certain capacities.

I believed in and swore by the flattering concept of my mind. Fugitive voluptuousness; then enthusiasms inflict heavy loss.

The illusion of being able to fix the immortal part of myself. Still and always there remains my catastrophic being!

Empty forms and empty polished planes, cubed; my denominating segments are in agreement. These images that I supposed were constructed at the spiritual center of the times, and of all time, are abstract and detached manias of a stylist, cold and meager strivings.

Far from wearisome research, I felt so secure in the shadow of my work. I seemed to have arrived at that next point to happiness, which is so dear to us above all else.

Ah, horrifying Beauty which extends a ladder to the arbitrary paradises of the One-God.

In my soul a command is sounded! Look how once more I bring to hand my oppressive nostalgias, miraculously overcome! And I say: Ravished word, give up the ah's, and oh's, the woe is me!

Look how I build fantasies upon the solid geometries of objects! Shall I arrive at the total song if a mere nothing sends me into ecstasies? If a mere nothing causes my heart to throb?

This consideration stands as a parenthesis commenting on my intimate drama.

Natural brevities, intimate and clear in grain and porosity, primordial recallers of iridescent solidity, are brought together by my centralizing instinct.

The sign of the sphere: vision is no longer animal.

The cruiser of the wind, the wheel of extrasensory destinies, has come to rest on the black sea, which possibly sleeps beyond the first level, sooty and streaked like steamboats.

Pushing upward in vertical planes, the metaphysical house of the Milanese proletariat encloses an immense silence.¹

Because the Marconi Telegraph antenna is erected on the arc of the earth, the syllables of the legend that returns at every spring are murmured.

This is the poetry of this grand and mathematical time.

The vast sky is hidden in slate color.

The lot is about to be cast as in year one.

Electrical man sets forth into the air in the guise of an inverted cone. His bust is in the form of a water-clock surrounded by circular, moving planes of polychrome tin which reflect reality as seen in concave and convex mirrors. His chest and torso are sharp volumes, and attributes with white highlights are nailed to his back.

On the same plane but farther back rises the archaic statue of my infancy (the shy anonymous lover or angel without wings?) It holds in its hand the tennis racquet and ball like its rubber sister on the wall in front of me.

Still farther back on the right side, a tombstone intervenes, possibly bearing an inscription in Latin whose softness is our Provençal.

At the same distance, parallel, stands the immobile spectator of the enormous hammered copper fish, resting on two iron bars (that have escaped from a museum?).

The shadows are sharp and black on the gray pavement. It is the drama of apparitions.

¹ Carrà here begins a description of his painting, *The Oval Apparitions*, which was reproduced as the frontispiece to *Valori Plastici*, I, 1 (January 1919). J. C. T.