

la rivista di **engramma**
luglio/agosto **2021**

183

**Alias. Miti còlti
sul (manu)fatto**

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Miti còlti sul (manu)fatto

a cura di
Monica Centanni e Maurizio Harari

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La Rivista di Engramma
a peer-reviewed journal
183 luglio/agosto 2021
www.egramma.it

sede legale
Engramma
Castello 6634 | 30122 Venezia
edizioni@egramma.it

redazione
Centro studi classicA luav
San Polo 2468 | 30125 Venezia
+39 041 257 14 61

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ISSN 1826-901X
ISBN carta 978-88-31494-64-9
ISBN digitale 978-88-31494-65-6
finito di stampare settembre 2021

Si dichiara che i contenuti del presente volume sono la versione a stampa totalmente corrispondente alla versione online della Rivista, disponibile in open access all'indirizzo: <http://www.egramma.it/eOS/index.php?issue=183> e ciò a valere ad ogni effetto di legge.
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Giorgio de Chirico, *Le printemps de l'ingénieur**

Maurizio Harari



1 | Giorgio de Chirico, *Le printemps de l'ingénieur*, 1914. Oil on canvas, cm 52x43. Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera (from 2022 on display at Palazzo Citterio), inventory no. 7427.

In 1998, the Brera National Art Gallery in Milan acquired an oil canvas by the highly distinguished master of Metaphysical Art, Giorgio de Chirico. This painting, known as *Le printemps de l'ingénieur* ("The Engineer's Spring"), had belonged to the famous French collector Paul Guillaume; it shows that both the artist's signature and date (moved up to 1913) were added later by De Chirico or perhaps by Guillaume himself. However, the work, unfinished, was certainly interrupted in 1914, on the eve of De Chirico's return from Paris to Italy because of the outbreak of the First World War. "The Engineer's Spring" has been recently displayed at an exhibition in the Royal Palace, Milan (Barbero 2019, no.

13).

Under a celestine sky and between two meager trees, a young woman is depicted, classically draped in white like a Greek goddess, with a yellow-brown tiara on her head. She grasps something quite indistinguishable in her right hand – a small branch?, an ear?, or a rolled patch, maybe, of her garment? – holding in her left hand a kind of big cup, or perhaps a horn of plenty, summarily sketched. To stress its unreal and purely iconic status, the classical epiphany is framed and affixed like a painting on the lit side of a vertical parallelepiped, which looks like a tower in the middle of a geometrical urban landscape. We can see, moreover, other architectural

elements both on the left and right side of the picture, in particular a typical De Chirico-style wall, made of red bricks. In short, we witness the materialization of a springy Hellenic dream within the greyness of a modern built-up area, where one can barely recognize, perhaps, the top of a square Italian *campanile*.

The title *Spring* – which could hint at some allegories of *Frühling*, painted by the beloved Arnold Böcklin in the Seventies and Eighties of the 19th century – should be regarded as relevant to a possible interpretation of the mysterious young woman as a Persephone or a Flora (or other, similar spring goddesses and personifications).

Far more puzzling, however, is the vague mention of the Engineer, which seems to relate not only to this non-poetic scenario of urbanization and industrialization, but also to the more or less conscious memory of De Chirico's father, who died in 1905. In fact, Evaristo de Chirico had been the executive director of Thessaly Railways, in Greece, and had planned the picturesque Pelion railway and the beautiful design of its main station, which still exists in Volos. On this subject, I would like to quote an evocative piece of prose by De Chirico himself, written in French during the years 1911-15 and known as *Le chant de la gare* ("The Station Poem"), where the Volos building is described as "a celestial toy":

Petite gare, petite gare, quel bonheur je te dois.

Tu regardes de tous les côtés, à droite, à gauche et par derrière aussi. Tes étendards claquent éperdument, pourquoi souffrir? Laissons passer, ne sommes-nous pas déjà assez nombreux? Traçons avec la blanche craie ou le noir charbon le bonheur et son énigme; l'énigme et son affirmation. Sous les portiques il y a des fenêtres; à chaque fenêtre un œil nous regarde et derrière des voix nous appellent. C'est à nous qu'il vient, le bonheur de la gare, c'est de nous qu'il sort transfiguré. Petite gare, petite gare, tu es un jouet divin. Quel Zeus distrait t'a oublié sur cette place si carrée et si jaune, près de ce jet d'eau si limpide et si troublant? Tous tes petits drapeaux claquent à la fois sous le vertige du ciel lumineux. Derrière des murs la vie roule comme une catastrophe. Que t'importe à toi de tous cela? ...

Petite gare, petite gare, quel bonheur je te dois.

Evoking Zeus was a mythological reference perfectly appropriate to a landscape such as that of Thessaly, a Greek region full of heroic sagas, which De Chirico was deeply acquainted with since the time of his fervid Hellenic childhood and adolescence (1888-1906). There are two Thessalian legends that are especially present in De Chirico's pictorial and poetical imagery: the departure of the Argonauts headed by the hero Jason from the harbor at Pagasai (now Volos) in the quest for the Golden Fleece; and the monstrous Centaurs, who were settled just on the wooded slopes of Mount Pelion. Argonauts and Centaurs represent a peculiarly Thessalian mythological imagery that one can easily recognize in well-known De Chirico paintings such as *La partenza degli Argonauti* ("The Departure of the Argonauts"), which belongs to a private collection, or *Lotta di Centauri* ("Fighting Centaurs") at the National Gallery, Rome: both dated 1909 and probably painted in Milan.

I would like to recall a passage from the first book of Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica* (547 ff.), which depicts the departure of the ship Argo in the presence of gods, Nymphs and Centaurs, who came down from the mountain to observe that amazing event:

On that day all the gods looked down from heaven upon the ship and the might of the heroes, half-divine, the bravest of men then sailing the sea; and on the topmost heights the nymphs of Pelion wondered [...] And there came down from the mountain-top to the sea Chiron, son of Philyra, and where the white surf broke, he dipped his feet, and, often waving with his broad hand, cried out to them at their departure [...] (transl. Seaton 1912).

Even more amazing, however, had to be a renewed apparition of the same Argonauts, this time in Paris, as evoked by De Chirico in a fascinating prose poem dated to the 1920s, entitled *Salve Lutetia*. Paris was described as *la ville occidentale par excellence* ("the Western city par excellence"), the final destination for all the wanderers coming from *le triste et infernal orient* ("the gloomy and hellish East") by an itinerary reversing the outward journey of the Argonauts:

[...] Même Homère, le mystérieux Homère à l'existence incertaine, dont sept villes se disputaient l'honneur de l'avoir vu naître, même Homère renaît à Paris; en la saison charmante où les côtes de France s'éveillent sous

l'agitation polychrome des baigneurs, son esprit plane dans les devantures des Galeries-Lafayette. Tandis qu'en haut les oriflammes claquent tranquilles à la tiédeur des vents estivaux, en bas les vitrines, petits théâtres à la scène toujours ouverte, nous montrent d'étranges gentlemans et des babys fantômes s'ébattant sur le sable, quelques natures mortes savamment disposées, coquillages, fruits de mer, galets polis par le travail séculaire des lames, et au fond un morceau de toile peint en haut au bleu outremer et en bas au bleu céruléum, nous font penser à Ulysse et à son destin errant. C'est à Paris que l'esprit moderne acquiert son aspect le plus consolant; il y garde les dons de la surprise, du charme et ce trouble heureux que nous donne l'œuvre d'art lorsqu'elle renferme l'énigme du talent; il y perd l'effrayant, le cruel, le méchant. La divinité grecque et babylonienne, reconquise, brille dans les faisceau [sic] lumineux d'un phare nouveau; le bébé gigantesque du *Savon Cadum* et le cheval rouge du *Chocolat Poulain*, ont pour nous l'aspect troublant des divinités antiques.

...reviens toi ô ma première félicité
la joie habite d'étranges cités
de nouvelles magies sont tombées sur la terre.

[...] Mais le miracle le plus étonnant auquel j'assistai, ce fut le départ des Argonautes.

A l'aube d'un matin du printemps dernier, j'avais pris, après une nuit d'insomnie, le premier métro à la station Kléber pour me rendre à Montparnasse, à la rue Campagne-Première. Juste au moment où le train débouchait sur le pont de la Seine, j'aperçus en bas un vaisseau splendide qui avait quelque chose entre la galère, la péniche, la charrue et l'avion; l'esprit de Neptune, de Cérès, d'Éole et du Pénée me parurent concentrés dans ce vaisseau magnifique, à la fois marin, terrestre, aérien et fluvial. Sur la proue se tenait Jason que je reconnus tout de suite à sa barbe majestueuse et surtout à la façon vraiment royale dont il s'appuyait sur sa lance, faisant ressortir la courbe exagérée de sa hanche droite où les plis de la chlamyde retombaient en lignes stylisées. Au même moment un individu mystérieux, assis auprès de moi et que je perdis de vue quelques instants après, comme ceux qu'on entend en rêve, me chuchota: "Ils ont passé la nuit dans le Trocadéro; c'est là qu'ils ont dormi à l'insu des gardiens". Mais moi je regardai de tous mes yeux, car déjà le vaisseau avait quitté les eaux du fleuve et rasait les toits des immeubles qui longent le quai;

malheureusement le métro filait trop vite, plus vite, j'eus encore le temps de voir l'étrange navire virer vers le sud-est, du côté de l'Ecole Militaire, et puis disparaître.

At the end of the prose section, *Salve Lutetia* included a remarkable poem, of which we possess also an earlier Italian version (1917):

... Ville des rêves non rêves
que des démons bâtirent avec une sainte patience
c'est toi que, fidèle, je chanterai.
Un jour je serai aussi un homme-statue
époux veuf sur le sarcophage étrusque
ce jour-là en ta grande étreinte de pierre
ô ville serre-moi, maternelle.

[...]

Città dei sogni insognati,
Costrutte da demoni con santa pazienza,
Voi, fedele, canterò!
Un dì sarò anch'io uomo di sasso,
Sposo vedovo sul sarcofago etrusco.
Quel giorno, materne, stringetemi
Nell'abbraccio vostro grande, di pietra.

In these lines, I would emphasize two significant excerpts. The “man of stone” comes, of course, from Lorenzo Da Ponte’s libretto of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* (II, 14): from the mouth of Leporello, the servant, crying before the frightening vision of the animated statue of the Commendatore: *L'uom di sasso, l'uomo bianco, / ah, padrone! lo gelo, io manco!* [“The man of stone, the man in white, / ah, master, I'm afraid, I'm going to faint!”].

However, in this image of an Etruscan *sarcophagus of the spouses*, which is unnaturally deprived of its female figure (the wife), one could also recognize an intriguing archaeological reference: the celebrated terracotta *Sarcophagus des époux*, displayed since 1863 at the Louvre Museum, which was depicted by Edgar Degas in an aquatint showing *Mary Cassatt au Louvre. La galerie étrusque* (1879-1880). This iconographic aspect is extremely interesting, because De Chirico’s poem preceded by a few years

the media boom caused by the public exhibition in Rome of the Apollo of Veii, which was discovered in 1916 but only restored and displayed in the 1920s.

It is worth underlining, moreover, that a poem by Guillaume Apollinaire – a friend of De Chirico and addressee of a number of letters sent between 1914 and 1916 – *À l'Italie* (August 1915), had mentioned *les sortilèges étrusques* (the “Etruscan spells”) among the characterizing aspects of a true Italian cultural legacy, which was radically opposed to Austro-German coarseness. It is also noticeable that in the same poem Apollinaire had already resorted to the metaphor of the ancient tomb: *Et dans ce jour d'août 1915 le plus chaud de l'année / Bien abrité dans l'hypogée que j'ai creusé moi-même / C'est à toi que je songe Italie mère de mes pensées* (“And on this day in August 1915 the hottest of the year / Well sheltered in the hypogeum that I dig myself / I think of you, Italy, mother of my thoughts”). It seems, therefore, that both De Chirico's Etruscan sarcophagus and stony embrace replied in some way to the ancient underground shelter metaphorically inhabited by Apollinaire.

Let's come back to the main subject of the painting, to the young lady in the white dress. From a classicist point of view, the association of two only sketched, but very characterizing attributes such as a tiara – which I suspect to be a mural crown – and, perhaps, a cornucopia emphasizes a probable connotation of fatality. Since around the end of the 4th century BC, in fact, both mural crown and horn of plenty have belonged to the canonical iconography of *Tyche* (in Greek; in Latin: *Fortuna*), the benevolent, although ambiguous, goddess that personified the destiny of the cities. We can find exactly the same solemn and numinous perception of an inscrutable ambiguity very well described in another prose poem *Villeggiatura* (“Vacation”), dedicated by De Chirico to Carlo Carrà in 1917:

Ho impiantato i giuochi belli
Nei giardini tra i cancelli
Serafici mediatori. Chi vinse la partita? Nel caffè-pacobotto portavano in
trionfo il presidente in alpagà.
C'era un terribile canterano e un animale mai visto che parlava sulla strada.
Dormo. Mi viene l'immagine di alberi tenebrosi visti nell'andito di una casa
che abitai da bambino.

Qualcuno mi chiamava dall'altra stanza

Spinsi il motoscafo presso il promontorio. Era pomeriggio, amici. Il mare tutto bollente. Le officine e le miniere fumavano sulle roccie della riva. Un metafisico in maglia rosa dormiva sotto un pino.

Uccelli di latta colorita si muovevano sulla spiaggia.

- Ho giocato l'anima e la felicità. Si stette per molto tempo senza muovere un dado. Il giuoco era impossibile. Uscimmo io e lui ch  l'aria gi  cominciava ad annerire. Nella via, a un tratto, pensai a quella scatola a quelle cose lucide e variopinte abbandonate *sole* nella spaventevole solitudine dell'immobile ipotecato.

L'uragano scoppia. Ove mi hai condotto o tremenda fatalit ?

Guardo tutto intorno le meraviglie postate sui terribili palcoscenici della primavera. Ogni cabina contiene un fantasma. Li scopro uno dopo l'altro scostando le cortine.

- Sono il superstite e il nascituro.

Porto l'elmo del palombaro. Il pulsare del mio cervello si spacca in tante bollicine sulla piattaforma laccata del mio settimo soffitto.

Il cielo   tutto una zanzariera di fil di ferro.

I cantieri non fumano pi .

Addio giorni della beatitudine stanca.

Le persiane sono chiuse. Le porte sbarrate.

Ovunque   l'attesa e il raccoglimento.

With good reasons, Barbero underlines how clearly *The Engineer's Spring* announced the claustrophobic shrinkage of perspective that characterized the immediately-following Ferrara period (1915-18) of De Chirico's works. We may add that the obsessive sequence of architectural screens aimed at emphasizing the prodigious epiphany of the bright goddess by intensifying the perception of her mysterious alterity.

As Spring is the season that announces the full maturity of the year, so Tyche seems to suggest a future of peace and beauty. But this Goddess is ambiguous, as we have said, and her image is surrounded by blind porches and doors, walls and enclosures, without any view of small stations or escaping trains. The Spring of 1914 preceded the start of the immense carnage of the First World War, and the choice of a figural personification shaped on the classical images of Tyche gives her anxiety and a sort of distressing resonance.

* This essay derives from the speech I gave at the Brera Academy, Milan, in 2018. It has been later presented at the conference of the Modernist Studies Association, held in Toronto October 17th-20th, 2019. The Toronto panel, organized by Leanne Darnbrough (Leuven) and chaired by Luca Somigli (Toronto), was entitled *Modernism and Archaeology: Textual Excavation*.

Riferimenti bibliografici

Barbero 2019

L.M. Barbero, *De Chirico, catalogo della mostra* (Milano, 25 settembre 2019 - 19 gennaio 2020), Venezia 2019.

Seaton 1912

Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica*, transl. by R.C. Seaton, London 1912.

All the quotations of De Chirico's prose and poetry works come from the website of the Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico.

English abstract

Le printemps de l'ingénieur is an unfinished oil canvas by Giorgio de Chirico, now kept at the Brera National Art Gallery. Painted in Paris in 1914, on the eve of the First World War, it appears symbolic of a mysterious farewell from France and an era of peace. This paper opens with some exegetic problems – raised by a deliberately puzzling iconography – which will be decrypted via literary and visual references found in De Chirico's French and Italian poetry and prose. Thus, one can focus on the revitalization of the heritage of classical poetry and art by this prominent 20th-century Master. The Mount Pelion Centaurs, the Argonauts on their fabulous ship, the Etruscan Spouses at the Louvre (so dear to Degas), and an enigmatic Goddess as a Tyche: these are the icons that rule this crucial chapter of De Chirico's classicism.

keywords | Giorgio de Chirico, *Le printemps de l'ingénieur*.

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(v. Albo dei referee di Engramma)



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