# AS IN A DREAM: SOME PAINTINGS OF GIORGIO de CHIRICO

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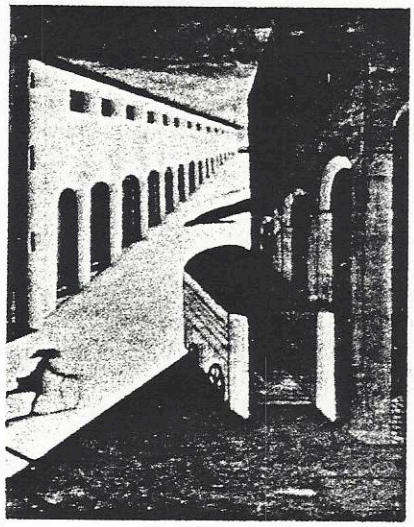
"In vain I struggle with a man whose eyes are shifty and very gentle. Each time that I get him in my grip, he frees himself by gently spreading his arms; his arms are unimaginably strong: they are like irresistible levers, gigantic cranes which rise above the swarming shipyards, floating fortresses with towers heavy as the breasts of antediluvian mammals. In vain I struggle with the man of gentle looks who eyes me suspiciously; from each hold, no matter how strong, he frees himself gently, smiling, by hardly spreading his arms . . . It is my father who appears thus in the dreams. Yet, when I look at him, he is not at all as I saw him when I was a child. And still it is he; there is something more far-away about the expression on his face, something which existed perhaps when I saw him and which, now, after more than 20 years, appears to me on all its force when I see him again in dream.

"The struggle ends in my giving in; I *give up;* then the images blur; the river (the Po or the Penee) which during the struggle I knew flowed close to me, darkens; the images intermix as though storm clouds were hovering overhead; there is an intermezzo during which I am perhaps still dreaming, but I remember nothing, only agonizing quests along darkened streets. Then the dream lights up again. I find myself on a piazza of great metaphysical beauty; it is the piazza Cavour in Florence, perhaps; or perhaps also one of the very lovely squares in Turin; or perhaps neither. One sees above which are apartments, shutters closed, columned balconies. On the horizon, hills with villas; above the piazza the sky is very clear, washed by the storm, but one feels nevertheless that the sun is setting because the shadows of the house and the rare passers-by are very long on the piazza. I look toward the hills over which loom the last clouds of the fleeing storm; here and there the villas are all white with something tomb-like and solemn about them when seen against the deep black curtain of the sky. All at once I find myself under the portico amongst a group of people who jostle one another at the door of a pastry shop, the shelves of which are stocked with multicolor cakes; people crowd around and look inside, as they do at the door of a pharmacy when a passer-by injured or sick is brought in from the street; but while looking inside, I see my father from behind, standing in the middle of the pastry shop, eating a cake; yet I do not know whether it is for him that people are crowding at the door; a certain anxiety then comes over me and I want to flee towards the west, a new, more hospitable land. At the same time I fumble in my clothers for a dagger, because it seems to me that my father is in danger in this pastry shop and I feel that if I go in, I would need a weapon as when one enters the lair of thieves. My anxiety grows. Suddenly the crowd presses in on me and carries me towards the hills; I have the impression that my father is no longer in the pastry shop, that he has fled, that he is going to be pursued like a thief and I waken in anxiety over this thought." (italics in original)



Giorgio de Chirico
(quoted in *Marcel Jean*, 1980:165, translated by Benjamin Kilborne and Lydia Nakashima Degarrod)

Pictured above: DeChirico, "*Melancholy and Mystery of the Street.*

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In the work of Giorgio de Chirico, dreams provide both content and structural elements. De Chirico's metaphysical paintings can be traced to dream sources not only in the symbolism and the object portrayed, but in the use of formal and constructive painterly elements and techniques.

De Chirico considered one dream he had to be particularly important. When asked by Andre Breton, in 1924 to participate in the publication of *La Revolution Surrealiste*, the first journal of the Surrealistic Movement, de Chirico wrote this dream which expresses various themes, elements, and structures that appear in his metaphysical paintings. Marcel Jean, one of those who was collecting dreams for the publication, believes this dream to have been recurrent throughout de Chirico's life.

Influenced by the writings of Schopenhauer, Bocklin, Max Klinger, Appolinaire, and particularly Nietzsche, de Chirico thought that the ideal artist was inspired through dream-inspiration, that artistic revelation could be encouraged through dream-pictures (Soby, 1955:27). The main thesis of the *Scuola Metafisica* founded by de Chirico and Carra was the negation of the sensations, proposing instead a new reality dependent upon mystery or incongruity. In common objects they sought an uncommon reality, a reality in touch with the unconscious. De Chirico's route to the unconscious was through what he called 'revelations,' self-induced moments of extreme sensitivity to perception, childlike vision; and it was also through dreams.

Analysis of de Chirico's dream of his father and the pastry shop points up several elements essential to his metaphysical writings and paintings: defeat and impotence, loneliness, perceptions and memories of his father, interior space, entrances, shadows, and nature as opposed to architecture. Techniques used in the paintings which appear designed to produce dreamlike impressions include multiple vanishing points, distorted horizons, cast shadows, multiple frames, light effects, and stark contrasts.

## Impotence and Anxiety

In the dream, de Chirico describes how he "struggles in vain with a man (his father) whose suspicious eyes are so gentle" and how each time he grasps him, the man frees himself effortlessly. No matter how hard de Chirico tries to grab him and hold him, he cannot. The image conveyed is of de Chirico's impotence in the face of his father's "unbelievable strength and incalculable power." Significantly, the father's strength is compared to elements of architecture and construction: cranes and towers. In the second episode, a crowd is threatening de Chirico's father. De Chirico attempts to come to his father's rescue, even searching in his clothing for a dagger. Once again his efforts come to nothing: the crowd carried him away to the hills. Although he can no longer see the pastry shop, he somehow feels that his father is no longer there and that he (presumably his father) is being pursued like a thief.

These images of defeat carry strong connotations of impotence, the impotence felt by a son whose father is able to brush him off "quietly" with his superior "unbelievable strength and incalculable power." While there is no incontrovertable evidence in either dreams or paintings or in what is known of de Chirico's life to point to specific sexual dysfunction, it seems quite clear that the dream expresses, as do the paintings, imagery motivated by anxiety over an inability to establish close relationships.

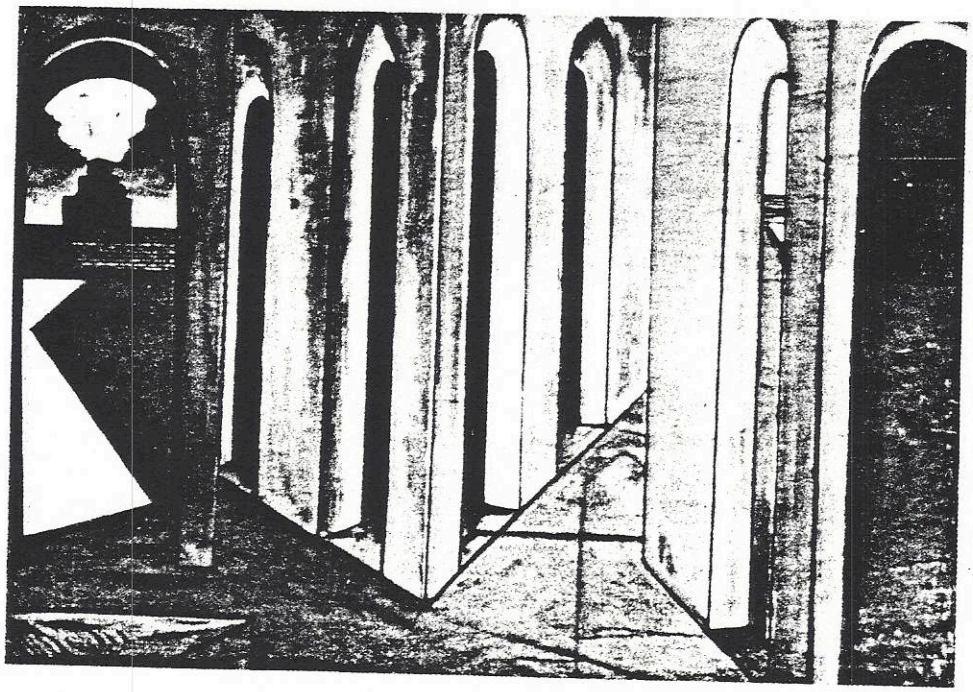
The clearest image of anxiety in the paintings is the absolute immobility that transfixes the viewer. De Chirico's piazzas and interiors and even his portraits are frozen, unmoving, as if the will to choose and act had been removed not only from the characters represented, but from the very universe. As one feels immobilized in a dream. The sketchy, diminutive, human figures dominated by the claustrophobic surroundings of interiors or by the vast expanses of the piazzas and attached to shadows much larger than themselves, seem unable to make decisions or take action. Intense anxiety is conveyed in such well-known works as *Melancholy and Mystery of a Street* (1914), where the girl rolls a hoop in an environment of darkened windows, jutting angular alleyways, and mysterious shadows. In *The Anxious Journey* (1913), immobility is expressed as frustration, as the inability of the viewer (and the artist) to know which of the multiple perspectived alleys to go down, whether the train in the distance is to be caught or to be avoided, lest it annihilate the viewer as it breaks through the brick wall marking the horizon line.

Rather than filling his atmospheres with any particular emotional quality, de Chirico's light seems instead almost to empty them. The super-clarity of the atmosphere serves only to highlight the immobility of the objects depicted and convey a sense of intense solitude.

## Solitude

Loneliness, a constant theme of de Chirico's paintings, appears in the dream and is further elaborated in de Chirico's own writings.

De Chirico's first and primary action in the dream is to attempt to embrace his father, an attempt perhaps to overcome the loneliness that separates him from his father. Writing about the dream, de Chirico dwells on the "man with the anguished



De Chirico, *The Anxious Journey*, 1913, 29½ x 42". The Museum of Modern Art, New York

look" (Soby, 252, 253) He describes his father as "perishing of love," presumably because de Chirico feels profoundly ambivalent.

Moreover, when de Chirico's father eats a cake in a shop (the same scene as in the dream), he is imagined to eat slowly a "cake so soft and sweet it seemed he was eating his heart" (Soby, 252). De Chirico concludes his treatment of this dream with an imagined scene in which he sweeps through the loneliness separating him and his father and in which they "fall in each other's arms, and together weep" (Soby, 253).

Yet in another essay titled *The Statue's Desire,* de Chirico has the statue say "I wish at any cost to be alone" (Soby, 253). One wonders then what the meaning of solitude might have been to de Chirico. Certainly his paintings express intense solitude.

In his *Memoirs,* Giorgio de Chirico writes about the loneliness of his childhood. His parents did not allow him to play with children who were not of their own social class (de Chirico, 1971:38). His companions as a child were his siblings, but his sister died when he was three and there may have been an estrangement with the younger brother brought on by de Chirico's awareness that his mother favored his brother (de Chirico, 13). De Chirico emphasizes the ambivalence and strength of his relationship with his father saying, "between me and my father, in spite of the deep affection which linked us, there was a certain aloofness, an apparent coldness, or, rather, a kind of reserve which prevented those spontaneous effusions found among people of mediocre birth" (de Chirico, 46), a remark which indicates an aloofness not unrelated perhaps to de Chirico's sense of isolation.

From the days just before his father died when de Chirico was seventeen, he describes a scene as they walked on the streets: "I was on my father's left; at a certain moment he took hold of me by the shoulders and I felt the weight of his large arm. I was upset and embarrassed. I tried to understand the reason for this unexpected gesture of affection" (de Chirico, 46).

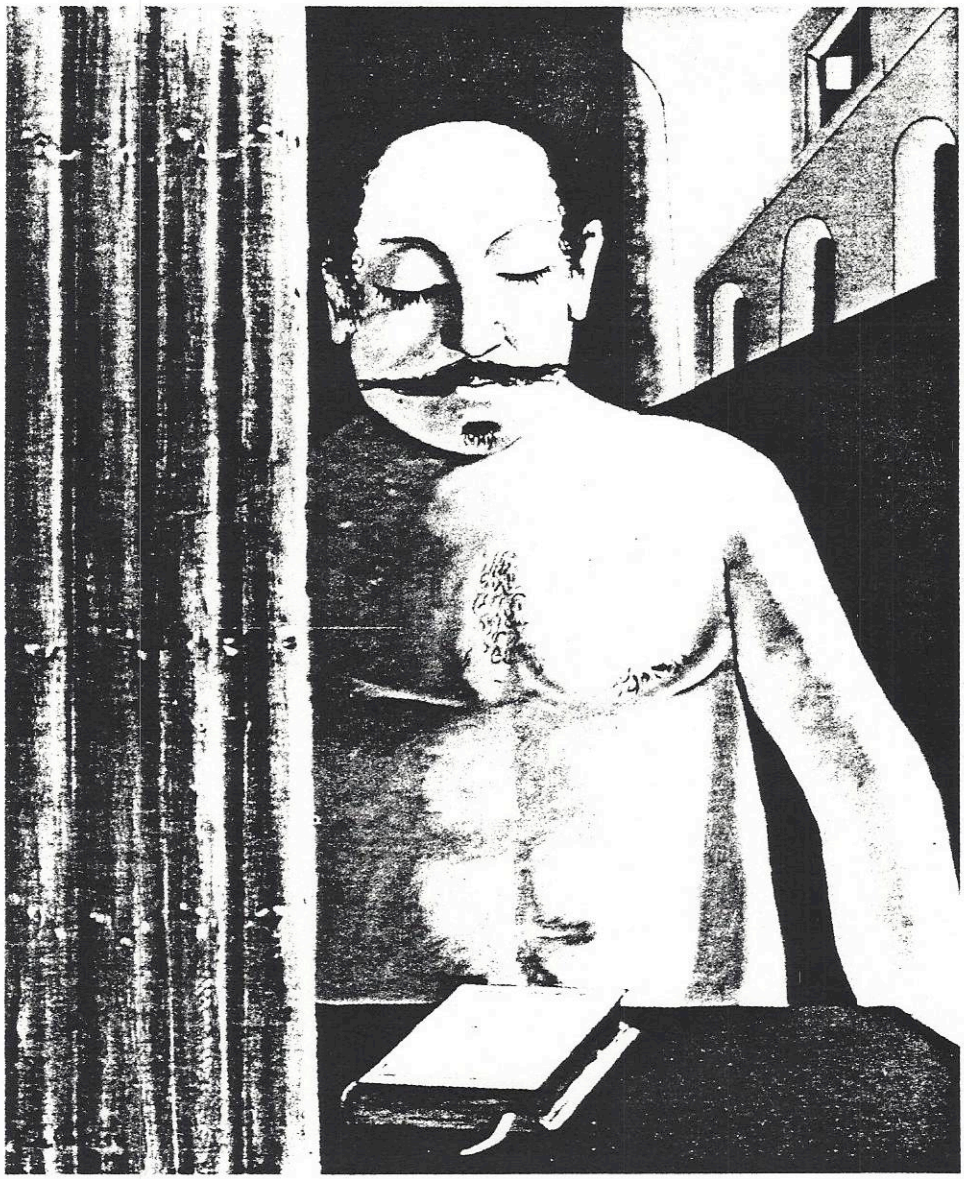
Affection appears as "unexpected" as it is strongly desired. In the piazza paintings, loneliness is expressed forcefully by the vast empty spaces. Using high horizons and out-of-the-plane vanishing points, de Chirico creates monstrously large outdoor platforms stretching from each side of the picture space and off to the far horizon. In this vast emptiness he places one, two, or three statues, mannequins, or figures, each separated from the other. The darkened arch entrances are never inviting, and always make the viewer, the characters in the piazza and the artist seem excluded. Human form is reduced to its least personal elements. Human's figures seldom appear in a natural scale (except in portraits). Often they are replaced by immobile statues and mannequins without eyes.

## His Father's Image

In the dream, de Chirico's father is described as having eyes that are 'squinting' [the translation of *louche* (in Jean, p. 165)] or as 'suspicious.' In addition to being unreliable and untrustworthy, the father in the dream has superhuman strength. Furthermore, the father is always alone, not simply alone in emptiness but alone in the crowd. De Chirico stated that he felt his father was a man of the 19th Century (de Chirico, 15). It could be that the separateness from the crowd in the dream represents his 19th Century 'aristocratic' father's self-imposed separateness from the mob of the 20th Century, 'democratic' society. De Chirico feels the crowd in the dream is accusing his father of being a thief (Jean, 165), although the act he is

engaged in is simply eating a cake. De Chirico considered the 20th Century in his memoirs to be "a century of destruction, hysteria and impotence, lack of balance, and integral thought" (de Chirico, 15), feelings he most likely shared with his father.

Eyes, especially his fathers eyes, are of great significance to de Chirico. In his writings in which he describes the man with the anguished look, he says that the eyes are very far apart. In his novel *Hebdomeros*, the main hero finds that "immortality has his father's eyes" (Jean, 165). And in the dream, the father's eyes are felt as gentle and at the same time anguished and suspicious.



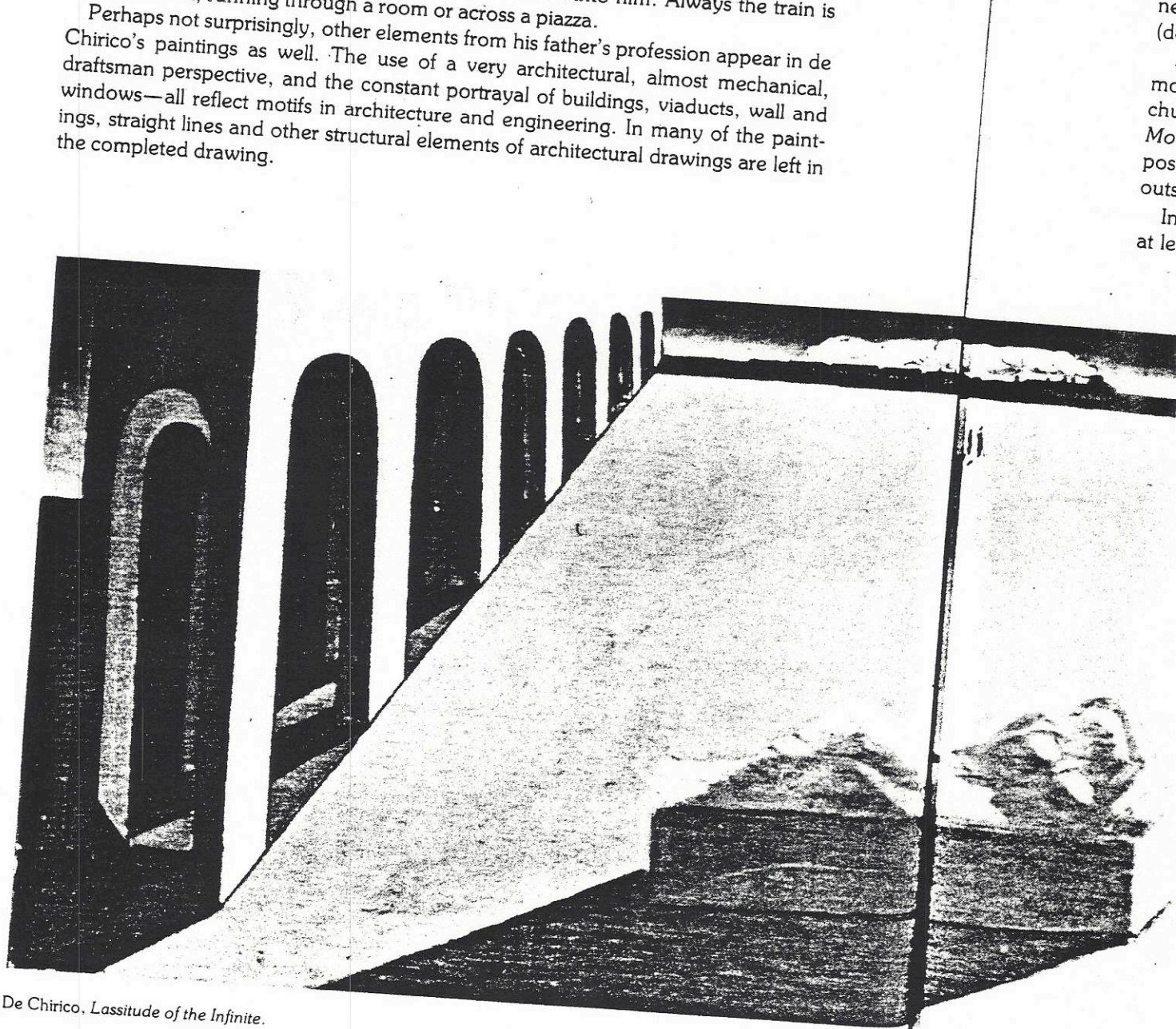
De Chirico, *The Child's Brain*, 1914, 32 x 25½". Collection Andre Breton, Paris

In the well-known *The Brain of the Child*, 1914, de Chirico paints his father with his eyes closed. The figure is standing up, facing the artist. But the eyes are closed. The man will not look at us.

## Trains and Arches

De Chirico's father was a railroad engineer, responsible for designing the high-arched viaducts that carried trains across valleys and gorges. The train in his paintings has a singular emotional strength. Sometimes it appears running laterally across the painting in the distance as if on a journey. At other times, it is heading straight at the viewer, bearing down as if it would run into him. Always the train is out of context, running through a room or across a piazza.

Perhaps not surprisingly, other elements from his father's profession appear in de Chirico's paintings as well. The use of a very architectural, almost mechanical, draftsman perspective, and the constant portrayal of buildings, viaducts, wall and windows—all reflect motifs in architecture and engineering. In many of the paintings, straight lines and other structural elements of architectural drawings are left in the completed drawing.



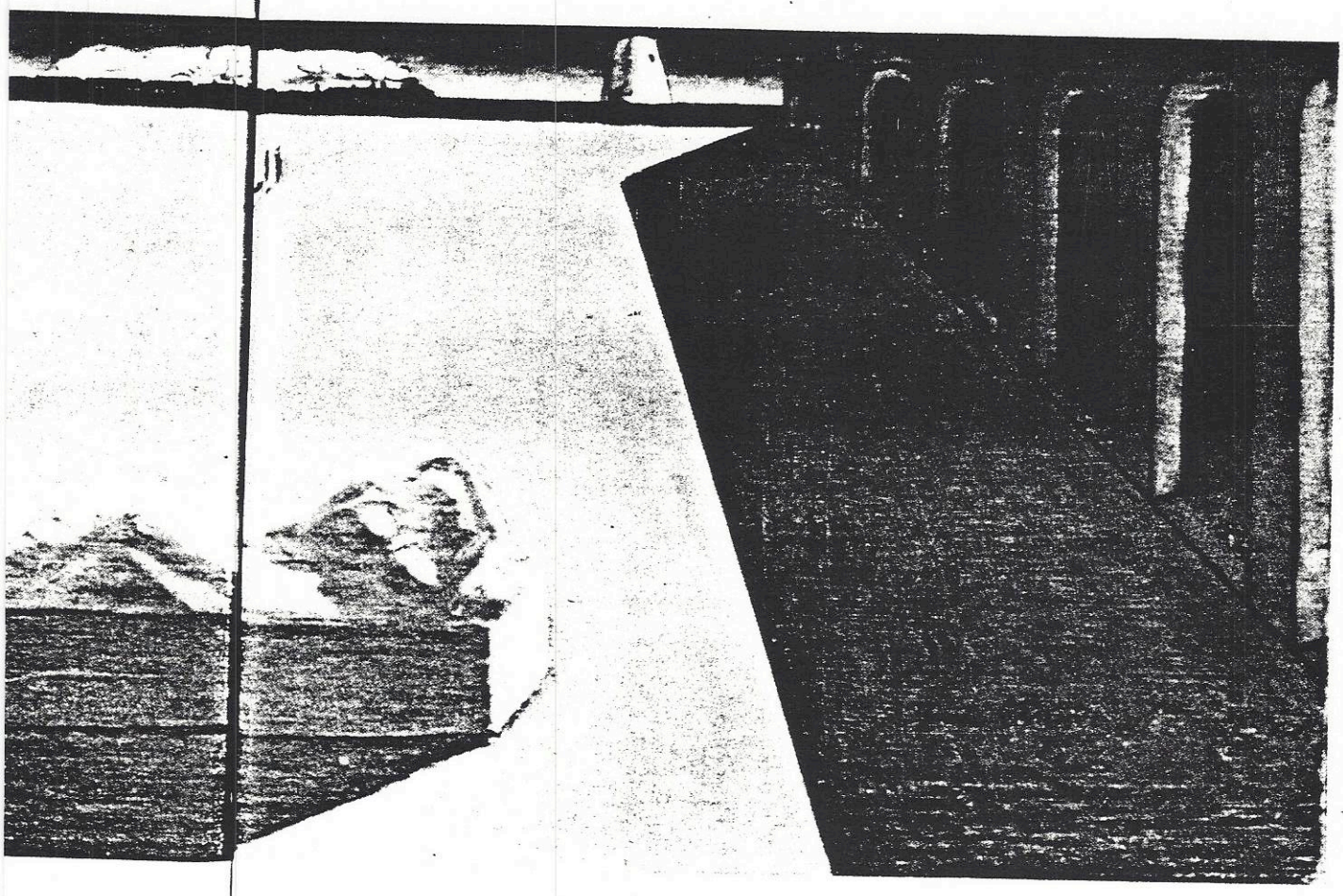
De Chirico, *Lassitude of the Infinite.*

## Where Is The Inside?

A sudden shift in tone and action is signaled in the dream by the move from open piazzas to the porticos and then into the shop. As this movement takes place, the emotional feeling becomes more negative with each move towards the interior. By contrast de Chirico remarks about this dream, "I am in a square of great metaphysical beauty. It is the Piazza Cavour in Florence perhaps; or it may also be one of those beautiful squares in Turin, or it may also be neither" (Jean, 166). However, when his dream gaze shifts to the apartments above, he returns to the negative feelings associated with interiors "with closed shutters, solemn balconies" (de Chirico, 135).

In another dream which de Chirico cites as important (his premonition of his mother's death), movement from the outside toward the interior (this time of a church)—is associated with death (Soby, 40). In his *Portrait of the Artist with His Mother* (1919), he portrays his mother as clearly inside, but the bust of himself is positioned ambiguously within a window frame; it could equally well be inside as outside.

In the paintings of piazzas, the outdoor square is, if not beneficient and peaceful, at least not as forbidding. The buildings, however, are uniformly ominous and the



many entrances are impenetrable. Seldom in de Chirico's work is anyone or anything seen in a building window. In openings, one finds a dense darkness.

## Uninhabited Shadows

In de Chirico's dream of his mother's death, she appears not as a body but as a shadow. In his dream about his father, his dream picture of the metaphysical piazza is formed by shadows, cast by a brilliant sun. This use of shadows to delineate space and form and to describe emotional content is a hallmark of the paintings. The

De Chirico. *Portrait of the Artist with his Mother*. 1919. oil/canvas, 31 x 21½".

shadows of the buildings break the picture plane more definitely than do the buildings themselves and the shadows of the figures are darker, longer and more filled with enigma than actual figures. In what amounts to almost a unique signature, de Chirico fills his piazzas with cast shadows whose origin lies *outside* the picture plane, and whose disembodied appearance often cuts at right angles across the path of a fleeing person or across the sight lines of the viewer. The message is one of foreboding when not more ominously threatening.

## Architecture vs. Nature

The moment de Chirico gives up in the struggle with his father in the dream, rain and the river suddenly appear. Again, when the crowd carries de Chirico off, it is to a natural setting: the hills outside the city. Nature appears in the dream only at moments when the dreamer is reduced to utter passivity. It is the built environment, the world created by architects and engineers, that dominates the dream scene and in which the important ego-motivated action takes place. The polar opposites of de Chirico's dream scene are not nature and built environment, but built interiors and built exteriors. Nature is a distant, unperceived backdrop.

De Chirico notes that "architecture complements nature" (Soby, 28). However, he felt that "great metaphysical beauty" may be found in cities. De Chirico's belief in the metaphysical quality of urban settings is similar to Nietzsche's praise of the beauty of the piazza which de Chirico quotes: "This innovation is a strange and profound poetry, infinitely mysterious and solitary, based on *stimmung* (which might be translated . . . as atmosphere) of an autumn afternoon when the weather is clear and the shadows are longer than in summer, for the sun is beginning to be lower" (Arnheim, 299), a scene depicted in de Chirico's well-known piazza paintings. Nietzsche was referring to a piazza in Turin, perhaps one of the piazza's mentioned by de Chirico as the locus of his dream.

Large vistas, areas that would naturally lend themselves to landscape, are often painted as immense paved or boarded piazzas or platforms. Nature appears forcefully *only* in the paintings within paintings, as a memory recreated by artificial means in an urban setting.

## Shadow and Perspective: Dreams and Pictorial Distortion

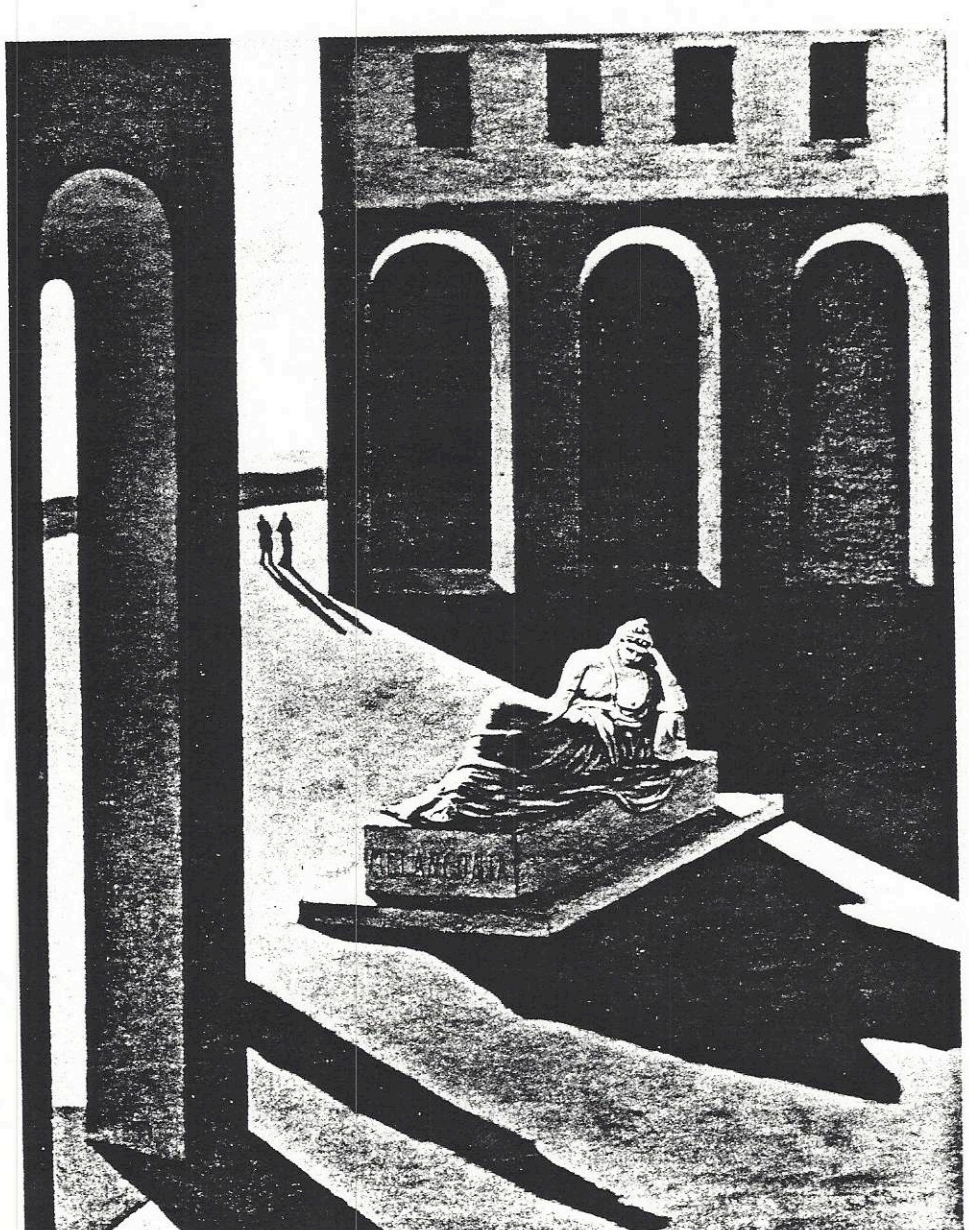
Several techniques of painting give de Chirico's works the quality of dream pictures. Foremost in effect and frequency are techniques of perspective, but important dream-picture qualities are also caused by multiple light sources, collage-like overlapping and assembly of images, breaking the frame of the pictoral space. Prominent also is the exaggeration of the spaces between things: either greatly stretched out (as in the open piazzas and the distant horizoned outdoor spaces), or greatly compressed (as in a telescopic lens effect).

## The Points of Solitude and Vanishing.

Although de Chirico employs traditional 15th Century techniques of perspective—horizon line vanishing point, and the relative sizes of foreground and background objects—he uses these well-known techniques to create a novel effect of dream reality. Often, especially in the piazza scenes, the buildings and other objects do not all recede toward the same vanishing point. In *Melancholy and Mystery*

*of a Street*, or *The Lassisitude of the Infinite* (1914), for example, the receding lines of the different elements of the painting are projected from *different* vanishing points. Even without overlaying in the lines and plotting the vanishing points, the viewer is aware that something is slightly out of kilter.

Dream-pictures, recalled by dreamer upon awakening, have this quality of multiple vanishing points, because each scene in the dream or the repeated "viewing" of a single scene may occur with the viewer-dreamer in a different place. Because vanishing points are dictated not by the physics of the scene but by the position of the viewer (the vanishing points exist not in nature but in the viewer's perceptions), multiple points of view cause multiple vanishing points. By painting



De Chirico, *Melancholy*, 1912(?), 31 x 25". Collection Peter Watson, London

pictures that are structured around multiple vanishing points de Chirico creates an ambiguous, dreamlike state, similar to that associated with recalling dreams.

As for de Chirico's horizons, they too are calculated and contribute to the effect. Often he places them inordinately high (by classical standards) in the picture plane. By so doing, he creates an inhuman vista, more like that recorded by a camera placed on the ground and pointed toward the horizon, than vistas we as erect human beings perceive. The high horizon line divides the picture space, so that the greatest percentage (as much as 7/8 of the space) is *below* the horizon. The psychologist Zajack has noted that convergence above eye level like this creates a stronger emotional response than convergence below eye level. When this great expanse of territory is filled with a usual number of buildings and statues, the impression created is of a sparsely decorated stage, a piazza built far too large for its inhabitants. Here again, the distortion of perspective yields pictures not unlike dream images. Dream pictures, unlike camera pictures or classically composed paintings, may have odd points of view, expanded or raised horizons. Such pictures, whether in a de Chirico painting or a dream, evoke feelings of emptiness, sadness, half-completedness.

These vanishing points and horizon placement techniques reverse the intended effect of Renaissance perspective: the creation of a unified, orderly world. By turning the techniques upside down, de Chirico creates a fragmented world, often contradicting itself, and seemingly made up of multiple realities. Here de Chirico is like the Cubists in that he represents the world of dreams, not by distorting the objects, but by placing realistically rendered objects into a space that could not exist in a single perceived reality. It is as if de Chirico had filmed the scene from different viewpoints and at different times (as may be discovered by trying to locate the suns that cast his shadows or to distinguish his superimposed frames). The resultant picture bears a close formal and structural relationship to certain dreamed images, yet is distinct from many dreamlikenesses evoked by distorted surrealistic objects.

## De Chirico's Shadows

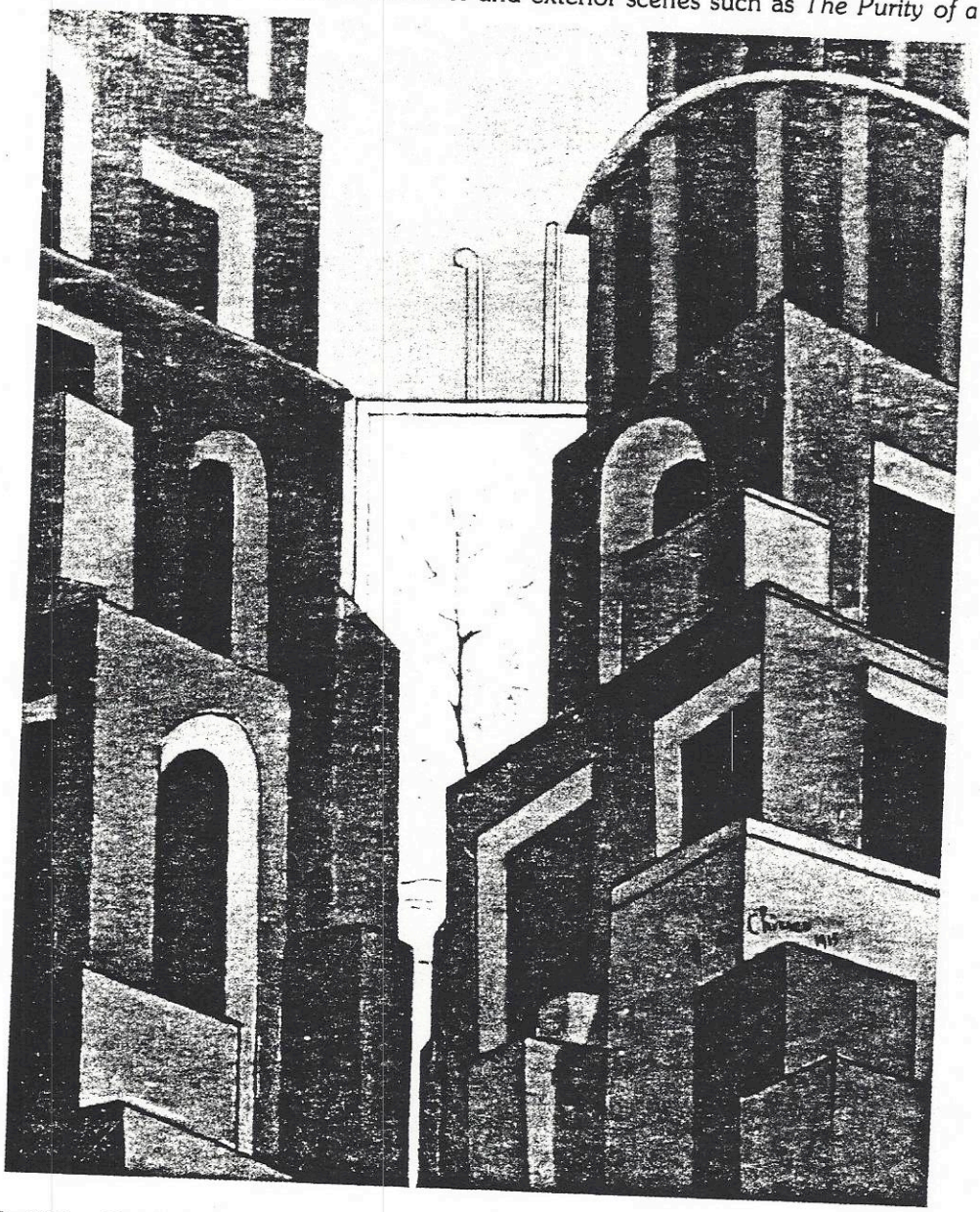
De Chirico's shadows have drawn much comment. Unlike Renaissance shadows which reinforce the logic and reality of the world by attesting to the concreteness of the objects as forms which block the passage of light, de Chirico's shadows exist almost as objects themselves. Often they are cast by unknown sources *outside* the picture, as in *Melancholia,* where the length, solidity and density of the cast shadows are in striking contrast to superficial modeling of statues, mannequins and figures. This effect is accomplished with simple hatching and shading.

The most original aspect of de Chirico lies in the incongruity of the shadows' nonparallellism. The divergent, nonparallel shadows of de Chirico can only be explained by the movement of the sun through the sky over the course of the day. In *Melacholia,* for example, the shadow of the two figures is cast by a sun in one position and the shadow of the wall next to them by a sun in a different position. Had de Chirico for some reason intended to imply multiple suns, each object would have two or more shadows with an umbrageous area of overlap, like actors on a stage lit from both wings. But de Chirico does not deny that there is only one sun; instead, he denies that a scene must be observed only at one moment in time. Again, the effect is like that of a dream. As space is fractured and folded in upon itself in dreams, time is inconsistent, overlapping, and full of gaps. Re-creating this sense of nonnormal time in pictorial works presents a challenge, one effectively accomplished by having different objects cast shadows that are understandable only if

they are cast by the sun at different times. Another distortion of time sense is created by de Chirico's juxtaposition of buildings from different historical periods and styles in a single scene. The viewer not only perceives scenes from multiple vantage points (vanishing points), but in multiple movements of time.

## Dreamlikeness: Relativity of Space, Time, and Light

Many of de Chirico's paintings appear at first to be collages, an effect created by the claustrophobic superimposition of objects on top of each other with no spaces between them. In contrast to the sense of spaces too large for human beings (created by the high horizon line and above-eye-level convergence of the piazza paintings), de Chirico creates interior and exterior scenes such as *The Purity of a*



De Chirico, *The Purity of a Dream*, 1915, 25 5/8 x 19 7/8". Collection Bernard, Poissonnier, Paris

*Dream* in which the viewer has the image presented as if condensed. This is accomplished by a number of simple techniques, including placing large, picture plane filling objects in the extremely near foreground and the stacking of multiple objects (even buildings) in the midground on top of each other with no open ground or sky indicating that any space exists between them. This telescopic perception may be associated with dreamed vistas.

Carrying the image beyond the distortion achieved through telescopic lenses, de Chirico not only drops out the space between objects, but flattens the objects themselves. This is what gives the paintings the assembled look of collage, a look reinforced by the contradictory perspectives of the assembled units. Collage is an ideal technique for re-creating and describing dreams. Since each object, symbol or structural element is torn from its context, given a new pictorial location and juxtaposed with other contexts, collage allows the artist to assemble fragments together in the way a dreamer patches together memories and other dream elements. As in the dream, each element contains (explicitly or by reference) its own perspective, and therefore a marker of its origin in another place and time.

## Conclusion

We have argued that pyschodynamically as well as formally de Chirico's paintings can be related to his dreams. Unlike many other painters of dreams (especially in the Surrealist school), de Chirico manipulates formal techniques in his creation of the dream picture. By rearranging, reversing, and juxtaposing techniques of perspective, by the use of shadows, by horizon placement and by the relationship between object and picture, de Chirico achieves a sense of pictorial reality which is quite apparitionlike. In a way reminiscent of Italian Mannerists like Pontormo, de Chirico uses space and volume in a distinctive fashion, one which indeed seems to make palpable the haunting anxieties of dreams. Finally, as we have shown, the dream text which has served as the point of departure for this article expresses some of the meanings which de Chirico appears to have associated with engineered, formal constructions of dreamlike space, and therefore, perhaps, helps us to see better what we are looking at when confronted with one of his paintings.

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