

Giorgio de Chirico, Time, Odysseus, Melancholy, and Intestinal Disorder

with Kathleen Toohey

Giorgio de Chirico (1888–1978), the Italian surrealist painter, is known well for his studies of melancholy and to a lesser extent for his interest in time. He is even less well known for his abominable digestion. In the phase of his career immediately before World War I, de Chirico painted a number of very powerful and often beautiful canvases focusing on the theme of melancholia (a few are reproduced in this appendix). Some of these make the link of melancholia to time apparent—above all by the inclusion of clocks. De Chirico does not necessarily link these with digestion, but he does seem elsewhere rather more concerned with food than might have been expected. We note the regular presence in his prewar painting of bananas (notably in *The Uncertainty of the Poet* [1913]), artichokes, pineapples, pomegranates, and eggs, then later of fish, biscuits, bread, and wine.¹ Occasionally one reads that his continuing fascination with the theme of melancholy may have been the result of the “intestinal disorders which plagued him from his youth” (Soby 1955, 31). We will return to de Chirico’s Petronian—or, more correctly, Trimalchionic—gizzards. To start we would like to demonstrate how some of the key themes of chapter 6 (death and the destructive linearity of time) are to be seen in his *The Delights of the Poet* (1912) and how these, through Greek and Roman precedent, have classical origins and a remarkable link with melancholia, both classical and modern. De Chirico, we will therefore suggest, offers a very striking instance for the continuity of the ancient themes that have been discussed within chapter 6 and throughout this book. He also provides a remarkable example for what has been termed the corporealization of affective registers. In de Chirico’s case, time and melancholia blend viscerally, on his own say-so, with a purportedly

dire indigestion (see Soby 1955, 34, 36). A number of the motifs that we have seen in chapter 6 are apparent in his painting. It provides, as it were, an expressive and affective mirror reflecting back, though no doubt unintentionally, to the Trimalchionic and the Senecan vision of time and its passing and to one of their chief means for affirming the integrity of the self.

The place to begin to illustrate this is with *The Delights of the Poet* (fig. 10) and, within this painting, with de Chirico's clock. Time, through this piece, stands at the near center of the picture. The clock looks down from the railway-station building in *The Delights of the Poet* and across the empty piazza toward its viewer. The picture demands that we interpret time's significance. That the hour is 2:00 in the afternoon is telling. The direction of the shadows indicates that the sun is now off its zenith and that, therefore, we are looking, past the clock, toward the south or southwest. The sun streams in from the southwest. That, too, is important. The ghostly wraith in the mid-background, gaze fixed on the ground, is turned toward the place where the sun will set. The wraith is turned to the directive distance traditionally associated with death.² Time, therefore, both through the angle of the sunlight and through the gaze of the wraith, is firmly, if not unexpectedly, linked with death. Time in this picture, on such a reading, is an absolutely linear affair. It has as its end point human death.

That knowledge makes the train more comprehensible. The train is a familiar motif in de Chirico's painting.³ Soby links it with a favorite childhood train set of de Chirico's. It is also true that from his childhood garden in Volos, Greece, de Chirico could see trains passing by. His father, moreover, was an engineer who worked on the railways in Thessaly. The train was also de Chirico's means of escape to Paris from the Italian military in Turin, whither he had been summoned and charged with desertion in 1913, the very period in which *The Delights of the Poet* was composed.⁴ Whatever the case, the train functions as a symbol for youth, life, expectation, and fulfilment. It is not a symbol, however, that is always unambiguous.⁵ In this picture the train, moving away from the west and death, draws into the railway station (as is indicated by the vertical direction of the ghostly clouds of steam that it produces). Is it fleeing the death that we can speculate is embodied in the wraith and implied by the distant vista taken in by the wraith's gaze? Is the train about to take on the wraith as a passenger and so vitiate its escape?

Consider once again the linearity of time as we have described it in the penultimate paragraph. The train moves on a fixed line in one direction. Its motion is mirrored again in the sharp lines created by the interplay of light and shade. These serve to illustrate this linearity of time. They may be contrasted with the fountain in the middle of the painting, directly beneath the clock. The



FIG. 10. Giorgio de Chirico, *The Delights of the Poet* (1912).
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fountain is also to be associated with time and death, although in the most ironic of manners. This fountain, set in the near foreground and—along with the train, the clouds of smoke, and the flags—one of the dynamic images in the composition, represents a metaphysical theme that de Chirico reworked a number of times. According to Baldacci (1997, 57) it is linked by de Chirico with Nietzsche’s concept of the “eternal return” (alluded to in the quote in chapter 6 from Long and Sedley 1987, I:311 ff.), or, as chapter 6 has it, of circular time. The fountain presents, therefore, an unresolved temporal alternative—what might have been, we could say—to the linear thrust of the painting as a whole. The fountain reemphasizes the theme of linear time, by obverse. Its unexpected significance can be seen clearly again in *The Enigma of the Hour* (1911), which painting we will briefly discuss later in this appendix.

Time and death are linked with melancholy, with a profound boredom, and with loneliness. This is the sense projected by the empty and eerie piazza and its shaded colonnades. Any doubts that might be had on this matter are allayed by

those telling colonnades in *The Melancholy of a Beautiful Day* (1913) and *The Lassitude of the Infinite* (1912) (both reproduced later in this appendix). In these two pictures, both painted very close in time to *The Delights of the Poet*, the colonnades and their shade are irrevocably associated with such an emotion. The architecture of the piazza reinforces our sense of the immanence of these emotions. “The nostalgia of the infinite is revealed beneath the geometric precision of the piazzas,” wrote de Chirico when describing Turin (quoted by Baldacci 1997, 128). We take it that Baldacci is referring here to a longing for the infinite—for the timeless, that is. The monumental and motionless piazza suggests a world without time. The timelessness of the piazza is, however, one that is doomed to failure, insofar as the buildings are human creations. Do the long and starkly imposing shadows indicate that the life of the buildings we create is as finite as our own lives? Do their cracks and crumbling stone further suggest their finite nature?

Unlike later works by de Chirico, *The Delights of the Poet* does not have an extremely anxious or dramatic tone. What is apparent, however, is its overwhelming sense of loss. This is emphasized by a number of features. The lack of horizon and the conflicting scale create a sense of emptiness. The oversized colonnade stresses the fragility of the wraith and again creates an overwhelming sense of emptiness. This impression is underscored, furthermore, by what is not to be seen: there is a dramatic lack of people in the piazza; the shadow spanning the right vertical is cast from an *unseen* building; note, too, that the buildings themselves are as empty as the shadows they cast. An interesting feature that adds to this impression is the shaft of sky that is visible through the first colonnade on the right. The space of surreal green sky is the only glimpse that de Chirico gives us into the buildings’ interiors. These interiors reveal nothing. They are as empty as the square. The green space balances the painting and emphasizes the movement of the train from right to left. This movement is reinforced by the flags. They indicate that the wind also moves in the direction of the train, from right to left. It also invokes the emptiness of the piazza and enforces our comprehension of the fragility and finite nature of the buildings. This sense of loss and emptiness complements the vision of linear time embodied in this painting.

The Delights of the Poet is a simple, albeit powerful, picture that collects and represents a series of favorite motifs. There is no necessarily unifying theme to the picture. Rather, the polyphonic motifs cluster about a series of ideas: the linearity of a time that leads irrevocably to death and that is associated in some manner or another, we sense, with a profound feeling of melancholy and, probably, alienation. All that is (apparently) missing from these paintings, from the point of view of chapter 6, is the Senecan sense of catastrophe.⁶ Yet some

views of *The Delights of the Poet*, perhaps unfairly and with too much foreknowledge, sense catastrophe in the dark shadows of the colonnades. A sense that catastrophe is about to happen is certainly projected by the famous shadows of the well-known painting *The Mystery and Melancholy of a Street* (1914). This canvas depicts the shadow of a young girl driving a hoop from the shadows of a street toward an open and bare piazza, while another shadow stalks her and forebodes who knows what.

The classical origins for much of de Chirico's iconography are as striking as they are unexpected. To illustrate these we need to turn back to the Swiss painter and mythological enthusiast Arnold Böcklin (1827–1901), a resident of Tuscany and a profound influence on the young de Chirico. In an attempt to illustrate this point, we have reproduced in this appendix Böcklin's *Odysseus and Calypso* (1882) and de Chirico's *The Enigma of the Oracle* (1910). A juxtaposition of these two not only makes clear the Greco-Roman origins for much of the conceptual imagery in de Chirico's metaphysical phase but also makes more clear how melancholia assumes a part within this imagistic web.⁷

Odysseus, in classical mythology, is a victim of nostalgia.⁸ In fact, he may be the first person in Western literature to suffer from the condition. His nostalgia was not, however, the flaccid and passive longing implied by the modern word.⁹ His is a strong and debilitating and grieflike emotion. Toward the beginning of the second tetrad of Homer's *Odyssey*, the depth of Odysseus's emotion, driven by his longing to return to Ithaca and to his wife, becomes clear (*Odyssey* 5.82–84).

But he sat weeping by the seashore, as he had before,
Breaking his heart [*thymos*] in tears, groaning, and grief.
He looked out across the barren sea and wept.

This description is sufficiently vivid for it to require little paraphrase. Note the apparent passivity and lonesomeness of the hero. He sits, rather than stands, and does so on the seashore, the most deserted of places in antiquity. His emotions are made evident in the reference to the broken heart, the groaning, and the grief. Their sterility has its parallel in the barrenness of the sea itself. Odysseus's emotion could easily be associated with depression. Böcklin's *Odysseus and Calypso* (fig. 11) has seized upon this insight and dramatized it in the remarkable portrait of a shrouded, seemingly grief-stricken Odysseus staring out across the barren and faraway distances of the ocean. (The sea seems to act as an objective correlative for Odysseus's state of mind.) Seated outside a sea cave, Calypso, possessing the face of a hausfrau on the body of a teenager, looks sympathetically, if disconsolately, at her distant lover. She is naked and, according to the myth, available. Odysseus is clothed and closed off to her.



FIG. 11. Arnold Böcklin, *Odysseus and Calypso* (1882).
 (Photo: Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Martin Bühler.
 Courtesy of Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Kunstmuseum.)

Unlike Homer's hero, Böcklin's stands upright, as if to assert his grief. His despairing head droops, and his shoulders are hunched in sorrow.

If you compare de Chirico's *The Enigma of the Oracle* (fig. 12) with *Odysseus and Calypso*, you can see how much de Chirico has relied on, though adapted, Böcklin to place a melancholy, grieving Odysseus within a new context. Böcklin's Odysseus has become an unnamed, melancholy, and grieving everyman. He stares out across a lowland from which he is cut off and across the ocean. The city and the lowland are new. The ocean is Homer's and Böcklin's. The rock outcrop separating Odysseus and Calypso has become a wall in *The Enigma of the Oracle*. "Calypso," veiled off, has become an oracle—the male god Apollo, presumably. Unlike Calypso, he stares away from the Odysseus figure. The grief and nostalgia of "Odysseus," therefore, may be the result of being cut off from human concourse (in the city below) and from the enigmatic god veiled off and turning away in the right of the picture. It is as if Calypso becomes an Apollo figure, but one standing, presumably, for the gods in general. The gods know (or God knows) how to cure our nostalgia and melancholy and how to "get us home." But they will not provide us with the



FIG. 12. Giorgio de Chirico, *The Enigma of the Oracle* (1910).
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answer. Thus Apollo looks away and is veiled off from the grieving everyman (who stares brooding from a Mediterranean Delphi—note how the sea is present in the distance). De Chirico thus has made a general statement about human alienation from the transcendent (and its immanence) and from human society, basing his vision on the saccharine and romantic specificity of Böcklin's picture.

At any rate, this Odysseus figure appears elsewhere in de Chirico's pictures from this period. So we see him depicted shrouded in *The Melancholy of a Beautiful Day* (1913), duplicated as tiny figures in *The Lassitude of the Infinite* (1912), and, quite alarmingly, rendered white in *The Enigma of the Hour* (1911). (All these paintings are reproduced later in this appendix.) We suspect that the wraith of *The Delights of the Poet* (1912) is none other than this grieving, melancholic Odysseus, rendered white.

Böcklin's picture helps in other ways. The ocean, the object of Odysseus's gaze, is the proximate cause of his nostalgia. The water of the sea is perhaps what is behind the presence of the fountain in de Chirico's melancholy prewar paintings. The sea is infinite, like linear time. Water becomes associated with

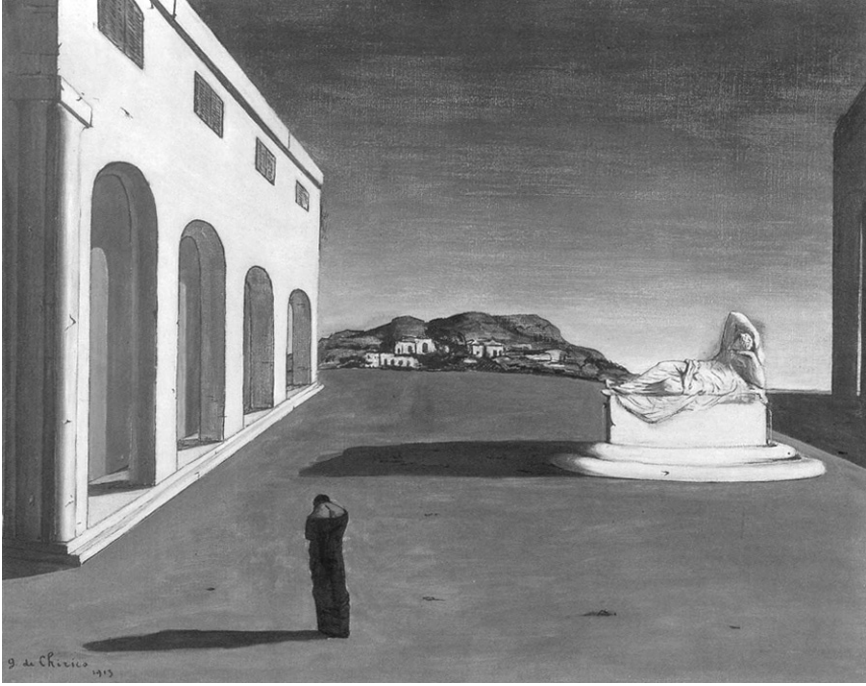


FIG. 13. Giorgio de Chirico, *The Melancholy of a Beautiful Day* (1913). (© Estate of Giorgio de Chirico / SIAE [Rome] / SODRAC [Montreal] 2002; the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels, Belgium.)

the etiology of melancholy and alienation, despite its link, through Nietzsche, to circular time. In *The Enigma of the Oracle*, this proximate cause of melancholy is transformed into a seemingly infinite land and sea vista.¹⁰ This motif occurs again in the other pictures that we have reproduced in this appendix.

Calypso is the ultimate cause of Odysseus's melancholy. She keeps Odysseus away from Ithaca and Penelope. As we have just stated, she "becomes" Apollo in de Chirico's *The Enigma of the Oracle*. There is a stark contrast, in both Böcklin's painting and de Chirico's, between the dark, shrouded, alienated, and melancholic figure and the white figure, the agent of alienation, nostalgia, and melancholy. The polarity is maintained in *The Melancholy of a Beautiful Day* (fig. 13). The powerful white female figure here, again agent of alienation, is, in origin, none other than Böcklin's Calypso. Elsewhere in de Chirico's paintings, she transforms into a figure known as MELANCONIA, melancholia itself, or, not infrequently, Ariadne (see figs. 14–15).¹¹ It is not hard to imagine why Ariadne should become MELANCONIA. How else can she



FIG. 14. Giorgio de Chirico, *Ariadne* (1913). (© Estate of Giorgio de Chirico / SIAE [Rome] / SODRAC [Montreal] 2002.)

have felt, abandoned by Theseus and left to stare out grieving and melancholy, Odysseus-like, across the sea? In *The Melancholy of a Beautiful Day*, however, the Ariadne figure stands in for Böcklin's Calypso and for the Apollo figure of *The Enigma of the Oracle*. Perhaps the Calypso-Ariadne-MELANCONIA figure is not so much the embodiment of the emotion as the cause and progenitor for melancholy and grief. (In figures 14–15, the Ariadne figure is unaware of her abandonment.)¹² These melancholy gods inflict melancholia on humans by refusing to communicate their knowledge (oracles) and by keeping them away from home. (The Ariadne figure of *The Melancholy of a Beautiful Day* seems to block off the Odysseus figure from the human settlement in the distance, thus enforcing his melancholia and nostalgia.)

At any rate, these figures seem, as we suggest, to stand for the silence of the gods and for the alienation and melancholy that their lassid indifference forces upon us. This indifference is embodied in death itself. The language of *The Lassitude of the Infinite* (fig. 16) should by now be plain—the melancholy, the threatening shadowed colonnades matching Böcklin's rocks and the wall of *The Enigma of the Oracle*, the two mourning Odysseus figures, the massive

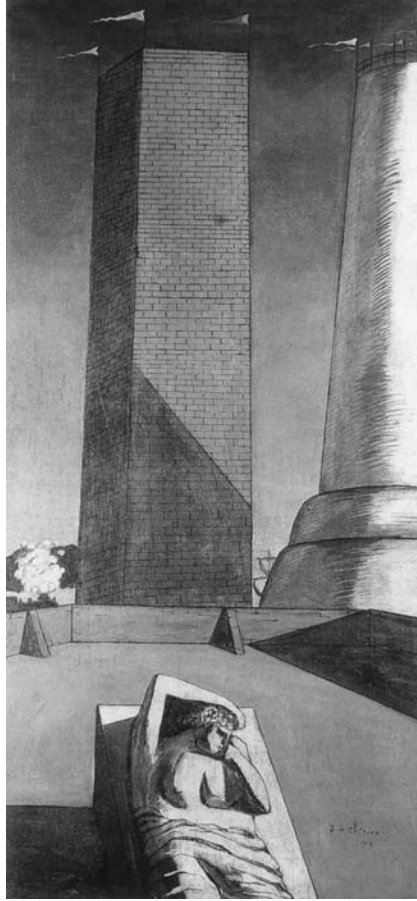


FIG. 15. Giorgio de Chirico, *Ariadne's Afternoon* (1913). (© Estate of Giorgio de Chirico / SIAE [Rome] / SODRAC [Montreal] 2002.)

Calypso-Ariadne figure (the apparent agent of alienation, death, and divine indifference), the train of youth and freshness hurtling toward the tower of death and time, and the infinitude of the endless regressive vista of the painting. The two pictures are powerful variants on the same theme.

The last of the paintings that we would like to address here is *The Enigma of the Hour* (fig. 17). The imagery should be becoming clear. The colonnade, a wall, stands in for Böcklin's rocky outcrop or for the brick wall of *The Enigma of the Oracle* and symbolizes human alienation from the divine. The clock within the structure of the colonnade stands for death, the final alienator. On the piazza, below the clock, is the spring, the symbol for circular time. It stands at counterpoint to the rest of the picture and points to what humans have

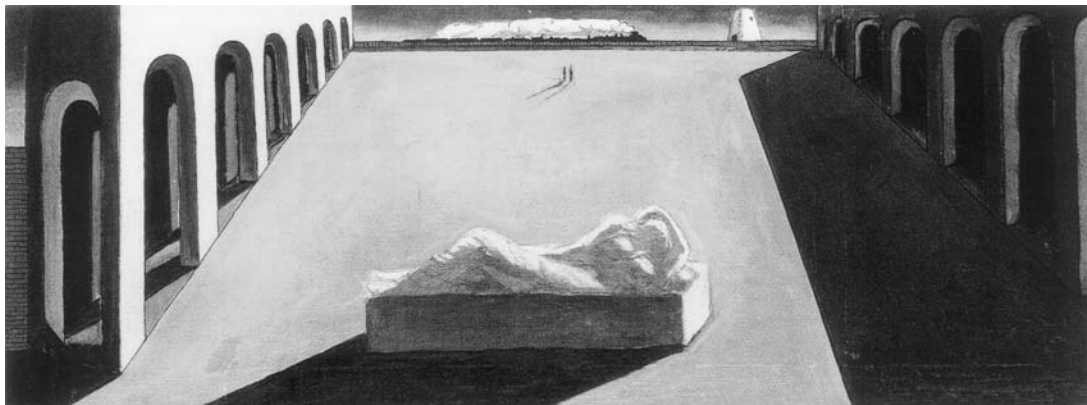


FIG. 16. Giorgio de Chirico, *The Lassitude of the Infinite* (1912).
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lost. The two figures (one white, one dark) in the bottom of the picture, both apparently staring with sorrow at the spring, are Odysseus figures, representing the melancholy, grief, and nostalgia of humans alienated by time, death, and the indifference of the gods. Is the small figure upstairs in the colonnade, to the left of the clock, an obscure version of Apollo-Calypso? *The Enigma of the Hour* joins with de Chirico's *The Enigma of the Oracle*, *The Melancholy of a Beautiful Day*, and *The Lassitude of the Infinite* to establish a remarkable imagistic, thematic, and ideational chain, via Böcklin, right back into classical antiquity.

It would be dreadfully reductive to attribute to intestinal disorder de Chirico's remarkably clear vision of melancholy, alienation, nostalgia, time, death, and the silence of the gods. De Chirico's ideas have ample parallels in other paintings and writings of this period, and for this reason alone they require serious treatment.¹³ Yet the parallel between de Chirico's and Trimalchio's intestinal disorders and the likely links between de Chirico's disorder, his take on time, and melancholia is striking. Intestinal disorder played a very great part in the life of de Chirico in the prewar years. He linked it with melancholy and, it seems, with linear time. This is something that Trimalchio did as well. It suggests, in my opinion, a very strange continuity in the understanding of the link between the body, time (of a linear sort), and melancholy. The continuity has no basis in reality. De Chirico's ideas are too powerful for them to be subject to removal by a digestive aid. Rather, we suggest that there is a popular conceptual continuity between Trimalchio's complaint and that of de Chirico. The

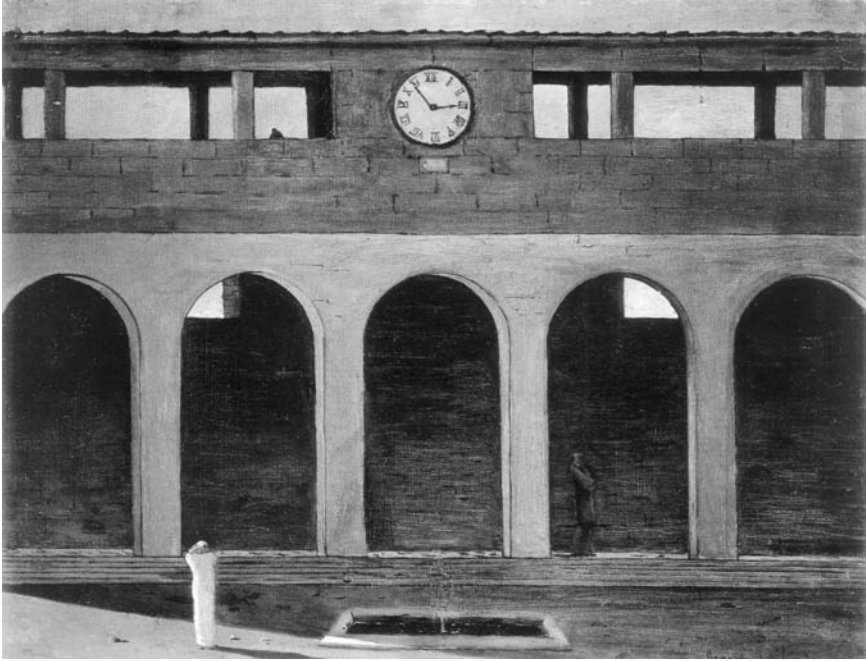


FIG. 17. Giorgio de Chirico, *The Enigma of the Hour* (1912).
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continuity is *discursive* and begins in the first century of our era. Trimalchio acted out time and death as a means to neutralize the fear and affective disorder with which they seemed to threaten him. De Chirico's paintings of 1911–12 and especially 1913 cannot be written down in such a reductive manner. Nonetheless, we have no doubt that they did provide for him a means by which he held together a delicately balanced sanity.

In conclusion, de Chirico's painting demonstrates the strange symbiosis of many of the affective conditions and responses examined so far in this book. It also demonstrates their continuity and, indirectly, the inadequacies of the periodizations favored in popular literature by the likes of Høeg or, in philosophy and cultural studies, by such scholars as Michel Foucault. Further, the paintings, by their articulation of de Chirico's visceral fears, provide a means for countering this and for affirming the boundaries of the self.