

Evdokia Meleziadou

Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece

**GIORGIO DE CHIRICO AND ALBERTO SAVINIO.
BROTHERS AND ARGONAUTS**

Giorgio and his brother Andrea De Chirico, polyedric artists, have shaped in the twentieth century the prototype of the *uomo universale* who is at the same time painter, writer, musician and, as for spirituality and intuitional thought, philosopher. Born in Greece, the two brothers not only preserved a good memory of their homeland as the mythical place of the childhood – remaining Italians or rather citizens of the world, *a-patrides* (that is to say ‘without fatherland’) travelers-nomads – but also protected it in their subconscious as source of inspiration of the figurative world where they created the mythical dimension of the symbols defining the coordinates of this magic space. Giorgio de Chirico’s *metaphysical painting* enables him to isolate the forms and the objects of the external world from their current meaning to a dimension which is not oneiric, but to an ecstatic world which is dominated by intuition and by pure cognition within a circularly pendulous time which bends and then comes back to the dominion of the present. Andrea de Chirico, who would take in Paris the pseudonym of Alberto Savinio, will share with Giorgio the same experiences from Munich till Paris, but will handle them differently at any rate, despite the common literary, philosophical and figurative substratum.

Humanistic education, Greek myth, enygmaticism, journalism and writing, all their multilayered development is characterised by the plurality and the coexistence of various influences. Classical temples, centaurs, Homeric and tragic heroes, Dioscurs and Argonauts, ancient philosophers, Olympian gods, horses and mannequin-like figures, warriors, trophies, muses, surrealist metamorphoses, childhood, the romantic and academic tradition of the nineteenth century Munich, the

vanguard of Paris, the surrealists, the futurists and the classical Italian art. All these components coexist and cohabit in the irony of relativity and all are at the same time refused with a diversion of their contents towards an unpredictable cosmos which extends beyond the dimension of painting, in the icons preexisting to the intuitional area of memory.

In 1911-12 Giorgio de Chirico delineates in the work *The enigma of the Arrival and the Afternoon* (fig. 1) the wall of the port which hides the secret of arrivals and departures, the sail of the boat which in an indefinable sky acts as fuse for new adventures which are still hidden to the spectator. The multiple views alienate the eyes from the usual understanding of the place, and the tower which will appear also in following works symbolizes the transition from the known to the unknown. The combination of a temple-shaped building on the first floor and of a Renaissance one on the second floor resembles the passage from the Greek to the Italian culture through the two openings which look at the same mysterious horizon. The solitary figures coming from the *Odyssey* by Arnold Böcklin – who inspired with emblematic characters of the Greek myth the first works of the brothers De Chirico together with Nietzsche's work – highlight the loneliness, the nostalgia, and the deep feeling of fate which raps the human existence, while confined in a non-space that represents the purely spiritual reality. The artist is able to penetrate and understand the enigma; however, he is kind of immobilized by his inability to interpret it.

The artist-hero of thought, holder of memory and creator of his own myth which he is able to emerge in the contemporary world appears in *Le rêve du poète* (1927) by Alberto Savinio (fig. 2). Making his autobiography, the artist who in the same year comes on the scene as painter, does not intend to transfer his personal journey towards oneiric lands, nor to drawn into the world of the sub conscious. A simple family photo shows the young man modernly dressed, wearing graceless shoes, turning with the head of the an ancient statue towards the bust of Zeus, placed on the floor. The heads of Zeus, Hermes, and Euripides often accompany the compositions of Giorgio de Chirico, like a remembrance from the past. They represent effigies of the antiquity which bring along a mysterious energy so as to revify the memory of living entities as

material icons-symbols of their absence. Savinio maintains that art sprang from the fecund womb of Mnemosyne, towards where the nostalgic wind for the terrestrial immortality blows. Only in the art the primordial good returns as a reminiscence full of life and, as from a miracle, becomes certainty.¹ Nowadays the metaphor of this feeling is quite clear-cut: the modern times in fact are characterized by the modern building, by the library with the volumes which carry the weight of the knowledge from the past and the *exemplum* of the two heads. The poet-Savinio turns round to the empty eyes of an ancient statue to face Zeus' similar eyes, in a non-space which carries scatteringly traces of the return to the homeland.

The tower-lighthouse – which constitutes another stereotype in Giorgio de Chirico's works as well as the sea in the night – refer to the myth of the brothers Argonauts who abandoned the seashores of Thessaly for a brave journey through time and space. A glance at what is left behind crystallizes the memory into an ecstatic-prophetic dimension. The memory, however, is coloured – like Zeus' head – with the ironic, verisimilar nuance of contemporary myth. The same ironic presence of Poseidon's bust will be adopted by Giorgio de Chirico in *The fruits of Poseidon* (1929), with the sea and the sea-wall with the lighthouse. The wooden theatrical platform which can be found in the works of both isolate the objects transferring them into the world of theatrical-poetic pretence, as representation of the individual theatre of memory. The kind of theatre the two brothers De Chirico worked with is for them the unsearchable place between material and illusory space, which is the place for the symbiosis of the metaphysical with the natural world. According to Giorgio, the characters of a tragedy on the closed stage have a deeper lyric value and terrific lyricism². In any event, Savinio himself was a distinguished composer (he wrote music for ballet and pantomime) and designer for theatrical costumes. The theatre as he wants it is a place where he imagines represented on the scene the cases of the world, where things, thoughts, remembrances

¹ Alberto Savinio, *Primi saggi di filosofia delle arti*, Valori Plastici, ch. 5, 1921.

² Giorgio de Chirico, *Il senso architettonico nella pittura antica*, Valori Plastici, chs. 5-6, 1920.

acts as main characters alongside men, where art is dissociated from life³.

An emblematic work of farewell and return to homeland, *The return of the Argonauts* (1921) by Giorgio de Chirico (fig. 3) shows the two Argonauts facing a dark strip of sea with the ancient yawl. The old man who lies on the right side, reiterates the iconography of the river-gods of the antiquity, the leg like statues which look at the sea, appear in Giorgio De Chirico's previous works, but now he has revived them. The atmosphere is neat, the geometricity of the volumes is emphasized by the warm Mediterranean colors. The hope for the up most glory, which symbolizes the conquest of the golden fleece is touched off by the small flag, while the innocence and the spiritual purity acting as equipment for the conquest of the truth through the tragedy of the life appear through the ephebic nudity of the two young men who – like metaphysical signs of the day – turn to the adventures of the sea. The fugacious shape of the past goes across the desert square and is crystallized in the two statues on the left and right corners of the temple-shaped building with Ionic columns. The half-open door which stands by like moirai, is perhaps the entrance of the inner self that is protected by the old man with the stick of Janus, the guard of roads and passages. The *aeternal noon* (*eterno meriggio*), the present which has been immobilized in the whirl of the sun at the zenith favours the presence of eidola, as it was believed in the antiquity. It is the crucial moment for Panos, the moment when the time is split in two parts and leaves the space to the apparition of daimons. The prophetic *furor* of this magic time, the inner intuitional light of the knowledge of future, the shadows which move away and the aquamarine sky accompany the Argonauts' view of the chimera⁴.

In 1927 Alberto Savinio realizes the work *Untitled* (fig. 4), representing an ancient naked cavalier on a grey horse in a room. The ancient world suddenly invades the tidy flat with modern furniture. It is as if it entered from the wide open window from where it is possible to see the neoclassical buildings on the opposite side. The tiny horse with its rider seem petrified in their schematic kinesis on the carpet floor and

³ Alberto Savinio, Teatro, "La stampa", 28.2.1943.

⁴ Giorgio de Chirico, *Gaetano Previati*, Il Convegno, ch.7, 1920.

the verisimilar presence is sort of technically invalidated by the use of intense black lines, shut eyes and a double view of the wooden boards of the floor which again reminds us of the theatrical scene. The De Chirico brothers quite often go back to the sources of the repertoire of ancient works so as to draw figurative exempla from the antiquity⁵. The alienation of the place which favors the apparition of eidola-figures which are obtained through diverse techniques and the style of the various subjects on the same painting. Far-off Thessaly, the place of the Centaurs, the infantile remembrance of the grey small horses and river Pineios are described as mythical remembrance⁶. Moreover, in 1909-10 Giorgio De Chirico painted the well-known portrait of Savinio in front of an open window having as background the landscape of ancient Thessaly, where centaurs and ancient ruins cohabitate, immersed in the rich Mediterranean vegetation. The events of the life of the two brothers in Thessalian Volos and Athens – events which seem to have been ‘forged’ by German philosophy and art of the end of the nineteenth century, create a sort of auto-referential personal mythology, where they are driven to, as to the very origin of reality. It represents a kind of game between enigma and parody which deforms its unravelling, on the basis of polysemy of the ambiguity and *non senso*. For Savinio Greece is an archaic and primordial place where men, facing the horror in front of unexplainable phenomena of nature move towards poetic wisdom, towards the ability to interpret the world through a magic and oracular spectrum⁷.

The theme of horses which is for the first time offered by Giorgio De Chirico in Paris in 1926, is quite regularly matched with antiquities, as we can see in the painting *Two horses on the seashore* (fig. 5). A magnificent Aegean sea, on the seashore in Thessaly, in a dramatized atmosphere in the late afternoon, with the whirl of a column and a archaic acropolis with temples on a hill in the background. As J. Cocteau writes,

⁵ They seem to often make use of Salomon Reinach, *Répertoire de la statuaire grecque et romain*, Paris, 1897-1930.

⁶ Alberto Savinio, Tessaglia, “Il Mediterraneo”, 26.4.1941.

⁷ Maurizio Calvesi, *La metafisica schiarita – Da De Chirico a Carrà, da Moranti a Savinio* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1982), pp.133-135.

“De Chirico, born in Greece, does not have to paint Pegasus. A horse beside the sea, through its colours, its eyes, its body, incorporates the significance of a myth”⁸. The horses in de Chirico assume dimensions of dionysiac impetus and freedom; in other words, they become symbols of the indomitable nature of men. They are rendered with light lines and fresh colours, “as if they were curved and forged into the shape of an immaculate marble like a diamond, divinities which are lifted up to the seashore, bringing along the enigma and the immense nostalgia of the waves in their eyes and in the movement of their white necks”⁹. In the painting, the two graceful horses acquire vividness through the technique of the *non finito* and through their unexpected colours. This representations have the same characteristics as many more similar paintings which were made by De Chirico between 1924 and 1929. All on the seashore of the Aegean Sea, with waving manes and tails which resemble spouting brooks, one dark and one light blond, occasionally enriched by the presence of riders, represent a reference to the immortal horses of Achilleus, to the two brothers who are different but nevertheless identical, who are predestinate to remain always together in a close spiritual relation: Castor and Pollux, the Dioscurs and the Argonauts. It is well-known that the Dioscurs took part into the Argonautic expedition, that the leaders were Iason and the renowned Argo who sailed from the seashores of Volos. The De Chirico brothers intensively felt the appeal of the mythical explorers as an existential need which was fixed in their ephebic memory through the powerful icon of the coexistence of contrasting elements (positive-negative, apollonian-Dionysian). The horses often are presented without eyes, as a sort of mannequin-like figures of their codes of representations themselves, contributing to the portrayal of the idea of alteration of the physical world into a metaphysical one, and demonstrating that the archetype of the horses permeates the two brothers with their personal self-mythology. The associations of archaic ruins and horses are also

⁸ Jean Cocteau, *Le Mystère Laïc*, Quatre Chemins, Paris, 1928.

⁹ Giorgio de Chirico, *Manoscritti Eluard-Picasso* (Parisian Manuscripts 1911-15). They are collected in *Il meccanismo del pensiero, critica, polemica, autobiografia 1911-1943* (Torino: Einaudi Saggi, 1985), pp. 22-23.

to be found in one of Savinio's lyric pieces *Souvenirs* (1945), as he describes "a feeble Greece, still effulgent but in the crepuscule, without gods, without men, where wild goats and horses pasture among the golden ruins of ancient times".¹⁰

Savinio's painting entitled *Les Dioscures* ("The Dioscures"), 1926, (fig. 6) attests the autobiographical world of De Chirico brothers, while presenting the two figures as reflection one of the other, or rather as shadow which follows the man as if it was somebody else. Two bodies which are joined and separated at the same time, with microscopic heads of mannequin-like figures (the only remembrance of antiquity, represented with blond and black tidy curls so as the diversification of the colors to refer to the mythical twin couple, as in the horses of the heroes) seem to blunder among the geometric frames of the room and of the window, in a cosmos which is pervaded by a dynamic metamorphosis. The primordial epoch the two heroes belong to has not yet assigned to them definite characteristics; it rather seems that they have just emerged from a world where everything is still 'under construction', in a chaos which is inhabited by gigantic shapeless Titans, before the dominance of harmony and order guaranteed by Olympic Gods. Savinio deals quite a lot – much more than his brother does – with the theme of irony and parody, which causes an unpleasant feeling of mental anxiety. The Dioscures with the heads of mannequin-like figures are to be found in a situation between life and death, between light and shadow, as Heraclitus – the philosopher they both like – refers. In the dramatic poem *Les chants de la mi-mort* (1914), for the first time Savinio describes men *without voice, eyes and face*, this is to say an embryonic mankind which is still in the phase of gestation. Analogously, in De Chirico's work absolute expressions of the human affliction do appear. They still have the tragic fate of knowing the future in the isolation caused by a world which they are unable to interpret, while on the other hand they are immobilized beyond the historical events.¹¹

¹⁰ Alberto Savinio, *Souvenirs*, (summa od articles from 1931 onwards, collected in a volume in 1945), (Palermo: Sellerio, 1989).

¹¹ Alberto Savinio, *Les chants de la mi-mort*, published during his studies on G. Apollinaire, *Les Soirées de Paris*, July-August 1914. Reprinted in *Hermaphrodito*, 1914.

Hermaphroditus, as symbol of Savinio's poetics and philosophy, expresses the need of cosmic Eros, beyond human boundaries, beyond every animated existence, so as to reach the real essence of the creation of the world through the primordial chaos. It represents the herald who through philosophy and art will bring to the world the message of beauty which is hidden under its ambiguous appearance¹². The reference to Giorgio De Chirico's work is self-evident, not only as far as the name which comes from the archaic κήρυκα, the messenger, the divinity which is depicted together with the painter in the well-known self-portray with head of Hermes (1923), but also in the other half (α-δελφός, i.e. not-one) of the being which, as Hermaphroditus say, "separates the epochs from one place to the other". The characters of Hermes and Aphrodite, in their mystic-alechemistic embrace represent a modern ideal, as they share the light and the shadow.¹³

Hebdomeros, autobiographical hero of Giorgio De Chirico, illustrates the coherent concatenation of dreams in his journey in successive fugacious scenes without a recognizable space and time¹⁴. Ebdomeros is god Apollo of Delphi, whose name is from Ebdomaies, the festivals which were taking place on the 7th day of the month for the birthday in honour of Apollo Ebdomaiois. However, it is also the hero who passes through thousands of dangers and adventures without hiding, like Odysseus, the nostalgia for the homeland and for all the places he loved

¹² Alberto Savinio, *Hermafrodito* [1918] (Torino: Einaudi, 1981).

Alberto Savinio, *La casa ispirata* [1920] (Milano: Adelphi, 1989).

¹³ An analysis of the pictorial themes of Savinio with parallel references to his essays, is found in the catalogue of the exhibition Savinio, *gli anni di Parigi* (1927-1932), Verona, Palazzo Forti e Galleria dello Scudo, 9.12.1990-10.2.1991, Electa 1990. Essays by Pia Vivarelli, Giorgio Cortenova, Daniela Fonti, Franco Rella, Loretta Cammarella, Mila De Santis, Gaspare Falsitta, Nicoletta Boschiero. Also, in the catalogue of the exhibition, *Con Savinio, mostra bio-biblio-grafica*, Electa, Firenze 1981, with essays by Maurizio Calvesi, Vanni Scheiwiller, Maria Salvino, Lara Vinca Masini, Vanni Bramanti, Sergio Zoppi, Daniele Lombardi, Mario Verdone, Cristina Nuzzi.

¹⁴ Giorgio de Chirico, *Ebdomero*, Il melangolo, Genova 1990 (first published as *Hebdomeros, le peintre et son génie chez l'écrivain* (Paris: Ed. du Carrefour, 1929).

while traveling. Ultimately, it is the archetypical model of the traveler – Argonaut – who on one hand desires open seas for new experiences and on the other turns to the lost past of his young age. In this poetic-labyrinthine wandering of the hero through almost all the figurative places in Giorgio de Chirico's works, we meet the image of the seafarer of the room where the hero rows in a boat on the humid surface of the floor¹⁵. In the painting *The Return of Odysseus* (1968) (fig.7), the hero rows in the sea which lays like a carpet in the centre of the room and encloses from the memories of many pictorial themes in art, such as the furniture from the series *Furniture in the valley*, the armchair where *The Archaeologists* were sitting, the metaphysical *Italian Square*, on the painting on the left side, the open window with Greek landscape, the Mediterranean light and the archaic temple on the right. It seems that the time is approaching the end for the man who having the destiny of Odysseus, has lost everything except memory¹⁶. If the archaic world wants to discover its mystery, has necessarily to join the memory of the past with the memory of the present time. This mystery is nothing else but the perennial actuality of antiquity. Memory is another life. If lost, one cannot turn back. It is the vehicle of return from a journey which might have taken place only in the realm of imagination, and it is also one more ironic displacement of things which the artist investigates, turning time upside down, while – as Ebdomeros does – “*he gets used to change the direction of its gaze*”¹⁷.

The figure of Odysseus as symbol of continuous search is to be found also in Savinio's theatrical piece *Capitano Ulisse*, which was firstly performed in 1938 at the Teatro delle Arti in Rome¹⁸. In *Ulisse e Polifemo* (1929) (fig. 8), Savinio deletes any elements of heroism and

¹⁵ Giorgio de Chirico, *Ebdomero*, pp.43-44.

¹⁶ Giorgio de Chirico, *Ebdomero*, pp.117-118.

¹⁷ Detailed comments and documents on the artist in Paolo Thea, *De Chirico e lo svelamento del mito* in Jole de Sanna (ed.) *La metafisica del Mediterraneo*, Rizzoli, Roma, 1998, and in M. Fagiolo dell'Arco e P. Baldacci (ed.), *Giorgio de Chirico. Parigi 1924-1929*, Milano 1982.

¹⁸ Alberto Savinio, *Capitano Ulisse* (written in 1925 and published in 1934) (Milano: Adelphi, 1989).

peculiarity in the Homeric character of Odysseus who navigates slowly in the background of the Mediterranean Sea, a disordered mixture of geometric objects which their ambivalent meanings put in danger the seriousness of the scene. The myth loses its heroism, the return and the immortality of the name are more relevant become highly relevant. If the these objects are represented by the rocks which Poliphemos has thrown, then they create a type of trophy that reminds us of the games for children and the polyedric structures of many works by Giorgio de Chirico on the theme of trophies. The *vain monument* for the journey without return, a game of sarcastic auto irony and desecration which tends to de-mythicizing the myth itself, the recording of the interpretation of reality. The perception of the artist has lead him till the essence of things and he is in the position to treat ironically – with a light mood – the fragile theatricality of the re-presentation of a myth. The ship, the sea, the toys for children, are the representation of the need of freedom which is shared with his Dioscure-Argonaute brother, of the childhood, the unrealized desire of which is expressed through art – the only way of salvation from the tragic destiny of oblivion. Through the poignant experience of infantile memory, Savinio looks for the traces of this mystery in Greece, as place of the heroic-infantile dimension of life.

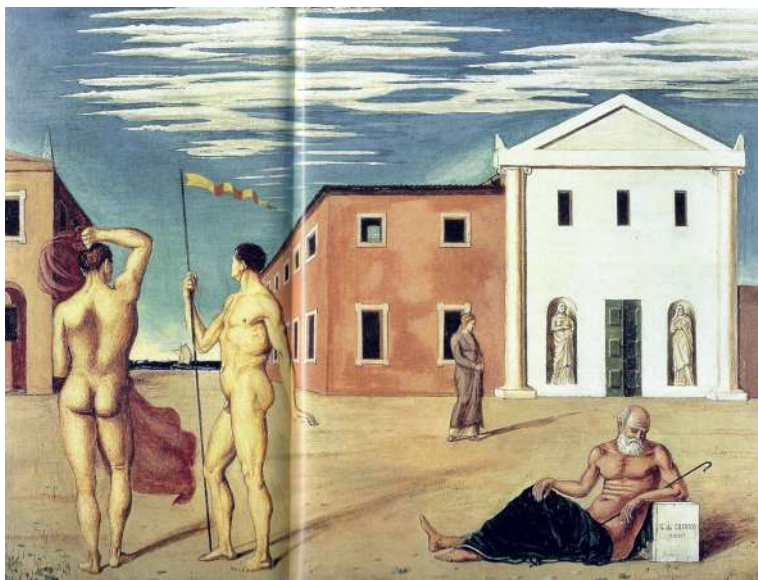
The Dioscures-Argonauts brothers Giorgio de Chirico and Alberto Savinio have created an entire world of archetypical figures, a new figurative language through which they have built stable and recognizable characters. They followed the daemon that is hidden in all things and animate them, which in other words represents the enigmatic personification of the unknown, and of the infinite and which at the last stages of the search takes the form of eternity. Through the emptying of meanings, the perennial elements of history – adumbrated as enigma – are here disclosed. Myths contribute to this process. Their work is a huge archive of images without words which can be approached with irony, auto-sarcasm, romantically or lyrically, with theatricality with a continuous process of metamorphosis. The solution of the enigma of the sphinx-daemon that leads to eternity is to be found in Greece. Odysseus and the Argonauts never came back because in reality they never left.



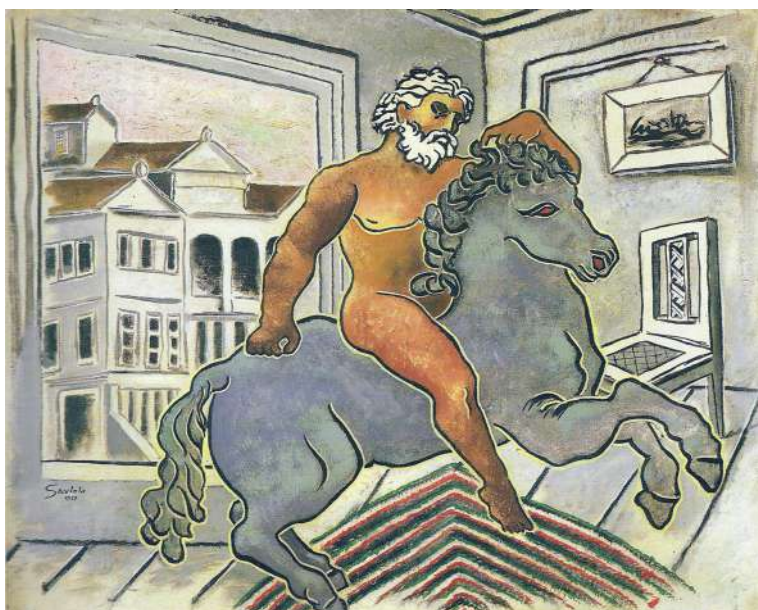
1. Giorgio de Chirico, *The enigma of Arrival and the Afternoon*, 1911-12, oil on canvas, 70×86.5. Private collection.



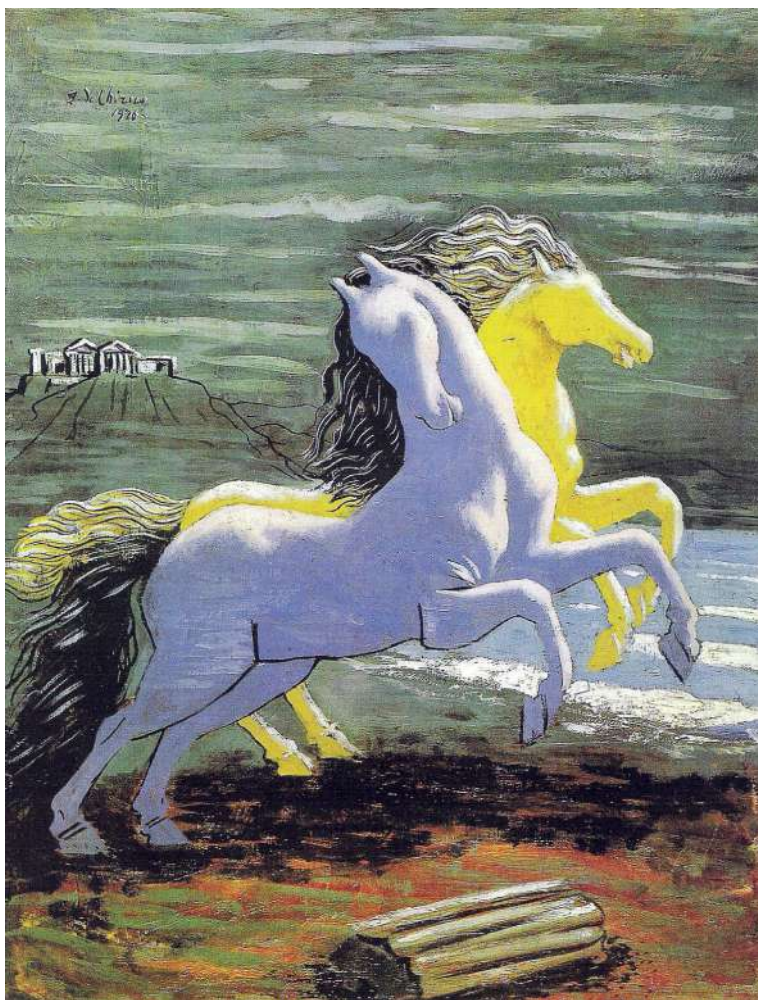
2. Alberto Savinio, *Le rêve du poète*, 1929, oil on canvas, 116×89. Private collection.



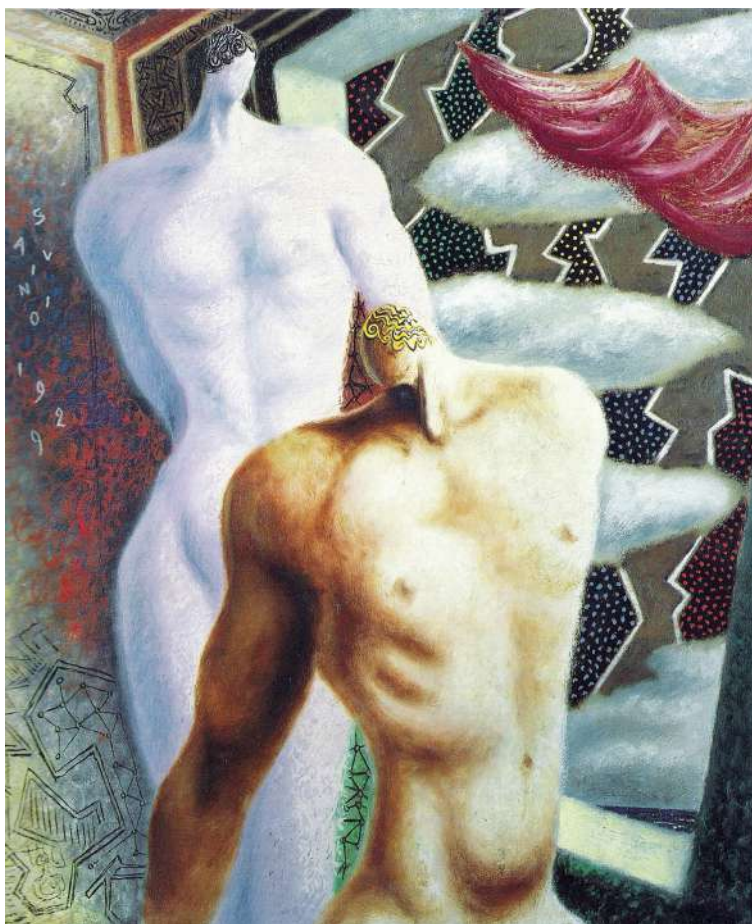
3. Giorgio de Chirico, *The return of the Argonauts*, 1920, oil on canvas, 54×73. Private collection.



4. Alberto Savinio, *Untitled*, 1927, oil on canvas, 65×81. Private collection.



5. Giorgio de Chirico, *Two horses on the seashore*, 1926, oil on canvas, 92×73. Private collection.



6. Alberto Savinio, *The Dioscures*, 1929, oil on canvas, 64,7×54,1. Private collection.



7. Giorgio de Chirico, *The return of Odysseus*, 1968, oil on canvas, 60×80. Foundation Giorgio e Isa de Chirico.



8. Alberto Savinio, *Ulysse et Poliphème*, 1929, oil on canvas, 65×81. Köln, Museum Ludwig.