A NOTE ON GIORGIO DE CHIRICO'S "SONG OF LOVE"

I HAVE SELECTED an early painting from Giorgio de Chirico's so-called metaphysical period, "The Song of Love," as *The Seduction of Unreason*'s graphic template. In many respects, the painting's imagery is germane to the theme implied by my title: that "unreason" has an uncanny power to fascinate and seduce.

De Chirico, of course, became an icon among the Surrealists. Breton adjudged him one of the first genuinely Surrealist painters: the artist who was responsible for initiating a revolutionary break with the unpardonable prosaism of representational art. (At a later point, when de Chirico abandoned metaphysical painting for the assurances of neo-realism, he fell out of favor with his one-time champions.)

The iconography of this image is both simple and inexhaustibly rich. According to scholarly lore, much of it derives from the artist's boyhood in Volos, Greece: the wall, the green cloth ball, and the smoking locomotive—a de Chirico fixture.

But the painting's most striking imagery concerns the provocative juxtaposition of the Apollo Belvedere and the rubber surgical glove. In light of Apollo's status as a god of illusion and appearance—an interpretation famously codified by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*—de Chirico's painterly tribute to him is fitting and unremarkable. Moreover, the visage of Apollo—also the god of love—gives the painting its title.

Yet the image of Apollo presented here is a fragment—a lifeless and oversized bust. As such, de Chirico's tribute is both reverential and irreverent. The painting purveys a sense of "transcendental homelessness": de Chirico's homelessness as an émigré, as well as our own irreducible alienation from the classical tradition. The tradition still speaks to us, but it does so in a language we do not immediately understand. Out of this loss, de Chirico is trying to forge new meaning—a new, post-classical iconography, a symbology "after the fall," as it were. At the same time, the painter knows that

the new symbolism is destined to be non-classical: a symbolism condemned to fragmentation. As a painter, de Chirico's bravado lay in the fact that he accepted this condition and made it the subject matter of his art.

But, undoubtedly, the painting's most disconcerting image is the gigantic rubber glove, nailed to the wooden partition next to the Apollo bust. Before de Chirico had had a chance to incorporate it into the painting, this glove-fetish caught the attention of Guillaume Apollinaire. Writing in the July 1914 issue of the *Paris Journal*, Apollinaire announced:

> Mr. de Chirico has just recently acquired a glove of pink rubber, one of the more extraordinary objects that one can find. It is destined, once copied by the artist, to render his future works even more striking and disconcerting than his past ones. If one asks him as to the terror that this glove is capable of inciting, he will speak to you immediately of the still more terrifying toothbrushes just invented by the dental art, the most recent and perhaps the most useful of all the arts.

Why the "terrifying" glove? Was de Chirico merely heeding Baudelaire's maxim that the "painter of modern life" must lionize the everyday? Is the glove de Chirico's humble contribution to the creation of a "modern mythology" (Aragon), a mythology the disenchanted denizens of the modern urban life so desperately crave? In any event, the glove and the Apollo Belvedere represent a genuinely striking juxtaposition; they are living proof of the Surrealist insight (borrowed from Lautréamont) about the "marvelous" nature of a "chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table." In point of fact, de Chirico's glove happens to be a *surgical* glove. In this way, nine years before the publication of Breton's "Manifesto of Surrealism," de Chirico anticipated the Surrealist doctrine of "objective chance." Thereby, both de Chirico and the Surrealists put the intoxicating powers of "unreason" to productive use.

THE SEDUCTION OF UNREASON