

The Enigma of the Horse: the Image of the Monument as Fiction
[El enigma del caballo: la imagen del monumento como ficción]

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With the avant-gardes the idea of the monument acquires a new meaning. Until the twentieth century, monuments were related to memory, alluding in some way to the sacredness of the represented past and associated with funerary architecture; from the appearance of the first avant-gardes, however, their function ceased to so clear, becoming lost in a world of mechanical images. The De Chirico brothers—Giorgio and Alberto Savinio—represent a contrary vision of the monument. In the case of the former, the apogee of monuments had led to their de-signification. In Savinio, on the other hand—against the non-historical exteriority that monuments represented for his brother—they present an interiority from which a deep significance emanated; as if their presence had been reduced to the imagination. The work of these two Italians is a reflection on the abstraction of the instant, dramatized by the monument and its figuration.

Keywords: monument; Giorgio de Chirico; Alberto Savinio; avant-gardes; metaphysics.

A partir de las vanguardias, la idea del monumento adquiere un nuevo significado. Si antes del siglo xx el monumento se relacionaba con la memoria, aludiendo, de algún modo, a la sacralidad del pasado representado y a la tumba funeraria, a partir del acaecimiento de las primeras vanguardias deja de tener una función tan clara, para desvanecerse en un mundo de imágenes mecánicas. Los hermanos De Chirico—Giorgio y Alberto Savinio—representan una visión opuesta del monumento. En el primero, el auge de monumentos ha conducido a una des-significación de los mismos. En Savinio, la exterioridad no histórica que representan los monumentos para su hermano, se convierte en una interioridad de la que emana un significado profundo; como si su presencia hubiera sido reducida a la imaginación. La obra de estos dos italianos es una reflexión sobre la abstracción del instante, escenificada por el monumento y su figuración.

Palabras clave: monumento; Giorgio de Chirico; Alberto Savinio; vanguardias; metafísica.

PELLIZZI, Francesco, “The Enigma of the Horse: the Image of the Monument as Fiction”, en Linda BÁEZ RUBÍ y Emilie CARREÓN BLAINE (eds.), *XXXVI Coloquio Internacional de Historia del Arte. Los estatutos de la imagen, creación-manifestación-percepción* (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México-Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, 2014), 313-329.

**IV. DOCUMENTO Y MONUMENTO:
“IMÁGENES HISTÓRICAS”**

THE ENIGMA OF THE HORSE: THE IMAGE OF THE MONUMENT AS FICTION

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For Angelica,
in ricordo del Poveromo

[...] O heavens! Die two
months ago, and not forgotten yet! Then there's
hope a great man's memory may outlive half
a year: but, by'r Lady, 'a must build churches,
then; or else shall 'a suffer not thinking on, with
the hobby-horse, whose epitaph is 'For O, for O,
the hobby-horse is forgot!'
Hamlet, III, ii, 124-9

The 'enigmatic horse,' refers to a mental image, still vivid in my mind: it is that of a child's *rocking horse* in the middle of a rather dark bourgeois nursery interior, painted at some point—I thought—by Giorgio de Chirico.¹ Many years ago, I referred to this same image in a talk I gave at Washington's National Gallery of Art; but I have now come to suspect that this may in fact have been, from the start, a kind of 'false-recollection'—perhaps akin

¹ The present essay is offered here as the record of an oral presentation, in a form very close to the one that was read at the conference in Mexico City, on October 11th, 2012. I wish to thank the organizers of the Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas of the UNAM for inviting me to participate in the conference, Rita Eder who gently moderated the session of which it was part, and Gini Alhadeff for reviewing its English form. It would be impossible to incorporate here in the text the many images that constituted a sort of parallel visual commentary on it. Hence the solution has been adopted here to post them all, in their chosen order, on a location of my website, from which, it is hoped, they can be easily viewed, at: http://www.francescopellizzi.com/Francesco_Pellizzi/Enigma_of_the_Horse_-_Images.html

to those psychologists sometime encounter in the childhood memories of their subjects—because, despite extensive searches in my library (and on the Internet), I have been unable, so far, to find any trace of its existence, either as a work by De Chirico or by anybody else.² This ‘false memory’ might be dubbed a ‘surreal experience’ (as if I had *dreamt* the image of the painting), but it so happens that De Chirico, in the winter of 1914-1915, did draw what looks like a ‘carnival’ horse, against the background of his enigmatically monumental settings, while in an important painting of that same first winter of War a rather mysterious toy-like object appears (‘upside-down’) that could well be a stick-hobbyhorse.³ Be that as it may, the image of the hobbyhorse—in real or metaphorical—has a long history, even beyond the Western tradition, as a sort of *nostalgic*, mock- or make-believe-contraption associated with child-play and with masquerades, often of a bawdy and carnevalesque nature, at least since the late Middle Ages.⁴ In fact, the very title of De Chirico’s *The Evil Genius of a King* may remind us that as a literary image the hobbyhorse famously appears, for instance, as a sarcastic reference in Hamlet’s last words of introduction to the *silent play-within-the-play* with which he aims to expose the crime of his uncle, the king, and the truth about his father’s murder: “[...] he must build churches, then; or else he will not be remembered, like the hobby-horse, whose epitaph is ‘For O, for O, the hobby-horse is forgot!’”⁵ Both the image of his father and that of Hamlet’s honor can dissolve as the memory of a childhood toy, or of a shady dance-pantomime, unless a *monument* (a church, in this case) is promptly built ‘in its place,’ to both hide and assuage the fickle consciousness of the living.⁶ In any event, these ‘theatrical,’ make-believe images of childhood and play (hence, also, in Freudian terms, of disillusion, negation, and disavowal), will also come very much to the fore in some key works of the Modernist avant-garde. Giorgio De Chirico stated as much, in 1913:

² Figure 1. Giorgio De Chirico, *The Apparition of the Horse*, 1914-1915; Private Collection (?).

³ Figure 2. Giorgio De Chirico, *The Evil Genius of a King*, 1914-1915; MoMA, New York.

⁴ Figure 3. *Boy on Hobbyhorse*, stoneware pillow; China, Jin Dynasty, ca. 1115-1234; Metropolitan Museum, New York.

⁵ Hamlet may be here quoting from the words of a popular ballad, associated with the so-called “Morris dance,” which was viewed as lewd, or at least improper, in late-Elizabethan Reformation circles. See Hamlet, III, ii, 124-9.

⁶ Laurence Sterne, in *Tristram Shandy* also echoed the quasi-post-modern ambiguity of Hamlet’s “hobby-horse,” and Nietzsche thought that in Sterne—“this most liberated writer”—the roles of “reader” and “author” were freely interchanged, just as are those of the characters in Hamlet’s play-within-the-play with those of their ‘target-characters’ in the play itself. See Figure 4. Hobbyhorse in “Morris” popular dance: Thames at Richmond, with the Old Royal Palace (detail), ca. 1620; Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

To become *truly immortal* [emphasis mine] a work of art must escape all human limits: logic and common sense will only interfere. But once these barriers are broken it will enter the regions of childhood vision and dream.⁷

Before returning to this “fleeting/immortal” aspect of childhood imagery in relation to that of fictional ‘monumentality’⁸ let me now turn to a very different yet, in my mind, related image:⁹ It is that of the epical, make-believe wooden contraption that the Ionians called *Dou̓reios Hippos*—the Wooden Horse—and we the *Trojan Horse*.¹⁰ ‘Conceived by Odysseus, but actually crafted by the ‘sculptor’ Epeiòs (in some instances, under the divine guiding hand of Athena) it looms large (literally) at the beginning of our civilization’;¹¹ though from the other end of the historical-symbolic spectrum from the diminutive hobbyhorse, it represents as much of an iconic *anti-monument*, as does, say, the discarded sled—*Rosebud*—(itself a sort of hobbyhorse) burning in the cleansing fire of oblivion, in the closing image of Orson Wells’ *Citizen Kane*, also an emblem of that ‘pseudo-Paradise Lost’ that bourgeois Modern society came to identify with and locate in childhood (a world newly *separate*, hence in some way newly ‘sacralized’).¹² In the Greek epos, the make-believe *image* of the horse, once the emblem of Troy, became the tragic cause of its ruin. We may see it as a sort of distant counterpoint to the hobbyhorses that populated so many nurseries in modern times, whose images may have haunted the ambivalent longings of

⁷ Giorgio De Chirico, “On Mystery and Creation” (Paris, 1913), as quoted in Richard Friedenthal, *Letters of the great artists*, vol. 1, *From Ghiberti to Gainsborough* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1963), 231. Of course, already for some time, Freud had been daringly (and famously) redirecting his scientific and personal analyses towards the unfathomable and enduring mysteries of childhood: “Freud ran the same, and in our eyes, crazy risk [as Schliemann in his childhood-born obsession with finding the ruins of Troy]: at a certain point in his life, from within the most rigid of cultural backgrounds, he began to lend credence to the prehistoric residues of his childhood, to that censured part of ourselves that resurfaces in dreams and fantasies.” Elvio Fachinelli, “Freud” (1966), in *Su Freud*, ed. Lamberto Boni, Piccola biblioteca Adelphi 633 (Milano: Adelphi, 2012), 11-62, 27. On the gap between creation and reception, doubling that between childhood and adulthood, one may recall the conclusion of Ernst H. Gombrich’s famous essay: “Meditations on a Hobby Horse” (1951): “[...] a Picasso would turn from pottery to hobby horses [...] but [...] he could not make the hobby horse mean to us what it meant to its first creator. That way is barred by the angel with a flaming sword.” Gombrich, *Meditations on a Hobby Horse and other essays on the theory of art* (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1985), 11.

⁸ Figure 5. “Trojan Horse” pythos; 670 BC; Archeological Museum, Mykonos.

⁹ Figure 6. *Stamnos*, Etruria: Epeios constructs the wooden horse, 5th c. BC.

¹⁰ Figure 7. Epeiòs(?) and the “Trojan Horse”; Vulci, ca. 480 BC; Munich Museum.

¹¹ Figure 8. *Kylix* with Athena fashioning the Trojan Horse; Attic, ca. 5th c. BC Archeological Museum, Florence.

¹² Figure 9. Orson Welles, *Citizen Kane*, 1943; *Rosebud*; Private Collection (?).

many of their young inhabitants long afterwards. If the hobbyhorse became a new emblem of that Paradise Lost that Modern society came to newly identify with and locate in childhood—a world forever *separate* (hence in some way newly ‘sacred,’ though ‘secular’)—Ulysses’ monumental contraption on wheels, a gift with a poisonous sting, destined for deception and obsolescence, is perhaps the prototype of a unique (and hence also *sacred*), *art* offering (*agalma* or *xòanon*, as the Greeks would call it), ensconcing *invisibly*, within its *animal* form, *live* human presences (as a monument, or the theratomorph image of a Egyptian divinity, for instance, never does), intent on causing death and destruction.¹³ Laocoön died a horrible death, with his children, for attempting to warn the Trojans against the treachery of this ‘Palladian monument’ and the Hellenistic image of his demise, rediscovered in Rome, inspired countless developments in early-Modern art, and even down to our days.¹⁴ I take the fictive nature of the pre-history and history of that *wooden horse*, on many levels, as a paradigm of some of the ways in which ancient conceptions of the ‘monument,’—notably, the funerary monument—after enduring, and being transformed, throughout our history, seem to have finally drifted into a ‘monumental crisis’ (forgive the pun) which I see as symptomatically expressed in *fictional* (as opposed to mythical, or even realistic) modes.¹⁵ These virtual monuments of Modernism are, from the start, pastiches of sort, hybrids themselves (and as such, like so many other Modernists innovations, *ante literam* postmodern). I am suggesting that since the time of the invention of the avant-garde, a new narrative and representational treatment superimposed itself as a secondary symbolic dimension to the old primary function of the object—monument as *memento*, or concretion of ‘material’ memory.¹⁶ I shall focus on literary references because I am not dealing here, principally, with monuments as *things*, but with the *idea* of monument—and with its *image*: i.e., with the monument as an idea, first of all, but also—and here what I call the fictional aspect becomes prominent—with the Idea as *imaginal* monument. Let me then first approach this aspect of the *fictional* dimension of the modern monument, before saying something about its history and concluding with a few words about institutionalized memory (or museum-type memory, we could also call it.¹⁷ I propose to do so by evoking some writings by Andrea de Chirico, Giorgio de Chirico’s younger and only brother, whose adopted

¹³ Figure 10. El Greco, *Laocoön*, 1604-14; National Gallery of Art, Washington. The horse, at the center background, should be noted.

¹⁴ Figure 11. Los Carpinteros, *Eclipse troyano*, 1998; Private Collection.

¹⁵ Figure 12. Giorgio De Chirico, *I cavalli della tragedia*, ca. 1935; The Barnes Foundation.

¹⁶ Figure 13. Giorgio De Chirico, *The Red Tower*, 1913; Guggenheim Museum, Venice.

¹⁷ Figure 14. Giorgio De Chirico, *Autoritratto con il fratello*, 1924; Private Collection (?).

nom de plume—also as a painter—became Alberto Savinio. It was actually Andrea who brought Giorgio to Paris—after the well-known ‘metaphysical’ epiphany De Chirico had experienced, one day in 1906, on Florence’s Piazza Santa Croce, while standing in front of its 1865 monument to Dante,¹⁸ and which eventually led, in turn, to his seminal *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon*, of 1910.¹⁹ Andrea was also a gifted musical composer and his 1914 iconoclastic Paris performance of his *Les chants de la mis-mort, suite pour piano* was later considered by André Breton to have been a key event of the early Avant-Garde, at the very roots of Surrealism).²⁰ If Andrea came to be somewhat overshadowed by his older sibling, I hope to show how his poetic *fiction*, both in writing *and* painting, provided a sort of revealing *controcanto* to De Chirico’s ‘philosophical images,’ particularly with regard to what both brothers *saw*, I believe, as the traditional monument’s *vanishing act*, in a world of proliferating mechanical images (and propaganda).

I

I shall draw throughout this text from a collection of stories written by Savinio—in the teens, twenties and early thirties of the last century—which were finally collected in 1938, in his book *Achille Innamorato*, or *Achilles in Love*.²¹ The theme of the word (and sound) as manifestation of the secret “soul” of a monument that is somehow secretly “alive,” recurs throughout these texts.²² The title of our first story could be rendered in English as “Song of solitude, or The shipwreck of the ‘*Commendatore*’.” It is a tale that deals, at once dialectically and, again, poetically, with the theme of ultimate, *monumental isolation*. A sort of ‘potential monument’ appears in it, at first as just a large, oddly-shaped rock, perched on the beach of a desert island, that turns out to be a singing and talking, half-sculpted image into which a French engineer (can one imagine a more ‘rational’ creature than that?) who had long been shipwrecked on the island, had finally managed to cast his own soul before dying. In a paradoxical echo of Baudelaire’s famous

¹⁸ Figure 15. Monument to Dante, Piazza S. Croce, Florence, 1865.

¹⁹ Figure 16. Giorgio De Chirico, *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon*, 1910; Peggy Guggenheim Collection.

²⁰ Figure 17. Man Ray, *A. Breton in front of De Chirico’s Enigme d’une journée* (1914), 1922.

²¹ The book’s full titled is *Achille Innamorato (Gradus ad Parnassum: racconti)*, Prosatori italiani contemporanei (Florence: Vallecchi, 1938), and that of the story in question here is *Il Canto della Solitudine, ovvero, Il Naufragio del Commendatore*, originally published in the magazine *Il Broletto* (Como: C. Peroni, 1935). I referred to the critical edition published as Alberto Savinio, *Casa ‘la Vita’ e altri racconti*, ed. Alessandro Tinteri e Paola Italia, *La Nave Argo* 4 (Milano: Adelphi, 1999), 73-80.

²² Figure 18. Alberto Savinio, *Il Sogno di Achille*, 1929; Private Collection.

verse, “*Homme libre, toujours tu chériras la mer*,” the “Commendatore” in the title of the story, himself eventually ship-wrecked on the same spot, gradually develops an intimate friendship with the spirit within the vocal monument, to the point of renouncing to be “freed” by any possible rescuers and joining his predecessor in the monolith facing the sea.²³ One is reminded of famous precedents of this gently haunting tale: there are living persons who turn into statues—and vice versa, effigies that come back to life—in the Biblical and Classic traditions, in Shakespeare, etc. Without going too far, however—and thinking of Savinio’s musical predilections—an obvious resonance may be with that *Statua del Commendatore* (Tirso de Molina’s *Convivado de piedra*, ca. 1615-1630)—that appeared as the *sur-real* agent (or anti-*Deus-ex-machina*) of the climactic demise of the hero-antihero at the end of Mozart’s (and Da Ponte’s) *Don Giovanni*. There too, “*l’uom di sasso*” is a funerary monument—a carved stone inhabited by a voice, but also an ominous image bringing about the annihilating clash of two states of being: that of *unlimited* desire, or of life *unbounded*, and that of the preservation of order and form, and of the memory of valor. Remember that *both* don Giovanni and the *Commendatore di Pietra* can be seen as descending into Hell, bound together by their ‘insoluble’ handshake: as if the pursuit of honor and dishonor were two faces of a common destiny, and the marble hand of the Commendatore clasped that of the Faustian count in a final spasmodic grip—pleasure principle and death wish conjoined—that is a tragic (but un-cathartic) union of *heterogeneous* elements, in some ways prefiguring Blake’s *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.²⁴

In Savinio’s tale, however, the solipsistic contentment of the semi-carved, *quasi-natural* monument (a sort of ‘landmark’) is infused with renewed *life* by incorporating, as if in one *flesh*, a second soul—a kind of *anima gemella*. In their dialogue within the rock-monument—the mediating element—nature itself becomes a place of memory and of memories, of hidden presences and indelible identities, and, as Savinio imagines, of “blissful wonder” (“*felici stupori*”), for those who have ears to listen.²⁵ We may be reminded of Fernando Pessoa, for whom in those same years, multiple, coexisting poetic identities, and the implicit and explicit ‘dialogue’ between them, had been the very center of *artistic* practice, as if there was

²³ Figure 19. Alberto Savinio, *Guerriero*, 1927-1928; Private Collection (?).

²⁴ Figure 20. Alberto Savinio, *L’ange mauvais*, 1930; Private Collection (?).

²⁵ Figure 21. Bruce Conner, *Dennis Hopper One Man Show*, volume III, Plate v, 1971; Private Collection. An echo of what I see as De Chirico’s and Savinio’s post-monumental *Weltanschauung* can be found in some of the work by the late (and in some way ‘post-Surrealist’) California artist Bruce Conner, some of whose images I have chosen for this reason as a sort of Contemporary reflection to accompany my main theme here.

great metaphysical value in actually *being* other people. Savinio, for his part, in a “Comment” to a book of his from that same period, titled *Tragedy of Childhood*, also wrote: “Human [...] stands for human solidarity, and replaces dead individuality, the dead will to greatness, the dead ‘solitude’ of man.” But fighting this “dead ‘solitude’ of man,” paradoxically, may ultimately imply taking a distance from one’s ego and ‘observing’ oneself as if from behind one’s own shoulder...²⁶

So, this trans-individual, dual (and even *conversational*) framework of the monument, which had its roots in traditional funerary contexts, and which lingered on, under different guises, in modern ones—with their hypostases of institutional and ideological memory—here, in what came to be known as “metaphysical” and “Surrealist” Modernism, finally shed these references and connotations. This aniconic (and even *iconoclastic*, but I shall not get into that aspect, here) modern destiny of the art-monument curiously echoes certain extreme forms of archaic ancestor- and spirit-worship, where both name and image can fade, as if absorbed in time into monolithic form).²⁷ But today, it is as if the spirit could no longer *possess* the monumental object *from the inside* and were confined to its exterior, *visible*, epidermic form—i.e., to its image. Savinio, in the eerily sounding aniconic monument-rock of his “Song of solitude,” may have hinted as much, though perhaps (again not un-like Mozart) *a contrario*: the monument reduced to its (invisible) *sound*, or to its presence as *imagined*.²⁸ A similar ambivalence is reflected in Giorgio de Chirico’s ‘metaphysical’ paintings, where *monuments* appear so prominently, almost obsessively. It could be argued, in fact, that the inflation (and hence decline) of the memorial monument in our culture—to the point that, actually, almost anything at any time can now stand as a make-shift ‘monument,’ or at least a *landmark*—is what is reflected in the proliferation of their programmatically *enigmatic* images that haunt de Chirico’s cityscapes. These too are fictional objects within more comprehensive fictions, *isolated* (and insular) elements (like those in his brother’s stories) embedded in the artist’s post- or meta-Symbolist settings.²⁹ But (unlike Savinio’s literary ones) they are *mute*, devoid of one essential feature of ‘historical’ monuments—their reference to the *narration* of given individual identities, or at least to that of specific places and times, or even to isolated events and abstract values. In De Chirico, the *image* of the monument is *meta-narrative*—and its presence (as so many of his titles indicate) fundamentally *in-explicable*. For his brother, on the other

²⁶ Figure 22. Alberto Savinio, *Doppio ritratto di Sante Astaldi*, 1950; Private Collection.

²⁷ Figure 23. Menhir, “Geant du Manio,” ca. 3,000–2,000 BC; Carnac.

²⁸ Figure 24. Alberto Savinio, *Untitled*, 1929; Private Collection.

²⁹ Figure 25. Giorgio De Chirico, *The Nostalgia of the Infinite*, 1911-1913; MoMA, NY.

hand, it is as if ‘monuments,’ though equally mysterious, invariably evoked images of *personal* engagement, of one sort or another, both through their intrinsic ‘inner life,’ and their *reception* by the viewer.

When thinking then of *monuments*, still today, what immediately comes to mind are these *images* conveyed by the visual and poetic arts. They certainly haunt the imaginal world of Magritte, for whom the casting of memory into bronze and stone, and the monumental ruin as preternatural object are almost ubiquitous images.³⁰ It is well-known that the very leaders and theorists of the Surrealist movement, such as André Breton, accused de Chirico of “betrayal”—after long holding him as their ensign-bearer—when he veered ‘back’ into what they thought was a neo-classical, and hence ‘conservative’ mode: but perhaps his (literally) *statuesque* horses and youths prancing on improbable beaches where not less ‘metaphysical’ than all those empty, stylized piazzas of his, with their statues ‘lost’ in a cool light—“*forgotten monuments*” (a contradiction in terms that seemed to inspire both de Chirico and Savinio).³¹ The monument, in this sort of cerebrally moody, *deserted*, urban setting, is often the only *trace* of human life: it is there, yet it isn’t, as though forever asking unanswerable questions about the nature, and, destiny, of our constructed space. A train may be going by, or a ship, a flag may unfurl in the wind, but, once more, all this *silently*, as if in a suspended moment—or an interrupted sentence—and in the recorded awareness of a present precariously balanced between the *nonstops*, the pain, of a haunting past and the intimations of an uncertain future.

This sense of an *abstraction of the instant* is not new in Modern Western Art, but de Chirico, and some of his contemporary, may signal a turning point in its significance.³² If it may be argued (but please remember that I am not an art historian), that the representation of *reality*, at least since Rembrandt, had reclaimed ever-greater *autonomy* from its ‘subject,’ now, in early Modernism, representation came to see its ‘object’ not just as the *reflection* of a state-of-mind, but as the *positing*. From Rembrandt, through Giacomo Leopardi, to Heisenberg (and from painting, through poetry, to science) the line is unbroken, if somewhat tortuous: the “moment of reality” comes to coincide with the “moment of consciousness,” but the latter remains elusive—in its entropic, Heraclitean motion—except when *reduced*, as it finally is in De Chirico, to meta-symbolic (or “metaphysical”) *abstraction* (even in the form of the *abstracted neo-Classical*). This capital acquisition of *Modernist* Western awareness is in the end, eminently anti-monumental—it is what makes us see the monument, any monument, as somewhat

³⁰ Figure 26. Rene Magritte, *Les Dernières Habitudes*, 1926; Vaduz.

³¹ Figure 27. Giorgio De Chirico, *Melancholia*, 1916; The Menil Collection.

³² Figure 28. Giorgio De Chirico, *The Enigma of the Hour*, 1910; Private Collection.

incongruous: as a claim to a permanence—a mnemonic constancy, a fastness of remembrance—which is newly contradicted by the scientific and technological experience of both reality and the Self.³³ It is not by chance that *À la recherche du temps perdu* was conceived in those same years that saw the enigmatically nostalgic apparitions in Giorgio de Chirico's and Alberto Savinio's paintings and writings, as well the unfathomable indeterminacies of quantum mechanics, for which *reality* itself, it would seem, consists "only of interactions."³⁴ It was a time that also witnessed Alfred Jarry's absurdly lucid, dryly passionate "pataphysical" speculations: no *traditional* monument, of any sort, and no *identity* could possibly withstand the corrosive effect of their paradoxical order, in which the boundaries of the physical and the purely mental were 'systematically', and poetically, subverted.

A dialectics of departure and return³⁵—in life and in memory—to the home, the site, and the tomb, as places of origin and identity, of rootedness and uprooting of the family tree (and of the "tree of life"), also insistently recurs in De Chirico's and Savinio's 'monumental' images.³⁶ The mythological brothers, *adelphoi*, or "*I Dioscuri*," as they sometimes called themselves, were at once for ever bound to and sadly removed from Volos, the small town in Thessaly where they spent their early formative years, and where their solemn, even *monumental*, but gravely missed father—a railroad engineer—had died suddenly, in their adolescence.³⁷ And Volos was also the ancient Iolkos, from where Jason and his Argonauts had started off on his journey. This is the often-recurring theme of "*The Departure of the Argonauts*," of a journey through uncharted spaces, through life, inexorably away from childhood, yet retaining childhood as an ever-present point of reference.³⁸ An ambivalent and paradoxical reference, as attested by Savinio's "Notes on the *Tragedy of Childhood*"; let me quote two sentences from this text: "Every memory, be it only the shadow of a reminiscence of what childhood was, is the pitilessly cruel confirmation that life, by law, is a defeat," and "Only in artists [...] is adult life the natural continuation of childhood. To make them behave artists are said to be grown-up children."³⁹ Brotherhood and

³³ Figure 29. Alberto Savinio, *Souvenir d'un monde disparu*, 1928; Private Collection.

³⁴ Carlo Rovelli, "La realtà in quanti," *Il Sole 24 Ore*, secc. Cultura Domenica, August 26, 2012, 24.

³⁵ Alberto Savinio, *I Dioscuri*, da Il Tesoretto, 1942.

³⁶ Alberto Savinio, *I Dioscuri* da Il Tesoretto, 1942.

³⁷ Figure 31. Volos Train Station, designed by Evaristo de Chirico, late 1890's.

³⁸ Figure 32. Alberto Savinio, *Le depart des Argonautes*, 1929; Private Collection.

³⁹ Alberto Savinio, *Tragedia dell' Infanzia* (Roma: Edizioni della Cometa, 1937) (originally composed around 1919-20), 461-564. I quote from the critical edition in Alberto Savinio, *Hermaphrodito e altri romanzi* (Milano: Adelphi, 1995), 560, 563. See Figure 33. Alberto Savinio, *Regard de l'enfant*, 1926-1927; Private Collection.

loss are celebrated again and again in the memory of the already mentioned tomb-monument in Thessaly, and de Chirico's and Savinio's surreal and metaphysical 'classicism' reflected this fundamental experience throughout their parallel lives.⁴⁰ Listen to this at once cryptic and visionary fragment by Savinio:

Now what happened?

Hearing talk of rediscovered forests, obscure memories awoke in the dull heads of men.

Many of them approached the gates to the forest and asked to be readmitted... A voice warned them that only poets had the right to enter.

One individual offered the suggestion that the forest of childhood and paradise lost were one and the same. The voice replied: "Yes."⁴¹

II

In a standard dictionary of synonyms one can find four headings under "monument":

- 1) memorial, shrine, reliquary; gravestone, marker, tombstone; sepulcher, mastaba, mausoleum; crypt.
- 2) pillar, column, obelisk, shaft, slab; dolmen, megalith.
- 3) relic, remains, vestige, trace, token; enduring evidence, reminder, remembrance, memento, commemoration, eulogy, obsequy.
- 4) exemplar, model, paragon; pattern, standard, ideal.

The list of synonyms of the adjective "monumental" goes from "massive" to "monstrous," to "towering," "mountainous," "tremendous," "humongous," etc.

In Medieval Latin, the "monument" appears within two parallel constellations of meanings, attached to the three terms *munimentum/ monimentum/ monumentum*. The first derives from *munimen*, denoting, principally, an "enclosure"—which can go from fortification walls (*munimentum arcis*) to those of a sanctuary (*munimentum ecclesiae*)—from the root *munire*, which means "to defend," "to arm against," "to provide with a bastion," etc.⁴² It

⁴⁰ Figure 34. Giorgio De Chirico, *L'angoisse du depart*, 1914; Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo.

⁴¹ Savinio, *Hermaphrodito*, 563-564. See Figure 35. Alberto Savinio, *Objets dans la forêt*, 1928; Private Collection.

⁴² See Carolus du Fresne du Cange, *Glossarium Mediae et Infimae Latinitatis*, digessit G. A. L. Henschel, 7 t. (Paris: F. Didot, 1840).

is, also, the building originally rising up from the sacred enclosure that cut out, and thus separated for divination purposes, a portion of both sky and earth—the *templum*—whose walls and columns come to define the space of “con-templation.” But this is also the space where the statues in honor of a God could be erected, in archaic and classic times, and also as mementos of particular men and women. *Agalma* even stood for hieroglyphic sign, *verbum*, and was partly a synonym of *anathema*, that could denote, in the classic age, any votive offering set up in a temple; but in Homer, originally, it stood for any “delightful feature,” “ornament,” before it eventually took on the negative connotation that was transmitted to our languages—that of “dedication-as-a-curse,” or “dedication-to-evil”: collective memory can nourish an indelible record of ill deeds, as Dante, who filled his *Inferno* with such *verbal monuments*, well knew.⁴³

The monument-as-tomb⁴⁴ was also a *munus*, a gift—in fact, the gift par excellence (the last services of burial were also called *munera*), just as the “walling-in” I just referred to, is also connected with actual tombs, and with representations of tombs, in many traditions, especially ours. Look, for instance, at the relief for the “Tomb of Hector,” on the lower left side of the *Tabula Iliaca Capitolina* (Rome, II-III century AD), with his shield perched within four stark high walls (almost like a gigantic open sarcophagus) surrounded by a group of mourners.⁴⁵ Like a *templum munitum*, this “sacred walled enclosure” is a very ancient prototype repeated in various forms through classic, and medieval times, down to the beginnings of ours. But opposite Hector’s, rises the burial monument of his slayer, Achilles: a bare, somewhat sinister, herma, that is also a prototype for the ages. All around this high marker, salient episodes of Achilles’ life are represented: the memory of his identity presented as an *image-narration* of personal history, the image of his funerary monument as emblem of that history, but also, in other cases, as a sort of portrait-monument, that can become a column, or even a *campanile*, projecting the “life-like image” of the deceased—or the emblem of his name, or both—towards the heavens.⁴⁶ In many tombs, and even “tombs-without-the-body” (cenotaphs, as they are called), it is as if the monument, in its vertical movement, ‘took off’ from the old seat of the *nekron* (the *site* of the cadaver, which is also the point of departure of the

⁴³ One may think of Farinata degli Uberti, the ‘heretic’, who stands up from his sarcophagus like a monument: “*Dalla cintola in su tutto il vedrai*”; Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, x, vv. 31-6.

⁴⁴ Figure 36. *Tabula Iliaca Capitolina*, detail, circa 2nd c.; Musei Capitolini, Rome.

⁴⁵ See Erwin Panofsky, *Tomb Sculpture: its changing aspects from ancient Egypt to Bernini*, ed. H. W. Janson (London: Thames & Hudson, 1964).

⁴⁶ Figure 37. Tomb-monument of Cangrande della Scala; Santa Maria Antica and Castelvecchio Museum, Verona.

soul) to become a pure image of memory, a marker of the ideal presence.⁴⁷ Thus this movement towards verticality is also one of *disembodiment* of the mnemonic image from the ‘magical’ presence of the remains and it prefigures the modern image of what I would call the museum-monument. And it is that “monument inside the man” that appears in several of the de Chirico brothers’ paintings (as again later in Magritte)—the mystery about “inside” and “outside” that Giorgio (in a recollection of 1921) remembered having first felt by gazing at the dead, bare-breasted woman depicted, as if asleep, within an elaborate house interior, on the Roman *Stele of Hedista* (II-III c. AD),⁴⁸ in the Volos museum.⁴⁹ What I find interesting, is the articulation of these two recurring movements—soul movements, we could call them, but, at the same time, architectural (“constructive”) and representational movements: the recurring shifts between an ‘outside’ and an ‘inside’—in chiasm with an ‘above’ and a ‘below,’ and played on the complementary registers of body vs. soul, tomb enclosure vs. tomb stele, and, occasionally, outer vs. inner surface of funerary chambers and buildings. Without invoking Ancient Egypt and the Etruscans, let me give you just one more European example: it is that of an intriguing, Roman sarcophagus found in Simpelveld, near Maastricht, also belonging to the Antonine period.⁵⁰ The almost unique peculiarity of this sarcophagus is that while its exterior is a bare, even rough stone, its interior is elaborately carved throughout. It represents, in bas-relief, a carefully furnished room, complete with a full-figure miniature portrait of the deceased woman comfortably reclining on her bed—and including even an image of what appears to be the house’s facade, a detail that strikingly reflects the inside/outside ‘dialectic’ I have evoked. The ‘outside’ is represented ‘inside, as if ‘visible’ to the *image* of the deceased (and to her “soul”?), that thus lays, so to speak, within a double enclosure: that of the tomb, and that of the representation of her earthly dwelling. There is, indeed, something almost Egyptian (and Etruscan) about this conception of a fictional *otherworld* that mirrors the real one while remaining completely hidden from it, but there is, also—once more—a sort

⁴⁷ Figure 38. Bruce Conner, *Dennis Hopper One man Show*, vol. 1, Plate 1, 1971; Private Collection (vertical ‘monument’).

⁴⁸ Figure 39. Painted stele of Hediste; Demetrias, 3rd-2nd century BC; Volos Museum, Thessaly.

⁴⁹ There may have been a darker connotation to De Chirico’s vivid memory of this distinctive funerary monument, which he had seen around the time of his father’s death: Hediste died while delivering a child that also died; on the stele, her husband gazes intently at her half-naked corpse, with eyes dilated by grief and, possibly, terror. See Rui Nakamura, *The Hediste stele in the context of Hellenic funerary art: the display of the corpse of a tragic woman*, PhD Dissertation (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1995).

⁵⁰ Figure 40. Simpelveld Sarcophagus; National Museum of Antiquities, Leiden.

of monumental solipsism to the Simpelveld woman, an isolated contentment, not unlike that of Savinio's French engineer, before his soul is united with that of the Commendatore, within his rock-monument overlooking the sea (but of course without the gentle irony that infuses the Modernist tale).⁵¹ Prison *and* monument, place of confinement and containment, *thesaurus*, crypt, like the tomb where the spirit (I have called it the *identity*) of the departed is bound to the site (the burial mounds, the earth), collecting the parts dispersed by its life into one point, and also projecting this focus of concentrated identity on a vertical movement. Be it heaven or hell, the "dead soul" goes up or down, but should not wander.

With a few notable exceptions, mankind has dealt with the problem of death under the two apparently opposite registers of occultation and destruction: that is, by discarding, burying, or burning the dead body (in a few instances, ingestion was also practiced). All imply a principle of *subtraction*: just when what is essential, life itself, withdraws from the body, the body is in turn taken away from the realm of life and, with it, often, *things* that were related to that life. As individual identity strives to endure, so the objects closely touched by and connected with it, enter into a play of preservation (memorization) and obliteration (forgetting) that is intimately linked to the very idea of the evanescence of individual immortality.⁵² Paleolithic cave painting—invisible to most, or most of the time—we may consider, in this sense, *pre-* or *a-monumental* (just as the decorations of Egyptian tombs), because a true monument, even when 'funerary,' is generally meant to be visible by as many people as possible: Visible and memorable, and, possibly, *memorably visible*. But for Savinio, the invisibility of the *soul-within-(the image of)-the-monument* only became manifest through its *music*. We saw that it was the *voice*, the *singing*, of the French engineer, springing from within the rock (and remember that Evaristo, Savinio's father, was a railroad engineer), that enticed the new visitor to also enter it and become a *Commendatore di Pietra*.⁵³

III

Returning to that monument-in-the-picture from which I started off from and which is not only, or simply, the representation of commemorative sculpture in art, but the treatment of art as a 'monument.' It is a question

⁵¹ Figure 41. Alberto Savinio, *L'isola portatile*, 1932; Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Torino.

⁵² Figure 42. Horses, "Hall of the Bulls", c. 15,000-13,000 BC; Lascaux.

⁵³ Figure 43. Giorgio De Chirico, *Le peintre des chevaux*, 1927; Private Collection.

that hinges, I believe, on the way in which we conceive of art itself after the modernist break with “objective” representation (fig. 44).⁵⁴ Thanks to an indication by Miguel Cervantes, years ago, I have come across another instance of the monument *in* the picture that I found full of this sort of Modernist *dis-placement*. It is a line drawing by Alberto Giacometti, also from the years 1917-18, which ‘reproduces’ the lone, enigmatic figure in Rembrandt’s “The Polish Rider,” at New York’s Frick Collection, in which the image of the “Rider” *materializes* as if slipping through an equally mysterious painted landscape (rider and landscape are made of the same substance of color and light), hauntingly looking at us as if from the boundary between life and death.⁵⁵ It is startling that in ‘copying’ it, Giacometti transformed the mysterious horseman not only into the *image* of a sculpture, a statue, but also into that of a full-fledged monument—complete with pedestal and relief decorations (*agalmata*, once more)—thus also evoking that *vacuum-of-time*, that silence of history-in-the-present, that encircles and isolates all monuments (as already in Durer’s *Memento Mei*, 1505; re-evoked, through Rembrandt, in one of Jean-Michel Basquiat’s last and most haunting pictures, *Riding with Death*, 1988).⁵⁶ Young Giacometti’s curious early *essay* on the *monument-in-the-picture* and the *memorable image*—well before he created his own emphatically anti-monumental sculptures—is not unrelated to de Chirico’s *proto-sur-real* suspensions of space and time—and their *malleable* interconnections—as perhaps also to what Walter Benjamin (echoing Origen) referred to as “historical apocatastasis” (something like a ‘primordial reconstitution’) in the face of the dark winds of Progress.⁵⁷

According to a recent interpretation, the structure and decoration of the emperor Hadrian’s countryside villa near Rome was more than a personal art-project, a record of *res gestae* and visited places, or a travelogue in brick and marble. It embodied a sort of ‘mnemonic *objectivity*’ through the placement of significant things—*munera*—within the confines of a structured space, while this space, in turn, became like an extension of the living body of the emperor: a place where all his past ‘inspirations’ were recorded—including those related to dead beings, past states, conditions of the soul—hence a place of the Muses, a *museum*.⁵⁸ So, the museum, which has often been regarded, in modernity, as the very image of what

⁵⁴ Figure 44. Alberto Giacometti, Drawing of *The Polish Rider* by Rembrandt, as monument, 1917-8; Private Collection.

⁵⁵ Figure 45. Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Polish Rider*, ca. 1655; The Frick Collection, New York.

⁵⁶ Figure 46. Albrecht Dürer, *Memento Mei*, 1505; British Museum, London; Figure 47. Jean-Michel Basquiat: *Riding with death*, 1988; Private Collection.

⁵⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *Signatura Rerum: Sul metodo* (Torino: Bollanti Boringhieri, 2008), 96. See Figure 48. Alberto Savinio, *La cité des promesses*, 1928; Private Collection.

⁵⁸ Figure 49. Villa Adriana, Tivoli, 2nd c. AD.

is *external* and culturally stale—and an obstacle to creativity—or a *tomb-of-art*—was for Hadrian, collector of his own experiences, very much *alive*—in fact it was his very life made (again) visible (i.e. the invisibility of memory and experience displayed ‘for many’ to see). This live connection between the museum-image and its creator also applied to several of the European *Wunderkammern*, from the XVI to the XVIII centuries. As if echoing Hadrian’s vision, the modern museum—unlike the Egyptian secret chamber and even the classic Greco-Roman tomb—was also born as a sort of ‘live’ mausoleum, the display of an ‘immortality’ not of the after-life, but of the *image-of-life-itself*, as reflected in the collection of objects that represent it. And yet, from this very description, one can see that it is also like a ‘tomb,’ but as if tipped upside-down into the theatre of the world.⁵⁹

It is not surprising, then, that in the collection of Savinio’s stories from the *Achille innamorato* that I chose as my starting point, the only one that speaks of a “museum” is also one that evokes “multiple identities.”⁶⁰ The narrator of this story makes the acquaintance of the member of a “family” within which each of the 24 children had been assigned, from the start and without need of any further qualification, a statutory social role (of “doctor,” “bishop,” “general,” etc.)—all, that is, except one, who had been accidentally “left behind” and “lost,” and whom the narrator, with his new acquaintance, now sets out to find. The story is called “Uomo Bianco,” “White Man”—and the white man in question is the lost brother, who ‘lives’ alone in a remote house turned into a museum-mausoleum of and to himself, in the middle of a forest. It so happens that this man, who is naked (and hence “white”) is already long “dead,” but still “standing upright” (like a marble statue in a museum, or a monument), but he crumbles into a small heap of white powder when his long-lost brother embraces him. The museum of the self fails: one can be given a label (like the brothers by their father), but one cannot put a label on oneself. The “white man” who museologizes himself is destined to precipitate into dust—once more, like the statue of the *Commendatore di Pietra* (that Leporello also calls, “l’uomo bianco”), while “nature” (in the form of a gigantic tree that acts as guide and guardian to the “museum”) takes over.⁶¹ The fragmentation and monumentalization of identity—one could also say of the creative impulse, of energy, and of life—is seen here, in avant-garde terms, as a form of ‘white death,’ a plague of modern culture, but also as something that, blissfully and inevitably, self-destructs.

⁵⁹ Figure 50. Alberto Savinio, *Idylle Marine*, 1931; Private Collection.

⁶⁰ Alberto Savinio, “Uomo Bianco,” in *Achille Innamorato*, 141-145.

⁶¹ Figure 51. Giorgio De Chirico, *The Double Dream of Spring*, 1915; MoMA, New York.

Savinio calls the “white man” figure in its “museum” a “unique model of human statuary.” This is of course a paradox: a model points necessarily to something that is not “unique,” and it is in this very contradiction that lies the whole question of what is or isn’t, of what can and cannot be, a museum, this “prison” of art, as Riegl called it, but also this *monument* of art, as I see it. Prison *and* monument, place of confinement and containment, *thesaurus*, crypt, like the tomb where the spirit (I have called it the *identity*) of the departed is bound to the site (the burial mounds, the earth), collecting the parts dispersed by its life into one point, and also projecting this focus of concentrated identity on a vertical movement. Be it heaven or hell, the “dead soul” goes up or down, but should not wander.⁶²

Ippokrene, the “horse’s stream,” is what the Greeks called a water spring on Mount Helion, around which the Muses gathered to sing and dance, for its water was said to bring poetic inspiration.⁶³ By the beginning of the last century, at the time when the vision of de Chirico and Savinio was formed, one got a *sense* that something crucial was being lost—the English word for it, “*feeling*,” has become too common, and hence weak, but we have no other—and a sense that a new entrance should be found to the inner *source* of the art object—or its *pre-history*:⁶⁴ a sense whose workings might operate outside the confines of any representational *logic*.⁶⁵ It was the time that also saw the flowering of Alfred Jarry’s absurdly lucid, dryly passionate “pataphysical” speculations: no *traditional* monument, of any sort, and no *identity* could possibly withstand the corrosive effect of their paradoxical order, in which the boundaries of the physical and the purely mental were ‘systematically,’ and poetically, subverted.⁶⁶ It is a fictional power of this order that I have attempted to evoke through images in some of Savinio’s and de Chirico’s painted and written images, today that the ‘digital monument’—like all images—is flying away from our fingertips and up into the “cloud.”⁶⁷

⁶² Figure 52. Alberto Savinio, *Monumento Marino ai miei Genitori*, 1950; Private Collection.

⁶³ See for instance Roberto Calasso, “*La folie qui vient des Nymphes*,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 26 (Autumn, 1994): 125-133.

⁶⁴ Agamben, *Signatura*, 85-88.

⁶⁵ Figure 53. Alberto Savinio, *Promenade pompéienne*, 1925-6; Private Collection.

⁶⁶ Figure 54. Salomon Reinach, *Répertoire de la Statuaire Grecque et Romaine*, 1897; Paris.

⁶⁷ Figure 55. Alberto Savinio, *Untitled* (drawing of ‘Garibaldi’ on his steed, flying off onto the clouds), 1925; Private Collection.

IV

Margaret Mahler, a distinguished psychoanalyst once noted how many public monuments in Washington D.C.—the capital of what President John Adams had presciently warned was at great risk of becoming an “imperial democracy”—looked (pleasantly, in her view) “surreal” (“as if designed by René Magritte”).⁶⁸ Monuments and museums, characteristically, are reminders of *other* people (and other *times*)⁶⁹—including our forebears’—so that our identification with them is as problematic as that with the hobby-horses of our early youth, but as De Chirico and Savinio showed us, just as ‘necessary.’⁷⁰ The metaphysical brothers at-the-end-of-metaphysics—with their fictional monuments and micro-monumental fictions, have left us wondering how our *fetish-haunted* monument-museum, within and beyond its walls, can survive the crumbling from its pedestal of the image of the “White Man,” and of his *Horse*.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Figure 56. René Magritte, *Les Verres Fumés*, 1951; Private Collection.

⁶⁹ Figure 57. Alberto Savinio, *Orphée*, c. 1929; Musée National d’Art Moderne, Paris.

⁷⁰ Figure 58. “Monnaie des Redons”, Celtic, North-West France; Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

⁷¹ Figure 59. Serge Lifar in *Le Bal*, scenes and costumes by G. De Chirico, choreography by G. Balanchine, Paris, 1929; and Figure 60. Bruce Conner, *The Dennis Hopper One Man Show*, vol. 1, Plate VII, 1971; Private Collection.

