

THE ELUSIVE SELF:
STORYTELLING AND THE JOURNEY TO IDENTITY
IN SVEVA CAETANI'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SERIES
RECAPITULATION

by

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ABSTRACT

Canadian artist Sveva Caetani was born in Rome in 1917 and emigrated to Canada in 1921 with her parents, Leone Caetani and Ofelia Fabiani. The family settled in Vernon, B.C. where Caetani was to remain until her death in 1994. Between the years of 1975 and 1992, Caetani produced a series of 56 watercolour paintings entitled *Recapitulation* that recounts the story of her life. Drawing on Dante's *Divine Comedy* as a model for the overarching format of the series, Caetani adopts the role of a pilgrim on a spiritual journey. Just as Dante called on Virgil to act as his guide, Caetani calls on her father to accompany her on her personal journey. By establishing a voice that bears witness to the tragic circumstances of her life, Sveva Caetani reconnects with her past in order to alter the shape of memory. The evidence Caetani offers is her own life and the country of her imagination; the extraordinary life of a woman and the separate life as a writer/artist. She draws us into personal memory and family history, weaving autobiography into analysis.

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Introduction

When Canadian artist Sveva Caetani died in April 1994, the majority of her estate, including her large home in Vernon, British Columbia, was donated to the City of Vernon. Most of the family possessions and relating archival material once owned by Sveva Caetani are now located in the Greater Vernon Museum, and constitute one of the largest collections housed there. I was first exposed to the life of Caetani in 2001 when I was hired as a research assistant on the Caetani project for the Community University Research Alliance program. Over the next few years I made numerous trips to Vernon with project supervisor Catherine Harding to conduct research and develop the conceptual framework for both the catalogue and the exhibition. In 2003, I spent May and June working full time at the University of Victoria writing the catalogue, then spent the remaining six weeks of that summer living in Vernon with the purpose of assisting the Greater Vernon Museum and the Vernon Public Art Gallery mount their joint exhibition. The exhibition at the Greater Vernon Museum, *Caetani: Visions of Rebirth*, presented the story of the Caetani family, while the exhibition at the Vernon Public Art Gallery, *Sveva Caetani: Selected Drawings and Paintings of Recapitulation*, focused on Sveva Caetani's paintings and drawings. My role in Vernon was to use the research I had conducted on Caetani to compose the text labels for the museum's exhibition and the artist's biography at the gallery.¹

My work at the Greater Vernon Museum was particularly valuable in that it gave me hands-on experience with the material objects once owned by the Caetani family. The process of linking the objects with archival documents and then producing text that best

¹To this day, a significant amount of the text I produced for the project remains on the websites of both venues. See: <http://www.vernonmuseum.ca> and <http://www.galleries.bc.ca/vernon>

reflected the story of the family was the most satisfying aspect of my work there. The archival documents left by Sveva Caetani's estate to the Vernon Museum include a vast array of letters, personal writings, financial records, video and cassette recordings, family documents, teaching records, information on her painting philosophy, and preparatory writings and drawings for her art work. It is extremely rare that researchers are provided with such a thorough and articulate record of an artist's life and in particular that of such an original and creative artist whose work is so little known. Without it, I could not have compiled the first comprehensive biography ever produced on the artist, included in the now-published exhibition catalogue, *Caetani di Sermoneta: An Italian Family in Vernon, 1921-1994*, which appeared in 2003.²

Sveva Caetani was an extremely talented individual whose work has been virtually unrecognized by the Canadian art establishment. The quality of the work reflects an individual who was exposed to a broad, culturally enriched European background. In 2003 I decided to redirect my research at the MA level in order that I might further explore the unique contribution Sveva Caetani made to the history of art in British Columbia. When I first began my research at the museum, the GVM archivist Linda Wills pointed out the unusual nature of this collection, particularly in relation to other family collections housed there. Both the quality and quantity of the material donated by Caetani is unprecedented. It has taken me a number of years to sift through the mountain of material, transcribing videotapes, audio tapes, and letters, carefully studying in detail each sketch and painting the artist created throughout her life. On more than one occasion throughout this long process I have cast my eyes skyward and asked, "Sveva

² Karen Avery, *Caetani di Sermoneta: An Italian Family in Vernon, 1921-1994*, Catherine Harding, ed. (Vernon, B.C.: Greater Vernon Museum and Archives, 2003), pp. 5-28, 77-80.

Caetani! Why? Why was it necessary for you to document every minute detail of your life?” I imagine her answer to be, “So you will know me, so the world will know me and my work and the Caetani name will live on.” Of course I am now thankful that Caetani suffered this acute impulse to record everything, for without this material it would not have been possible to excavate essential biographical information on this important Canadian artist.

According to Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, “feminism in art history has taken many forms: excavation, recovery, theoretical scepticism, and activism.”³ I believe part of my role here entails making Caetani visible by excavating the important biographical information she left behind. However, as I will argue below, this is only the first step in my methodology, which also encompasses theories of narrativity, storytelling, and autobiography.

I could have written this thesis as a straightforward biography or monograph on the artist but I chose not to for the following reasons. Kristen Frederickson discusses the “difficulty of writing about and describing work by women.”⁴ She offers an important warning that thirdwave or post feminist analysis highlights the necessity for scholars to examine their motives in writing narratives about the artist, and with regards to this, must avoid privileging the appearance of coherence that a traditional “biography of the artist/monograph” must inevitably reproduce. Heeding her advice, my work is located in a more honest “telling in which gaps and contradictions play a role.”⁵ During the writing

³ Norma Broude, and Mary D. Garrard, eds. *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*. (New York: Westview Press, 1992), p. 6.

⁴ Kristen Frederickson, “Introduction,” in *Singular Women: Writing the Artist*, Kristen Frederickson and Sarah E. Webb, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 12.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.13.

of this thesis I struggled to reconcile the gaps in Caetani's story or life narrative, which she told time and time again. In the retelling of the stories it seemed she transformed the past into a set of powerful metaphors.

One of the tasks of making this artist visible was to come to grips with the enormous body of documentation for the Caetani family in the archives. Part of Caetani's desire to document her life so thoroughly apparently stemmed from family custom. Caetani descended from one of the oldest families in Rome. The last in a long line of scholars, politicians, and intellectuals, she inherited from her forefathers the practice of documenting important aspects of their lives for the purposes of historical record.⁶ A number of her ancestors had devoted a portion of their scholarly work to honouring the memory of the Caetani lineage. For example, Caetani's uncle Gelasio Caetani meticulously traced the family history from its earliest records to the year 1630 in his two-volume work, *Domus Caietani*.⁷ Caetani's father, a renowned scholar who had published extensively on the subject of Islam, utilized an autobiographical format when he recorded his adventures in Canada during the 1890s in a travel diary entitled *Selkirks*.⁸ Sveva Caetani continued this tradition of honouring the family in a scholarly way when she wrote a tribute in memory of her father, "Leone Caetani: World Traveller Who Came to Vernon," for the Canadian journal, *British Columbia Historical News*.⁹ The fact that Caetani was the last surviving member of this ancient Roman family would have added a

⁶ These records reside in the Caetani family archives, Vatican Archives, Italy. The collection is comprised of more than 200,000 documents, 2,700 volumes of history, philosophy and other literature, and 4,000 parchment folios dating from the year 954 to 1832.

⁷ Gelasio Caetani, *Domus Caietana: Storia documentata della famiglia Caetani*, (Sancasciano Val di Pesa: Stianti, 1927-1933). For some reason, the intended third volume of the series was never published. In all likelihood, this final volume would have continued to trace the family history up to Gelasio Caetani's generation.

⁸ Leone Caetani, *Selkirks*. Trans. D. Aguzzi Barbagli. Ed. H.S. Noce (Fasano, 1999)

⁹ Sveva Caetani, "Leone Caetani: World Traveller Who Came to Vernon," *British Columbia Historical News*, 27/1 (Winter 1993-94), 29-31.

further incentive to prevent the family name from slipping into obscurity. Her ultimate dedication to the family came in the form of a series of fifty-six watercolour paintings entitled, *Recapitulation*, which are based on the family story. While *Recapitulation* is the body of evidence of this thesis, a preliminary discussion of the methods of everyday storytelling, both for the artist and myself, is a necessary starting point.

The archival documents reveal how Sveva Caetani repeated her life story time and time again in a variety of ways, in recorded interviews, and in writing. In order to contain the fluctuating and disparate elements that comprised the story of her life, I believe she adopted a narrative structure, which according to autobiography theorist Sidonie Smith, is a necessary component of autobiographical storytelling for any individual. Smith writes:

Every day, in disparate venues, in response to sundry occasions, in front of precise audiences (even if the audience of one), people assemble, if only temporarily, a 'life' to which they assign narrative coherence and meaning and through which they position themselves in historically specific identities. Whatever that occasion or that audience, the autobiographical speaker becomes a performative subject.¹⁰

Smith's statement raises two issues in relation to debates that have been circulating in autobiography theory surrounding the idea of the unified self. She maintains that "the self is not a self in any total sense, but a self which is to some degree a fiction, a construction."¹¹ Firstly, any retelling of an individual's existence, whether it be oral or written, requires the use of a coherent structure to link the events together, a narrative form derived from literary discourses. Secondly, in the retelling the narrator becomes a performer on a stage, a venue which offers to her the possibility of redefinition through

¹⁰ Sidonie Smith, "Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance," *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds. (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), p. 108.

¹¹ Ibid.

the construction and execution of her own monologue. Throughout my research on this artist, I have become aware of the narrative structure inherent within Caetani's storytelling and the way in which she worked to hone that narrative into a well-rehearsed performance, or as previously stated, a set of metaphors. In mirror fashion, I too engaged in storytelling about the artist but, following the advice of Frederickson, I continually examine my motives as a storyteller.

Caetani considered herself and the rest of humanity actors on the stage of life. In a thinly-veiled reference to Shakespeare, Caetani wrote about the performative aspects of human life in her unpublished philosophical essay, *Exploration*:

Firstly, to some degree, men realize the immensity in which their drama, and drama it is, is set. A stage which is lit by anything as tremendous as a near-by star, and whose dark is an endless wheel of enigmatic lights can never be "mundane"...we live in recurring states of utter urgency – for breath, for food, for sleep, for love – and have only panic and despair if these are not forthcoming. All this is universal for mankind – it is our universe – backdrop, boards, play, acts, intermissions, lines and curtain call.¹²

As Caetani's text suggests, "All the world is a stage," and the impulse to perform the self throughout the drama of their lives is a universal motivation for all humanity in their ongoing quest to assert their sense of identity. This ties in nicely with Smith's assertion that "autobiographical storytelling becomes one means through which people . . . believe themselves to be 'selves.' In this way, autobiographical storytelling is always a performative occasion."¹³

The many individuals I spoke to in the Vernon community about Sveva Caetani would invariably mention the dramatic aspects of her personality. She was often described as a queen "holding court" when she shared her life story or when she

¹² Sveva Caetani, *Exploration*, unpublished, last revised April, 1994 (GVMA, MS 174), p. 1-1.

¹³ Smith, "Performativity...", p. 109.

expounded on one of the myriad of subjects of which she had a profound knowledge. When interviewed for radio or video, whether it was CBC or the local Vernon cable station, every word was carefully chosen and communicated with a rich and eloquent voice, every dramatic gesture seemingly timed to punctuate the narrative she constructed. She was described by one individual as someone “deeply in need of expressing herself” and that when she did so her power to captivate her audience was undeniable.¹⁴ The combined effect of the dramatic narrative of her story, together with her evocative performance of “self,” resulted in Caetani being known in her community as an eccentric individual, much like Emily Carr in her Victoria community. Through her performance Caetani crafted her own personal mythology, a mythology that revealed the multiple layers of her subjectivity.

This eccentric persona was, in part, shaped by the dramatic events Caetani experienced in her life, as the daughter of a Roman aristocrat locked up in the large family home in Vernon for twenty-five years by a mentally ill mother. Over the years, the elements of this story have been woven by Caetani and those within her community to form a tightly-knit mythology. In the repetition, the mythological narrative grows and changes, “real” events are transformed. Writer Steven Lattey, the son of a friend of Caetani’s, grew up in the area and was witness to the stories that circulated about Sveva Caetani, the “Countess of Vernon.” The figure of Caetani made such an impression on him that he was inspired to create a short story about her in “Behind the Fence,” from his collection, *Aphid and the Shadow Drinkers*.¹⁵ Lattey describes the

¹⁴ Heather Brown, 1994 CBC *Ideas* program by Anne Pollock (GVMA, MS 174, Box 10/13)

¹⁵ Steven Lattey, “Behind the Fence,” *Aphid and the Shadow Drinkers*, (Saskatoon: Thistledown Press, 1999), pp. 64-82.

fictional version of Caetani as:

one magnificent, long limbed, dark eyed, mysterious Countess, striding out with her basket (covered with a white linen cloth) down Pleasant Valley Road. Striding out darkly and quickly with her little handmaiden right behind, three short maid steps to one long royal step. Long dark skirts rustling, shawls covering, pale skin glowing, beneath the big fir trees, along the dirt path.¹⁶

Caetani's mother, Ofelia, received similar romanticized treatment within Lattey's short story:

the mystery is there, upstairs in the big house, where the mother stands with her back to the heat register, fingers entwined in the warm metal coils . . . Mother lives upstairs and never goes outside and nobody ever sees her. The rumours of her madness are whispered over our small heads at five o'clock suppers, whispered between neighbours over backyard fences. The endless rumours.¹⁷

Lattey's reference to "the endless rumours" about the Caetanis circulating within the small community of Vernon highlights the way in which this community had unknowingly participated in the process of mythologizing the life of Caetani. Because of their reclusive existence, Caetani and her mother were pushed to the margins of society, thereby inviting speculation, gossip, and sensationalism, all aspects that feed into the transformative nature of storytelling and its ability to bend the "truth" through its repetition.

Caetani extended the mythologizing of her life in narrative form when, at the age of fifty-eight, she embarked on an artistic project that was to consume her for the next fourteen years. Combining her talents as a writer and an artist, Caetani painted a series of fifty-six watercolour paintings, writing textual accompaniments for each one of them. She entitled the series *Recapitulation*. These works reflect a process of rethinking and reconceptualizing the self, and consequently of autobiographical representation. Caetani stated: "It was in 1975 that I conceived the idea of assembling all my experiences in life

¹⁶ Ibid., 64.

¹⁷ Ibid., 65.

and all my judgements into a visionary journey . . . I began by writing an outline or sequence of episodes for the paintings entitled *Recapitulation*, or the recounting of my experiences and perspectives on life.”¹⁸ Caetani believed in the power of art to lock down the slippery elements of an experiential history, as revealed in this written statement by the artist: “Art = the process for stabilizing, pinning down the event.”¹⁹

Recapitulation addresses more than the various events of Caetani’s life; it also includes her critique of the world of politics, religion, and human violence in the form of war. It celebrates literature, philosophy, cosmology, music, architecture, science, and mysticism. While the scope of subject matter explored in *Recapitulation* is extremely broad, it consistently draws on the memories of the personal experience of the artist.²⁰

Evaluating each of the fifty-six paintings and accompanying text of the series would require a treatment considerably larger than the limited scope of this MA thesis. Therefore, I will restrict my analysis to those paintings from *Recapitulation* that I believe are the best examples of how she negotiated the telling of her relationship with her parents, how she revisits these relationships in order to reconstruct the past and transform loss into renewal. As Smith states, “self-creation in [a] text [can] explore or recapitulate the writer’s [artist’s] past interplay with . . . her parents.”²¹

I am in the fortunate position of writing the first in-depth scholarly analysis of

¹⁸ Sveva Caetani, *Recapitulation : A Journey*, Heidi Thompson, Angela Gibbs Pert, Dennis Butler, eds (Vernon, B.C.: Coldstream Books, 1995), p. 8.

¹⁹ Sveva Caetani in a journal entry (GVMA, MS 174)

²⁰ As I studied the imagery based on Caetani’s memory in *Recapitulation*, it became clear that these were transformed memories, faulty and partial in their construction.

²¹ Sidonie Smith, “Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance,” in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), p. 109.

Caetani's life and work. The opportunity for carrying out original research on an unknown artist is an exciting endeavour. However, while I believe that my mission is to lift this talented B.C. artist out of obscurity to position her within the Canadian art historical canon, I am also conscious of the ongoing debate amongst feminist art historians of how best to negotiate the issue of evaluating artists and their artwork. Over the last three decades, feminist art historians have interrogated the patriarchal construction of the art historical canon from many different standpoints. Some feminists have asked whether a separate canon should be created to celebrate the accomplishments of women artists; others have questioned whether there should be a canon at all.²² As a result of writing this thesis, I will argue for a more inclusive canon that accommodates the diverse histories of neglected women's lives.

It should be noted that my reading of these selected works from Caetani's series is only *one* of many possible feminist art historical readings. I resist following the model of a masculinized form of writing which results in an uncritical celebration of an artists' life and work, a product Griselda Pollock has identified as "one of the central myths of art history, that of the heroic artist-individualist."²³ How do I avoid that construction when so much of my analysis focuses on the individual, Sveva Caetani, and how the personal details of her extraordinary life story impact the works she created for her series

Recapitulation?

My solution to this problem has been to combine the biographical components of the artist's life story with the critical approach of autobiographical storytelling. I am

²² Kristen Frederickson, "Introduction," in *Singular Women: Writing the Artist*, Kristen Frederickson and Sarah E. Webb, eds (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 2.

²³ Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon : Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 7.

interested in how Caetani used her art as a way of reflecting and negotiating her place in the world, as a way of defining her identity. In painting her life history, Caetani attempts to reconcile past events with her current sense of self. Therefore we can read *Recapitulation* as a text that is “metaphorically authentic,” rather than a product that represents an essential truth. As psychologist Daniel Schachter reminds us, “memories are records of how we have experienced events, not replicas of the events themselves.”²⁴

Rather than utilizing the conventional symbols of traditional art, Caetani invented her own set of symbolic iconography in *Recapitulation*. She took great pains to make explicit her interpretation of the paintings with regards to this idiosyncratic symbology, their contextual references, and their embodiment of her philosophical worldview. Besides the written text she created to accompany the paintings when they were exhibited and ultimately published, Caetani gave detailed explanations in video interviews, taped commentaries, artist statements, and at art openings. Clearly, she felt the need to reach a wider audience by providing an explanation for her work. It may be that Caetani was aware of the value of her artistic legacy. She once remarked: “I know I am not an ‘established’ artist’, but I do feel that my work will last...”²⁵ Eleven years after her death, I am here, still struggling to hear her voice and all that her telling implies, to respect her interpretation of her work, and negotiate my response to her work.

Initially, I found myself wondering how I could best achieve shaping knowledge about Caetani in terms of how she wanted to be described and remembered. According to Kristen Frederickson, “the work of Amy Schlegel on Nancy Spero and of Kristine

²⁴ Timothy Dow Adams, *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), ix, 3.

²⁵ Sveva Caetani in a letter to her friend Vanessa Alexander, dated January 26, 1987 (GVMA MS 174, 1-S1_48/68, Box 2/18)

Stiles on Carolee Schneemann *has been significantly shaped by their knowing how these women want to be described and remembered.*"²⁶ Throughout the process of researching Caetani, with every tape I transcribe, every letter I read, like Schlegel and Stiles, I am palpably aware of the tensions and difficulties in how we write about what one person remembers and tells as a story and the stories we tell about them. I am also aware that my interpretation of her work is one of many approaches possible, and one she may not have entirely agreed with. For my analysis exposes how, despite Caetani's efforts to pin down her experiences through image and text, the subjectivity expressed in *Recapitulation* is in a constant state of flux, just as my voice was altered in the writing of her story.

26 Frederickson, *Singular Women...*, p. 9.

Chapter 1: A Biography: The Caetani Family History

In order to establish a context for the autobiographical components of Caetani's series *Recapitulation*, the following biography of the artist and her family is provided below.²⁷ I have constructed this biography from documents held in the Caetani Collection at the Vernon Museum Archives. I will emphasize the term "constructed" because, as I allude to in my introduction, an authentic version of a life lived is virtually unattainable. Just as Caetani reinvented herself time and time again in the story she told of her existence, I have also recreated the persona of Sveva Caetani. As I stitched together bits of information derived from the private journals, letters, photographs, and financial documents, I became aware of the impossibility of providing a complete, moment-to-moment account of an entire lifetime. For there is slippage that occurs between the actual lived experience and the documents capturing pivotal events. In this chapter that offers a biography I am aware of the transformative nature of my storytelling and my role in the construction of Caetani's fascinating tale.

The Caetani Family: Popes, Princes, Scholars and Artists²⁸

Leone Caetani, Duke of Sermoneta and Prince of Teano, was born September 12th, 1869, into one of the oldest and most illustrious families in Roman history. The family

²⁷ I know this biography, although based on biographical documentation, is as much a fiction as Caetani's storytelling and contains gaps.

²⁸ This biography is a modified version of one previously published in the exhibition catalogue, *Caetani di Sermoneta: An Italian Family in Vernon, 1921- 1994*, Catherine Harding, ed. (Vernon, B.C.: Wayside Press, 2003).

name can be traced as far back as 750 B.C.E., when the Caetani (originally Gaetani) battled with the Saracens for control of the towns of Gaeta and Fondi on the Italian coast.²⁹

Leone grew up in the Palazzo Caetani in Rome, the ancestral home of the family, situated near the ruins of the Forum. His ancestors included some of the most important members of the medieval papacy: Gelasius II (d.1119) and Boniface VIII (1230-1303). Other family members during the course of many centuries included seventeen cardinals, scholars, prominent diplomats, scientists, and literary figures.³⁰

Leone's grandfather, Michelangelo Caetani (1804-1882), was a political leader who was appointed the Provisional Governor of Rome in 1870 when Italian troops occupied Rome and brought the temporal power of the papacy to an end. As one of the few members of the "white" aristocracy, or that connected to the king and not the church, Michelangelo "was a great friend of King Umberto and Queen Margherita."³¹ Like many of the Caetanians before him, and many still to come, Michelangelo was a multi-talented individual with diverse interests. In addition to his political expertise, he was also a distinguished scholar, a patron of the arts, and a recognized authority on the work of the famous medieval poet, Dante Alighieri. One of his most well-known books on the subject of Dante was entitled *Materia della Divina Comedia*, published in Rome in 1865.³² In 1840, he married a Polish Countess, Calixta Rzewuski. Countess Rzewuski's father had left Poland to spend the latter part of his life in the Near East and this may

²⁹ Reyazul Hasan, "Prince Leone Caetani – A Great Italian Orientalist (1869-1935)," *Hamdard Islamicus*, Vol. 5, no.1, Spring 1982: 46.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

³¹ Marella Caracciolo, Giuppi Pietromarchi, and Marella Agnelli, *The Garden of Ninfa*. (Torino: U. Allemandi, 1999), p. 62.

³² Reyazul, Hasan, "Prince Leone Caetani – A Great Italian Orientalist (1869-1935)," *Hamdard Islamicus*, Vol. 5, no.1, Spring 1982: 47.

have inspired the future generations of the Caetani family in their fascination with Arab culture.

Michelangelo and the countess had two children, Onorato, the fourteenth Duke of Sermoneta (1842-1917), and his sister Ersilia. Like his father before him, Onorato was a member of the Italian Parliament for more than thirty years. In 1896 he was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs in the cabinet of Antonio di Rudini, and he later served as Lord Mayor of Rome.³³ He was a renowned archaeologist and until his death was President of the Italian Geographical Society. In 1867, Onorato married a woman from an English noble family, Ada Booth Wilbraham.³⁴ They had five sons and one daughter in quick succession: Leone (1869), Roffredo (1871), Livio (1873), Giovannella (1875), Gelasio (1877), and Michelangelo (1890).

Leone and his siblings were raised within the intellectually fertile climate of the Palazzo Caetani, which had become a salon for international scholars. Among the visitors were writers, scientists, teachers of Oriental languages and missionaries from all over the world. Within this setting, it is no wonder that the Caetani children were successful individuals in their own right. Leone was to become a world-renowned scholar of Islamic history. Roffredo, having studied with Liszt and Sgambati, made his mark on the world as a musician and composer.³⁵ Livio held office as the Minister of Persia. Gelasio became a prominent engineer and eventually the Italian ambassador to the United States.³⁶ At one point or another, most of the Caetani children held political office.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid. It was a common practice of the Caetanis to marry into English nobility.

³⁵ Robert Peele, *Gelasio Caetani: A Biographical Memorial* (New York: 1936), p. 8.

³⁶ Ibid., 3.

Leone Caetani demonstrated an aptitude for foreign languages from an early age; he picked up German from the governess who cared for him in the Palazzo Caetani, and Italian and English were spoken at home by his parents. At the age of fifteen, Leone decided to teach himself Sanskrit and Arabic. By 1891, at age twenty-one, Leone had earned a degree in Ancient and Oriental Language and History from the Faculty of Letters at the University of Rome. He received further formal language instruction in Arabic, Hebrew and comparative Semitic languages, as well as studying Persian language and literature.³⁷ He would eventually become fluent in eleven languages.

Throughout these early years, Leone's fascination with Islam and its history was inspired and encouraged by his father, Onorato, and grandfather, Michelangelo. Together they conducted extensive research on the subject and worked toward a common goal: to further their understanding of Muslim religion, history, language, and culture.

Leone wanted to acquire firsthand experience of the diverse geographies and cultures of Islam. In 1888, he embarked on the first of many visits to the Near East. He started in Greece and from there crossed over to Egypt. A year later, he visited Sinai where he explored ancient monuments. In 1892 he traveled to Algeria, Tunisia, and the borderland of the Sahara. Two years later, Leone made an extensive trip through Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Turkey and Iraq, ultimately ending up in Central Asia and Russia.³⁸

Sveva Caetani remembered some of her father's impressions of his trip in 1899 to India with the Count of Turin, cousin of the king of Italy.³⁹ She recounts how her father was astonished by the impressive height of the Sikh Imperial guard in Calcutta, all of

³⁷ Hasan, "Prince Leone..."; 48.

³⁸ Hannibal S. Noce, "Introduction," *Selkirks*, Leone Caetani, trans. D. Aguzzi Barbagli, H.S. Noce, ed. (Fasano, 1999), p. 13.

³⁹ Sveva Caetani, 'Leone Caetani: World Traveller Who Came to Vernon', *B.C. Historical News*, no.27/1, Winter 1993-4, 29-31.

whom were much taller than himself (he was 6 feet 8 inches tall). Leone continued his travels throughout India, where he went big-game hunting for six weeks in the jungles of Bengal and Bihar, rounding off his journey in Benares, Agra, and New Dehli. He watched a polo game played by the Pathans, “in the original manner with a dead calf instead of a mallet and ball...”⁴⁰ His love of adventure also led him to visit the northern United States and Canada in the summer of 1891, a trip that would later influence his decision to emigrate to Vernon, B.C. Leone was to make a final trip to the Muslim lands he so dearly loved in 1908 when he visited Egypt.

In 1891 Leone embarked on a journey of a far different nature than his trips to the Near East and Asia. This journey involved hunting grizzly bears in the rugged wilderness of the Canadian Rockies. Accompanying him on the trip was a member of a noble Prussian family, Felice Scheibler. With his vast experience as a big-game hunter in America, Africa, Asia, and Europe, Scheibler was the perfect traveling companion. Leone’s motive for this bold venture came from his family. His parents had instilled in him a great love of mountain climbing and now at the age of twenty-one, he wanted to test his skills in a nearly unexplored region. According to Scheibler, Leone desired above all to explore the southern slopes of the Selkirk mountain range located in the Lake Kootenay area of B.C., “since he had been greatly impressed by the description of the beauty and grandeur of those mountains, covered by glaciers...”⁴¹

Leone kept a journal recounting his experiences in the Lake Kootenay area. This was transcribed by Danilo Aguzzi Barbagli and published in Italy in 1999.⁴² Leone’s passion for the Selkirk mountain range inspired him to give his journal the same name. In

⁴⁰ Ibid...p30.

⁴¹ Noce, “Introduction,” *Selkirks*, p. 25.

⁴² Leone Caetani, *Selkirks*. trans. D. Aguzzi Barbagli, H.S. Noce, ed. (Fasano, 1999).

Selkirks, Leone provides a detailed report of the entire adventure, from psychological sketches of his hunting party and the townspeople he met along the way, to the awe he felt for the vastness of the Canadian landscape.

On July 5th, Leone and Scheibler set sail from Liverpool to New York on the ship, *The City of Paris*. From New York they proceeded by train to Chicago, St. Paul, Billings, Thompson Falls, arriving at their final destination of Lake Kootenay by 12th August, 1891.⁴³ The landscapes they encountered were at times far from hospitable and the men faced many harrowing adventures. The Italian prince who had slept in the lavish bedrooms of palaces was now sleeping on the cold bare ground in the open night air.

When Leone stepped off the train in Thompson Falls on August 10th (the first entry in his journal) he was stepping into a whole new world. He describes how just a short time ago he had been walking the streets of London with the aristocratic elite dressed in redingotes [a type of gentleman's long coat] and top hats, "and now, almost inadvertently, I found myself among prospectors, trappers, and the badmen of the Far West."⁴⁴ Before leaving Thompson Falls the men exchanged their European clothes for "American" ones: "a broad-brimmed hat, a woolen shirt, a pair of pants, a pair of big hobnailed boots, and a woolen jacket with large yellow and red checkers."⁴⁵

In his writings Leone expressed a keen sense of wonder for this new world. He marveled at the smallest detail, "By keeping my eyes fixed on the river, I could instantly see the...head or back of a big trout splashingly jumping on some beautiful water spider."⁴⁶ In another passage the synthesis of his Christian and Muslim knowledge comes

⁴³ Ibid., 25.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 31.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 43.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 53.

together: He compared the “living trees whose trunks, straight and smooth as columns,” to the forms of the “nave of a gigantic gothic cathedral, or that of the porticoes of a colossal mosque fallen into ruins.”⁴⁷

Sadly, Leone was only able to observe the Selkirk range from a distance. His dream of climbing the mountains was not to be realized, as the roughness of the terrain prevented them from reaching the base. However, Leone was able to explore the Purcell Range on the route back, thereby fulfilling his wish to go mountaineering.

Unfortunately, Leone’s journal entries end on September 5th, a full month before the end of their escapades in the Kootenay region. However, within the pages of what he did write, it is clear that the trip had a profound impact on Leone, instilling in him a love for the beautiful landscape of British Columbia, the memory of which would ultimately draw him back.

On June 20th 1901, Leone married Vittoria Colonna, daughter of Prince Marc’ Antonio Colonna and Lady Teresa Caracciolo d’Arbia.⁴⁸ The Colonna had been the enemies and rivals of the Caetani family since the Middle Ages. Leone’s ancestor, Pope Boniface VIII, had “waged a relentless crusade against the ... Colonna family” during his reign as Pope.⁴⁹ The marriage of Leone and Vittoria, therefore, was considered historic because it symbolically represented a resolution of centuries of conflict between the two families. The couple had one son, Onorato, who unfortunately suffered from a physical and mental illness. Their marriage was turbulent, which may have led to Leone’s later attraction to Ofelia Fabiani, Sveva’s mother.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 101.

⁴⁸ Caracciolo, *The Garden of Ninfa*, p. 69.

⁴⁹ Stephen Bemrose. *A New Life of Dante*. (Exeter, UK : University of Exeter Press, 2000), p. 53.

Leone was determined to concentrate to his scholarship in this period, and he worked long hours to synthesize the materials he had gathered on his visits to Muslim lands. As the result of his extensive travels, coupled with his enormous wealth, Leone succeeded in assembling one of the most comprehensive libraries of Islamic manuscripts in Europe. His goal was to amalgamate the material into a chronological account of the rise and spread of Islam through the ages, entitled *Annali dell'Islam* (*The Annals of Islam*).⁵⁰ In 1905, Leone published the first of ten volumes. The Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei recognized his efforts in 1908 when he won the National Prize of 10,000 lire.⁵¹ A year later he was inducted in the ranks of this prestigious academic institution. Finding the task of completing the subsequent nine volumes too great a task to accomplish on his own, he decided to combine forces with other well-known Islamic scholars who expressed a keen desire to work with him. With their assistance, the subsequent nine volumes were published in Milan and Rome between 1907 and 1926.

At the time of its release, this ten-volume work received international attention for its range and scope. Leone's approach to the material added to its unique value and quality: he had introduced a whole new method to Islamic studies in the Western world by basing his discussions on primary sources in Arabic.

Members of the Caetani household had always been involved in politics and, following this trend, Leone was elected to represent Rome's fourth riding in the Italian Chamber of Deputies, Italy's lower house of Parliament for four years (1909-1913).⁵² He did not, however, take the same political stance as his grandfather and father as enlightened conservatives; instead, he sided with the Radical Socialist Party. From this

⁵⁰ Leone Caetani, ed. *Annali dell'Islam*. 10 vols. (Milan: U. Hopli, 1905-1926).

⁵¹ Hasan, "Prince Leone...", p. 54.

⁵² Ibid., 77.

place of opposition, Leone worked to reform the Italian social system and better the situation of the working classes.

In 1911, Italy entered into conflict with Turkey over the occupation of Libya. When Leone stood up in the House of Parliament and protested against the appropriation of funds to wage the war, he made many enemies.⁵³ He was defeated in the parliamentary elections four years later because of his liberal views. With the growing storms of conflict and potential for war, more political trouble lay ahead.

In 1915, perhaps as a way of deflecting any criticism he received because of his position in the Libyan affair, Leone demonstrated his national pride by volunteering for military service in World War I. He served as an artillery officer and translator, fighting against the Austrians in the Dolomite sector of the Italian Alps.⁵⁴ In 1916 Leone was recalled from the Alps, possibly because of ill health, and sent on a special mission to England. On his return to Italy Leone presided over a civil organization on the home front for the remainder of the war.⁵⁵

By the time Leone had left for his military service in the Alps, his marriage to Vittoria had significantly deteriorated. In a letter written to a friend years later, in 1934, Leone expressed his disenchantment with the woman he had married: "I had taken a wife . . . that didn't have any fancy for my studies and inspirations, and gave me for many reasons, a difficult and sad life."⁵⁶ Sometime between 1916 and 1917, Leone met and fell in love with Ofelia Fabiani, the daughter of a wealthy Roman engineer. Born in 1896 to Spanish, French, and Italian background, Ofelia had grown up in the lavish residence of

⁵³ Ibid., 77.

⁵⁴ Noce, "Introduction," *Selkirks*, p. 17.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 17.

⁵⁶ Leone Caetani. Letter to Giorgio Levie Della Vida, March 25, 1934 (GVMA, MS 174, Box 1-3/10)

the Villa Mengherini in Rome. Ofelia had a delicate constitution and temperament that contrasted greatly with the intense, bold and adventurous spirit of Leone. As a consequence of her physical delicacy, it was with great difficulty that Ofelia gave birth to their daughter, Sveva Ersilia Giovanella Maria Caetani on August 6, 1917, in the Villa Mengherini. Having almost lost her life, Ofelia was to spend a long period of recovery from the experience, leaving Sveva in the care of a wet-nurse. Sveva was to later recount how this separation from her mother early in life left a rift between them that ultimately never healed.⁵⁷ It was during this very difficult time that a Danish woman, Miss Jüül, was hired to act as a secretary and companion for Ofelia. She was to remain with the family the rest of her life.

On September 25th, 1917, Onorato Caetani died and, as his eldest son, Leone inherited the extensive family estates, one of the largest united landholdings in Italy. Not long after, the social changes occurring in post-war Italy brought about a series of conflicts with regards to these lands. Leone was confronted with the threat of a Bolshevik uprising and claims made by farmers on his land.⁵⁸ Around the same time, a series of unfortunate investments “pushed Leone into getting rid of most of the Caetani lands, transforming them into anonymous companies or selling them at very low prices to co-operatives of ex-servicemen.”⁵⁹ Overwhelmed with the loss, and struggling to reconcile his role in the decline of the Caetani fortunes, Leone abandoned his scholarly pursuits, relinquished his titles to his brother Roffredo, and radically shifted the course of

⁵⁷ Sveva Caetani. Video Cassette of television interview with Barbara Hartley, Vernon, BC, 1983 (GVMA, MS 174, Box 10/13)

⁵⁸ Noce, “Introduction,” *Selkirks*, p. 17.

⁵⁴ Caracciolo, *Gardens Of Ninfa*, p. 72.

his life by removing himself and his family to a whole new world. He decided to return to British Columbia, which had so impressed him on his visit in 1891.

Leone, Ofelia and four-year-old Sveva arrived in Vernon in the summer of 1921.

A partial explanation for their move is given in a letter written by Leone in 1934:

I decided to break up with everything and everybody and go away to a new world. There I was able to build for myself a new life and dedicate it to a marvelous daughter. This daughter of mine was born under conditions, which are treated by our (Italian) code of civil law with barbarous cynicism. Here in Canada I was able, by changing my nationality, to give my name to my daughter and to put in order her situation.⁶⁰

As the passage suggests, Leone's life was troubled with regards to his failed marriage to Vittoria Colonna and the fact that, according to Italian law, he was unable to divorce her and marry Ofelia, the mother of his daughter. By renouncing his Italian ties and becoming a Canadian citizen, Leone was able to legitimize his daughter. Sveva also provided other reasons for the move:

The reason my father came to Canada was two-fold. Firstly, he refused to live in a country where, as he could see, he would no longer be allowed to speak his mind freely and publicly, and secondly, after a long and arduous career he wanted to raise me and enjoy himself in the tranquility and beauty of British Columbia. The degree to which my father demonstrated his English heritage has often been underestimated. For him anything British was second nature, and a new home based on English ideals of freedom and human rights was his first choice.⁶¹

Sveva is referring here to Leone's reaction to the growing political trend towards Fascism in Italy. In March 1919, Benito Mussolini founded the Fasci de Combattimento, thereby legitimatising Fascism as an organized political movement in the country. As a staunch socialist with ties to the anti-Fascist movement, Leone could not remain in a country that did not support the democratic ideals reflected in his English heritage. Additionally, his

⁶⁰ Letter from Leone Caetani to Giorgio Levi della Vida, March 25, 1934 (GVMA, MS 174, Box 1 – 3/10)

⁶¹ Letter from Sveva Caetani to David Pateno, May 20, 1993 (GVMA, MS 174, Box 1 – 3/10)

attachment to the beautiful landscape of British Columbia, formed during his hunting trip in 1891, had never wavered over the years. For Leone, the small town of Vernon, with its strong tradition of British culture, provided the tranquil haven he was searching for.

When the family stepped off the train in Vernon, along with “a cook, a valet, a secretary and 30 pieces of luggage,” they were beginning a brand new life that would contrast sharply with their aristocratic existence in Europe.⁶² After purchasing a home on Pleasant Valley Road that satisfied Ofelia’s taste, Leone invested in an orchard and woodlot in the region northeast of the city. With the idea of becoming a “gentlemen” farmer, Leone at first dedicated his days to tending the orchard with the assistance of a hired hand. But he eventually tired of this activity, and as reflected in this passage from the 1934 letter he wrote to his friend, Giorgio Levi della Vida, he preferred the life of a logger: “I have a wooded lot up higher in the mountain. I go to it in the morning with my truck, work with an axe and a saw, load the product of my work on the truck and then return with my load.”⁶³

Ofelia’s transition into a life in Vernon was not as successful as Leone’s. This elite woman of fashion had been plunked down into a small town in British Columbia where her Parisian wardrobe was of little use. She clearly did not fit into her new environment and her resistance to learning English further increased the family’s isolation. In order to keep Ofelia content, frequent trips back home to Europe would be necessary in the years to come. Sveva was instructed at home by a series of English governesses. Cut off from other children, Sveva’s early childhood was very lonely. She did, however, enjoy accompanying her father on his trips to the orchard and the wood lot, dressed in overalls,

⁶² Sveva Caetani, CBC interview, cassette tape, 1994 (GVMA, MS 174, Box 10/13)

⁶³ Letter from Leone Caetani to Giorgio Levi della Vida, March 25, 1934 (GVMA, MS 174, Box 1 – 3/10)

where she helped him pick fruit and haul wood. Leone also encouraged his daughter to read extensively and many books were ordered from all over the world for her to peruse.

Shortly after the Caetani family had settled in Vernon they began what would become a decade of traveling back and forth to Europe to visit the family estates in Italy, as well as to shop in Paris. Photos taken during this time, show that the family visited London, Monte Carlo, Paris, and Rome regularly, sometimes spending over a year at these points.

For Ofelia, the fashion houses of London and Paris were the most important destinations on these trips. There she would satisfy her need for the finer things she was missing out in Vernon by purchasing the clothing of world-class designers, such as Chanel and Vionnet. These designs were selected by Ofelia from a model, and made to order to her size and choice of color and material. According to Sveva, “though she lived an extremely retired life, my mother became famous in the ‘Maisons de coutures’ for her exquisite taste and fabulous grooming. Indeed, every item she possessed or touched was renowned for its spotless freshness and extreme tidiness.”⁶⁴ Ofelia would also buy designer dresses for Sveva, as shown in a photo of Sveva dated 1925 in which she proudly models a ball-gown designed by Vionnet. Later in life, Sveva was to remember these shopping sprees as a “crushing bore” and said she much preferred the overalls she wore when she accompanied her father to the orchard in Vernon.⁶⁵

One of Sveva’s favorite places to visit in Europe was a villa Leone had built on one of the highest hilltops in Rome, the Villa Gianicolo. Leone had drawn his inspiration for the design from the Muslim architecture he had seen in India, which was open on all

⁶⁴ Sveva Caetani. Letter to The Costume Museum of Canada, Dugald, February 12, 1993 (GVMA, MS 174, Box 5/13)

⁶⁵ Ibid.

sides. In a letter written in the 1990's, Sveva fondly remembers her visits to the villa:

“whenever we lived there I had the room at the top of the house. Every morning I would jump out of bed and rush to gaze out of the windows, first at the Rocca de Papa, with the snowy Appenines behind, and then running across the room to the opposite window, at the dome of St. Peter’s.”⁶⁶ Sveva had other memories of Rome: “the Villa Doria where I played, the Villa Borghese and its gallery, the Villa Wurtz with its peacocks . . . then there were the visits to the Via delle Bottghe Oscure, and my grandmother’s apartment in Palazzo Caetani when I was invariably compared to the bust of my Polish great-grandmother, whom I was said to resemble in every facial detail.”⁶⁷ At the Castle Sermoneta there were picnics with Leone’s brothers, Gelasio and Michelangelo.

In 1929 the family traveled to Havana, first by train from Vernon to Los Angeles, and from there, they took a twelve-day cruise on *The California* through the Panama Canal to Havana, returning through Palm Beach, Florida to New York. According to the journal kept by Sveva’s governess, Miss Bonnell, they “were all charmed with Los Angeles in every way.”⁶⁸ They toured past the homes of famous Hollywood stars, including Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, Buster Keaton, Gloria Swanson, and John Barrymore. They took photographs of Rudolph Valentino’s home, and visited the Hollywood Bowl. On *The California* they attended a masquerade where Sveva, dressed in her Vionnet gown as an early Victorian, “far out-shone everyone else.”⁶⁹ Traveling through the San Miguel Locks of the Panama Canal, they marvelled at

⁶⁶ Sveva Caetani. Letter to Anna Pan, Re: interview questions (GVMA, MS 174, Box 3-6/15)

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Edith Bonnell. Journal kept on trip to Havana, 1929 (GVMA, MS 174, Box 1-S1-13/64)

⁶⁹ Ibid.

“with what ease and rapidity the ships [were] put through.”⁷⁰ In Havana they collected shells from the beaches and visited a cigar factory and a sugar cane plant.

As was the tradition of her aristocratic class, Sveva was educated at home by a series of English governesses until she was sixteen. These governesses scheduled a daily routine of instruction that was kept up even during the extensive travels to Europe. The standards of Sveva’s aristocratic background dictated that Sveva be exposed to an intellectually rigorous and culturally well rounded education. For instance, the longest employed governess, Miss Bonnell, was also an accomplished musician. Besides teaching the standard subjects of English and French, she also taught Sveva the rudiments of piano and drawing. The surviving correspondence between Sveva and Miss Bonnell, located in the GVMA, demonstrates the important role of companion that a governess would provide in Sveva’s lonely life. Miss Bonnell would accompany Sveva to performances of dance and opera during their stays in Europe, and at home in Vernon, they would swim together in Okanagan Lake. When the family was between governesses, Miss Jüül would care for Sveva.

Throughout the 1920's, the family spent long periods of time in Monte Carlo at the Hotel de Paris. During the family’s stay in 1930, Sveva kept a detailed journal of how she spent her day. She was kept busy with lessons in history, geography, spelling, and music. Some of her leisure time was spent at the Monte Carlo Country Club where she watched professional tennis players compete. In the evenings she went to the theatre where she saw everything from the Russian Ballet to the films of Charlie Chaplin. One of the most significant aspects of this trip, however, was that Leone had hired a Russian artist named Andre Petroff to instruct Sveva in drawing and painting. This was the first

⁷⁰ Ibid.

formal artistic education Sveva had received from a professional and was a significant influence on her development as an artist. Petroff imposed a rigorous daily schedule, which involved Sveva drawing from a live model and painting still lifes on canvas. The subject matter ranged from classical figures, such as Venus, to portraits of Sveva's puppy, Cracker. Sveva's work was entered in a local exhibition in which she hoped to win "a gold medal . . . (or) at least a little honorary medal."⁷¹ The results of the competition were not recorded in the journal, as the entries end before the end of their stay in Monte Carlo. Petroff's high standard of instruction would instill in Sveva a level of artistic self-discipline and dedication that she would maintain her entire life.

In October 1929, the financial world was struck with the largest stock market crash of the century. According to Sveva, the family travels ended "when most of my father's fortune, invested in England, disappeared in the 1929 crash."⁷² While the initial crash hit Leone's resources hard, it wasn't until 1931 when the family made their last trek to Europe that he was to feel the full effect of the devastation. The estrangement from the family's Italian ties was to have a profound impact on Ofelia, as she was now forced to accept an isolated life in Vernon far from the cultural amenities she was accustomed to in Europe. For Leone, the isolation proved to be a welcome opportunity, a chance to slow down and contemplate his life. In a letter from 1934 he wrote about his newfound contentment, "here in Canada, we live a simple life, have two servants, have found much peace . . . I [have] acquired a richness, priceless, which is true serenity of the soul...without ambitions and regrets, to accept with tranquility every event of destiny."⁷³

⁷¹ Sveva Caetani. Diary entry written in Monte Carlo, January 1930 (GVMA, MS 174, Box 1-3/10)

⁷² Sveva Caetani. Letter to The Costume Museum of Canada, Dugald, February 12, 1993 (GVMA, MS 174, Box 3-6/15)

⁷³ Letter from Leone Caetani to Giorgio Levi della Vida, March 25, 1934 (GVMA, MS 174, Box 1 – 3/10)

Sveva also began a whole new chapter in her life as her governess was let go and she was sent to a boarding school in Vancouver. For the first time in her life, she would be separated from her parents and surrounded by other girls her age.

In Sept. 1930, Sveva was sent to Crofton House, an independent school for girls in Vancouver. Founded by Jessie and Mary Gordon in 1898, Crofton House advocated academic excellence, good citizenship, and manners. Leone and Ofelia believed Sveva had reached the age when she would benefit morally and intellectually from her exposure to this type of academic climate, as opposed to being tutored at home. Much of the correspondence between Sveva and her parents during her stay at Crofton House has survived and is now housed in the Vernon Museum Archives. These letters provide an insight into how Sveva coped with the change and they provide a sense of the family's dynamics. From the letters it seems that she wrote more to her father than her mother. Her father apparently played the role of disciplinarian in the family, but at the same time he was quite indulgent. The letters between Sveva and her mother are loving and tender, although Ofelia wrote less because of her failing health and difficulties with the language.

Within this new and different academic system, Sveva had to apply herself in order to catch up to the standards of the school. Initially she was put in the lower "form," or class, for her age group, but before long was excelling in most areas by the end of her first year. The school provided a wide range of academic subjects, including Latin, French, Algebra, Geometry, Composition, Literature, and History. As a tall, athletic teenager, Sveva gained strength and agility in the program's physical education classes. She enjoyed such sports as badminton, tennis, and basketball, with riding lessons as her favorite. Leone sent extra money so that she could receive piano instruction and it was

not long before she was playing for the school's concerts and musicals. Sveva's dramatic personality was well suited to the school's theatre program, and in her second year she played Beatrice in the production of *Much Ado About Nothing*.⁷⁴

Sveva also took artistic instruction at the school, although it is not clear how significant the lessons were for her artistic development. Canadian artist Emily Carr had taught art at the school between 1906 and 1910 when it was still under its previous name, Miss Jessie Gordon's Neighborhood House, but this important artist's influence on the school's art curriculum would have very likely dissipated by the time Sveva attended.⁷⁵ However, in one letter to her parents she proudly announced one of her drawings was to be sent to an exhibition in Italy.⁷⁶ Leone's responding letter expressed his delight at her success in drawing and encouraged her to take it up seriously when she finished school: "All other things that we enjoy in life (love included!) turn to [?]. . . and bitterness, but a great work and devotion to art are joys that never leave or betray you."⁷⁷ As this letter demonstrates, Leone wholeheartedly supported Sveva's artistic endeavors and clearly thought the arts would be a worthwhile pursuit after she graduated.

It was very important to Ofelia that Sveva attend Roman Catholic church services and have access to the parish priest while at Crofton House. This seems to have been out of the ordinary for the school, as most of the students attended St. Paul's Anglican Church. Special arrangements had to be made for Sveva to go to mass accompanied by an

⁷⁴ Sveva Caetani. Letter to her parents, nd (GVMA, MS 174, 1-S1-19/64)

⁷⁵ According to Carr's biographer, Maria Tippet, Miss Gordon was initially reluctant to hire Carr but relented when Carr's reputation for excellence in teaching became well known in Vancouver. Carr's young female students enjoyed the freedom Carr's classes afforded, stating: "Miss Carr was such fun...her classes were always happy; she sang, was very sloppy with the paint, and made everyone laugh...most of her students loved her and would not miss a class for anything." Maria Tippet, *Emily Carr: A Biography*. (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Co., 1979), p. 71.

⁷⁶ Sveva Caetani. Letter to her parents, January 1931 (GVMA, MS 174, 1-S1-19/64)

⁷⁷ Leone Caetani. Letter to Sveva Caetani, January 1931 (GVMA, MS 174, 1-S1-19/64)

acquaintance of Miss Gordon's. Personally, Sveva preferred the Anglican church and when in September 1931 she attended a service with a friend, Ofelia's outrage was communicated in a letter from Leone to Miss Gordon. He stated that in order to calm Ofelia it was "quite indispensable" that Sveva exclusively attend the Catholic Church from that point on.⁷⁸

Socially, Sveva blossomed during her stay at Crofton House. In her letters home to her parents Sveva would often refer to the many friends she had made and how much fun she was having. Initially, Leone would not allow Sveva to go out with her friends on the weekends until her grades improved. Consequently, many of the early letters begin with Sveva's desperate cries of protest, begging her parents to write to Miss Gordon, the headmistress, to grant permission. In one letter Sveva writes: "Because I am away from home does that mean I can't go out and that I have to be doubly miserable? Sometimes I just cry my eyes out when everybody but me goes out . . . I have been out once all the time I have been here!"⁷⁹ Sveva eventually won the battle for the weekend outings with friends, which included attending classical music concerts, the opera, and various plays. Sveva also had close relationships with some of the instructors at Crofton House, one of whom took her for tea and crumpets at Purdy's restaurant, and then out to the cinema in the evening.⁸⁰

Overall, Sveva made some good friends at Crofton House and succeeded in almost every aspect of school life. However, conflict did occur once in while between Sveva's parents and the headmistress, particularly with regards to the fact that Sveva stood out within the school community because of her aristocratic background. This is revealed in

⁷⁸ Leone Caetani. Letter to Jessie Gordon, September 26, 1931 (GVMA, MS 174, 1-5/10)

⁷⁹ Sveva Caetani. Letter to her parents, April 30, 1931 (GVMA, MS 174, 1-S1-21/64)

⁸⁰ Sveva Caetani. Letter to her parents, October 3, 1931 (GVMA, MS 174, 1-S1-21/64)

the number of letters from Miss Gordon to Leone in which she insisted he cut back on the amount of money and clothing he was sending to Sveva, as “Sveva already has so much to store and take care of.”⁸¹ With a designer wardrobe that included Chanel dresses and Vionnet blouses, Sveva had the reputation as the most fashionable student in the school.

In February of 1932, Sveva came down with a serious case of the measles and Ofelia traveled down from Vernon to care for her. When it looked like Sveva would require an extended recovery period, Leone decided to bring her home in order to convalesce, fully intending to send her back to Crofton House when she had recovered. It is not clear why Sveva never returned to the school.

Sveva’s return home in 1932 marked the beginning of gradual darkening in the life of the Caetani family. According to some of the documents in the Vernon Museum Archives, Leone attempted to hire a tutor for Sveva but there is no record as to whether someone was secured for the position or not.⁸² The family kept mostly to themselves with Leone making his daily trips up to the wood lot. Occasionally, Ofelia and Sveva would accompany him, Sveva working at her father’s side and Ofelia lounging in the sun.

In the summer of 1934, Sveva produced three cards for her parents (see figures 1 a, b, c) whose highly stylized representations indicate the nature of her relationship with them. For her father, she depicted an image of the Ascension of Muhammad riding his steed Barak into Paradise. She is referencing and paying homage to her father’s devotion to the history of Islam, and the imagery forms part of the standard repertoire in Islamic art.⁸³ The inscription on the back of the card reads: “To my darling Daddy, Wishing him

⁸¹ Letter from Jessie Gordon to Leone, October 9, 1930 (GVMA, MS 174, 1-5/10)

⁸² Letters between Leone and various applicants for the position of tutor (GVMA, MS 174, 1-8/10)

⁸³ Later in life, Sveva repeated this theme in her 1982 painting, “Barak for the Skies”, in the series *Recapitulation*. Harding; *Caetani*, p.23.

a very Happy Birthday, his loving daughter, Sveva” (Figure 1a). It is dated on his birthday, September 12, 1934. For her mother, Sveva created two cards with a similar stylistic treatment and composition but with a more ambiguous message. The card dated on Ofelia’s birthday on 29 July 1934 depicts an elegant female figure wearing an Egyptian-style headdress, dancing with a translucent veil that plays in and around the body of a mythical dragon that looms in the background (Figure 1b). The serpentine composition suggests the hypnotic and compelling nature of Ofelia. The inscription on the back of this card reads: “To my darling, darling Mau, my sweet inspiration, and my wonderful compassionate friend – your adoring daughter, Sveva Beo.”⁸⁴ The psychological implications are taken a step further in the second card to her mother featuring a dejected female figure bound with a ball and chain (see figure 1c). Part of the inscription on the back reads: “This little ‘Princess’ a captive, as you can see, is only a very poor mark of my deep love and affection for you, and in offering her to you, I offer myself as well!” Whereas her father’s role inspired freedom and flight, Sveva’s relationship with her mother appeared to have been based on a mixture of adoration, intense devotion, and claustrophobic confinement.

The family’s isolation from their ties in Europe became increasingly pronounced during this time, as reflected in a letter written by Leone to his Aunt Vivi where he complains that he does not hear from any of his family except for her and Gelasio.⁸⁵ He attributes this communication breakdown as a consequence of his moving so far away and goes on to explain how his life is now centered around Sveva who has become “too old for her age . . . very Polish in temperament, very lively, a keen sense of humor and

⁸⁴ This was Sveva Caetani’s nickname.

⁸⁵ Leone Caetani. Letter to Aunt Vivi, July 3, 1933 (GVMA, MS 174, 1/10)

full of fun. She can draw, paint, play the piano, model busts in clay, has an extraordinary memory, a most pleasant conversation, a good listener, but also rather a short temper which might get her into trouble.”⁸⁶ These words of adoration express how Sveva had become the entire world to her father. At the same time, he worried about her future and didn’t want to keep her isolated in western Canada much longer. Consequently, he made some inquiries into prominent girl’s colleges in Paris but had to abandon the idea when circumstances intervened, changing the course of their lives forever.

The family was shaken in 1934 when Leone was diagnosed with throat cancer. He traveled to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, to seek treatment. From November, 1934, to October, 1935, he underwent a series of painful operations that ultimately failed to have any effect. As his condition deteriorated, Miss Jüül was sent to act as his personal nurse and to keep Ofelia and Sveva updated on his condition. The letters from Sveva to her father during this stage of his illness became increasingly urgent, attesting to the anxiety she was experiencing over his stay in hospital.⁸⁷ After each operation she would request details as to his recovery, imploring him to get well soon so that he could return home to them. When Leone began radium treatment in September 1935, Sveva expressed concern over the effectiveness of it and suggested that he see a cancer specialist she had read about in *Time Magazine* who evidently had a new cure, “although,” she added, “it may be grasping at a frail straw.”⁸⁸ She was beginning to suspect her father was beyond help and that the famous Mayo Clinic had failed to cure him. This was, in fact, the case, and in October 1935, Leone’s treatment at the clinic was

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Sveva Caetani. Letters to Leone at the Mayo Clinic (GVMA, MS. 174, 1-7/10)

⁸⁸ Sveva Caetani. Letter to Leone, September 24, 1935 (GVMA, MS. 174, 1-7/10)

abandoned and he was transferred to Vancouver General Hospital. Sveva and Ofelia, along with Miss Jüül, came down from Vernon in order to be at Leone's bedside.

In the last remaining months of his life, Leone, with his scholarly approach to everything, wrote a series of notes documenting his failing condition. Initially, he complained about things such as the treatment he was receiving by the nurses and the quality of the food that was being forced upon him. As time passed, the notes became more introspective as he slipped deeper into his private world of pain: "Everyday I lose lots [of weight] and gain little . . . have to keep in mind that the cure didn't help and that I can't return to Vernon . . . starting to hope I won't live much longer . . . all my strength is leaving me."⁸⁹

Leone was finally released from his suffering when he died on Christmas day, 1935. Sveva and Ofelia were devastated by the loss of the most important person in their lives. In a letter to her Aunt Kallista, Sveva wrote, "I cannot write of what has happened, without living all over again those long months of pain and despair and agony. Even now, it seems so unreal to me, so impossible that my beloved Daddy has gone. Sometimes I feel that it is only a horrible nightmare, and that when I wake up I will find him again, to be with always, forever and ever. It is only when I realize that that can never be, that he is really gone from us, that I feel that [life] is not worth living anymore."⁹⁰

Following an ancient Roman tradition, a death mask and cast of Leone's hand were created.⁹¹ Plans were made to have his body sent to the family chapel in Rome, but in the

⁸⁹ Leone Caetani. Notes written while in hospital the last months of his life, November, December, 1935 (GVMA, MS. 174, 1-9/10)

⁹⁰ Sveva Caetani. Letter to Aunt Kallista, March 21, 1936 (GVMA, MS. 174, 1-S1-22/64)

⁹¹ For an image of this see page 15 in Harding, *Caetani di Sermoneta*.

end, a plot was purchased in the Vernon cemetery and he was buried there in a “magnificent bronze casket” on February 8, 1936.⁹² His obituary was placed in newspapers around the world and the family received many cards of condolence. Ofelia, greatly weakened by the loss physically, withdrew from the world entirely. Worse still, she compelled Sveva to join her, and the three women began an isolated existence together in the big house on Pleasant Valley Road.

Ofelia’s heart was weakened by Leone’s death and she used the resulting heart condition to control her daughter. Sveva recalls how “she [Ofelia] hung onto me...it’s quite easy to persuade an 18-year-old that if she does anything on her own she will have a heart attack and die.”⁹³ Initially Sveva was confined to the house where she was in charge of cleaning and dusting the sparsely decorated rooms, arranging the furniture to her mother’s demanding and fastidious standards. Eventually when this restrictive environment proved too oppressive for Sveva, her mother allowed her to venture into the yard to work alongside the gardener, and finally, into town to run errands with Miss Jüül. While Sveva was permitted to continue the extensive reading she had maintained through her childhood, Ofelia became increasingly threatened by her desire to write and paint. During the 1940’s, Sveva produced a series of small paintings that were primarily religious in content, with titles such as “Carpenter Christ” and “Virgin Mary at the Cross.” As a devout Catholic, Ofelia did not object to the subject matter of the paintings, but rather the fact that with her art Sveva enjoyed a world entirely her own. Ofelia’s restriction of Sveva’s artistic output was yet another way of keeping her tied emotionally

⁹² Leone Caetani Obituary in the *Vernon News*, February 13, 1936 (GVMA, MS. 174, 5-2/3)

⁹³ Susan Thorne, “Sveva Caetani: Celebrating the Path Taken,” *Okanagan Sunday*, March 27, 1994.

and physically. Sveva was to later recount how, “in order to have peace I gave it [painting] up for fifteen years...it was like death in life.”⁹⁴

Sveva did, however, manage to exert some resistance to her mother’s oppression in the form of written notes she would scribble down in a book she kept in her apron pocket while she did her chores. Metaphorically, some of these thoughts and ideas represented the seeds of inspiration that would eventually blossom into the artistic and literary output she produced in the latter part of her life. It was also during these years of restricted activity that Sveva created a number of caricatures reflecting her experience as a young woman cut off from the rest of the world. The example provided here reminds us that, within this isolated world, the books in the family library and the ones her mother ordered from afar, provided her only solace (see figure 2a). She represents herself as “Beo the Librarian,” a long, lanky individual with knobby knees and large feet, stooped over an open book. Beo’s sole companion, a cat, lies curled up under the table.⁹⁵

The majority of the cartoons that survive from this period depict Beo, or Sveva, in various states of emotional upheaval. In one particularly long cartoon of twenty separate sketches, Beo expresses her frustration at not being able to access the items she dreams of, such as beautiful new skirts and dresses (see figure 2b). Gone are the days of shopping trips to Vionnet’s shop in Paris. With the gates of the property keeping her prisoner, Beo must resort to ordering through the mail. As the days pass, Beo waits in vain for the things she has ordered. Frustration builds with each successive sketch until, in the final section, when there is no sign of the much anticipated items, she stands holding a gun to her head, about to put herself out of her misery. It is fitting that Sveva utilized the

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ These cartoons have also been reproduced in Harding, *Caetani di Sermoneta*, p. 24.

subversive medium of cartoon to vent the conflicted feelings she was experiencing at the time.

The years between 1958 and 1960 were increasingly difficult for the Caetani family as Ofelia's health deteriorated. The agoraphobic tendencies Ofelia had acquired over the years, compounded by the effects of her physical ailments, resulted in the need for frequent home visits by doctors. Sveva and Miss Jүүл worked tirelessly to provide round-the-clock care for Ofelia. Sveva would carefully bandage her mother's legs, which had developed ulcers on them. Years later, Sveva spoke of the challenges of her mother's illness: "I tried and succeeded in providing my mother with the kind of care and attention to which she was accustomed even while developing my own world of the mind."⁹⁶ Sveva's long vigil came to an end when Ofelia died. For her funeral, Ofelia's coffin was taken from St. James' Roman Catholic Church to the family plot in Vernon Cemetery by a horse-drawn sleigh, the first used in Vernon for 27 years.

The months following Ofelia's death provided an opportunity for Sveva to reflect on the complicated relationship she had had with her mother. While she was glad that Ofelia was at peace, she also found it difficult to be "without her voice, her touch, the sound and feel of her."⁹⁷ In a letter to a friend, Sveva spoke of her mother affectionately: "My mother – legend perhaps to the contrary – loved simplicity, nature, kind and gentle animals; and her religion."⁹⁸ It is clear that Sveva greatly loved and admired her mother, but at the same time, the years she had spent with her in isolation had been extremely demanding and had required a tremendous amount of endurance. According to her friend Joan Heriot, Sveva had spoken of the reclusive existence as a form of imprisonment and

⁹⁶ Notes by Sveva to the Dugald Costume Museum, Feb. 12, 1993 (GVMA, MS. 174, 1-S1-47/64)

⁹⁷ Sveva Caetani. Letter to Mrs. Price, n.d. (GVMA, MS. 174, 1-S1-35/64)

⁹⁸ Sveva Caetani. Letter to Mrs. Clarke, n.d. (GVMA, MS. 174, 1-S1-35/64)

had “described herself as a survivor – adding that if one did survive such an experience it left one strong in some ways and crippled in others.”⁹⁹ It was with that very same strength that Sveva launched into the next chapter in her life.

Ofelia’s death and subsequent funeral provided an opportunity for Sveva and Miss Jüül to emerge from their insulated world and establish friendships within the Vernon community. Many individuals stepped forward to offer their assistance during the funeral ceremony and reception and to comfort the two women in their grief. As Ofelia’s faithful companion for over forty years, Miss Jüül had her own sorrow to work through and, according to Sveva, probably felt the pain more acutely because of this closeness.¹⁰⁰ Sveva and Miss Jüül would continue to live together in the Pleasant Valley house Sveva had inherited from her father.

Their first task was to transform the interior of the house, which was sparsely decorated according to Ofelia’s sterile specifications, into a warm and inviting place to live. Sveva utilized the carpentry skills she had learned from the various handymen employed by the family over the years to revamp the walls and ceilings of the house. She single-handedly designed and built fine wood cabinets with highly detailed inlay. She upholstered chairs and sofas. The walls were decorated with beautiful hooked rugs, designed by Sveva and stitched by Miss Jüül. These rugs had a distinctly tapestry-like appearance. Sveva’s designs were influenced by Italian Renaissance painting, the austere compositions of Japanese screens, and the abstract lyricism of Paul Klee. The combined efforts of Sveva’s innovative designs and Miss Jüül’s precision handiwork earned them

⁹⁹ Joan Heriot wrote about Sveva’s life for the 100th Anniversary of Crofton House School (GVMA, MS. 174) [hereafter Heriot, ‘100th Anniversary’]

¹⁰⁰ Sveva Caetani. Letter to Mrs. De Brele, n.d. (GVMA, MS. 174, 1-S1-35/64)

top awards year after year at the annual Interior Provincial Exhibition. This period of creative productivity in the home signified Sveva's first foray back into a warmer, more open world.

Sveva's integration with the Vernon community involved joining, with the help of her new-found friends, various associations such as the Canadian Women's Club and the Naturalists' Club. She learned to drive, an activity she enjoyed immensely considering her years of confinement, and it was not long before she became known for speeding up and down the streets of the area.

While Sveva was reveling in her newfound freedom, she was, at the same time, experiencing harsh financial difficulties. In her will, Ofelia stipulated that the little money she had would go to Miss Jütl, with the remainder of her holdings in Rome going to the Roman Catholic Church. This left Sveva financially strapped, and in order to support the two of them, she was forced to go out into the community and find work. Considering she was now forty-three years old and had not had any vocational training in her life, this was a daunting task.

After working in an office for a short period of time, Sveva applied for and received a teaching position at St. James Elementary School, a Catholic school. The vast reading she had done over the last twenty-five years had given her the background, despite having had no formal training, to teach French, History, Social Studies, and Art, at the grade 5 level. She enjoyed her teaching position at St. James until 1969, when she decided to move Victoria to finish her high school diploma and get her B.C. Teacher's certificate.

In the fall of 1969, Sveva rented out her Pleasant Valley home and she and Miss Jüül moved to a friend's basement apartment in Victoria. After a short time at the Adult Institute (which later became Camosun College), where she finished her high school diploma, Sveva enrolled at the University of Victoria. There she quickly learned that academic life required a regimented schedule, as Miss Jüül attested to in a letter to a friend, "Sveva is working very hard – every morning long before 8 getting off – take lunch with her – back 3:30 in the afternoon – having tea together. Then homework for several hours – stop for dinner for very short time and on again, but she likes it and finds it very interesting."¹⁰¹ Despite the grueling schedule of classes Sveva still managed to enjoy herself, as her friend, Joan Heriot, relayed, "she [Sveva] was at long last revelling in the freedom, making new friends, learning new technique – and with little Miss Jüül as her constant companion, exploring all over the place by car."¹⁰²

Perhaps the most significant connection Sveva made at the University of Victoria was with art instructor John Cawood. She was to later attribute her renewed interest in art to this person whose words of encouragement were just what she needed to set her off on a new artistic journey. Sveva said, "I'll never forget him...he gave me the courage to start over again."¹⁰³ With this renewed confidence, Sveva entered the most artistically productive phase of her life.

In the summer of 1972, Sveva and Miss Jüül returned home to Vernon where Sveva had acquired a teaching position at Charles Bloom Secondary School in nearby Lumby. In order to be closer to the school, Sveva rented out her Vernon home and bought a small house in Lumby. Having always enjoyed the company of children and

¹⁰¹ Miss Jüül. Letter to Joan Heriot, February 19, 1970 (GVMA, MS. 174, 1-S1-/1)

¹⁰² Heriot, '100th Anniversary'

¹⁰³ Thorne, 'Sveva Caetani', *Okanagan Sunday*, March 27, 1994.

adolescents, Sveva enjoyed in her role as a teacher. With her imposing height, intelligent wit, and dramatic persona, Sveva quickly earned the love and respect of her students. In her classroom, she provided an atmosphere conducive to unrestrictive creative and intellectual exploration. Her teaching philosophy revolved around one primary message: “Life is above all a journey of the soul, and that journey is the one that must be pursued at all costs, even if it must be interwoven with the commonplaces of daily life.”¹⁰⁴ She instilled in her students the confidence to explore unknown territory, stressing the importance of breaking boundaries and challenging outmoded ways of thinking. Many of the students Sveva taught at Charles Bloom represented the children she never had. They in turn would come back to visit her on a regular basis after they had graduated, sometimes bringing their own children with them.

In March of 1973, Miss Jüül died at the age of 88 and was buried in the family plot in the Vernon cemetery. The head stone that marked her grave bore the words, “The meek shall inherit the earth,” a fitting phrase for a woman who had devoted her entire life to the service of others and had become indispensable to them. For the first time in her life, Sveva was left on her own. She sold her small house in Lumby and bought another closer to Vernon on Coldstream Creek Road. Teaching and art became Sveva’s primary concerns, and she threw herself into them whole-heartedly. While working a full day at school, Sveva would also devote herself to producing an unprecedented number of watercolours during this time. She worked to develop a drybrush technique whereby layer upon layer of colour was applied in order to produce a luminous glow. Sveva sought much of her inspiration from classical mythology and literature for the subject-

¹⁰⁴ Sveva Caetani. Letter to Anna Zampieri Pan, February 22, year unknown (GVMA, MS. 174, 5/13)

matter of her work. In 1974, she exhibited for the first time in a show entitled *Okanagan Energy*, at the Burnaby Art Gallery. This would be the first of many shows she would be involved with in the coming years.

While driving to work one morning in 1975, Sveva was struck with an idea that would consume her for the next fourteen years.¹⁰⁵ She conceived of a project that would recount the story of her life, with the figure of her father playing a major role. Drawing on Dante's *Divine Comedy* as a model for the overarching format, an outline began to formulate in her mind. She would call the series, *Recapitulation*. In 1976, Sveva decided it was time to return to her Pleasant Valley Road home. She sold her house in Coldstream, set up her studio, and by 1978, after producing a written version of the series, began the first of fifty-six paintings. Balancing her teaching career with her rigorous painting schedule for the series proved too much for Sveva, and her health began to suffer. Plagued with diabetes and arthritis, Sveva somehow managed to maintain a remarkable momentum. This was partly due to the support she received from her friends and members of the Vernon artistic community and partly to her remarkable strength as a human being. The years of seclusion with her mother had, indeed, crippled her, but they had also strengthened her in many ways.

By 1983, it was clear that Sveva could not continue teaching because of her ill health and she was forced to retire. In a written tribute to Sveva by the Vernon School District, the unique contribution she made to the school was celebrated: "We remember her great gusto for Art and Life (in that order please!). Even when plagued with ill-health . . . she continued to inspire her students! As a teacher she was like a prospector always

¹⁰⁵ Sveva Caetani. CBC interview, cassette tape, 1994 (GVMA, MS 174, Box 10/13)

seeking that ‘talent’ buried in a student – digging it out and polishing it to her exacting standard of beauty.”¹⁰⁶ Having inspired and polished a myriad of students’ work over the last eleven years, Sveva was now free to devote herself entirely to her own artistic endeavors.

Sveva would spend the next seven years deeply engrossed in producing the fifty-six paintings for *Recapitulation*, despite her failing health. The pace only slowed at one point when she was almost blind with cataracts in both eyes. According to Joan Heriot, Sveva was fortunately able to have the cataracts removed and new lenses implanted: “Her sight was not only restored but greatly improved, enabling her to paint on for many more years until the series was complete.”¹⁰⁷ Sveva’s friends were integral to the completion of the series. In 1985, Joan moved into the Pleasant Valley home, providing the companionship and support Sveva needed. In the role of “artist’s apprentice,” Joan would help Sveva put the “stiff watercolour paper on the drawing board” and “fasten all around the edge with numerous pins and strips of masking tape.”¹⁰⁸ Another close friend, Grace Funk acted as Sveva’s personal secretary, dealing with her financial matters and typing for her when she was no longer able to.

With the help of her friend Vanessa Alexander, the Alberta Art Foundation in Edmonton agreed to provide a home for *Recapitulation*, even before the series was complete. The foundation generously covered the cost of framing each work as it arrived. By 1989 when the final work for the series had been completed, Sveva had exhibited in many solo and group exhibitions, including Expo ’86 in Vancouver. As Sveva’s exposure grew, she received more and more requests for interviews, among

¹⁰⁶ Tribute to Sveva by the Vernon School District No.22 (GVMA, MS. 174, 5-5/5)

¹⁰⁷ Heriot, ‘100th Anniversary’

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

them, one from CBC's Vicki Gabereau in 1991. Sveva communicated how overwhelmed she was by all the attention in a letter to a friend: "I have even had phone calls from unknown individuals wanting to start extensive correspondence with me. Thank God they haven't."¹⁰⁹ Gradually Sveva's health deteriorated to the point that she was unable to attend her own openings, and her friends had to attend in her place.

Wheelchair-bound and fingers gnarled with arthritis, Sveva completed her last painting in 1992-93. She continued to write as well, producing the philosophical essay entitled, "Exploration," which remains unpublished in the GVMA.¹¹⁰ In 1993, Sveva's friend Heidi Thompson approached her about publishing a book on *Recapitulation*. Sveva agreed to the project but, unfortunately, did not live to see it published.¹¹¹ On the morning of April 28th, 1994, Sveva passed away peacefully, leaving the world to ponder the deep complexities of the legacy she left behind. The following year, the series of autobiographical paintings and Caetani's accompanying text came out as a book, *Recapitulation: A Journey*, a fitting legacy to her difficult but richly creative life.

¹⁰⁹ Sveva Caetani. Letter to Lillian, January 15, 1992 (GVMA, MS. 174, 1-S1-59/64)

¹¹⁰ "Exploration," unpublished manuscript, 1994 (GVMA, MS 174)

¹¹¹ Caetani, *Recapitulation : A Journey*.

Chapter 2: Autobiography Theory, Feminism, and the politics of self-representation

As stated earlier, my role in studying, describing, and contextualizing Caetani's story is to make transparent the constructed nature of that story, both the construction of Caetani's narrative on her part and my constructed retelling of it. I am aware of the slippage that occurs between what is remembered, what Caetani remembers, and what actually occurred in her past. As Sidonie Smith theorizes, "The self is not a documentary repository of all experiential history running uninterruptedly from infancy to the contemporary moment, capacious, current, and accessible. The very sense of self as identity derives paradoxically from the loss to consciousness of fragments of experiential history."¹¹² Throughout my research I been able to compare the life narrative Caetani constructed within and around the making of the series *Recapitulation* with the archival documents that present the hard facts of her life and that of her parents, including legal papers, correspondence to and from family and friends, and family photographs dating back to her childhood. Admittedly, I am aware of the difficulty of deriving a coherent trajectory of one person's life from such a collection of documents. At times there are glaring inconsistencies between the information attained from these documents and Caetani's story. This may be because, as Andrew Norman has asserted, "the constructive activity of the narrator is seen to be in tension with history's professed aim to tell truths about the past."¹¹³ It is difficult for me to reconcile these discrepancies

¹¹² Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography* p. 85.

¹¹³ Andrew Norman, "Telling it Like It Was: Historical Narratives on Their Own Terms," *History and Theory*, 30 (1991): 119.

in my analysis when Caetani's series draws so heavily on memory which, by nature, is fluid rather than static.

I will look at how the mechanisms of memory disrupt the "truth." Steve Lattey alludes to Caetani's fluid memory in his short story when he says, "Our Countess often told the story of their royal arrival in our little town. A story she probably did not remember, since she was only four at the time, but had been told again and again until it had become her own memory."¹¹⁴ Caetani herself was clearly aware of the elusive quality of memory when she wrote, "The so-called 'past' is just a memory-event contrived by the brain in order to provide both a perspective and a reference file...a reassessment. This applies equally to the famous double helix in that it is by its very function as much an actively creative agent as it is a pattern code."¹¹⁵ With these thoughts in mind, I am aware of how necessary it is that I let go of any investment I may have in presenting the definitive "truth," and instead focus my efforts on the constructed aspects of the autobiographical voice in *Recapitulation*.

As I worked through and gradually digested the vast amount of autobiographical material Caetani left behind, I began to sense a deeper reason for her need to tell these stories than one of familial pride; indeed, a much more psychologically complicated motivation began to surface. The voice telling these stories expresses a longing for what has been lost, an intense desire to somehow reconnect/reclaim the past. Caetani reserved a section of *Recapitulation* for her parents: "The pictures from now on represent the actual beginnings and the actors in my life. Of course, the main actors were my parents."¹¹⁶ It is my contention that Caetani was driven to revisit the

¹¹⁴ Steve Lattey, "Behind the Fence," 69.

¹¹⁵ Sveva Caetani, (*Exploration*, unpublished manuscript, GVMA, MS 174), p. V-4.

¹¹⁶ Sveva Caetani, taped commentary for *Recapitulation* (GVMA, MS 174, Box 10/13)

most profound relationships of her life, particularly her relationship with her father, in order to work through the grief she experienced as a result of her father's death and the agony of the twenty-five year period of isolation she subsequently endured with her mother. Mark Allister comments on the power of writing to heal when he states, "writing can heal, translating vague, unarticulated pain into narrative."¹¹⁷ Clearly, Caetani was impacted by the circumstances of her life, the primary relationships of her childhood, and these were to remain primary relationships throughout her life. Did she utilize autobiographical narration in *Recapitulation* to heal the unresolved pain she experienced in her youth, transforming loss into renewal?

In many ways, *Recapitulation* is Caetani's journey to the interior of her subconscious and the journey, as a process, constitutes a continual dying, where old attitudes, grief and longing, and unfulfilled desires are revisited and then left behind, never to be returned to. Caetani reaches back into her memory to experience the event or relationship once more, but this time in order to live it again and by extension to experience it anew, as she states: "This cycle...is called *Recapitulation* because it revives, rather than reviews all the major themes and feelings of my life." By "reviving" the experience, Caetani reconstructs it.

For Caetani the literary and visual act of autobiography brings an end to mourning, but rather than life after death, the final result is "life *out* of death." Linda Anderson has written, in another context, "What emerges is very much a 'subject-in-process', to borrow [Julia] Kristeva's useful term, a subject constructing herself through a writing which aims consistently and courageously towards the unknown."¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ Mark Allister, *Refiguring the Map of Sorrow: Nature Writing and Autobiography* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2001), p. 9.

These ideas seem an appropriate frame to help us understand Caetani.

The literary autobiography vs. the visual self-portrait.

Caetani's series works on multiple levels within the genre of autobiography. It constitutes a personal compendium of a number of genres in which the artist/writer explores the complex relationships of her life through visual imagery, poetry, comments, memory fragments, and myths. In the introduction to their anthology, *Interfaces: Women, Autobiography, Image, Performance*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson draw attention to the increasing number of female artists in the twentieth century who have, like Caetani, turned to autobiographical representation "at the interface of the domains of visuality (image) and textuality (the aural and written word, the extended narrative, the dramatic script)."¹¹⁹ Their list includes such female artists as Tracy Emin, Mary Kelly, Claude Cahun, and an artist whose work I have incorporated into this thesis as a comparative model, Frida Kahlo. These artists have expanded the concept of the self-portrait beyond the notion of the mirror for reproducing the artist's face and have introduced hybrid modes that constitute explorations of self-representation in time.

In 1975, Sveva Caetani first began to formulate her ideas in literary form, mostly through the medium of poetry. After spending a few years immersed in the writing process, she was ultimately dissatisfied with the result: "I thought of making it in poetry, but my poetry, while it's not too bad in the occasional short piece, it won't sustain

¹¹⁸ Linda Anderson, *Women and Autobiography in the Twentieth Century: Remembered Futures* (Toronto: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1997), p. 49.

¹¹⁹ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds., *Interfaces: Women, Autobiography, Image, Performance* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), p. 7.

long...well, I'll paint it...and paint it and comment and paint it and comment."¹²⁰ In a letter to Joseph Pivato of Athabaska University, Caetani again expressed her dissatisfaction with the written component of her work. Caetani describes the format of the text as "comments, short poems, [and] brief dissertations. I may be quite frank about it. I do not feel that they are in any way of exceptional quality. And while in my young womanhood I had debated whether to write or to paint, I had realized that my best effort would be in the latter direction...they (the written components) are mostly *jeux d'esprit*."¹²¹

After two years of writing, Caetani turned to the canvas to enhance further the visual quality of the autobiographical voice, to bring her life into relief more effectively. Ultimately, Caetani, through the interweaving of images and written text, produced a complex work she described as "a journey in parables, and of course, paintings."¹²² The parables, comments, poems, and brief dissertations are utilized by the artist as an extension of the narrative that plays out in visual form, in tandem with the imagery to further the storytelling capacity of the narrative. Aware of her limitations as a writer, Caetani decided to juxtapose the literary with a visual mode of self-representation in the form of watercolour paintings, a form of artistic expression she was much more confident with. It is possible that Caetani was aware of the added sensory effect painting her life narrative would produce, for there is a visual quality to our recollections about the past. As she states: "Strong influences in my formative period were the great illustrators, Arthur Rackham, Edmond Dulac and Aubrey Beardsley. Beardsley taught me that design applied as illustration to a literary idea could reveal far more than the actual words or

¹²⁰ Sveva Caetani interviewed by CBC radio host, Vicki Gabereau, 1991(GVMA, MS 174, Box 10/13)

¹²¹ Sveva Caetani in a letter to Dr. Joseph Pivato, March 27, 1987. (GVMA MS 174, 1-S1-45/68)

¹²² Sveva Caetani. Notes on *Recapitulation* (GVMA, MS 174, 6-10/11 Box 10/18)

scene depicted.”¹²³

The written component was not abandoned however and was included alongside the paintings when *Recapitulation* was exhibited and also in the book that was published by Heidi Thompson entitled *Recapitulation: A Journey/ by Sveva Caetani*. Caetani was clearly aware of the power inherent in the combination of a literary and visual form of creative expression. She strengthened her identity within the text by juxtaposing text and image, utilizing the combined effect in order to create her own personal mythology.

In Defence of Biography

Given that my analysis of Caetani's series *Recapitulation* utilizes a methodology strongly based in biography and the autobiographical voice, I am compelled to provide an explanation as to my use of this hotly contested methodological approach. There are critics who question the value of biography and autobiography in the examination of an artist's work, as a legitimate approach within the context of literary and art historical analysis. They have questioned how relevant the events of the artist's life are to the work they produce and deny that the writer's life in any way bears upon the interpretation of his or her work. This line of critique was instigated by Roland Barthes in his 1968 essay, "The Death of the Author." This essay initiated the critical deconstruction of the individual author/artist. Barthes argued:

The image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centred on...the *explanation* of a work [which] is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less

¹²³ Sveva Caetani, artist's statement for "An Exhibition of the Work of a Selected Group of Okanagan Artists" (GVMA MS 174, 1-S1-45/68). An example of Caetani's interest in Aubrey Beardsley is exhibited in the three cards she produced for her parents (figures 1a,b, and c). Another example of Caetani's influence by Beardsley can be found in a book dedication plate she produced around the same time period as these cards in Harding, *Caetani di Sermoneta*, p. 29.

transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the *author* 'confiding' in us.¹²⁴

Barthes' assertion had a tremendous impact on critical discourse and instigated a new line of post-structuralist thought wherein terms such as *author* were replaced with *scriptor*, *work* with *text*, and *self* with *subject*. The transparency of language and its ability to adequately replicate the "real" was called into question. These theories also proclaimed the individuality of the *author* as a construct whose empire must be overthrown. What is of paramount concern for our purposes here is that, in Barthes' theory, the *author* is immediately presumed to be male in the patriarchal construct of social ideology.

In the last few decades, feminist literary critics like Nancy Miller have questioned whether the post-modern decision that the author is dead should apply equally to women, because, as Miller writes, "women have not had the same historical relation of identity to origin, institution, production that men have had...they have not, I think (collectively) felt burdened by too much Self, Ego, Cogito, etc."¹²⁵

The Death-of-the-Author theory has also been worrisome to feminist art historians, including Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard who in their 1992 anthology, *The Expanding Discourse*, noted: "Some art historians have observed that the death-of-the-author theories emerged, perhaps not fortuitously, just at the time when feminist scholars were attempting to gain a place for women artists within the historical canon."¹²⁶ Thus, they suggest, male critics have once again developed a rationale for ignoring female artists. This argument remains prominent within current feminist art history, with critics

¹²⁴ Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text*, translated by Stephen Heath. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 143.

¹²⁵ Nancy Miller, *Subject To Change: Reading Feminist Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 106.

¹²⁶ Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds, *The Expanding Discourse* (New York: IconEditions, 1992), p. 4.

such as Kristen Frederickson asserting, “Although there are problems in linking an artist’s life to her work, the denial of any such linkage in Barthesian theory may be excessive and the cost to feminist art history too high.”¹²⁷

Women artists have often dealt extensively with the personal and the autobiographical in their works to a greater degree than male artists because society forced them to live in more restricted circumstances than men and therefore the subject matter from the wider world has been unavailable to them. For example, Mary Cassatt painted scenes of women and children inside the home because the French café life that provided such rich support and subject matter to the male Impressionist artists was closed to her, as a respectable middle-class woman of her day. For many years, her choice of subject matter led male art historians to dismiss her work as too personal or merely charming. For example, François Mathey could barely bring himself to mention her in his 1961 history of Impressionism, remarking only in passing on the “charm” of her work.¹²⁸

While the biographical details of male artists have been the focus of the art historical discourse since the inception of the discipline, the lives of female artists have been virtually ignored until the 1970s when feminist critics began the process of reinstating forgotten female artists into the art historical canon. One of these female artists was Frida Kahlo, whom writer Hayden Herrera brought to the attention of the art historical community in her 1983 publication *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo*.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Kristen Frederickson, “Introduction,” in *Singular Women: Writing the Artist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 5.

¹²⁸ François Mathey, *The Impressionists* (New York: Praeger, 1961), p. 113.

¹²⁹ Hayden Herrera, *Frida, a Biography of Frida Kahlo* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983).

Herrera turned to the biographical details of Kahlo's life to explore the artist's psychologically charged paintings, many of which were self-portraits. Kahlo, forced by the circumstances of her physical disabilities, wrote and painted from a profoundly interior place. Kahlo spoke of this introspective aspect of her work when she said: "I paint self-portraits because I am so often alone...because I am the person I know best."¹³⁰ In the introduction of *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo*, Herrera commented on the autobiographical nature of Kahlo's work: "Painting herself bleeding, weeping, cracked open, she transmuted her pain into art with remarkable frankness tempered by humor and fantasy. Always specific and personal, deep-probing rather than comprehensive in scope, Frida's autobiography in paint has a peculiar intensity and strength."¹³¹ Herrera's groundbreaking work on Kahlo inspired many feminist art historians to probe the lives of other forgotten female artists in an attempt to balance the scales in the patriarchal, male-centred discourse of art history.

Similarly, I argue for the necessity of biography in my analysis of Caetani's work for the simple fact that so much of the imagery in *Recapitulation* relates to and is derived from the life experience of the artist. The events of her life directly inform the imagery. My critique follows the feminist assertion: "the personal *is* political." The personal circumstances of Caetani's life were, to a certain degree, dictated by the cultural and societal pressures of her day. Had she not been born into an aristocratic family, which required the socially restricted education by governesses, she might not have spent a childhood in isolation from her peers. Had she not been obligated by her Caetani Italian cultural imperative to live out a secluded existence with her invalid mother at an age

¹³⁰ Frida Kahlo, in Herrera, *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1991), p. 3.

¹³¹ Herrera, *Frida*, p. xii.

when she could have lived independently, she might have been able to devote her young adulthood to developing and practicing her art.¹³² And finally, had Caetani not spent the last decades of her life battling the multiple illnesses that would confine her to a wheelchair, and eventually a bed, she might have been able to experience a more socially and artistically active life. Sveva Caetani painted the details of her life story because she lived virtually a lifetime in isolation. Her interior world *was* her reality, in much the same way that Frida Kahlo's was. I propose that this kind of investigation into self-imaging and self-examination in Caetani's work is of paramount importance in order to redress the power balance in art historical practice.

Self-portraiture in *Recapitulation*

By taking their own bodies as a starting point, Caetani and many other contemporary women artists have articulated how subjectivity is produced through new narratives, enacting the possibility of, as Whitney Chadwick has asserted, "a feminine imaginary."¹³³ Caetani's use of autobiographical presentation engages with the cultural politics of self-representation in much the same way as the work of Frida Kahlo and that of many other woman artists, including Käthe Kollwitz, Suzanne Valadon, Claude Cahun, Remedios Varo, Leonora Carrington, Alice Neel, and Kiki Smith. Although Caetani represents herself in every one of the fifty-six paintings in *Recapitulation*, these depictions in some ways adhere to, yet also move beyond, the traditional understanding of self-portraiture.

¹³² In *The Garden of Ninfa*, writer Marella Caracciolo recounts Vittoria Colonna's (Leone's first wife) reaction to the Caetani "parental word [of] law...the Duke had decided that his son and daughter-in-law were to live in part of the second floor [in the family palace]...and so it was for seventeen years." Caracciolo, *The Garden of Ninfa*, p. 69.

¹³³ Whitney Chadwick, *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism, and Self-Representation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT, 1998), p. 4.

Her self portraits participate in the narrative structure of the series like a moving character in a drama rather than a static representation of a singular self. Sidonie Smith comments on this style of representation when she states:

Women artists have...frequently used repetitive series of self-images to tell a story through sequencing and juxtaposition, as in Kahlo's, Varo's, or Kollwitz's self-portraits . . . [their work is thus] an exploration of seriality itself, or self-representation in time . . . Self-representational acts in all these media - singular, dual, serial, or hybrid - exceed the conventions of painting a head or torso to represent the artist, the traditional conception of self-portraiture."¹³⁴

Prior to the creation of her series *Recapitulation*, Caetani turned to the mirror only occasionally to produce self-representations that adhere to the 'traditional' artist's self-portrait. The following two self-portraits mark important moments in the artist's life. The first example (see figure 3), dated August 1933, was produced by Caetani at the age of sixteen while the Caetani family was vacationing in Europe. This drawing demonstrates how, even at this young age, Caetani was interested in depicting in visual form the interior, psychologically charged aspects of her personality. The young Caetani challenges the viewer with a direct gaze that communicates the intensity and maturity of someone far beyond her years.

Caetani painted the second self-portrait, entitled *Persona* (see figure 4), in 1991, only three years before her death. In some ways this work is characteristic of the traditional self-portrait. The artist sits in a chair facing the viewer surrounded by the tools of her trade. She signals her role as an artist by placing a container of brushes on the table to her left and a manikin on a bookshelf to her right. The remaining objects in the composition are representative of various aspects of her life at this time; the green

¹³⁴ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds, *Interfaces: Women, Autobiography, Image, Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), p. 7.

foliage represents her love of gardening and nature, the cat curled up on her lap represents her love of animals, the statue above her head was an actual statue she owned and represents her love of Italian art, and the bed represents a place she spent most of her time because of her declining health. In a very Van Gogh-like style, Caetani has placed the objects in the composition off-kilter, particularly the cup of brushes which is about to topple over and the manikin which is bent over in an awkward position. This is perhaps suggestive of Caetani's psychological state at this time. She is losing control of her body and is therefore increasingly unable to paint, a reality that was, understandably, very upsetting for her.

The self Caetani paints in these two works differs greatly from the self she inserts into her series *Recapitulation*. Within the narrative structure of *Recapitulation*, Caetani elected to represent herself from the outside, as a character in a familial drama. While each self-representation is visually true to her actual form and physical stature, Caetani adopts more of a performative role within the *Recapitulation* narrative. She is a character who interacts with other characters within her own epic drama.

Dante's *Divine Comedy* as Autobiography and a Working Framework for Caetani's *Recapitulation* Series

As previously mentioned, the years following Ofelia's death proved to be an artistic "renaissance" for Caetani and it was during this time that she developed her own distinct visual style and technique. The rich store of literary works she had devoured over a twenty-five period of isolation provided the inspirational fodder for her artistic outpouring. She spoke of this literary connection to her art when she said: "At first I painted mainly the images of scenes or situations that particularly struck me in one or

another piece of literature, such as the *Iliad*.”¹³⁵ In the Caetani archives there exists a compiled list of paintings Caetani produced prior to her series *Recapitulation*, the titles of which confirm she borrowed subjects from such literary works as *Gormenghast*, *Lord of the Rings*, the poetry of St. John Perse, and the classic tales from Greek mythology. By the time Caetani was ready to embark on the monumental project of tracing her life history, she knew exactly which literary hero to turn to: “I chose for my model Dante Alighieri, the medieval poet and visionary who decided in mid-life to make the greatest of all recapitulations, and scour Creation itself in his master-work, *The Divine Comedy*.”¹³⁶ I will not explore the complex iconographical connections between Caetani’s series *Recapitulation* and Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, for they are far too extensive for proper consideration within the framework of this thesis. However, I will briefly outline how *Recapitulation* utilizes the overarching structure of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, while it, at the same time, expands beyond it to include other areas of consideration pertinent to Caetani’s artistic vision. I will also discuss the presence of the autobiographical voice in Dante’s text and how this method of self-referencing compares with Caetani’s.

The choice of Dante for the structural and stylistic model of Caetani’s work is not surprising. Interest in the Italian Medieval poet had been prevalent in the Caetani family for generations. This was not just a minor interest either; three generations of Caetanis had written scholarly publications on Dante’s work. For example, Sveva’s great grandfather, Michelangelo Caetani, was a distinguished Dante scholar and wrote *La Materia della Divina Comedia* (Roma, 1865). Her grandfather, Onorato Caetani, who

¹³⁵ Sveva Caetani. Personal writings, text for *Recapitulation*. (GVMA, MS 174, 3-/62/65)

¹³⁶ Caetani, *Recapitulation*, p. 10.

was appointed Foreign Minister in 1896 under Antonio di Rudini, was a great scholar of Dante, as well as of antiquities. Gelasio Caetani, Leone's brother, wrote a number of books on the history of the family including the *Codice Caetani della Divina Commedia*, a codex of numerous parchment documents in the Caetani archives in Rome relating to Dante's *Divine Comedy*.¹³⁷ These documents include a text of the poem bearing copious notes and comments by the fifteenth-century humanist Marsilio Ficino.

Caetani makes explicit the organizing structure of her series in relation to Dante when she states: "The journey, as with all tales, is divided into chapters. Dante's first chapter is really a whole book, *Inferno*, within which the Canto's give the details. Mine too starts with what in the twentieth century idiom can, instead, be called, *The Burrows of Nightmare*."¹³⁸ As in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the theme of the spiritual journey traced through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven provides the skeletal structure for *Recapitulation*. Caetani's interpretation of these chapters is loose and idiosyncratic. The material she has chosen to build around is very different from Dante's because, as she once stated, "I am not so literal as a medieval poet."¹³⁹ In *Recapitulation*, Caetani depicts symbols and characters from her contemporary world, rather than those of Dante's. She, herself, plays the role of Dante and she brings her father back from the grave to act as her guide, as Virgil was Dante's guide through the *Divine Comedy*.¹⁴⁰ The great number of artists who have chosen Dante's epic poem as the subject of their paintings have usually approached the work in a very illustrative manner, depicting Dante's heroes and villains according to

¹³⁷ This codex resides in the Caetani family archives, Vatican Archives, Italy.

¹³⁸ Sveva Caetani. Interview with Barbara Hartley, Jan. 1985. (GVMA, MS 174, Box 10/13)

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ However, where Virgil only acts as a guide for Dante through the first two sections of the *Comedy*, Leone guides Caetani through to the conclusion of *Recapitulation*.

his description, tracing the Dante's narrative episode by episode.¹⁴¹ Caetani's approach, in contrast, is far from being rigidly illustrative.

The structure of *Recapitulation* sometimes adheres to Dante's text and sometimes deviates from it. Dante's poem is divided into Cantos, one hundred in all: thirty-four in *Inferno*, thirty-three in *Purgatorio*, and thirty-three in *Paradiso*. Caetani translates the literary Canto into her own visual equivalent she identifies as "Experiences." In *Recapitulation* there are forty-seven Experiences. After her introduction, *Inception*, which contains one Experience, Caetani begins her journey with a chapter on Hell, entitled, *The Burrows of Nightmare*. There are a total of eight Experiences in this section. In an interview she said of this chapter: "I chose *The Burrows of Nightmare* as the title of my chapter about Hell because it represents so well the dark underground channels, not of divinely-inflicted punishment as in Dante, but of the suffering endured, and inflicted, by mankind itself."¹⁴² In *The Burrows of Nightmare*, Caetani explores man's injustice to man in the form of senseless violence, indifference, cruelty, envy, and lies.

After coming out to see the stars again (as Dante does at the end of the *Inferno*) in her Transition Experience, *Barak For The Skies*, the characters of Caetani and her father go through what Caetani has explained as, "a sort of review of my own background but it is really general it applies to any body."¹⁴³ This section, entitled *Le Morte Stagioni*, or *The Dead Seasons*, stands on its own and is nowhere to be found in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. It comprises six Experiences. In this section, Caetani at the height of her

¹⁴¹ I am thinking of such artists as Gustave Doré, Sandro Botticelli, and to a certain extent, William Blake. For various examples of these and other artist's interpretations of the *Divine Comedy* see Charles H. Taylor and Patricia Finley's book, *Images of the Journey in Dante's Divine Comedy* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997)

¹⁴² Caetani, *Recapitulation*, p. 118.

¹⁴³ Sveva Caetani. Interview with Barbara Hartley, Jan. 1985. (GVMA, MS 174, Box 10/13)

autobiographical storytelling within the narrative, examines her relationship with her parents, her parents' relationship with each other, and some of the challenges each family member faced in his or her lives. Caetani resumes Dante's narrative structure in her next section, *Areas of Fate*, her equivalent of Purgatory, in which she undergoes "an exploration of the situations into which [one] is arbitrarily born, such as the moral, social, economic and political structures that frame [one's] entrance to the world."¹⁴⁴ *Areas of Fate* is made up of ten Experiences. The journeyers then move into Caetani's rendition of Heaven, entitled *Great Themes for a Journey*. The eleven Experiences in this section recount a journey through what Caetani believed to be the highest forms of human activity, including science, philosophy, music, literature, mysticism, and the adventures of the imagination. In the next chapter, Caetani again deviates from Dante's poem when she turns to examine the wonders of nature and of friendship. This section, called *A Litany*, four Experiences, could be read as an extension of Heaven (although Caetani does not make this clear). *Recapitulation* ends with a chapter called *Journey's End*, five Experiences, in which Caetani explained "as a personal confrontation with loneliness, ordeal, vulnerability and spiritual imperatives."¹⁴⁵

A comparison of the autobiographical components of *Recapitulation* and Dante's *Divine Comedy* reveals a similar treatment of, while once again deviating from, representations of the self. While Dante's *Divine Comedy* acts as a fantastical exploration of Hell, Purgatory and Heaven, it also contains aspect of the writer's personal and socio/political reality and therefore contains explicit autobiographical details. Just as Dante represents the primary traveller in his role as pilgrim in the *Divine Comedy*,

¹⁴⁴ Harding, *Caetani di Sermoneta*, p. 33.

¹⁴⁵ Sveva Caetani. Notes for *Recapitulation*. (GVMA, MS 174, Box 10/18)

Caetani inserts herself into the role of the main protagonist in *Recapitulation*. In both cases there is the sense we are witness to the creation of a double identity; Dante the poet/author and Dante the character/pilgrim, Caetani the artist/writer and Caetani the character/traveller.

Autobiography theorist Sidonie Smith identifies Dante as one of the forerunners of autobiographical storytelling when she states: "In fourteenth-century Italy, Francesco Petrarch and Dante Alighieri introduced self-referentiality into traditional poetic genres to present the spiritual quests of their narrators and to define their relationship to a classical tradition."¹⁴⁶ While the autobiographical voice Dante adopts in his poem is much less introspective than the one Caetani uses in her series, there is a similarity in the choice of contemporary figures in each artists' world. In passages from the *Commedia*, Dante ruthlessly exposes the politicians and war-mongers of his time as Stephen Bemrose points out, "when Dante encounters a damned or saved soul, it is...the soul of a real individual who once lived on earth and in some cases had been personally known to Dante."¹⁴⁷ Likewise, Caetani depicted her parents, beloved authors, her pets, and other characters from her own life in the various paintings that comprise *Recapitulation*.

Caetani is aware of the dangers of forcing her narrative too tightly into the imagery Dante creates in his *Divine Comedy*. The basic format is the same: a journey, a spiritual quest through Hell, Purgatory, and finally, Heaven. But Caetani's areas differ greatly from Dante's. For example, she makes a distinction between her version of Hell and Dante's in this statement:

¹⁴⁶ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), p. 85.

¹⁴⁷ Stephen Bemrose, *A New Life of Dante*. (Exeter, UK : University of Exeter Press, 2000), p.116.

[The journeyers come to the doors [of Hell] but I have changed that because I am not so literal as [Dante was]... I have not used the traditional Hell of the Catholic Church of which I was born. I consider Hell to be created by human beings for other human beings and for animals and for the earth. Evil is in man. So here are what I consider the grave sins: the first is violence, the second cruelty, the third indifference, the fourth lies, the fifth betrayal. Those are the most terrible things one could do to anyone else.”¹⁴⁸

Caetani speaks of her version of Hell in another statement:

Hell is a matter of choice. Purgatory are the situations that fall upon you in life...like war, or like all the things which are beyond your control...and therefore, I consider *that* purgatory. You are not, in a sense, responsible for them, they just happen to you. There is a divergence between myself and the medieval view which Dante reflected supremely. I don't consider God a punisher and a torturer. We bring these things on ourselves by our own acts and choices. Evil is not a gigantic, satanic creature. It is what is small and miserable inside each of us.¹⁴⁹

Clearly, on a philosophical (and theological) level, Caetani did not regard Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven in the same way Dante did and therefore, the symbolic aspects of the imagery these areas are very different. Caetani believed Hell was created by individuals on earth, whereas Dante tells his reader that Hell was made by God in his justice in his inscription over the gates of Hell: “My maker was Divine authority.”¹⁵⁰ For Caetani, once again, the journey is within the self and can be understood only by reference to the self.

The next chapter allows us to tell stories, to contrast a selected group of paintings from *Recapitulation* with the “hard facts” of her life story, as she told it.

¹⁴⁸ Sveva Caetani. Interview with Barbara Hartley, 1983 (GVMA, MS 174, Box 10/13)

¹⁴⁹ Sveva Caetani. Commentary for *Recapitulation*. (GVMA, MS 174, Box 10/13)

¹⁵⁰ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Inferno*, Canto III, line 5 (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1982), p. 21.

Chapter 3: The Journey Begins

Before I begin my analysis of the six paintings I have chosen from the *Recapitulation* series, I will briefly discuss the technical aspects of Caetani's artistic process. Each of the fifty-six works are painted with a dry brush watercolour technique on paper. For a time, Caetani was under the impression that she invented the dry brush process. However, she was corrected when an acquaintance informed her that the dry brush technique had been used by the Moguls in India hundreds of years ago. The difference was the Moguls' paintings were relatively small in size, averaging nine inches square, while Caetani's paintings are unusually large for works in watercolour. They average 100 x 90 cm, with one of the paintings, *Makimono of the Ninth*, reaching 487 cm long, or approximately fifteen feet. In an artist's statement written for an early exhibition of *Recapitulation*, Caetani refers to the Mogul influence:

I paint exclusively in water colors, and my technique, strangely enough, is a personal rediscovery of that used in India during the Mogul Empire of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. I never knew this until recently. The method consists of small brush strokes, not washes, and an endless series of coats of paint, not all of the same colors.¹⁵¹

The dry brush technique involves a painstaking process of building layer upon layer of colour with small brush strokes. According to Caetani, at times she used as many as

¹⁵¹ Sveva Caetani. Artist's Statement for *Recapitulation*, nd. (GVMA, MS 174, Box 3-/62/65)

fifteen layers of colour; “each coat is slightly different (in colour) than the one before.”¹⁵²

Given this, it is amazing that she was able to complete the fifty-six works in a fourteen-year period. The layering of colour achieves a vibrant effect and each painting glows as if it was painted in acrylic or oils, rather than watercolour.

The Summons

The first painting I will discuss, *The Summons* (see plate 1) of 1978, is the first painting Caetani painted for the series, although positioned second in the overall narrative. According to Caetani the image came to her “in a flash” one day while driving from Vernon to Lumby where she taught art at the local high-school.¹⁵³ The image was so vivid in her mind’s eye that she was able to transfer it directly onto the canvas, including compositional details and colour, without any preparatory drawings. For our purposes, it is a significant jumping-off point for the idea of autobiography because it marks the beginning of the narrative, the story Caetani will tell of her life, as well as the beginning of her process of visualization. The previous painting in the series, *The Bell Tower*, was actually painted after *The Summons* and provides more of a recollection, a moment of looking back. In literary terms, an epigraph, rather than a start to the narrative.

In *The Summons*, Caetani has called on her father to guide her on the journey, just as Dante called on Virgil to guide him through the cosmos of his time. She expressed her ideas about this painting in the text panel which she wrote to accompany it:

The Burrows of Nightmare

¹⁵² Sveva Caetani. Interview with Barbara Hartley, video cassette, 1983, Vernon, BC (GVMA, MS 174, Box 10/13)

¹⁵³ Sveva Caetani. CBC interview, cassette tape 1994 (GVMA, MS 174, Box 10/13)

Then the beloved companion, the father, is summoned from the dead to come and guide the daughter along the journey, to share with her again the great and terrible things that meant the most to both of them. Side by side they pass into the dark burrows of life, where all forms of catastrophe await, from impersonal disasters to willed and wantonly-inflicted suffering.

The Summons

The child, the girl, the woman.
 But to her, the father suffered only one change, the one she must face herself.
 Life, an experience and a passing.
 The soft tree of blood, the nails that need no cross, the flayed survivor, and the austere stone form that is their joint heritage.
 Words called and heard across many levels, many years and many silences.
 Worlds that have multiplied in times together, and apart.
 He is summoned. They will journey together. It is to her mindscapes and heartscapes that she, the inheritor, bids him come on this journey through a journey.
 He is her Virgil once again.¹⁵⁴

The last line of the poem, "He is her Virgil once again," refers to the idea that Caetani's father served as her Virgil, her spiritual guide, when she was a child and now returns to that role in the narrative of *Recapitulation*. It is appropriate that Caetani's father, Leone Caetani, provides the role of intellectual guide within this series in the form of the legendary figure of Virgil from Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Leone was the most important person in Caetani's life and his death, when she was just seventeen, had a profound impact on her. Caetani speaks of her choice:

I call on my brilliant and scholarly father who died while in my teens and just as Dante relates in the opening passages of the *Paradiso*...radiates the joy he feels in the very act of imagining that he sees and hears Beatrice again, I have myself felt the same joy in drawing the figure of my father-without having recourse to a photograph and making a genuine portrait of him each time in shape and expression.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ Caetani, *Recapitulation*, p. 16.

¹⁵⁵ Sveva Caetani. Commentary for *Recapitulation*, Vernon, BC audio cassette 5A, July/August 1988 (GVMA, MS 174, Box 10/13)

Leone was a doting father to Caetani and showed his adoration in many ways. The love they shared is readily apparent in a photograph showing three-year-old Caetani in the arms of her father (see figure 5). The letters he wrote home to family and friends in Italy are filled with praise for his daughter. He wrote to his mother in 1925, "Sveva is well and in high spirits...very affectionate and remarkably intelligent."¹⁵⁶ He recognized her intelligence and was determined to feed it by introducing her to all kinds of literature. From his sick bed at the Mayo Clinic in 1935, he wrote a telegram to her asking her to commit to memory his favourite work, Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

Caetani recalls what he wrote:

Typical of him is the impulse that made him take the effort of sending me a telegram concerned with only one thing - urging me to learn the *Divina Commedia* by heart, even while he was for a time taking treatment at the Mayo Clinic. What other man would have done such a thing in such circumstances? That telegram, treasured for fifty years, was part of the incentive behind my *Recapitulation* series, which was my tribute to that brave message.¹⁵⁷

With this in mind, it is fitting Caetani would base her series, a commemoration to her father, on the structure of Dante's work.

In *The Summons*, Caetani has employed an artistic convention called continuous narrative, a technique used by artists as far back as the ancient world in the Near East and Egypt. In a 1983 interview, Caetani identifies the Renaissance precedents as her inspiration: "In the Renaissance, many times they made these pictures in which all the events of the story are in the same picture and they go across the picture...I thought of doing that. So that is a sort of story in itself."¹⁵⁸ In this statement Caetani is paying tribute to her Italian heritage, specifically the influence of the Italian Renaissance on her

¹⁵⁶ Leone Caetani. Letter to his mother, January 6, 1925 (GVMA, Leone Caetani, Personal Correspondence, MS 174)

¹⁵⁷ Sveva Caetani. Letter to Anna Pan, February 22, unknown year (GVMA, MS 174, Box 5/13)

¹⁵⁸ Sveva Caetani. Interview with Barbara Hartley, Vernon, BC, 1983 (GVMA, MS 174, Box 10/13)

work. One example of Renaissance continuous narrative is Masaccio's *The Tribute Money* (1424-27) (see plate 2), in the Brancacci Chapel in Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence. In this fresco, Masaccio (1401-28) depicted three scenes from the life of Saint Peter within one setting. In the centre, the figure of Christ stands with Peter, directing him to where he will find a coin in the mouth of a fish to pay the tax the collector is demanding of him. At the left, Peter struggles to extract the coin from the fish's mouth, while at the far right, he gives the coin to the collector.¹⁵⁹

In *The Summons*, Caetani has utilized the convention of continuous narrative in which the same figures, herself and her father, appear more than once in the same space at different stages in the story. Ultimately, the historical trajectory of the most important relationship in Caetani's life is condensed into this one narrative within this one painting. The work becomes a microcosm of the world Caetani explores throughout fifty-six paintings in *Recapitulation*. Four moments in time are represented across the painting in descending order from top left to lower right. According to Caetani, "The painting, *The Summons*, represents myself and my father when I was a small child, myself at the time of my father's death, where he is fading from view, and then the actual ghost of my father facing the old woman that I have become."¹⁶⁰ The fourth moment is placed behind the third on the right hand side of the painting and depicts the reunion of daughter and father in front of an Italian-style church. Caetani has compositionally placed the architectural element in the same location as in Masaccio's painting, at the far right.

Leone was a scholar fluent in eleven languages. He possessed a great passion for learning and instilled in Caetani an unrelenting quest for knowledge. Through her father,

¹⁵⁹ John T. Paoletti, *Art In Renaissance Italy*. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997) p.202.

¹⁶⁰ Sveva Caetani. Commentary for *Recapitulation*, audio cassette 5A, July/August 1988. (GVMA, MS 174, Box 10/13)

she was intensely conscious of the history, geography, and cultural achievements of her native land. Leone Caetani had established that the Italian family name, originally Gaetani, had gone back 1,200 years and had included well-known statesmen, scientists, scholars and popes. This Italian bloodline is suggested on the left hand side of the painting where the first stage of Caetani's relationship with her father is depicted. Caetani, as a young child, stands before the figure of her father, arms outstretched in a questioning gesture, as if imploring him to teach her more of the wonders of the world. They both stand in front of a tree-like form. Caetani states: "And so in this picture here you have the child looking at her adored father, and here is the blood which joins us together, this is a tree of blood."¹⁶¹ The symbolic branches of the "tree of blood" surround father and daughter and root them in their common heritage.

The narrative moves to the second episode, where Caetani as a young woman stands with the figure of her father. A photograph located in the Caetani photo archives of Caetani and her father, taken just before her father fell ill when Caetani was in her late teens, illustrates the love they still shared at this time (see figure 6). Leone spoke of this love in a letter, dated March 25, 1934, to a friend, "...a healthy life, as you can see, made happy in the company of a daughter almost as tall as me, with extraordinary intelligence...she spends all her time reading and when she sees me, loves to discuss about everything she reads...she is then a friend, full of intellectual and moral surprises."¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ Sveva Caetani. Commentary for *Recapitulation*, Vernon, BC. audio cassette 5A, July/August 1988 (GVMA, MS 174, Box 10/13)

¹⁶² Leone Caetani. Letter to Giorgio Levie Della Vida, March 25, 1934 (GVMA, MS 174, Leone Caetani, Personal Correspondence)

In the second episode, the dying father, fragmented in his disease and fading into the tree of blood, stands beside the figure of his now teenage daughter. Of this portion of the narrative Caetani states: "And here you have my father who died when I was 17 ½ years of age . . . he suffered terribly, and I have put the nails of the cross in his hands and feet . . . and for me it was very devastating to lose him, and furthermore, my life afterwards was very hard so I have painted myself as having my skin taken off...[as if I were flayed."¹⁶³ Caetani, traumatized by his passing, stands flayed beside him with every nerve exposed, the color red symbolizing her pain and anguish. The linear pattern of her veins echoes the lines of the roots of the tree of blood her father fades into. She grasps hold of his hand in an attempt to pull him back—imploing him to stay. His hands and feet are marked with the "nails that need no cross." He has been sacrificed to another world.

The final stage of *The Summons* depicts two events simultaneously, one layered atop the other. The father and daughter appear in the foreground, the ghostly visage of the father beside the elderly figure his daughter has become. Caetani states: "And now we come to the present and I call him and he is a ghost and he is transparent."¹⁶⁴ A solid red line outlines the father now, perhaps an indication of the afterlife, while at the same time, his transparent body suggests that he is a ghost returning. The figure of Caetani as an elderly woman with a skull-like visage stands beside him. Caetani comments on this rendition of her aged self: "I might add in parenthesis as a curious incident, this is the only painting in which I have shown my age. In all the rest, I am miraculously twenty-

¹⁶³ Sveva Caetani. Interview with Barbara Hartley, Vernon, BC. video cassette, 1983 (GVMA, MS 174, Box 10/13)

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

ish."¹⁶⁵ Caetani has painted herself the same ashen white colour she had applied to the figure of her father in the previous episode, perhaps an import of disease and impending death. She has just begun to dissolve, one fragment removed from her right hip area, suggesting the disease which was to confine her to a wheelchair only a few years after this painting was completed.

In the background, against the backdrop of an Italian-style church, the daughter has summoned the father and the figures are moving towards each other along the front steps of the church. The architectural element within the painting is significant here. According to Caetani, "the building represent(s) their heritage as Italians, inspired by Leon Battista Alberti's church in Rimini."¹⁶⁶ However, on closer examination, this church is more reminiscent of Giacomo della Porta's Il Gesu, in Rome, c.1575-1584 (see plate 3). When we take into account the influence of Alberti present in the design of Il Gesu, such as the scroll motif and the classical elements of pilasters into engaged columns, Caetani's reference to Alberti is not all that far-fetched. The fact that Il Gesu stands in Rome is even more significant, as it was in this city that Caetani was born in 1917. Father and daughter stand poised ready to begin the journey that will take them through all the major themes and feelings of Caetani's life.

I have often been struck by the similarities between Caetani's life story and that of surrealist artist Frida Kahlo (1907-1954). They shared a penchant for autobiographical storytelling and an extensive use of self-portraiture to express their inner psychological state. Over the last decade, the issues surrounding the autobiographical nature of Kahlo's work have been hotly debated within the art historical canon, as writer Margaret A.

¹⁶⁵ Sveva Caetani. Commentary for *Recapitulation*, cassette tape, Sept. 22, 1991 (GVMA, MS 174, Box 10/13)

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

Lindauer argues in her book, *Devouring Frida: The Art History and Popular Celebrity of Frida Kahlo*. In the chapter, "The Language of the Missing Mother," Lindauer explores the relationship between autobiography and surrealism in Kahlo's work. She starts by pointing out:

When Kahlo is included in encyclopaedic art history survey books such as Gardner's *Art Through The Ages*, she is listed among the surrealists as 'perhaps the most autobiographical of all artists connected with surrealism,' one who "used the details of her own life as powerful symbols for the psychological pain of human existence."¹⁶⁷

Like Kahlo, Caetani used autobiography as a basis for much of her painting and there are many similarities between the lives of the two.

Both artists were born in the early years of the twentieth century, Kahlo in 1907, Caetani a decade later, in 1917. As discussed earlier, when Caetani was born her mother fell very ill and was unable to hold her in her arms for six months, let alone breast-feed her. This made it impossible for mother and daughter to bond completely. Caetani spoke of the lack of affection from her mother in a 1994 interview: "The trouble was she was also a woman of iron will and a very reserved character. I think the only person she truly ever loved in the world beyond her sister was my father."¹⁶⁸ Similarly with Kahlo, according to Kahlo's biographer, Hayden Herrera, "shortly after Frida's birth, her mother became ill, and the infant was suckled for a time by an Indian wet nurse."¹⁶⁹ In a later work on Kahlo, Herrera asserts, "all through her adult life Frida would, by a thousand different means, including painting, flee from loneliness by attempting to re-create the

¹⁶⁷ Margaret A. Lindauer, *Devouring Frida: The Art History and Popular Celebrity of Frida Kahlo*. (Conneticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1999), p. 86.

¹⁶⁸ Sveva Caetani. CBC interview, cassette tape 1994 (GVMA, MS 174, Box 10/13)

¹⁶⁹ Hayden Herrera, *Frida; A Biography of Frida Kahlo*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), p. 8.

nurturing experience she had missed in childhood.”¹⁷⁰ Of Kahlo’s relationship with her mother, writer Andrea Kettenmann states: “This lack of emotional bond no doubt helps to explain Frida’s ambivalent feelings towards her mother, whom she described as very kind, active and intelligent, but also calculating, cruel and fanatically religious.”¹⁷¹

Both Caetani and Kahlo felt estranged from their mothers; consequently, their relationship with their fathers became all-important. I have already outlined Caetani’s relationship with her father. Kahlo experienced a similar closeness with her father, Guillermo Kahlo. According to Herrera, Guillermo had a “special love for his fifth child...He would say, ‘Frida is the most intelligent of my daughters...she is the most like me. Having no son, and recognizing in Frida his own intellectual independence and curiosity, he loaned her books and...also taught his daughter to use a camera.”¹⁷² Kahlo painted a tribute to her father in 1951 entitled, *Portrait of My Father* (see plate 4). The love she expresses in the dedication to her father at the bottom of the painting sounds hauntingly familiar the language Caetani uses in relation to her father:

I painted my father Wilhelm Kahlo, of Hungarian-German origin, artist photographer by profession, in character generous, intelligent and fine, valiant because he suffered for sixty years with epilepsy, but never gave up working and fought against Hitler. With adoration. His daughter Frida Kahlo.¹⁷³

Both artists admired their fathers for their intelligence, their professional expertise, their depth of character, and their abhorrence of the rise of fascism in their native lands.¹⁷⁴

Caetani and Kahlo also shared the experience of childhood disease that would affect their relationship with the outside world. It appears that Caetani suffered from

¹⁷⁰ Hayden Herrera, *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings*. (New York: HarperCollins, 1991, reprinted 2002), p. 14.

¹⁷¹ Andrea Kettenmann, *Frida Kahlo: 1907-1954, Pain and Passion*. (New York: Taschen, 2000), p. 9.

¹⁷² Herrera, *The Paintings*, p. 18.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁷⁴ Caetani in the case of Mussolini in Italy and Kahlo in the case of Hitler in Germany.

undiagnosed Marfan syndrome, a genetic disorder that caused her limbs to grow at an abnormal rate. From the time she was six years old, she suffered considerable pain as her legs and arms grew longer and longer, weakening the cartilage encasing the knee and elbow joints. At times throughout her life, the loose cartilage caused Caetani's knees to dislocate and she would be forced to walk with a cane, and ultimately, be confined to a wheelchair. When Kahlo was six years old she was stricken with polio and was bedridden for nine months.¹⁷⁵ The affliction caused one leg to be shorter than the other, and as a consequence, Kahlo developed the self-conscious habit of hiding her deformed leg beneath trousers and long skirts for the rest of her life. Both artists suffered lonely childhoods: Caetani's aristocratic upbringing which involved being educated at home, along with the complications of her disease, set her apart from other children; Kahlo's polio occurred "just at the age when she might have expanded her world beyond her family circle and made 'best friends'" and "when she returned to school, she was teased and left out."¹⁷⁶

Kahlo and Caetani also experienced a traumatic event in their late teens that was to have great consequences. For Caetani, it was the death of her beloved father which sent her into an even deeper isolation for the next twenty-five years. At the age of eighteen, Kahlo was in a bus accident that caused her to be bedridden off and on for many years. According to Herrera, "Frida's condition was so grave that the doctors did not think they could save her. They thought she would die on the operating table."¹⁷⁷ Both artists spent a long period of time cut off from the world, resulting in a very introspective perspective in their art, hence, the focus on the self.

¹⁷⁵ Herrera, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo*, p. 14.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

A comparison of Caetani's *The Summons* and Kahlo's 1936 painting, *My Grandparents, My Parents and I* (see plate 5), demonstrates the profoundly similar subjective quality of both artist's work. In Kahlo's *My Grandparents, My Parents and I*, the artist traces the history of her ancestry. In *The Summons*, Caetani's ancestry is suggested by the "tree of blood" her father, and herself are placed within. Both artists have utilized the colour red, suggesting blood, symbolically connecting them to their ancestry. Kahlo depicts herself as a small child holding the loop of a red ribbon (or bloodline) which branches up to evoke the shape of a family tree. Caetani positions herself against a red background in which vein-like branches intertwine to form the tree of blood. As Caetani has done, Kahlo positions herself in close proximity to her father, aligning herself with him rather than the mother.

Caetani and Kahlo were intensely proud of their cultural heritage and often referenced it in their work. In these examples, each artist includes an architectural element that refers to their native land; Caetani stands before an Italian-style church, and Kahlo stands within the courtyard of her childhood home, the Blue House in Coyoacan, Mexico. Kahlo's biographer Hayden Herrera comments on this ancestral pride in relation to *My Grandparents, My Parents and I*, when she states: "In the distance are the ravine-gashed mountains that were often the landscape setting of her self-portraits; just below the images of her paternal grandparents is the ocean. Her Mexican grandparents were symbolized by the earth, Frida explained, and her German ones by the sea."¹⁷⁸ Just as Kahlo utilizes iconic architectural and landscape elements to symbolize her ancestral national identity, Caetani often inserts references to her Italian heritage throughout the

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 8.

Recapitulation series in order to express the pride she felt in her Roman background. The construction of self in Caetani's series relies heavily on her cultural heritage.

The Watchers At The Hinge

The painting *The Watchers At The Hinge* (see plate 6), produced in 1981, Experience 12 in the *Recapitulation* series and is situated in the section, "Le Morte Stagioni," or, "The Dead Seasons." This is the most autobiographical of all the chapters in the series, the one Caetani specifically devotes to "persons, forces and relationships which shaped the daughter's existence."¹⁷⁹ While Caetani's father appeared previously in the series, this section also includes the figure of her mother and deals most directly with the impact the family relationship had on her life story. Caetani's text panel for the painting reads:

The Watchers At The Hinge

Along the burning plain
Above the dark arroyo
The Watchers at the Hinge
Stand clattering with the storm they brew
And coarsen the wind with cries;
While fevered life below
Moves red in its seasons.

The hinge is an image of change. But changes go deep in one's life, and involve far more than outsiders know. The clatter these watchers make as they stand at the flanges of the hinge is loud and empty, with little relevance to what is being changed. Alongside the realities of loneliness, as in the man stranded at the hinge in bitterness and

¹⁷⁹ Caetani, *Recapitulation*, p. 119.

desolation, and the reclusive woman beside the small chapel, outside comment is grotesque. As for the child between them – pondering all this the birth to which she then marches is the first loneliness we are all given to know, for love or no love, who else can be oneself?¹⁸⁰

The Watchers At The Hinge is one of the most enigmatic of Caetani's paintings in the series because it contains multiple associations with events in the artist's life history. More than in any other painting, they are veiled in ambiguous symbolic imagery. Each member of the family makes an appearance in the painting but they are compositionally set apart from one another; the mother on the left, the father in the center, and Caetani depicted three times in the foreground and right. This separation, along with the smallness of the figures, heightens the effect of the theme of loneliness in the work. A strong yellow line emanating from just above Leone's head and arching to the right creates a division between the figures of Caetani and her father and her mother. The young Caetani is once again aligned with her father. However, even they are separated within their triangular-spaced "arroyo;" the father turns his body towards the direction of his wife, and Caetani, as a child, sits with head in hand, brooding over her parents' plight.

The figure of Caetani is also depicted on the right side of the painting, moving towards a fetus in a blood-red womb. The fetus may well be considered as another self-portrait of Caetani; she multiplies her self-image within the composition in much the same way Frida Kahlo does in *My Grandparents*, *My Parents and I* (see plate 5, discussed earlier). Like Caetani's, Kahlo's rendition of her child-self occupies the central area of the composition while another version of herself as a fetus is placed elsewhere. Both artists declare their role within the family dynamic by inserting multiple versions of themselves throughout one composition, as if to say, "I belong here . . . and here . . . I

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 34.

have different selves that act in tandem to create a space I can inhabit within this family.” The difference in Caetani’s painting is the fetus is not situated with the mother, but on its own, in direct opposition to the mother within the composition. According to Caetani, the image of the fetus “is taken from a drawing by Leonardo da Vinci.”¹⁸¹ Leonardo did a number of drawings of fetuses and embryos. This example, from 1510 (see plate 7) closely relates to Caetani’s version in *The Watchers At The Hinge*.¹⁸²

The large, white biomorphic creatures, or “Watchers,” dominate the composition. They stand side by side, forming a “hinge” on either side of a desert arroyo. For these “Watchers,” Caetani was possibly inspired by a passage from Dante’s *Inferno*, Canto XXXI, in which Dante, the pilgrim, arrives at the eighth circle of Hell where he sees enormous figures he mistakes for towers standing in a circle:

as I drew always nearer to the shore,
my error fled from me, my terror grew;
for as, on its round wall, Montereccioni
is crowned with towers, so there towered here,
above the bank that runs around the pit,
with half their bulk, the terrifying giants,
whom Jove still menaces from Heaven when
he sends his bolts of thunder down upon them.¹⁸³

According to Dante scholar Allen Mandelbaum, these giants are based on a Greek myth: “When the Giants tried to attack the gods’ home on Mount Olympus, Jove struck them down with lightning bolts. His thundering still frightens the Giants in Hell.”¹⁸⁴ In *The Watchers At The Hinge*, Caetani evokes Dante’s imagery of the “terrifying giants” and “bolts of thunder” by painting these towering “Watchers” against the background of a

¹⁸¹ Caetani, Notes and Translations, *Recapitulation*, p. 119.

¹⁸² For an illustration of Leonardo’s drawings of the fetus, see Martin Kemp, *Leonardo*, (New York : Oxford University Press, 2004), p.

¹⁸³ Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, Canto XXXI, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (Toronto, Bantam Books, 1982), p. 285.

¹⁸⁴ Mandelbaum, *Inferno*, “Notes,” p. 388.

dark and stormy sky. Another link to Dante's passage is referred to in Caetani's text panel when she writes, "The clatter these Watchers make as they stand at the flanges of the hinge is loud and empty, with little relevance to what is being changed." In Dante's passage, Nimrod, the first giant to greet Virgil and Dante, threatens the travelers with incomprehensible babble. As a response to this, Virgil directs Dante to "leave him alone – let's not waste time in talk; for every language is to him the same as his to others – no one knows his tongue."¹⁸⁵ According to Dante scholar Helen Luke, "Nimrod ... built the tower of Babel and so he symbolizes the breaking of the clear beauty of constructive imaginative work into empty words that have lost their power to communicate."¹⁸⁶ Caetani has adapted Dante's character of Nimrod, with his inability to communicate, into her own symbolic imagery; her "Watchers" make no sense with all their clattering.

She also incorporates the physical characteristics of the setting and the giants in Dante's Canto XXXI into the abstracted forms of these figures. Dante's giants stand petrified and immobile within the frozen landscape of the lowest part of Hell. Caetani refers to this frozen environment by painting her "giants" an ice-white colour. The second giant Dante and Virgil come across in Canto XXXI, Ephialtes, is fixed to the earth, his arms unable to move because they have been chained and bound. Caetani utilizes this sense of immobility and incompleteness in her rendition of the "Watchers." Caetani provides further explanation of these figures when she states:

And so all the clattering and I have made a caricature of these, are all incomplete, and ridiculous figures, empty headed, drooping, signaling emptily with no brain, just a big gap again, absolutely faceless, hands clenched, birds with two wooden wings, a funny old woman, an instrument - a musical instrument you cannot play, a two-headed monster.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ Dante, *Inferno*, p. 287.

¹⁸⁶ Luke, *Dark Wood*, p. 33.

¹⁸⁷ Sveva Caetani, interviewed by Barbara Hartley, video tape, 1983 (GVMA, MS 174, Box 10/13)

The musical instrument Caetani refers to in the above passage may relate to the horn that Dante described as wrapped around Nimrod's torso.

It has been suggested by a number of Dante scholars that the scene depicted in Canto XXXI represents the political turmoil occurring in Florence during Dante's time. Just as Dante had participated actively in the politics of his native Florence, Leone had held a seat in the Italian Parliament in Rome. The political turmoil present in these cities ultimately disillusioned both writers, forcing them into exile; for Leone it was a self-imposed one. In many of the references Caetani made to *Watchers At The Hinge*, she implied that these figures represented the gossiping, faceless members of Leone's Italian community, predominantly the political community, who had judged him for his anti-fascist leanings. At the center of the painting the character of the father stands facing the Watchers, not in a defiant way but rather in a gesture of resignation. Of this figure Caetani said, "My father, who had had a very bitter life, is standing and it is just before he met my mother."¹⁸⁸ However, there is a deeper meaning that can be derived from the image, one that relates to the problematic relationship between Leone and Ofelia. If we refer back to the text panel for the painting, the "change" Caetani's text refers to may allude to an additional change that occurred in her father's, and by extension, her mother's life before they left Italy.

In an unpublished reference to this painting, Caetani identifies the hinge as "the hinge of fate and it was fate that my father should meet my mother, that they should marry, and that they should have me."¹⁸⁹ What is interesting about this statement is that

¹⁸⁸ Sveva Caetani, commentary for *Recapitulation*, cassette tape, July/August, 1988 (GVMA,MS 174, Box 10/13)

¹⁸⁹ Sveva Caetani, commentary for *Recapitulation*, cassette tape, 1983 (GVMA,MS 174, Box 10/13)

Caetani implies that her parents were married when, in fact, they were not. Leone had married Vittoria Colonna in 1901 and, as a Catholic from a prominent family in a Catholic country where divorce was illegal, was unable to divorce her when he fell in love with Ofelia Fabiani a decade later. Therefore, Caetani's mother was considered his mistress, a shameful role for an upper-class Italian woman. Caetani kept this fact a secret her entire life. Even her closest friends never knew the truth until after she died. At the far left side of *Watchers at the Hinge*, the tiny figure of Ofelia moves toward a Spanish style church. Caetani said of this church:

That little church is an actual building in Spain. My mother was a woman of exquisite taste and she loved small, delicate things, and she would have adored that church, so I put it in as a kind of tribute to her. The church she was actually married in was one of those very florid, baroque things with lots of twirls on it. But that is what my mother would have wished if she could have chosen where she could have been married.¹⁹⁰

When Caetani refers to the church as a "tribute" to her mother, could it be that by painting a new reality for her mother's dream of being married, she is redeeming her mother's honor, thereby legitimizing her own existence? Or, had the story of her parent's marriage in the baroque church been told so many times that Caetani had come to believe it as the truth? There are many possible reasons for Caetani to manipulate the facts here. The primary reason may be that if it was known her parents had never married, Sveva Caetani would be regarded as illegitimate in the eyes of the world. This would have been unacceptable to her, given that, despite her openness, Caetani remained throughout her life a staunch traditionalist with a keen sense of duty to her family heritage. The additional meaning that can be derived from the work is the sense of sadness and frustration Caetani felt over the fact that her parents were unable to marry.

¹⁹⁰ Sveva Caetani, commentary for *Recapitulation*, cassette tape, July/August, 1988 (GVMA, MS 174, Box 10/13)

Throughout my research into the artistic precedents for the compositional elements in *Watchers At The Hinge*, more than one example came to my attention. In the “Notes and Translations” section of the book *Recapitulation: A Journey*, Caetani writes that the figures of the “Watchers” are a tribute to U.S. artist Louise Nevelson:

whose use of bric-a-brac and pieces of junk wood assembled together illustrate perfectly for me the kind of dense alienation against which some of mankind’s deepest experiences may have to be endured. I have made quasi-human constructions in her style and these form the kind of hinge at which whole lifetimes can change.¹⁹¹

In the Caetani collection, in the file “Inspiration for *Recapitulation*,” I was fortunate to come across a magazine article Caetani had saved which includes a photograph of Nevelson standing before the wooden sculptures she created in 1959 (see figure 7). Caetani, clearly inspired by these particular forms, may also have been looking at Nevelson’s later work, *Transparent Horizon*, which included a similar treatment of figural abstraction (see plate 8). While the characteristics of Caetani’s figures closely relate to Nevelson’s, Salvador Dali’s painting *Archaeological Reminiscence of Millet’s Angelus* (1935) (see plate 9), provides, in my opinion, an even closer comparison. Both the composition of the painting and the design of the figures are very similar to Caetani’s painting.

In Dali’s *Angelus*, the background is dominated by a dark, ominous sky-scape painted with various washes of blue. Two stone figures, much like Caetani’s group of Watchers, stand like rock statues on a desert landscape; the shadow they cast forms a triangular shape similar to Caetani’s ditch in the arroyo. And just as in *The Watchers At The Hinge*, two tiny figures of a father and child occupy the triangular space emanating

¹⁹¹ Caetani, Notes and Translations, *Recapitulation*, p. 119.

from the giant stone figures on the desert. Both paintings utilize a strong horizon line across the bottom third of their compositions.

One of the most sustained personal obsessions in Dali's *oeuvre*, appearing in various forms over a 36-year period, was Jean Francois Millet's famous painting, *The Angelus* (c.1858-9). Millet's painting of peasants, who pause for a moment of prayer after a long day working in the fields, was understood in the nineteenth century as an evocation of the piety of simple people. Dali had been familiar with the image since his childhood and became obsessed with it to the point that he wrote a psychoanalytic reinterpretation of it in a book, *Le Mythe tragique de l'Angelus de Millet, Interpretation 'paranoiaque-critique'*.¹⁹² He interpreted the picture as an image of sexual repression and the fear of sex. As Dawn Ades points out in her study *Dali and Surrealism*:

The resemblance of the expectantly aggressive woman to the form of a praying mantis, notorious for its practice of devouring the male after the sexual act, suggested . . . latent 'sexual cannibalism'. . . [Dali] suggests that [his wife] Gala took the place of the threatening [female] in the early stages of his relationship with her, through which he eventually overcame his fear of sex, which he had, before he met her, thought would inevitably bring his own death with it. [His] analysis of the Angelus is, then, a tour de force of mental disequilibrium leading to the creation of what Dali suggests is a 'primal' and atavistic 'tragic myth'.¹⁹³

Caetani, as a woman, would not have shared Dali's belief in the cannibalistic female (just as she did not share Moreau's belief in the sphinx as an image of the devouring woman, but saw it rather as an evocation of the riddle of life). Nevertheless, she may have found in Dali's use of the Millet painting a symbol of repression, of hidden fears or dark secrets, appropriate since her own dark secret was the fact that her parents had never married. She would certainly have agreed with Dali when he wrote, "The Angelus' is, to my

¹⁹² Salvador Dali, *Le Mythe tragique de l'Angelus de Millet, Interpretation 'paranoiaque-critique'* (Paris: J.J. Pauvert, 1963)

¹⁹³ Dawn Ades, *Dali* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), p.141-3.

knowledge, the only painting in the world which permits the immobile presence, the expectant meeting of two beings in a solitary, crepuscular and mortal landscape."¹⁹⁴

It is interesting that Caetani chooses to cite Nevelson as an inspiration for some of the compositional elements in this painting when the influence of Dali appears to be a stronger force. Caetani may have been reluctant to mention Dali in the context of her paintings because it was not fashionable for the art historical community to consider him an important artist during the early 1980's. Until writer Dawn Ades published her pivotal book, *Dali*, in 1982, the artist was considered by some too much of a loose cannon to be taken seriously. In the following statement, Caetani refers to her impression of how the viewing public regarded Dali's use of symbolism:

Most people are used to images...the surrealism of Salvador Dali...limp watches...pianoforte with breasts, or something like that...and they laugh at it, they don't really take the symbolism very seriously. My symbolism has always been serious, and therefore, people find it frightening...¹⁹⁵

Dali reveals his awareness of how the viewing public may have questioned the seriousness of his symbolism when he writes, "It is not necessary for the public to know whether I am joking or whether I am serious, just as it is not necessary for me to know it myself."¹⁹⁶ Like Dali's, Caetani's symbols were of her own creation and therefore represented a personal iconography that mattered to her alone. But she probably distanced herself from Dali's work because she wanted hers to be taken seriously.

Until recently, I was not aware that Dali had created an entire graphic series illustrating Dante's *Divine Comedy*. This series creates an even closer comparison between Caetani's work and Dali's. In 1951, the Italian government, in preparations for

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 146.

¹⁹⁵ Sveva Caetani. Interview with Barbara Hartley, video cassette, 1985 (GVMA, MS 174, Box 10/13)

¹⁹⁶ Salvador Dali, in David Larkin, ed., *Dali* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1974), p. 28.

the 700th anniversary of Dante's birth, commissioned Dali to produce illustrations for a new edition of *La Divna Commedia*. Unfortunately, there was immediate opposition from the Italian community, who objected to the fact that a Spanish artist was being hired to commemorate an Italian icon. When the commission was ultimately cancelled, Dali decided to continue on with the production of the illustrations. The 100 images he created were later published in a few editions of the series as woodblock engravings. One illustration in particular relates to Caetani's *Watchers At The Hinge*, Dali's *The Second Cornice* (see plate 10). Clearly, Dali has picked up on the compositional elements of his 1935 work, *Archaeological Reminiscence of Millet's Angelus*, particularly in the stylistic treatment of the giant stone figures. However, instead of two stone figures dominating the composition, as in *Archaeological Reminiscence of Millet's Angelus*, in *The Second Cornice*, Dali has strung many of them together in a line. Caetani has done the same thing in *Watchers At The Hinge*, creating a triangular shape with the figures rather than one long diminishing line. Another similarity between Dali and Caetani's compositions is the inclusion of a seated figure that appears to be in quiet contemplation. It is interesting that this figure represents Dante in Dali's work, for Caetani plays the role of Dante throughout her entire series.

In *Watchers At The Hinge*, Caetani figurally positions herself more than just an observer contemplating the injustices done to her parents and how those injustices impacted their relationship. By representing herself three times, she asserts her particular role within the family dynamic, producing a pictorial narrative that provides a ground for her to explore the part of her identity that depended on her relationship to her parents and their relationship to each other.

Chapter 4: Trauma and Isolation

Her

The two paintings devoted solely to Caetani's mother in the *Recapitulation* series are *Her* (see plate 11) and *Departure from the Canyon of the Dark Sisters*. I have chosen to focus on the more intimate painting of the two, *Her*, which represents the complexities of Ofelia's psychological state, and gives us some sense of her pivotal position in Caetani's life. In terms of the chronological placement within the narrative, the painting *Her* directly follows *The Watchers at the Hinge*. The themes of Ofelia's isolation and disillusionment are developed in this painting. The text panel accompanying the painting emphasizes these themes:

The great moth self-caught in a bottle, its delicate wings matured but crippled, a burden and a wounding, almost unrealized for the moth has never flown.

Never defraud power of its stroke!
Had she only known and broken the thin glass
All the veins of heaven were there
To draw into her blood.

Confined in the same sense, gifts such as intelligence, beauty, elegance and discrimination, joined to an unbending will and mysterious power of foreknowledge, can become a barrier to any form of sharing. Then, as self-imprisonment within a transparent globe, tension and torment replace the wayward chanciness of ordinary life. So it was with Her, the mother.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁷ Caetani, text to accompany the painting, "Her," *Recapitulation*, p. 88.

Caetani depicts her mother as a young woman who has, through the ravages of her self-imposed exile, become tired and worn around the edges. The delicate female figure, contained within a glass bottle, sits on a stone plinth much like those found in a graveyard. This is an image of mourning. Caetani mourns her mother's inability to break through the thin glass and fulfill her potential as a woman of intuitive and "mysterious gifts." Caetani continued, "because she was very musical and she also loved the rest of things there and she was partly mystic.. ... She was a strange woman with extraordinary powers and so with mysticism she would be there."¹⁹⁸

According to Caetani, the image of *Her*, all tension and crumpled power, was inspired by this passage in Anne Dillard's book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.¹⁹⁹

I remember the Polyphemus moth. Once when I was ten or eleven years old, my friend Judy brought in a Polyphemus moth cocoon. In a book we found what the adult moth would look like; it would be wonderful. We passed it around. As we held it in our hands the creature within warmed squirmed in heart-stopping knocks. When it came to me it was hot as a bun – it jumped half out of my hand. The teacher intervened. She put it in (a) jar. There was no stopping it now, January or not. The whole cocoon twisted and slapped around in the bottom of the jar. The teacher fades, the classmates fade, I fade: I don't remember anything but that thing's struggle to be a moth or die trying. It emerged at last, a sodden crumple and stood still, but (it) breathed. It could not spread its wings. There was no room. The chemical that coated its wings like varnish, stiffening them permanently, dried and hardened its wings as they were. It was a monster in a jar. These huge wings were a torture of random pleats and folds, they made a single nightmare clump.²⁰⁰

With her back to the viewer, Ofelia rejects the world of human contact and turns her attention to the veiled world hanging in linear folds before her. She wears a diaphanous gown suggestive of the clothes she wore in life, such as the French couture designs of Madeleine Vionnet. But this gown also retains traces of the world of nature; the fractal-

¹⁹⁸ Sveva Caetani. Interviewed for television by Barbara Hartley, 1985 (GVMA, MS 174, Box 10/13)

¹⁹⁹ Sveva Caetani, commentary for *Recapitulation*, cassette tape, July/August, 1988 (GVMA, MS 174, Box 10/13)

²⁰⁰ Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1974), p. 61.

like forms of the dress falls away from the body much like leaves drifting in an autumn breeze, spilling over and settling quietly on either side of the cold, stone plinth. Or, in reference to the Annie Dillard story, the sections on either side Ofelia's body might represent the "dried and hardened wings" of the trapped moth. What is key here, is the way in which Caetani makes visible the outline of her mother's body through the sharp, triangular shapes of the motionless wings. The maternal body is glimpsed at, a secret revealed through a layered past. Ofelia's hair is drawn loosely at the nape of the neck in order to accentuate the fine detailing of the spine, each vertebrae carefully delineated. She rests back slightly, her long, thin arms supporting her weight, her hands echoing the razor-sharp edges of the "torture of random pleats and folds."

Elsewhere in the book on *Recapitulation*, Caetani writes of her mother in terms of her feminine body: "the cool blaze of her skin and colouring, the shadowy eyes and the perfection of her mouth, were set in an almost inhuman freshness, an immaculateness that saturated not only her almost flawless body and limbs, but her clothes and all her belongings, so that she seemed to whisper in her movements like a soft plant under frost."²⁰¹ The way in which Caetani consistently focuses on her mother's body as a site of romantic beauty relates to Kristi Seigel's assertion that, "Over and over again, in women's autobiographies, we may observe this same movement. Metaphorically or otherwise, the daughter associates the "active" part of her identity – her mind, of course – with her father and, in essence, waves good-bye to her mother. If the daughter does not

²⁰¹ Caetani, text to accompany the painting, "Departure From the Canyon of the Dark Sisters," *Recapitulation*, p. 87.

actually dissociate from her mother, the attention she gives to depicting her mother's body versus her father's mind accomplishes the same thing."²⁰²

Carolyn G. Heilbrun in her book, *Writing a Woman's Life*, similarly notes the sharp division daughters draw between their fathers and their mothers: "Consistently, daughters (as autobiographers) emphasize their father's intellect, his library, his sense of adventure, and his books in contrast to their mother's beauty, submissiveness, and/or lack of intellect."²⁰³ In the painting *Her*, Caetani depicts her mother's body in a very detailed way and contains that body in a chemical retort. This produces an effect of separation and distance between mother and daughter. Pictorially, Caetani aligns herself with her father by placing his figure beside her at the top right corner of the painting. Father and daughter remain outside the confines of the mother's existence.

It must be noted, however, that Caetani did not view her mother as lacking in intellect. She was to acknowledge her mother's extensive intellectual capacity, her love of language and culture, and the impact she had on her childhood education, in a letter: "Her (Ofelia's) special interests were in music, particularly Chopin and Debussy, and in French and Russian literature. I would mention that I owe most of my knowledge of the modern literature of both France and Russia to my mother's tastes and recommendations."²⁰⁴ Caetani also refers to her mother as "intuitive, subjective, perspicacious and ingenious. In great things she was a man, a warrior, intransigent and single-minded, with the clear, clean courage that makes disaster vanish."²⁰⁵

²⁰² Kristi Siegel, *Women's Autobiographies, Culture, Feminism* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1999), p. 43.

²⁰³ Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Women's Lives: The View From the Threshold* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), p. 87.

²⁰⁴ Sveva Caetani. Letter to Anna Pan, February 22, unknown year (GVMA, MS 174, Box 5/13)

²⁰⁵ Caetani, *Recapitulation*, p. 87.

Nevertheless, in this painting Caetani conveys an image of her mother as frustrated and trapped because her abilities were unused or underdeveloped. Caetani said of her mother:

And I believe that those of us who do not use whatever ability we have within us and every single one of us can do something – if we deny ourselves – in the end it becomes a self-frustration and I think it is a very serious condition. In my mother it was particularly – she was a woman of not only very strong character but she had enormous ability – she could design clothes – she could invent things and she had all this imagination that she could use and wouldn't use it. ... her job in life was to be the mother and a wife and run the house and have the guests in the house and look after the family. She was not a person who should develop a career. And so therefore it was terribly frustrating because she had an enormous amount of ability that was just corroding her inside."²⁰⁶

Caetani revisits, or reconstructs, her mother in the painting, *Her*, in order to fix her elusive, yet haunting, visage down on the canvas somehow and derive some kind of understanding of the complexities of her mother's psychological disorders, and further, their unique mother/daughter relationship. I believe that Ofelia remained a mystery to Caetani her entire life and, therefore, when Caetani approached the subject of their relationship in this painting, the effect was one of ambivalence, separation, and sadness. *Her* provides an opportunity for Caetani to explore these feelings.

Harbour With Sphinxes

The next painting I will address, *Harbour With Sphinxes*, produced in 1982, (see plate 12), is the seventeenth painting in the series, situated at the transition point between Hell and Purgatory in the narrative. Caetani's text panel accompanying the painting was intended to assist the viewer in decoding the symbolic aspects imbedded within this work. The text reads as follows:

²⁰⁶ Sveva Caetani in a video interview with Barbara Hartley, Jan. 1985 (GVMA, MS 174, Box 10/13)

V Transition Two

The Travellers depart from their past and the Boatman, the Charon of Time, comes to fetch the father and daughter in a small boat. It is now that the actual journey begins. The mother stays behind.

HARBOUR WITH SPHINXES

Charon ferried Virgil and Dante across the river Styx, over which there was no return passage. The father and daughter are brought across their 'river' by the Boatman, who represents Time, the passing-by of all things.

Every choice in life presages a change; every change is a riddle, perhaps never properly solved. The emblem of a riddle is the sphinx, and in great changes, sphinxes abound. The homeland left behind, with its symbolic crown of towers, is a giant riddle turning away from the Travellers. They are now forever absolved from any part in its eternal unraveling.

And more riddles surround the mother, who inwardly rejected changes or solutions, and spiritually would not share in any voyage of discovery.²⁰⁷

Within the context of Caetani's life story, *Harbour With Sphinxes* depicts the departure of the family from Italy in 1921. This pivotal event in Caetani's life is woven into the narrative of the *Recapitulation* series in order to signal the beginning of the imaginary journey Caetani will take with her father. As suggested in Caetani's text above, metaphorically this painting serves to communicate the belief that once a person leaves their homeland, that country will forever turn their back on them. This painting also reveals the psychological division within the family relationship. While in real life the entire family left Italy to immigrate to Canada, this painting suggests that Ofelia in some way stayed behind. The right-hand side of the painting depicts the figures of the young Sveva Caetani and her father standing on the lower pier ready to board the boat that has arrived to take them on the journey. With her right arm outstretched the daughter gestures toward the mother who stands on the upper pier surrounded by sphinxes (see

²⁰⁷ Caetani, *Recapitulation*, p. 48.

figure 2). This is the moment of choice for Ofelia who ultimately refuses to take part in the adventure. Caetani spoke about her mother's inability to leave Italy in a 1994 interview on CBC Radio: "My mother, of course, stays behind. She did not do so physically, she did so mentally and psychologically. Rome began at our front gate in Vernon and nothing changed until she died."²⁰⁸ Ofelia's role in the series parallels the role she lived in real life; she was not born for adventure, as Caetani and her father were, and was therefore isolated from the strong bond father and daughter shared both in life, and here within the narrative. This is reflected in how, as in previous paintings in the series, Caetani has compositionally distanced the figure of her mother off to one side by utilizing a strong diagonal line to separate her from the figures of daughter and father.

Caetani has situated the scene in the Piazzetta San Marco, Venice, a place she had visited on more than one occasion as a child. A 1920 photograph from the Caetani collection shows her at age three years, posing with her nanny in front of San Marco, the state church which dominates the square (see figure 9). It is significant that the artist has recreated an Italian landmark that must have held so much wonder for her as a child. The family trips to Europe, and particularly Italy, were an opportunity for the young Caetani to learn about the land her ancestors had walked upon and, to a certain degree, made history on. By reaching back into her memory and recreating the scene she would have lived and breathed in 1920, Caetani refers to the love she felt for her Italian heritage. However, as discussed earlier, memory changes and modifies real places and real people and the scene in *Harbour With Sphinxes* is no exception. This is not a literal translation of the actual piazzetta. Caetani has taken artistic license with the figures topping the two

²⁰⁸ Sveva Caetani, in a CBC *Ideas* program, Ann Pollock, dir., cassette tape, March 15, 1994 (GVMA,MS 174, Box 10/13)

columns that mark the entrance of the square. The Lion of St. Mark crowning the top of one column, and the first patron saint of Venice, St. Theodore, on the other, are replaced with sphinxes in the painting (see figure 10).²⁰⁹ In a 1983 interview for a Vernon television station, Caetani speaks of the modification of the scene in her painting:

In the old days in the Mediterranean when a harbour was built, it was built very formally like a complete piece of architecture with beautiful marble and beautiful steps going down to the water. And Venice, which was a great Maritime builder and power, always put two columns, but with the lions of St. Mark on it, instead I have put two sphinxes, sort of staring and looking around.²¹⁰

The top half of the composition is dominated by a large, blue sphinx that sits regally with a crown of towers on her head (see figure 11). According to Caetani, “the emblem of towers on the head is like the helmet of Britannia or the cap of liberty on Marianne, the symbol of France . . . Towers are the symbol of Italy so I put towers on the head of the sphinx.”²¹¹ The skeletal form of the sphinx is carefully delineated beneath a thin wash of color. Her powerful wing is in the shape of an eagle’s. As Caetani’s text explains, the sphinx turns her head away from the voyagers who are about to leave her. She is emblematic of the riddle of existence that accompanies any great change in life. There are more sphinxes, much smaller than the matriarchal sphinx, pacing the pier, surrounding the figure of the mother in a watchful manner. Instead of eagle’s wings, these smaller sphinxes have bat-like wings that echo the rippling effect in Ofelia’s scarf and dress. This formal similarity suggests a connection between Ofelia’s figure and those of the sphinxes; possibly the sphinxes represent aspects of Ofelia’s persona.

²⁰⁹ Marion Kaminski, *Art And Architecture of Venice* (Colgne: Konemann Verlagsgesellschaft mbh, 2000), p. 176.

²¹⁰ Sveva Caetani, video, interview with Barbara Hartley, 1983 (GVMA, MS 174, Box 10/13).

²¹¹ Sveva Caetani, cassette tape with narration by Caetani to accompany slides from *Recapitulation*. July/Aug. 1988 (GVMA, MS 174, Box 10/13)

A brief discussion of the origins of the sphinx is required here to flesh out the meanings inherent within Caetani's symbolic use of the figure. Depictions of the sphinx go back as far as c.2600-c.2500 BC. in Egypt, and appeared in ancient Greece as well.²¹²

While researching references to this painting in the Caetani collection of the GVM archives, I was fortunate to locate pictures of sphinxes that inspired those depicted by Caetani in *Harbour With Sphinxes* in a file titled "Inspiration for *Recapitulation*" (see figure 12). Judging from the illustrations Caetani worked from, the artist chose sphinxes originating in Greek mythology, rather than their Egyptian precedents. Whereas the Egyptians depicted the sphinx with a ram head, hawk head, or male head, and a lion's body and human hand, the model Caetani paints is more in line with the Greek version which appeared in art around the 5th century BC.²¹³ At this time, depictions of the sphinx were associated with the Theban legend of "Oedipus and the Sphinx." The demon of death and destruction and bad luck, the Greek Sphinx was depicted as a female creature with the body of a lion, the head and breasts of a woman, and the wings of an eagle.²¹⁴ These versions often depict the sphinx on top of a tall column. Caetani's use of the sphinx in *Harbour With Sphinxes* relates to this myth wherein Oedipus became the king of Thebes when he overcame the sphinx by guessing her famous riddle, and thus put an end to her depredations of the Theban people.²¹⁵

The figure of the sphinx was popular in literature and visual art at the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Artists of both the Symbolist movement and the Surrealist movement often utilized the sphinx to represent the manipulative,

²¹² A.R. Hope Moncrieff, *Illustrated Guide to Classical Mythology* (London; Studio Editions, 1992), p. 94.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

destructive potential of women's sexuality. Considering the impact of these artistic movements on Caetani's work, it is natural that a popular motif of these artists would show up in *Recapitulation*. However, there is a dramatic difference between the sexually aggressive sphinx of these earlier artists and Caetani's interpretation. In his book, *Idols of Perversity*, writer Bram Dijkstra describes the proliferation of images of the devouring female, what he terms as 'the feminine evil', in *fin-de-siecle* culture. He states:

the period's many representations of sphinxes and chimeras were characteristic examples of the nineteenth century's habit of juxtaposing – without synthesizing – extreme dualistic opposites in a single image. The sphinx, 'half woman and half animal' as Oscar Wilde said, still had the outward appearance of the warm, all yielding mother of the 1850s for she had the nursing nun's tantalizing, milk-white breasts with which she lured her unsuspecting sons.²¹⁶

A more recent study of the phenomena of the representation of the female in Symbolist art by Patricia Mathews in her book, *Passionate Discontent*, reveals the deeper cultural implications inherent within these images. According to Mathews, the influx of images of the *femme fatale* in the form of sphinx by Symbolist artists "arose in the context of the shifting public roles of women and the increasing pressures on masculinities...the heightened visibility of capable, intelligent women in the role of the 'New Woman' or involved in the feminist movement of the 1880s and 1890s threatened the social order..."²¹⁷ Avant-garde artists across Europe manifested these anxieties in the images of woman reduced to her animal nature in the form of the sphinx. These artists include Ferdinand Khnopff, Edvard Munch, Odilon Redon, Alexander Séon, Raoul du Gardier, Franz von Stuck, and Jan Toorop. Some of these artists used the Egyptian style sphinx, such as Jan Toorop's *The Sphinx* of 1892-97, but most preferred the winged

²¹⁶ Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 331.

²¹⁷ Patricia Mathews, *Passionate Discontent: Creativity, Gender, and French Symbolist Art* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press: 1999), p. 107.

sphinx of Greek mythology. Among these, Gustave Moreau frequently turned to the theme of Oedipus and the Sphinx, as in his 1886 work, *The Sphinx*, or, *The Victorious Sphinx* (see plate 13). This work is typical of the depiction of the devouring sphinx; she lounges in front of an elaborate column, high on a jagged cliff, while her dismembered victims fall in ruin below. The threatening power of the female in sphinx form is certainly evident here.

The theme of woman as sphinx was later picked up again by the Surrealist artists, including Salvador Dali and Max Ernst. In his 1939 collage, *Shirley Temple, The Youngest Monster Sacred to the Cinema of her Time* (see plate 14), Dali transforms the figure of child star Shirley Temple, America's little sweetheart, into a man-eating monster, the bones of her victims strewn across a desert landscape.

Judging from the many books on Salvador Dali in Caetani's library, she admired the artist and she clearly adopted some of his stylistic qualities in her work. However, it is my opinion that Caetani's primary interest in the story of the sphinx was in the riddle, rather than the destructive powers of the sphinx. In a CBC interview, Caetani explains the nature of the riddle in relation to her rendition of the sphinx in *Harbour With Sphinxes* when she remarks: "All choices are a mystery. One thinks one makes a choice, when actually one is trying to answer a riddle and that riddle is one's life."²¹⁸

In the Vernon Museum Archives there is a large amount of material written by Caetani relating to the *Recapitulation* series that, for whatever reason, she chose to leave out. The following example of unpublished text for *Harbour With Sphinxes* alludes to

²¹⁸ Sveva Caetani in a CBC *Ideas* program, Ann Pollock, dir. March 15, 1994 (GVMA, MS 174, Box 10/13)

the impact that leaving Italy and moving to Canada had on the family and how it relates to the sphinx's riddle. The text reads:

All choice is sphinx-like; the wrong answer to the riddle kills. Nowhere do there pad and hover more riddles than on the edge of what is called a 'new life' – a label illogical in itself, for new soil, new air, new routes do not alter old attitudes, old illusions, old aches. Sometimes transplanting works, but the new soil does best for the new roots of seedlings, not for the old plants....And what is taken away, or left behind, by choice, is sphinx-like too – just as deadly when wrong, just as much as a riddle, but now eternally unanswered.²¹⁹

Clearly, being transplanted to new soil in 1921 was a positive move for Caetani as an adventurous four-year-old. On the other hand, the experience was as destructive as an unanswerable riddle for her mother for who found it impossible to adjust to the rugged landscape of Canada. Caetani writes that Ofelia “brought Rome over here” with all its customs and traditions.²²⁰ Could it be that Ofelia, with her roots firmly imbedded within Italy, was unable to answer to the change the riddle of the sphinx would bring? For this socialite from Rome, to leave the fast-paced, cosmopolitan center of her native Italy and to immigrate to the culturally-deprived rural town of Vernon was a very difficult transition. Things were made worse by the fact that there were very few Italians living in Vernon at the time. Ofelia's refusal to learn English only compounded the problem. Ofelia dug her heels in even further when she chose not to join Leone and Caetani when they applied for Canadian citizenship in 1926. In a 1982 interview with Barbara Hartley, Sveva said: “For her, it meant giving up her family, giving up the kind of world to which she was used, giving up all the little things she treasured so much, the clothes and the pretty home and everything. And for her, it was a tremendous sacrifice.”²²¹

²¹⁹ Sveva Caetani, unpublished text for *Harbour With Sphinxes*, nd. (GVMA, MS 174)

²²⁰ Sveva Caetani, video, interview with Barbara Hartley, 1982. (GVMA, MS 174, Box 10/13)

²²¹ Ibid.

As stated earlier, Ofelia Fabiani, born in Rome in 1896, was the daughter of a prosperous Roman engineer. Her privileged upbringing instilled in her a love of luxury, including fine jewelry and clothes. In *Harbour With Sphinxes*, Caetani has depicted her mother as a lady of fashion, elegantly dressed in a Parisian style hat and dress. Photographic records of the family show Ofelia continuing to dress in her Parisian designer gowns in the rustic environment of Vernon, a choice that not only made her stand out within the community but also set her apart in an odd way, furthering her sense of isolation (see figure 13). It is striking how similar Ofelia's clothing and stance are in this photograph to the depiction of the figure of the mother in *Harbour With Sphinxes*. It is possible that Caetani used this photograph as a model for her mother in this painting and in the painting *Her*. Caetani refers to this when she writes, "She is wearing the same clothes as in that picture, "Her," but this time not crumpled. My mother, very elegant...she had a beautiful choice of clothes, taste in clothes, beautiful choice of whatever she put together. But my mother never really left Europe."²²²

While I was working at the Vernon Museum, a box containing a number of old magazines was found amongst a pile of un-catalogued material belonging to Caetani. The archivist asked me to go through it to determine whether it contained anything of value for the collection. To my amazement and exhilaration, I found tucked within a magazine four large sheets of scrap paper with expressive, intricate drawings by Caetani (see figures 14 and 15). The drawings primarily depict sphinxes and architectural forms of columns, obviously related to *Harbour With Sphinxes*. The sketch of the female sphinx in figure 14 is strikingly similar to the body position and countenance of the figure of

²²²Sveva Caetani. Cassette tape with narration by Caetani to accompany slides from *Recapitulation*. July/Aug. 1988 (GVMA, MS 174, Box 10/13)

Ofelia in the previously discussed painting, *Her* (see figure 15). Both Ofelia and the sphinx turn their back on the viewer. The carefully delineated lines of the spinal column evoke a fragility and vulnerability, while the hair of each figure is pulled up into a bun with soft tendrils hanging down. In Caetani's imagination, the sphinx is emblematic of her mother. This link is further strengthened if we compare the sphinxes' wings in the drawings and those in *Harbour With Sphinxes*. In the drawings, the wings are modeled after eagle's wings, whereas in the painting, they are more bat-like, echoing the ripple and flow effect of Ofelia's scarf in the painting. These drawings are important because they provide a link between Ofelia and the sphinx by way of their similar treatment of the female body.

In the painting, the mother stands aloof while the daughter gestures to her, pleading with the mother to join the others in the boat arriving at the quay. The boatman, the "Charon" of Time and agent of passage, will escort the voyagers on their journey. This is the first time this figure appears in the series. Caetani borrows this figure of Charon from Dante's *Inferno*. But as she has done previously, she inserts an autobiographical component into her narrative by utilizing the memory one of her ancestors for the role.

Caetani's text panel reveals the family origin of this character:

The Boatman*

His image derives from the father's cousin, a caring friend who died long before the daughter was born. He was a man of fire and flame, *condottiere* by heritage and character. But obligation and custom forced him to stagnate in a lethal numbness that drove him into a final, terrifying silence – a retreat not of madness but of contempt. Even those who loved him and whom he loved could not penetrate his silent walls. He remains locked in a silence on the Traveller's journey, for who can violate another's agony where there is no comfort? But we should rejoice – the Boatman after all will pole the Travellers along the wonder-river it is possible for all journeys to be.

Her footnote identifies The Boatman as:

* Giovannino Lovatelli. The daughter cherishes his memory and resuscitates him – but as the inexorable agent of time and passage.²²³

Ofelia was devastated when Leone died, and locked herself up in the big house on Pleasant Valley Road in Vernon for the next twenty-five years. However, it should be noted that, despite the fact Ofelia forced Caetani to join her in that isolation, the artist does not vilify figure of her mother in the series. As discussed earlier, Caetani's relationship with her mother was ambivalent. She clearly loved her mother but, as we have seen, her comments reveal that her memories of her mother were very painful. The paintings in the series that depict Ofelia, including this one, are marked by a keen sense of melancholy and sadness for the waste of the immense potential her mother possessed. *Harbour with Sphinxes* ultimately symbolizes the forces of change and how individuals respond to that change.

The Nook

The painting *The Nook* (see plate 15), of 1986, is situated in Chapter VII of the *Recapitulation* series, entitled "Great Themes For a Journey." According to Caetani, this section of the series is devoted to "the pleasant things, more or less what I consider Heaven...we go through poetry, books, music and science, friendship, animals, birds, and

²²³ Caetani, *Recapitulation*, p. 48. Little is known about Leone's cousin Lovatelli. The Caetani records in the GVMA do not mention him.

mystery.”²²⁴ *The Nook* is Caetani’s tribute to the wonders of the book; it also contains a strong autobiographical component, referring to the years from 1935 to 1960 when the artist endured a not so “pleasant” period of isolation. The text for the painting reads:

The Nook

In Dante’s time, small wooden shelters (nooks) were built in the draughty arcades of medieval stone buildings. There, scholars and other thoughtful folk could be screened into relative quiet and privacy, even with some comfort. These were triply havens: first from the seethe of the outside world; then from the dispiriting chill; and most of all, into an anchorage of beloved writers. For a book is not simply the printed word – it is *spirit communing with spirit* via each phrase, each image, each expression of thought, and every observation of feeling. In this sense the father, who undertook a great mind-journey himself across history, meets with his first and final hero, Dante. By now the father’s kindred, once hotly condemned by the great Florentine, are all Ghibellines in their passion for a united and free homeland. For the daughter, there is her own treasured figure, Jane Austen, no less universal in her classically impeccable assessment of human behaviour. Her utter sanity of outlook offers the daughter a lifeline to survival.²²⁵

While Caetani’s text speaks of the nook as a place of “comfort” and a “haven” for her “beloved writers,” there is also a sense of the darker realities affecting the personal life of Caetani. The artist turns to her muse Jane Austen, as a way of holding on to her “sanity” and utilizes the stories told by great writers as a “lifeline” in order survive twenty-five years of complete isolation. In a CBC interview with Anne Pollock, Caetani offers this poignant view into her experience of spending twenty-five years cut off from human society:

[Anne Pollock]: “But your life became a little more sheltered...”

[Sveva Caetani]: “It wasn’t sheltered, it was imprisoned.”

[Anne Pollock]: “Imprisoned...”

[Sveva Caetani]: “For the first sixteen years I did not leave this house.”

[Anne Pollock]: “The actual house, or the gardens?”

[Sveva Caetani]: “The first, from ‘35... ‘36...January ‘36...to about Nov.

²²⁴ Sveva Caetani, interview with Barbara Hartley, video cassette, January 1985. (GVMA,MS 174, Box 10/13)

²²⁵ Caetani, *Recapitulation*, p.76.

'42, I did not leave the house...except to go and vote...or to talk to a lawyer.
 From '42 to '51, I didn't leave the garden."
 [Anne Pollock]: "What did it feel like to..."
 [Sveva Caetani]: "I nearly went mad."²²⁶

While there were times that Caetani was pushed to the edge of madness during this period, she managed to draw upon an inner strength fostered by her love of books. As she explains in her statement, "In those days I felt suffocated, completely suffocated. If I hadn't had the books to read, I don't know how I would have survived...but I had the books."²²⁷ Clearly, this period in the artist's life was one of struggle and survival, but also one of joy – two opposing forces working on the identity of Caetani.

In real life, Caetani's only companions during this period were her mother and her mother's Danish secretary, Miss Juul. Despite being central figures in Caetani's life, these women are not depicted in the painting. Instead, Caetani brings back the figure of the father because, as mentioned earlier, Caetani identifies the father with the world of books and knowledge, the world of intellectual pursuit. He represents the active mind; he moves, he journeys, not only physically but also mentally. As Caetani remarked in the above text, he "undertook a great mind journey himself across history," as Caetani does in *Recapitulation*.²²⁸ Refusing to be stifled and immobilized, Caetani depicts herself in this painting as an active character, joining her father on the journey of the mind.

In the painting, a wooden nook is placed centrally in the composition. Seated at a desk inside this nook is the figure of Jane Austen, while the figure of Dante descends the staircase to greet Caetani's father. Caetani has kept the colour palette of the entire composition consistent with the central wooden nook. Linear waves cut across the

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Sveva Caetani, in a CBC Ideas program, audio cassette, March 15, 1994 (GVMA, MS 174, Box 10/13)

painting, simulating the patterns in the grain of wood. Large archways tower over the nook, suggesting the “draughty arcades of medieval stone buildings”. The figure of Caetani observes the scene from the central lower edge of the painting; the boatman waits in the lower right corner, perhaps to whisk the artist and her father to far-away realms of the imagination afforded through reading.

The figures of Dante and Leone move towards each other with outstretched hands ready to link in a handshake. This gesture is significant considering the historical connections between Dante and the Caetani family. Sveva Caetani mediates the transgressions of her ancestors by creating a space in which the figures of Dante and Leone can come together as friends. Dante had condemned one of Caetani’s most illustrious ancestors, Pope Boniface VIII (1230-1303), to Hell in Cantos VI, XIX, and XXVII in his first book, *Inferno*, of his poetic trilogy *Divine Comedy*.²²⁹ Dante had good reason to treat Boniface harshly in his poem, for it was because of this man that Dante spent the last nineteen years of his life in exile from his beloved home of Florence. Pope Boniface VIII, born Benedetto Caetani, was a supporter of the Black faction of the Guelph party. He was a persecutor of the Ghibellines and firm supporter of the need to affirm the absolute supremacy of the papacy over every political authority in the Christian world. Dante, a member of the White Guelphs, was banished from Florence in

²²⁹ It should be noted that Boniface does not appear as a character in Dante’s text, he is only referred to by other characters (sometimes by name, sometimes not). This is because Boniface did not die until three years after the date in which Dante’s narrative takes place, 1300. Dante has made sure to secure a place in Hell for Boniface. In Canto VI, line 69, the character of Ciaccio, a real-life Florentine of the generation immediately prior to Dante’s, refers to Boniface VIII anonymously when he intimates the Black Guelphs are: “using the power of one who tacks his sails.” A reference to Boniface occurs for a second time in the poem in Canto XIX, line 52, when Nicholas III mistakes Dante for Boniface, whom Nicholas knows will be his successor in the papal hole of Simonists. Nicholas says: “Are you already standing, already standing there, o Boniface?” The final reference to Boniface occurs in Canto XXVII, lines 67-72, when Guido da Montefeltro blames Boniface, “the Highest Priest – may he be damned!” for making him “fall back into [his] former sins.”

1302 by the Black faction who were backed by Pope Boniface VIII.²³⁰ According to writer Stephen Bemrose, “this pope, who is variously denounced by characters in the poem (sinners and saints alike) as an avaricious Simoniac; the ‘Prince of the New Pharisees’; a plotter; and a usurper.... Dante regarded Boniface as a key protagonist in his exile from Florence.”²³¹ Over time, the Caetanis shifted their loyalties and became members of the “white” aristocracy, or those connected to the king rather than the church. In her painting, *The Nook*, Caetani redeems the family name; in relation to Dante the sins of her ancestors have been atoned.

On one of my research trips to Vernon, a rare example of a predecessor to the final version of this painting came to my attention (see figure 16). This unfinished work was purchased by a friend of Caetani’s, Hetty Lattie, and presently resides above Ms. Lattie’s fireplace in her Vernon home. I was fortunate to be able to visit Ms. Lattie, at which time she graciously allowed me to photograph the work. I was immediately struck by the quality of the draughtsmanship and the valuable contribution this painting would make to my research. I had studied the many preparatory drawings Caetani had made for the series, but here for the first time, was a painting in progress with the various stages of the watercolour process Caetani used still in evidence. I wondered what possible reasons Caetani would have had to abandon the painting so close to its completion.

This earlier version of *The Nook*, while retaining the thematic concern of books and literature, differs dramatically in tone and composition from the final version. In contrast to the simplified depiction of just two literary figures (Austen and Dante) accompanying

²³⁰ R.W.B. Lewis, *Dante* (New York: Viking Press, 2001), p. 11. According to R.W.B Lewis, “the Guelphs, so long the city’s leaders, fell to quarrelling vociferously with each other. In the fall of 1301, actual war broke out between them: between the White Guelphs...oriented toward the merchant class; and the Black Guelphs...favouring the nobility.”

²³¹ Stephen Bemrose, *A New Life of Dante* (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2000), p. 51.

Leone, Caetani, and the boatman, the artist has filled this earlier composition with the figures of at least twenty notable writers and poets. While some of these figures have been completed, many others remain unfinished as detailed drawings. Caetani has penciled in the name of each author upon or beside the drawing of the figure (see figure 17). The names that remain legible are: Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926), Marcel Proust (1871-1922), Joseph Conrad (1857- 1924), E.M. Forster (1879- 1970), William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), Alexandre Dumas (1802-1870), Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936), Selma Lagerlöf (1858-1940), George Eliot (1819-1880), Thomas Hardy (1840-1928), Emily Bronte (1818-1848), Percy Shelley (1792-1822), William Shakespeare (1564-1616), Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837), John Keats (1795-1821), Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894), Jane Austen (1775-1817), Mme. de Sévigné (1626-1696), Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), and the scholar closest to her heart, her father, Leone Caetani. The figures are spread throughout the entire composition, sometimes integrated into the architectural element of the nook, other times placed at different intervals across the checkered piazza. This depiction of her literary heroes and heroines shows us how widely Caetani ranged in her reading, as it includes novelists, dramatists, poets, and philosophers. Of particular note is the inclusion of Marcel Proust, who like Caetani transformed autobiography into art in his seven-volume novel *À la recherche du temps perdu*, or, *In Search of Lost Time*, 1913-1927.²³²

For the overarching theme of the celebration of literature, it is possible that Caetani was inspired by one of the four frescoes executed by the Italian Renaissance painter Raphael, who was commissioned to paint them for the Stanza della Segnatura in the Vatican Palace in Rome between 1508 and 1512. As she was born in Rome and

²³² Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1919-1927)

visited there many times throughout her childhood, she may have been exposed to these works by Raphael. She certainly would have seen them illustrated in books. The program of images depict symbolic representations of four main areas of Western learning: philosophy in the *School of Athens*; religion in the *Disputa*; law in the *Justice*; and the arts in the *Parnassus*. It is the latter fresco, *Parnassus* (see plate 16) (1510-1511), that most closely relates to Caetani's early version of *The Nook*, for Raphael has gathered together in one composition all the writers he admired. Like Caetani, he included the figure of Dante (on the top left of the composition).

Clearly the writers Caetani included in her composition are the writers she admired most and whose work she must have read extensively. Between the ages of eighteen and forty-three during the period of isolation, she did a tremendous amount of reading. She later remarked, "It was a very dark period for me and so I decided to make a kind of working philosophy for myself. I read a great deal, my mother did not deprive me of that. I had books by the caseful and I read, and read, and read."²³³ Portraying the physical likeness of each of these famous writers would have required a great deal of research into the details of their appearance. Of course, given there are no historical portraits for some of the writers, Caetani would have occasionally taken artistic license with their images. The following statement by Caetani provides a possible explanation as to why she invested so much time and effort to this task:

For me, books are friends and some of them are the friends...are the absolute chief friends. Books are not only knowledge, they are contact...when I read one, I have contact with the person...I rarely go over a page without either stopping to think about what that person was saying...whether it was a novel or poetry...and I can see the actual poet or author there. Or, if it is a scientific or historical book, I feel like arguing nearly every page...asking questions of the writer as if he

²³³ Sveva Caetani, interviewed for CBC *Ideas* program, cassette tape, March 15, 1994 (GVMA, MS 174, Box 10/13)

was in the room with me.²³⁴

Phrases such as, "...I can see the actual poet or author there," and "...as if he was in the room with me," reveal the degree of importance Caetani placed on these literary figures and how they had become living presences in her private world. They became imaginary replacements for the friends her mother denied her during this time. Caetani once said:

I had friends I had made, Canadian, young Canadian friends, teenagers my own age. Mother took their letters and threw them away. I didn't know they wrote...I couldn't understand why they didn't write anymore. Relatives came to the door during the war...mother had them turned away. Mother was in a panic that I should be independent and leave her.²³⁵

A photograph of Caetani from 1945 (see figure 18), taken ten years after her father's death, hints at the psychological impact a decade of isolation had made on her. Her cloistered existence is evident in the way she stands on the porch of the family's large Vernon home wearing a severe black suit, white gloves, her hair pulled back, and a pensive look on her face. What is most revealing is the manner in which she holds the front door ajar, as if to stop it from closing completely. By keeping her hand on the door, Caetani is assured of escaping back inside if need be. For the space behind this door had become her entire world, and that conflicted world represented both a prison and a haven to her.

Caetani has imbued the first version of the *The Nook* with the complexity of this world. This version is much more open in terms of composition, for Caetani has extended the interior space of the nook up into the arcade by way of multileveled balconies. She has also painted a background of blue sky and open sea; these elements suggests the meeting of two separate worlds, the insular world of study and scholarly

²³⁴ Sveva Caetani, commentary for *Recapitulation*. (GVMA, MS 174, Box 10/13)

²³⁵ Sveva Caetani, interview for CBC *Ideas* program, cassette tape, March 15, 1994. (GVMA, MS 174, Box 10/13)

pursuit, and the outside world of travel and adventure. This is underscored by the positioning of the boatman at the water's edge on the right hand side of the painting. He stands ready to escort any one of the travellers who might choose to take part on the journey, thereby providing the possibility of escape. It is possible Caetani felt the inclusion of sky and water created an openness and airiness that belied the "suffocated" existence she had endured. Also, the inclusion of so many figures may have detracted from the cohesive quality of the composition for her. Whatever the case, she abandoned the work and turned to fresh paper to begin again.

For the final version of *The Nook*, Caetani may have, again, been looking back to her Italian heritage in the form of paintings like Antonella Da Messina's *St. Jerome In His Study* (c.1450-55) (see plate 17). It is possible this was the painting Caetani was thinking of when she spoke of taking her inspiration for the nook from "drawings made in the Renaissance," for it is one of the most famous and relevant renditions of the subject. Messina's painting contains a similar colour scheme, along with many of the compositional details of Caetani's *The Nook*. Tall, columned Gothic archways span from the bottom to the top of Caetani's composition, echoing the smaller columned archways on the right hand side of Messina's painting. The curve-topped desk, presumably belonging to Dante and tucked into the alcove of Caetani's nook, looks strikingly similar in style to the desk St. Jerome sits at in Messina's painting. More significantly, and possibly as a direct quote, the staircase Dante descends from retains a similar series of arched supports as Messina's staircase in *St. Jerome In His Study*. Caetani may have chosen Messina's painting as a model because it reflected the particular quality of an insular, cloistered existence so like her own life.

Where Caetani's version of the nook differs from Messina's rendition is in the omission of any suggestion of the outside world. Messina has placed a window on either side of St. Jerome's nook, each one revealing a lush and verdant landscape. During her twenty-five years of isolation, the outside world was largely inaccessible to Caetani. Therefore, her nook of shelter inhabits an austere, dream-like space; it is her private cloister suspended between the real and the imaginary. The only hint of a world outside the nook are the thinly painted orthogonal lines converging at a vanishing point on the very faint horizon midway up the painting. Again, Caetani is utilizing pictorial devices developed during the Italian Renaissance, in this case, linear perspective. Ultimately, however, this reference to a world beyond is only suggested, it is not concrete; therefore, the overall result is a dreamlike journey seemingly drawn from the subconscious mind. As Caetani stated in her original notes for *The Nook*: "all journeys of the mind start with books (or tales – one upon a time – since tales are stores of memory and thought, just as books are) and books are authors, beloved authors, whose company, once known, changes the inner life of the reader for the rest of his (in this case, her) days."²³⁶ During this period of the artist's life when she was forbidden to voyage beyond the front door of her Vernon home, literature provided the opportunity for travel through a journey of the mind.

In her painting, *The Nook*, Caetani confronts the memories of trauma and isolation she experienced over a twenty-five year period in her life. She recreates a pictorial narrative that outlines how her intellectual pursuits during this difficult period saved her from losing sight of her identity and falling into madness. She recreates in visual form the personal agency she applied to this difficult situation in order to survive.

²³⁶ Sveva Caetani, notes for *Recapitulation*, nd. (GVMA, MS 174)

Chapter 5: The Final Path Taken

Severance

Caetani ends her series with a chapter entitled *Journey's End*, which, as stated earlier, acts “as a personal confrontation with loneliness, ordeal, vulnerability and spiritual imperatives.”²³⁷ The painting *Severance* (see plate 18), 1985, is located at the beginning of this ninth and final chapter, deals directly with aging and loss.²³⁸ As the chapter title suggests, this is a pivotal point within the series when Caetani begins the process of drawing the narrative and the journey to a close. In this painting Caetani faces the difficult task of saying a final goodbye to the people who have meant the most to her, her father, mother, and Miss Jüül.

Journey's End

The journey is at a close. The companions go on with their own existence, if any, beyond life and beyond the daughter's memory and heartbreak. The solitary Traveller now takes the path in search of the final meaning of things. And endings must always be endured within oneself alone.

Severance

The shutter on the lens must close, though every fibre screams to stop it. The Boatman is ready for the other travellers, and the emptiness waits beyond.

The large, somewhat abstracted figure of Caetani grasps the curved edges of overlapping circular disks that appear to move closer together as they rotate in a spiral pattern. The

²³⁷ Sveva Caetani. Notes for *Recapitulation*. (GVMA, MS 174, Box 10/18)

²³⁸ The last painting in the series is *Taman Shud* which is on the theme of death but I have chosen not to deal with it because I wish to concentrate on paintings in which Caetani explores her relationship with her parents.

lightly coloured curved lines at the bottom of the canvas emphasize this movement. These light lines also suggest the aperture of a camera behind which Caetani struggles to stop the inevitable closure of the disks. As in the painting *The Summons* (see figure 4), Caetani has depicted herself with her skin flayed off and her inner being revealed. However, this time, instead of the young teenage figure she was at the beginning of the narrative, Caetani paints herself as the aged person she has become. In both cases, Caetani is having to undergo a profound separation from her father. In an interview Caetani said of this painting:

The... picture is called *Severance*. In the end in life you are always alone. And everything you do is alone, however much you have loved people. I say goodbye to my father, my mother, and Miss Jüül, whom I loved as a second mother, who was kinder to me than my own mother. They're going to go on the boat with the boatman, they are going to disappear, I don't know where. And I am trying to hold back what looks like the shutters of a camera. It's going to click on the photograph of memory. I will never see them again.²³⁹

Severance communicates the painful process of letting go and saying good-bye to those whom she held dear in her life. In the tiny space, "my parents, my old Danish friend (Miss Jüül) and the Boatman, are ready to set out onto a sea where I cannot follow them."²⁴⁰ The footnote to this painting reads: "*Severance* employs the symbol of a camera shutter closing forever on the image one seeks to preserve." Caetani must endure the closing of the shutters of the camera. Photography's ability to freeze a moment, to literally stop time in its tracks, is of great relevance here. Caetani has frozen in time probably the most intensely emotional experience of her life. Photographs have played an important role both throughout my years of researching the life of Sveva Caetani, and in the formulation of this thesis. I am reminded of the words of writer Susan Sontag:

²³⁹ Sveva Caetani, Interview with Barbara Hartley, video cassette, 1985 (GVMA, MS 174, Box 10/13)

²⁴⁰ Sveva Caetani, *Recapitulation*, p.123.

Photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we're shown a photograph of it...the camera record justifies. A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may distort, but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what's in the picture. Whatever the limitations (through amateurism) or pretensions (through artistry) of the individual photographer, a photograph – any photograph – seems to have a more innocent, and therefore more accurate, relation to visible reality.²⁴¹

It is interesting to note that in terms of the compositional format of the five paintings in the closing chapter of the series, Caetani has painted herself as monumental in size with her image occupying almost the entire area of the canvas. This is not accidental, as it does not occur in any of the other fifty-six works. The meaning behind this gesture can only be conjectured at. It is possible that by bidding farewell to those few she loved so very deeply, whom she, in many ways, devoted her life to, she has arrived at a resting place where she is finally alone – completely alone. In this place of solitude she has become larger than life. Her identity is fully formed now, just at the moment her physical body is beginning to fade away. Whether she fully reconciled the complexities of her relationship with her parents, whether she truly came to some kind of resolve about her father's death and her mother's oppression of her, we will never know. The only bits of narrative truth we have are contained within the myriad of brushstrokes she used to paint fifty-six watercolour paintings and the heartfelt words of her parables and poetry in her series *Recapitulation*.

²⁴¹ Susan Sontag. *On Photography*. (New York : Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), p. 5.

Conclusion

In her series *Recapitulation*, Sveva Caetani foregrounds the events of her life by combining literary and artistic genres to form a style of self-representation that is uniquely her own. By exploring these ideas through an interplay of text and image, Caetani produces a self-narrative that demonstrates the shifting nature of subjectivity, and a self-narrative that acts as a site of identity production. In many ways, *Recapitulation* is Caetani's journey to the interior of her subconscious and the journey, as a process, constitutes a continual regeneration, in which old attitudes, grief, and unfulfilled desires are revisited and then left behind. Caetani reaches back into her memory to experience the event or relationship once more, but this time in order to live it again and by extension to experience it anew, as she states: "this cycle...is called *Recapitulation* because it revives, rather than reviews all the major themes and feelings of my life."²⁴² By "reviving" the experience, Caetani reconstructs it and gives it life in a new way.

As I have shown, in her series *Recapitulation* Caetani draws on many of the literary and artistic precedents of her Italian cultural heritage. By reaching back to this heritage, Caetani is developing a sense of self similar to that described by writer Karen Bearor when she states: "One might say that our sense of our 'self,' however fragmentary or illusory, is dependent upon the stories we tell of ourselves and that these are largely determined by how others narrate us, by language, and by the genres of storytelling we inherit from our cultural traditions."²⁴³ Caetani's use of Dante's *Divine Comedy* for the overarching structure of *Recapitulation* moves beyond her ancestors' analysis of Dante's

²⁴² Sveva Caetani. Interview with Barbara Hartley, video tape, 1985 (GVMA, MS 174, Box 10/13)

²⁴³ Karen A. Bearor, "Subjectivity, p. 184.

text as a monolithic entity unto itself. Through her own combination of text and image, she reinterprets the Italian poet's vision of Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven to express her personal journey, thereby bringing the medieval narrative into the 20th century. While the vivid word-images in Dante's *Divine Comedy* have invited pictorial responses from many artists from the earliest days until the present, rarely has an artist taken the bold step Caetani has taken in *Recapitulation*. It is significant that Caetani, in an act of personal agency, has appropriated the autobiographical role Dante plays in his *Divine Comedy*. She adopts the position of a contemporary female pilgrim on a spiritual journey and inserts her own father into the role of Virgil, Dante's intellectual guide.

Caetani also reaches back to her Italian artistic heritage by referring to the works of Italian architecture and to the paintings of Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, and Masaccio. Again, she reinterprets these cultural precedents by combining the surrealist aesthetic of Dali and Kahlo with her own unique brand of symbolism to produce psychologically-charged images that communicate the events of her life.

I have chosen to analyse six paintings from Caetani's series *Recapitulation* that deal most succinctly with the artist's relationship with her parents in order to demonstrate the agency she employed in asserting the multiple layers of her subjectivity. *The Summons* begins the journey, emphasizing the important relationship she shared with her father and the impact of her cultural heritage had on her identity. *Watchers At the Hinge* reflects on her parents' relationship to each other and the conflicted nature of the political and cultural issues present in Italy during the 1920s. *Her* delves into the psychological aspects of her mother's personality and Caetani's inability to break through the wall of that self-contained existence after Leone's death. *Harbour With Sphinxes* marks the

moment of change in the artist's life when the family must leave their Italian homeland for a new world. Ofelia's inability to embark on the journey with Leone and Sveva Caetani furthers the estrangement between mother and daughter. In *The Nook*, the sequestered world of books and literature acts as a refuge for Caetani, within which she develops the intellectual side of her personality. And finally, *Severance* draws the narrative to a close and demonstrates Caetani's process of letting go of the past and the people she held dear. She carries on alone, journeying forward to her own version of spiritual Heaven.

In this thesis, I have used biography because the lives of unknown women artists still need to be excavated and made visible. My intention in outlining the biographical details of Caetani's life has been two-fold: first, to document this little known artist, and more importantly, to move beyond it in order to illuminate the transformative nature of storytelling in both Caetani's narrative and my own. I have adopted a revisionist feminist methodology that works to avoid the pitfalls of the masculinized form of writing about the artist. This analysis, therefore, argues for a different way of writing the stories of women's lives and constitutes a thematic case study (in the form of autobiographical storytelling), one that moves beyond a celebration of the artist as genius. As this journey comes to an end, I am aware this work can not possibly represent the ultimate "truth" about Sveva Caetani and her work. Instead, I have experienced the unique opportunity to actively engage with Caetani's life story and search for a "more honest telling in which gaps and contradictions play a role."²⁴⁴

²⁴⁴ Frederickson, *Singular Women...*, p.12.

ILLUSTRATIONS



Figure 1a

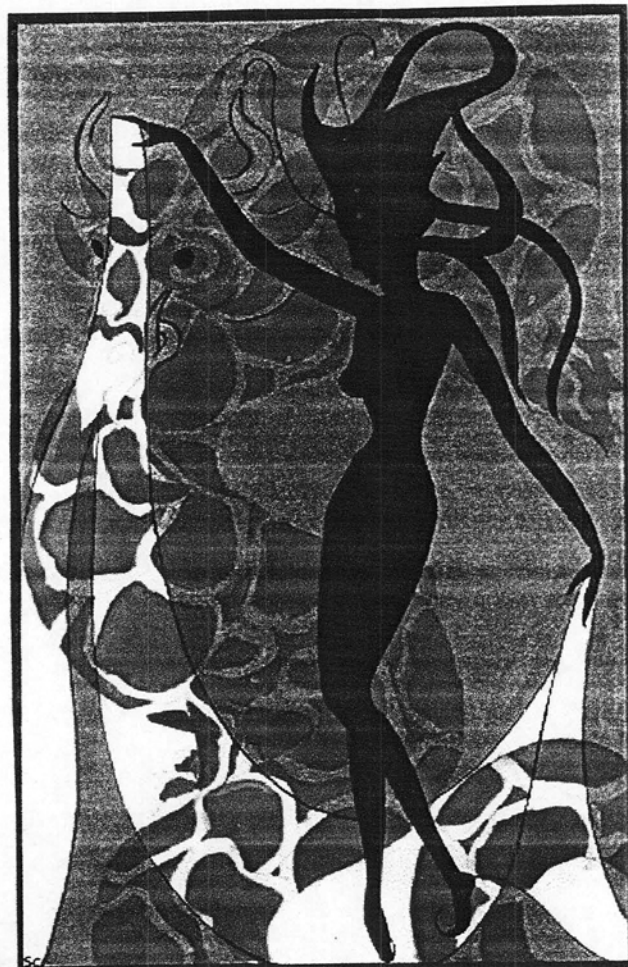


Figure 1b



Figure 1c

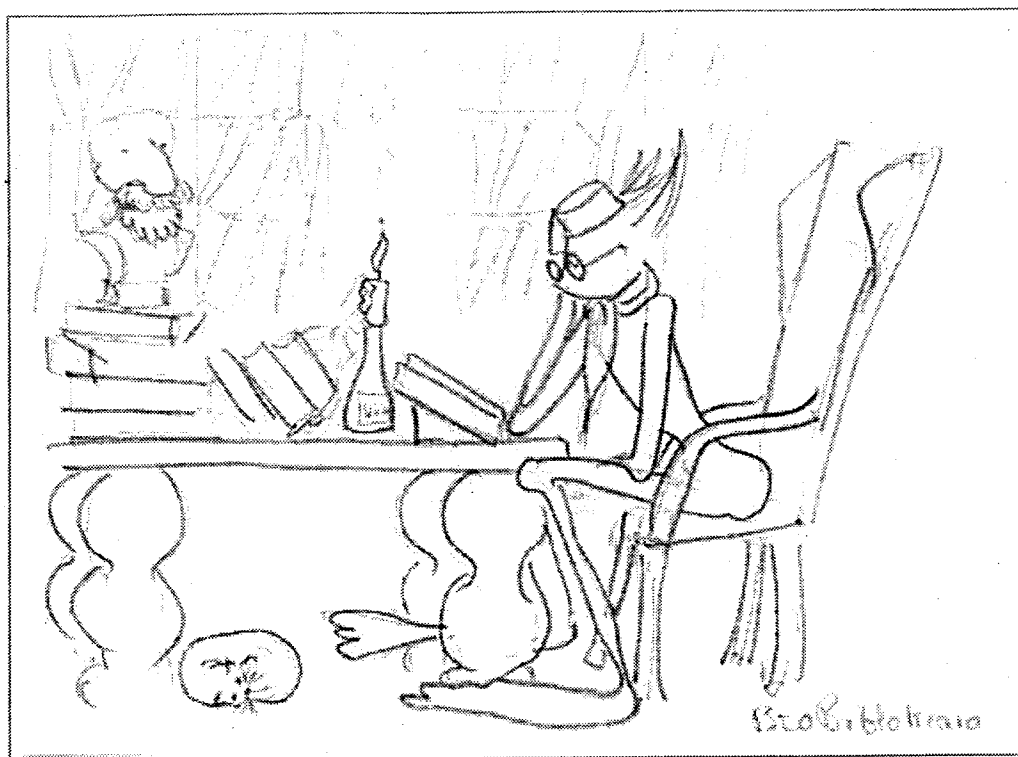


Figure 2a

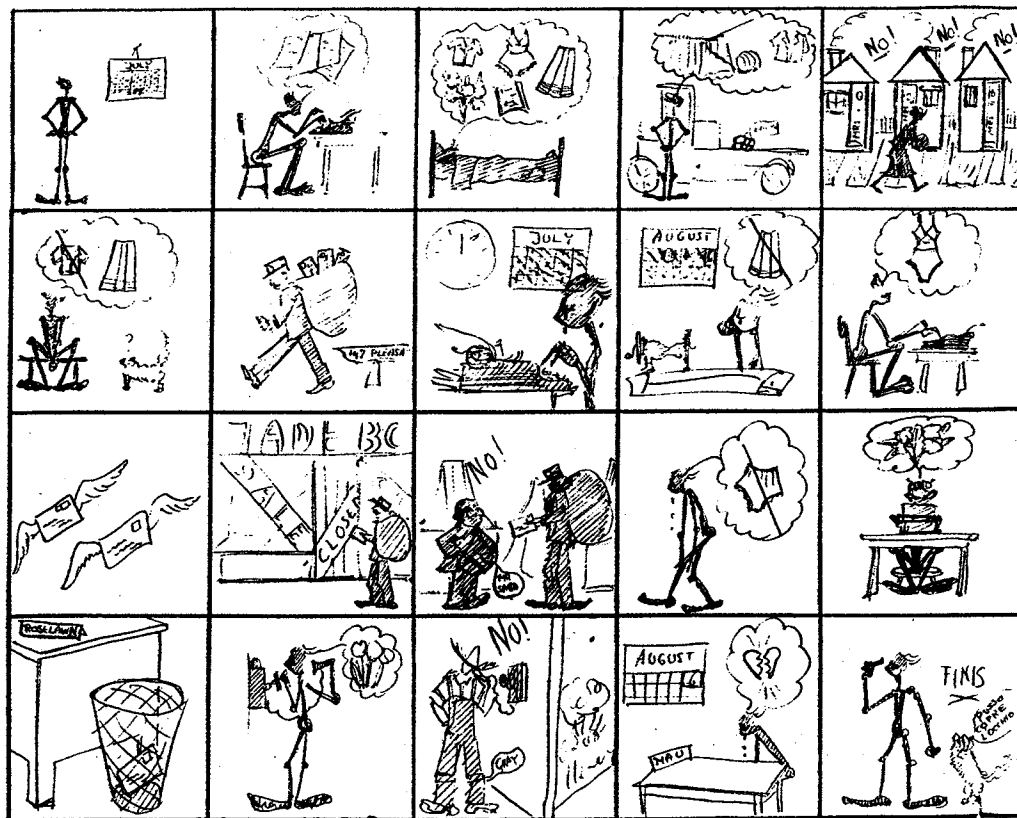


Figure 2b

TRISTO STORIO DEL PAPA GIOVANNI. PER MAI IL 6 AGOSTO 1929

Figure 3



myself.
Q. L. Marco
Aug. 1933



Figure 4



Figure 5

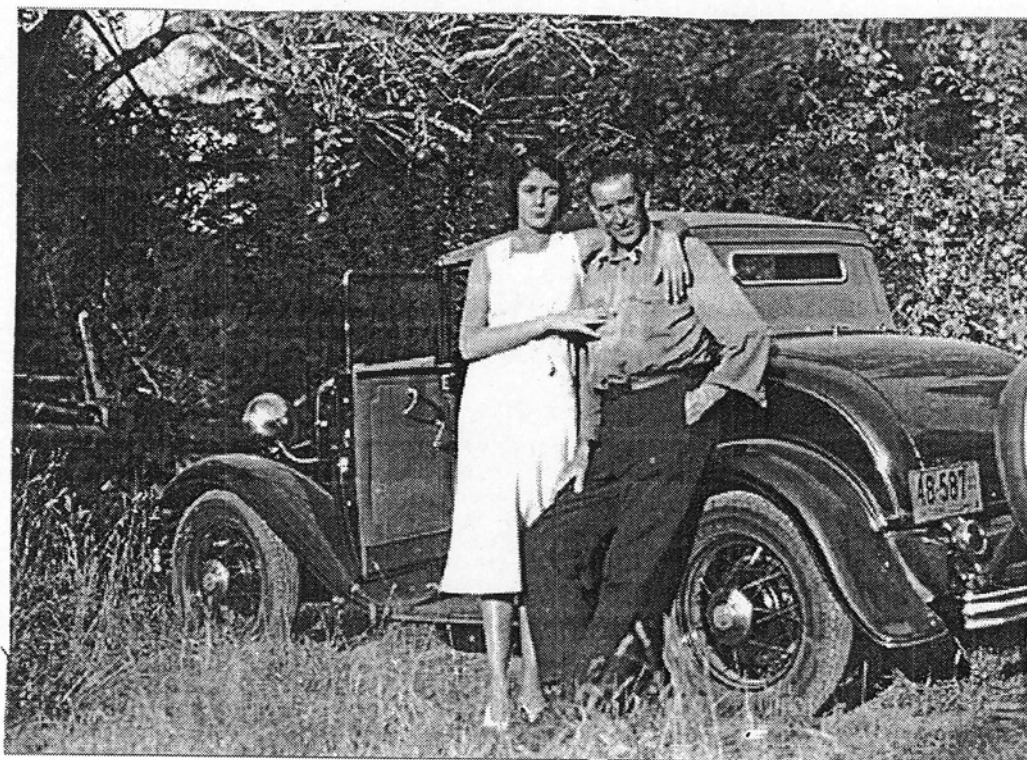


Figure 6

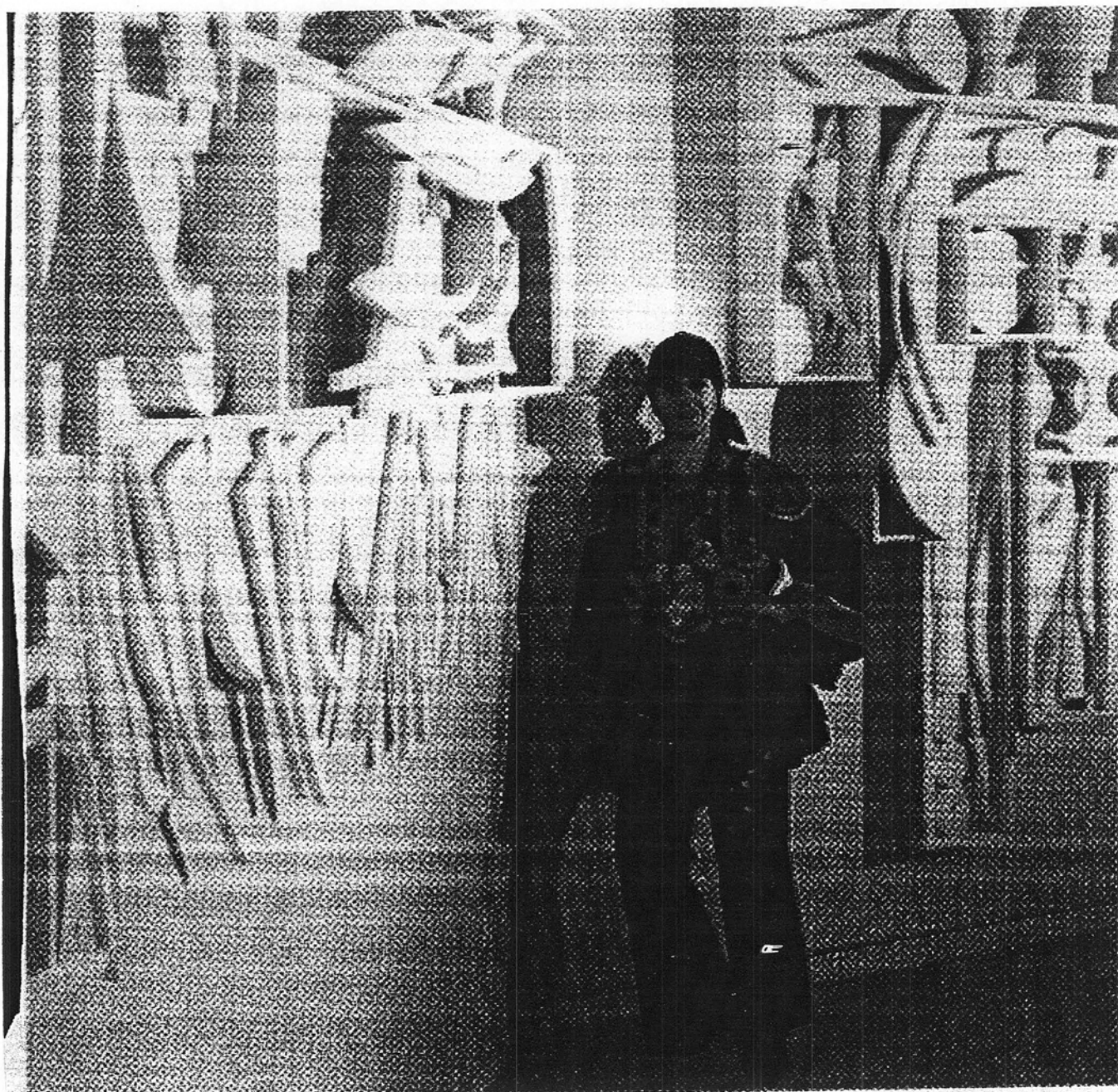


Figure 7

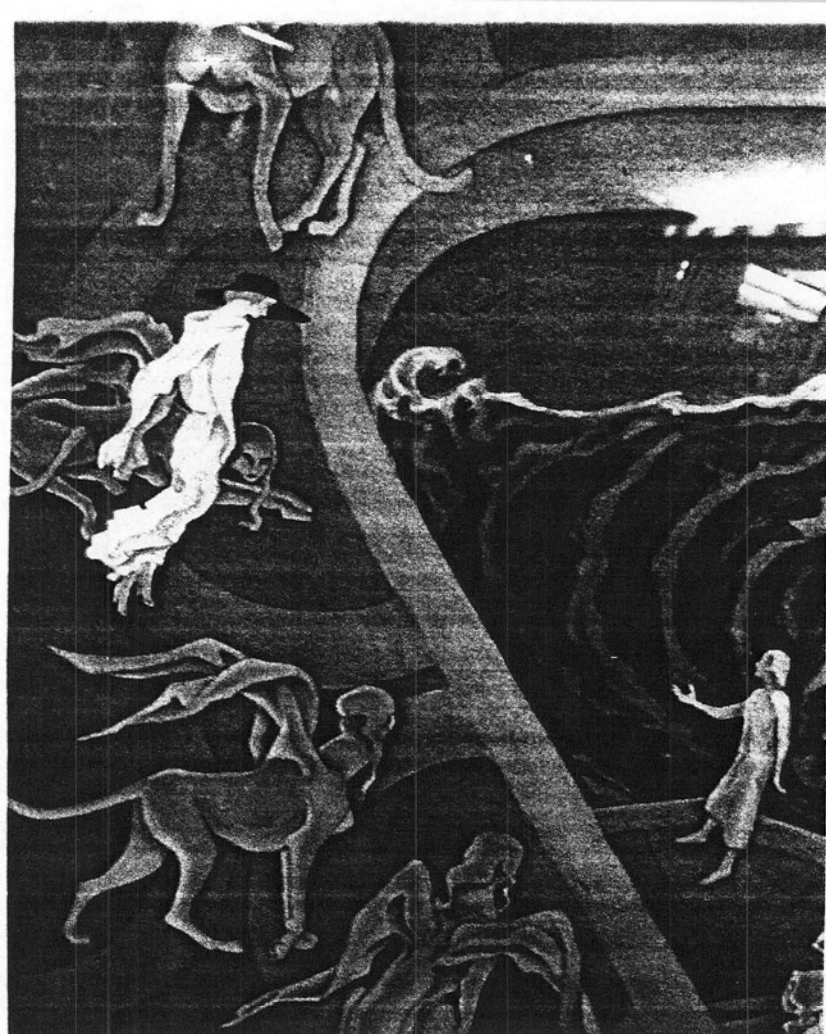


Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14

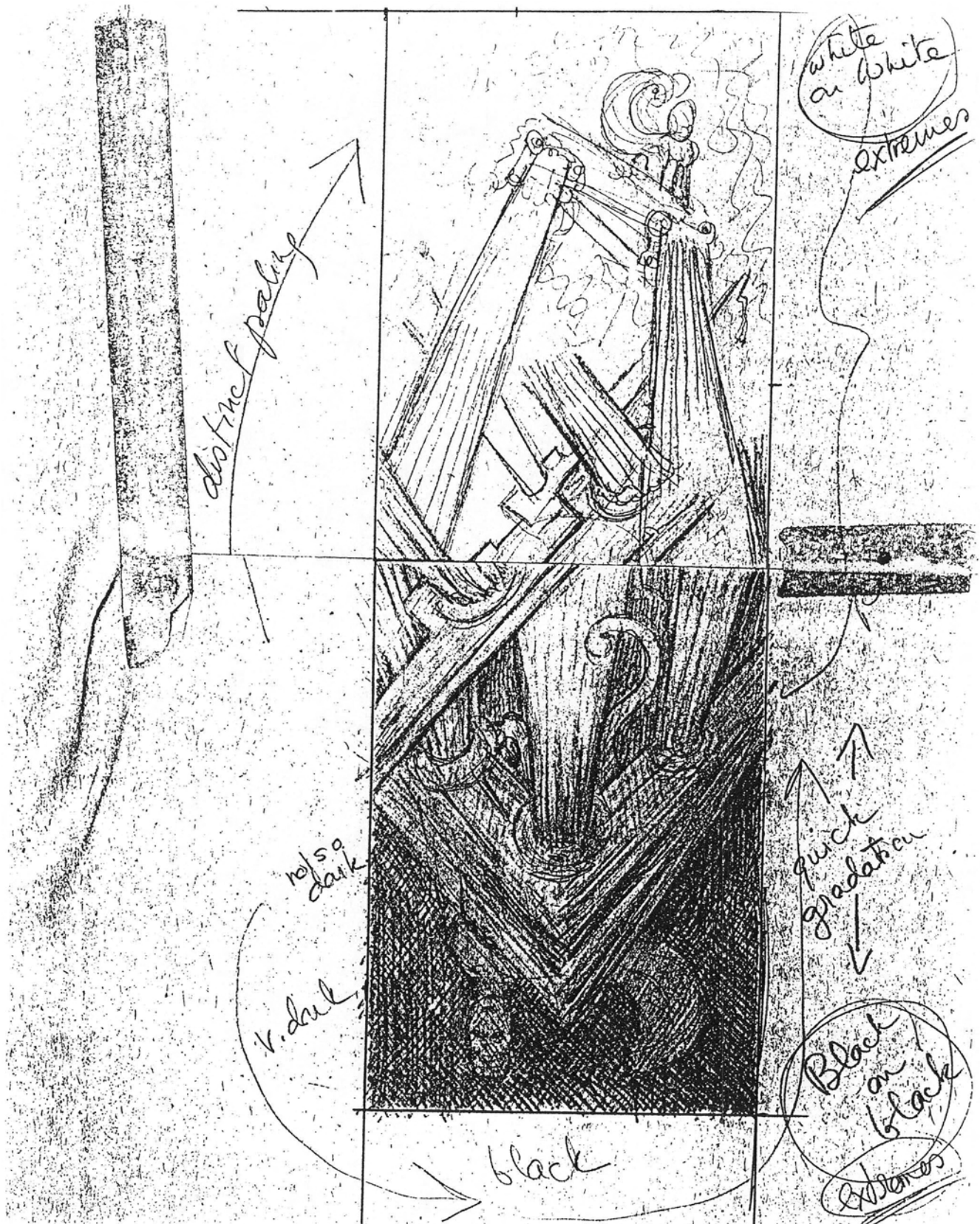


Figure 15



Figure 16

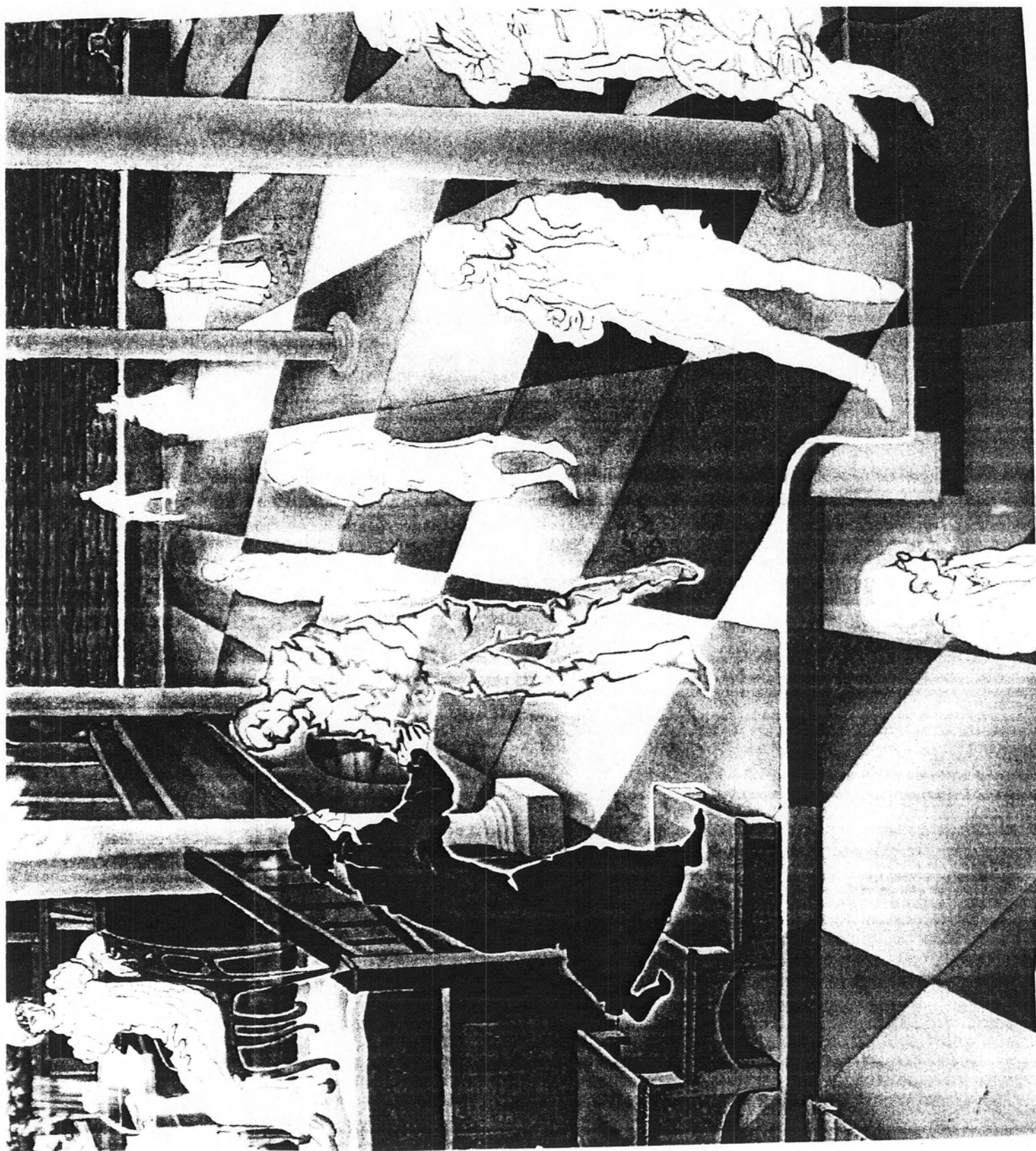


Figure 17



Figure 18

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APPENDIX

Illustrations without copyright permission:

- Plate 1. Sveva Caetani, *The Summons*, 1978, watercolour on paper, 56 x 76 cm, Alberta Art Foundation, Edmonton. (Photograph courtesy of Heidi Thompson, Sveva Caetani, *Recapitulation: A Journey*, Vernon, 1994, 17)
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APPENDIX

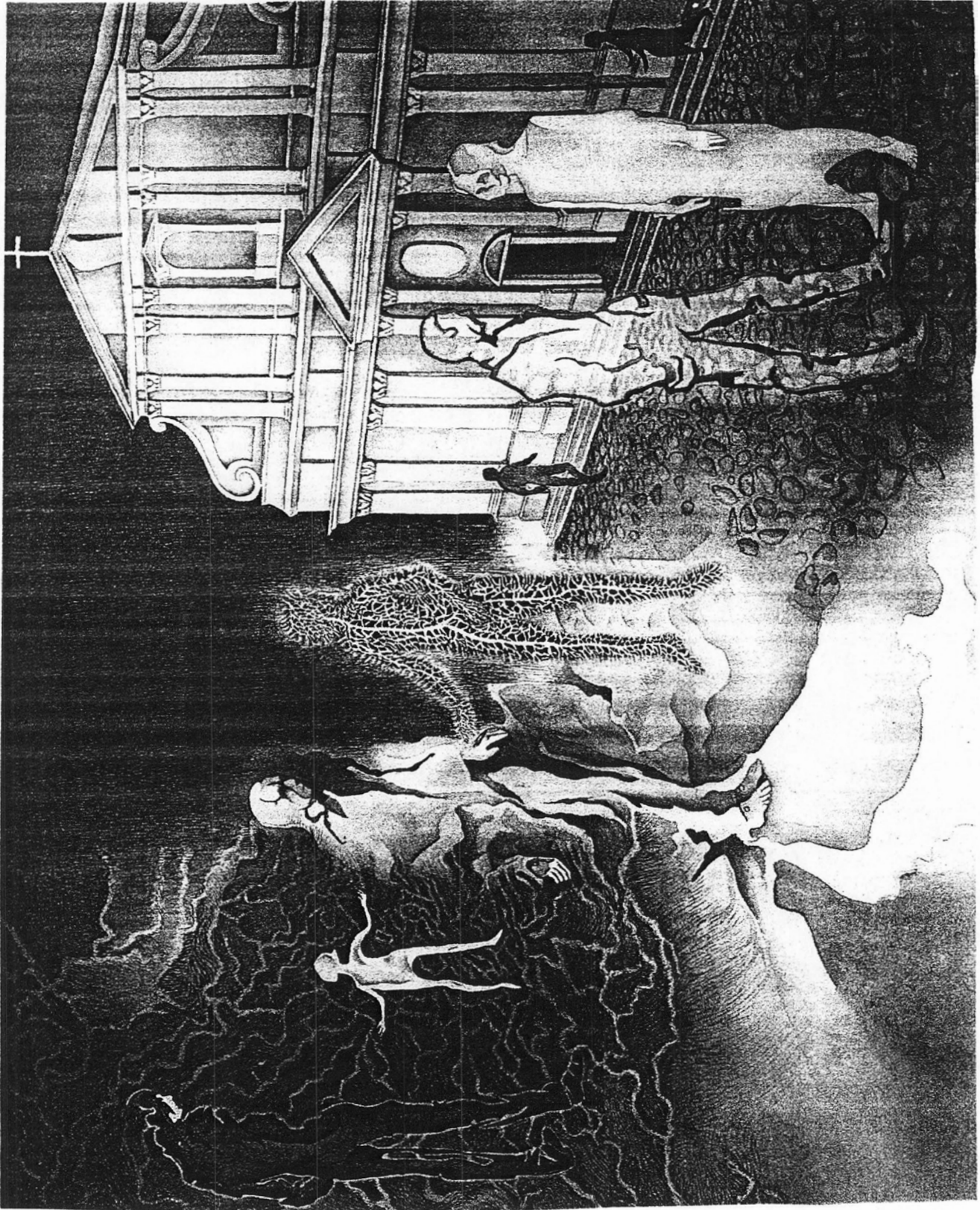


Plate 1

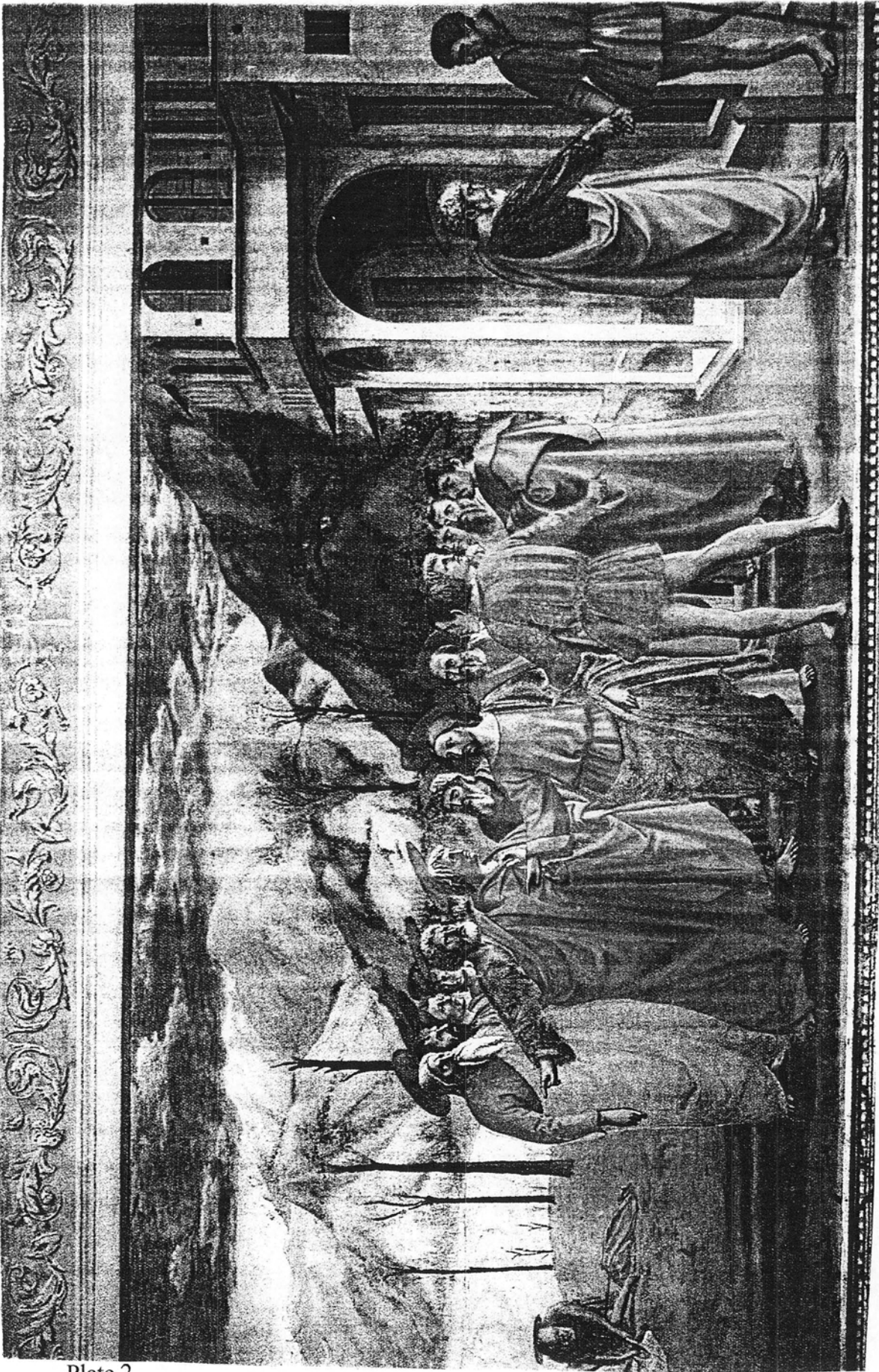


Plate 2



Plate 3

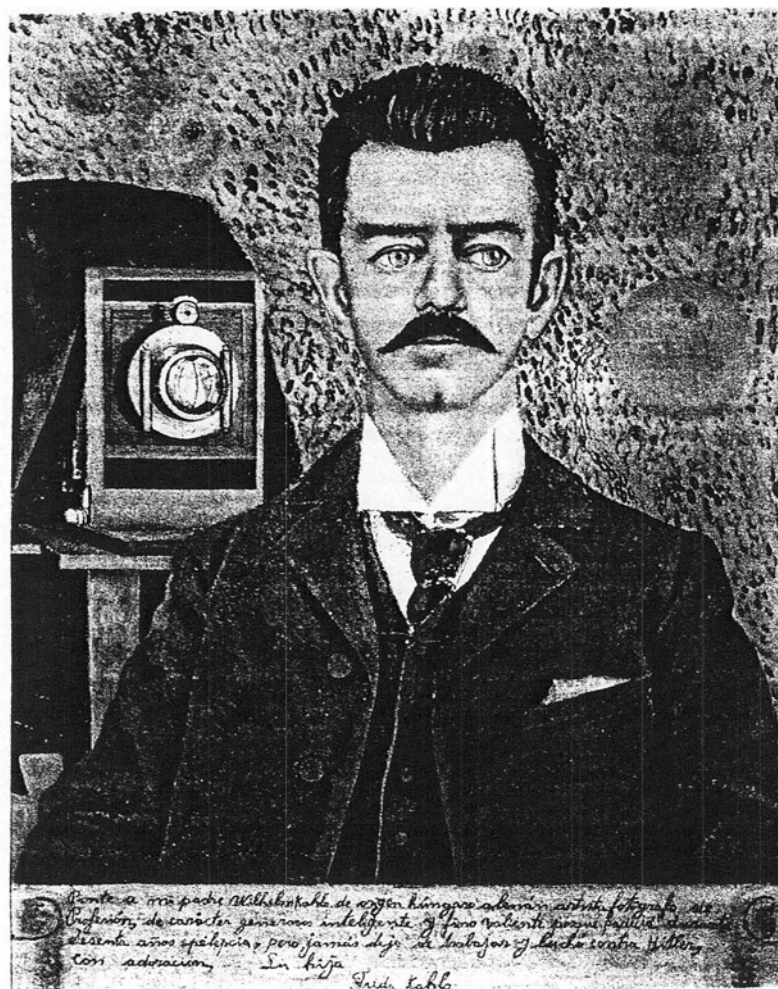


Plate 4

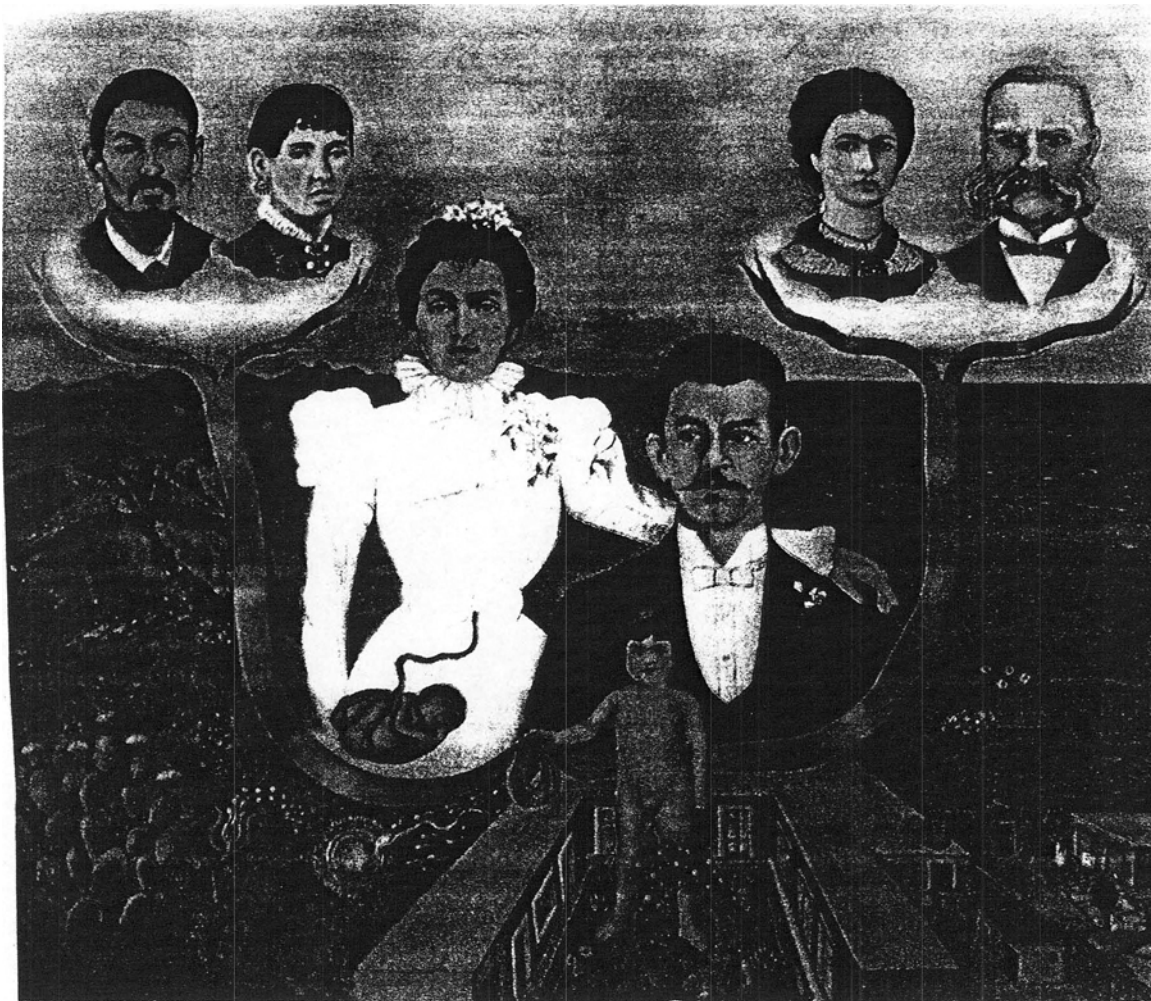


Plate 5

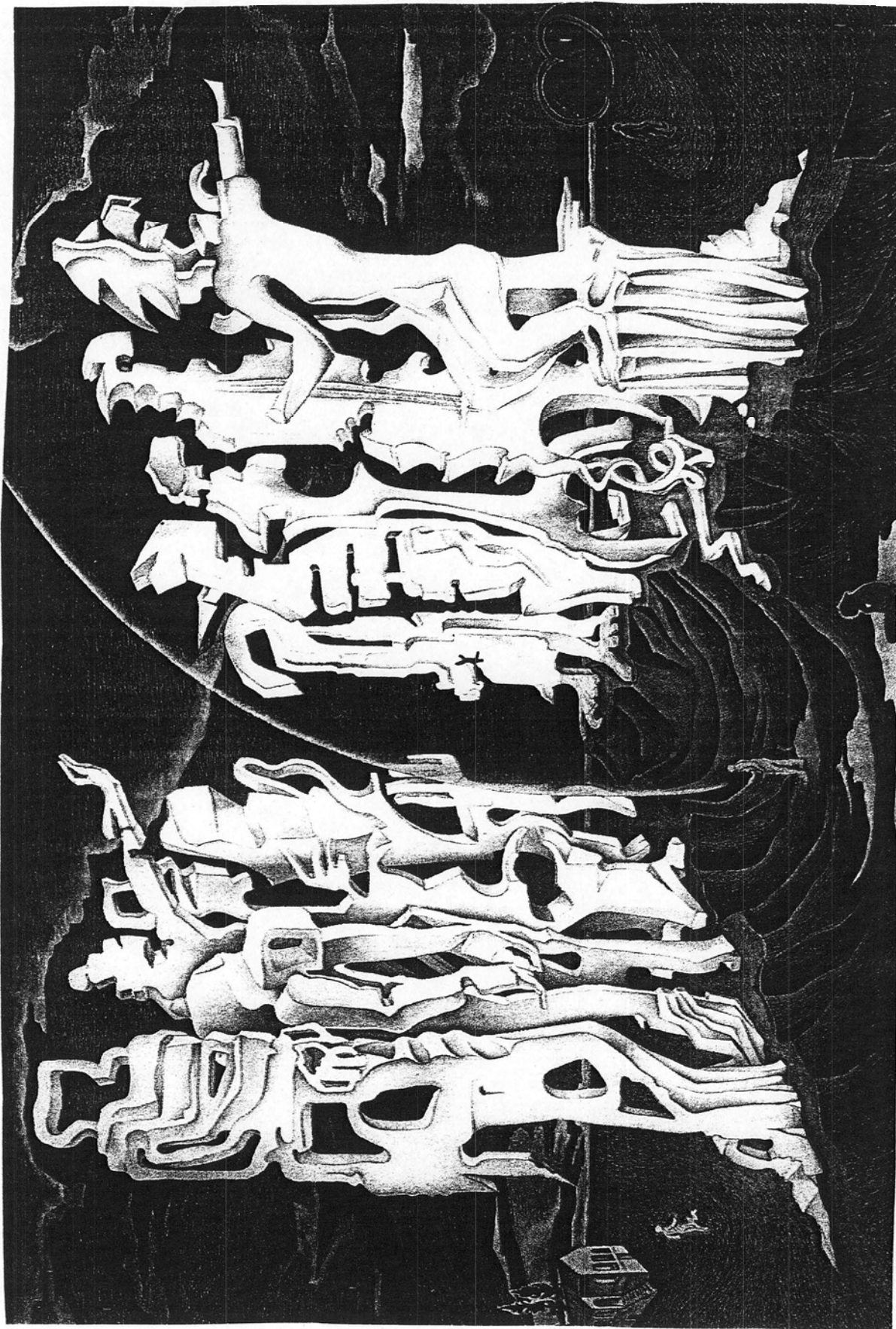


Plate 6



Plate 7

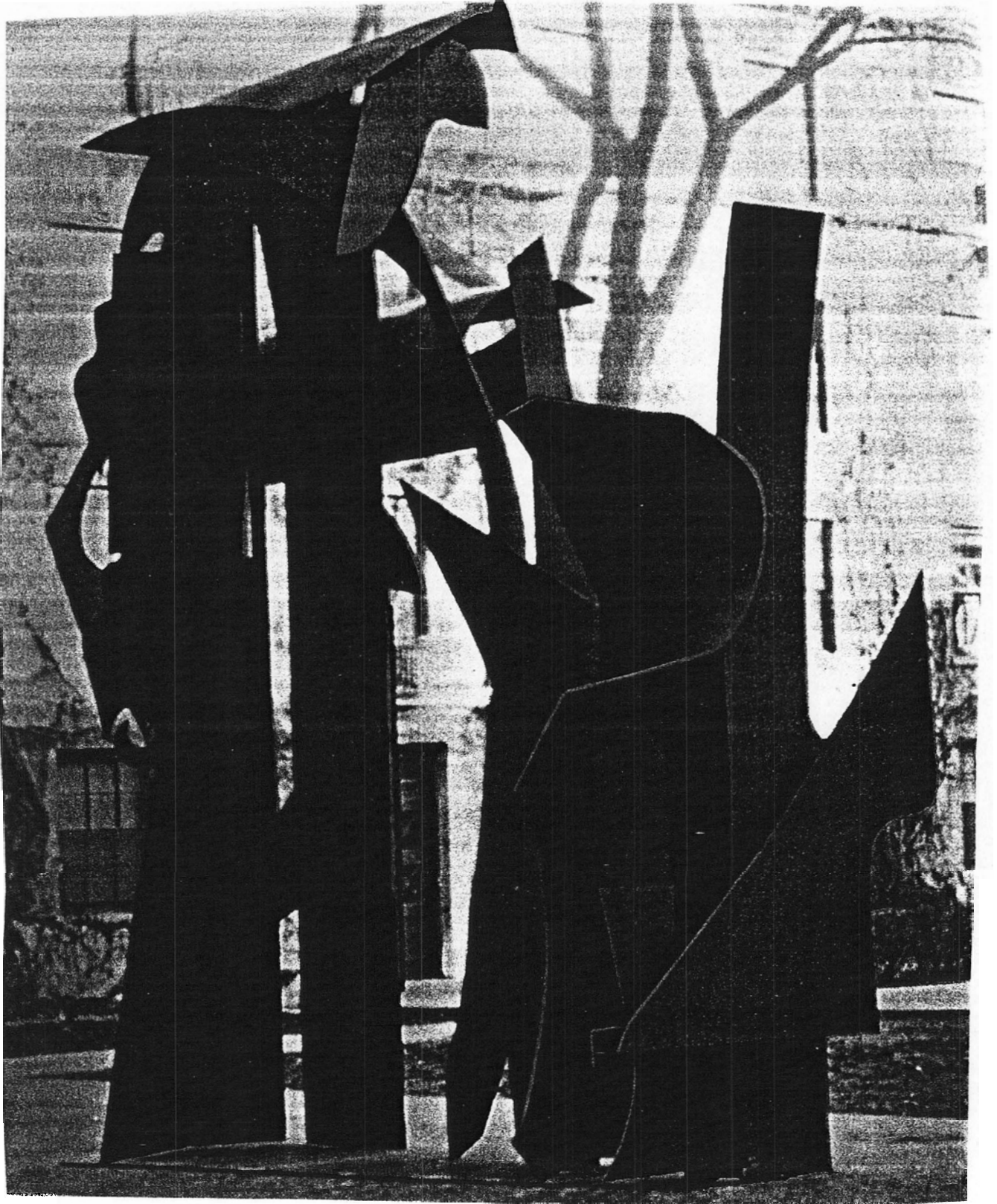


Plate 8

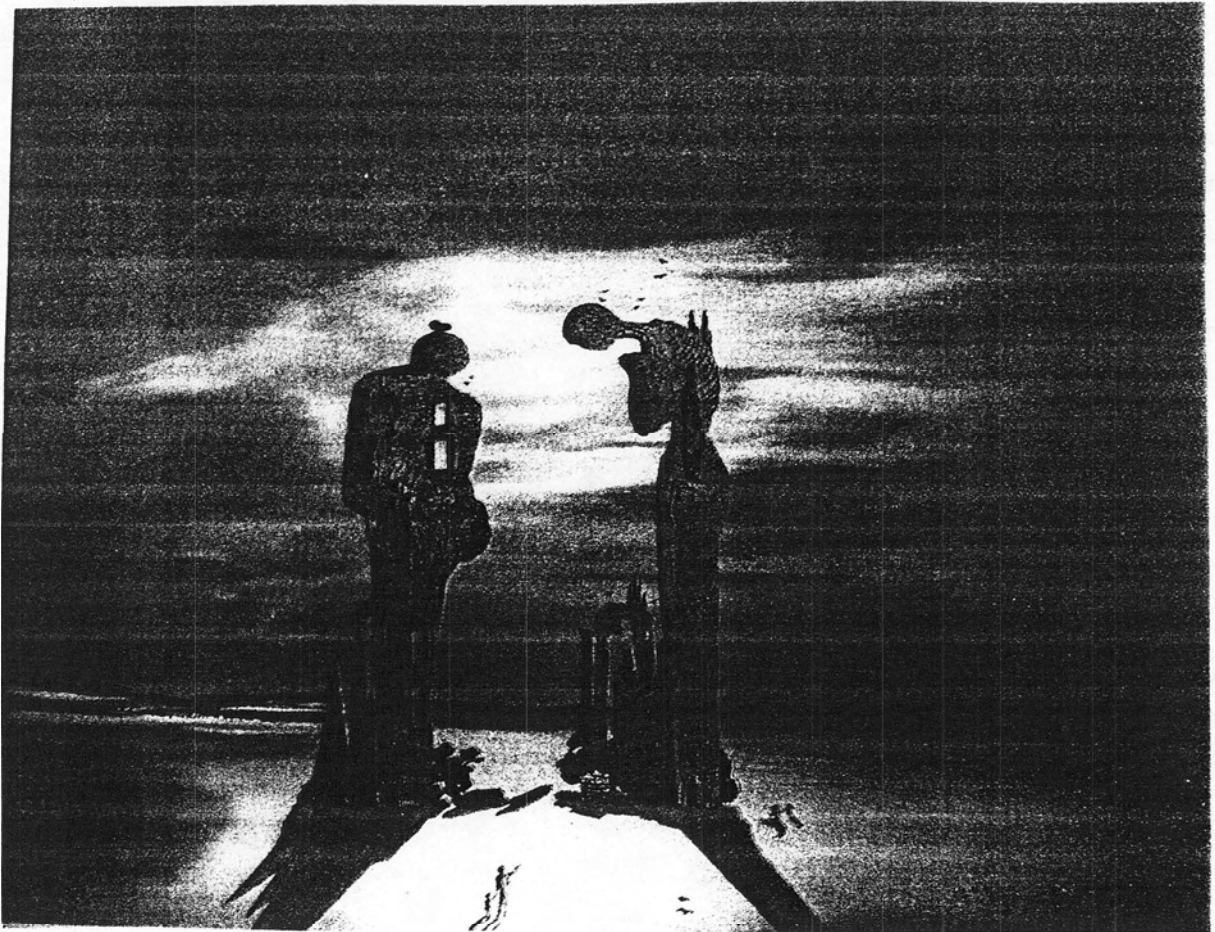


Plate 9



Plate 10

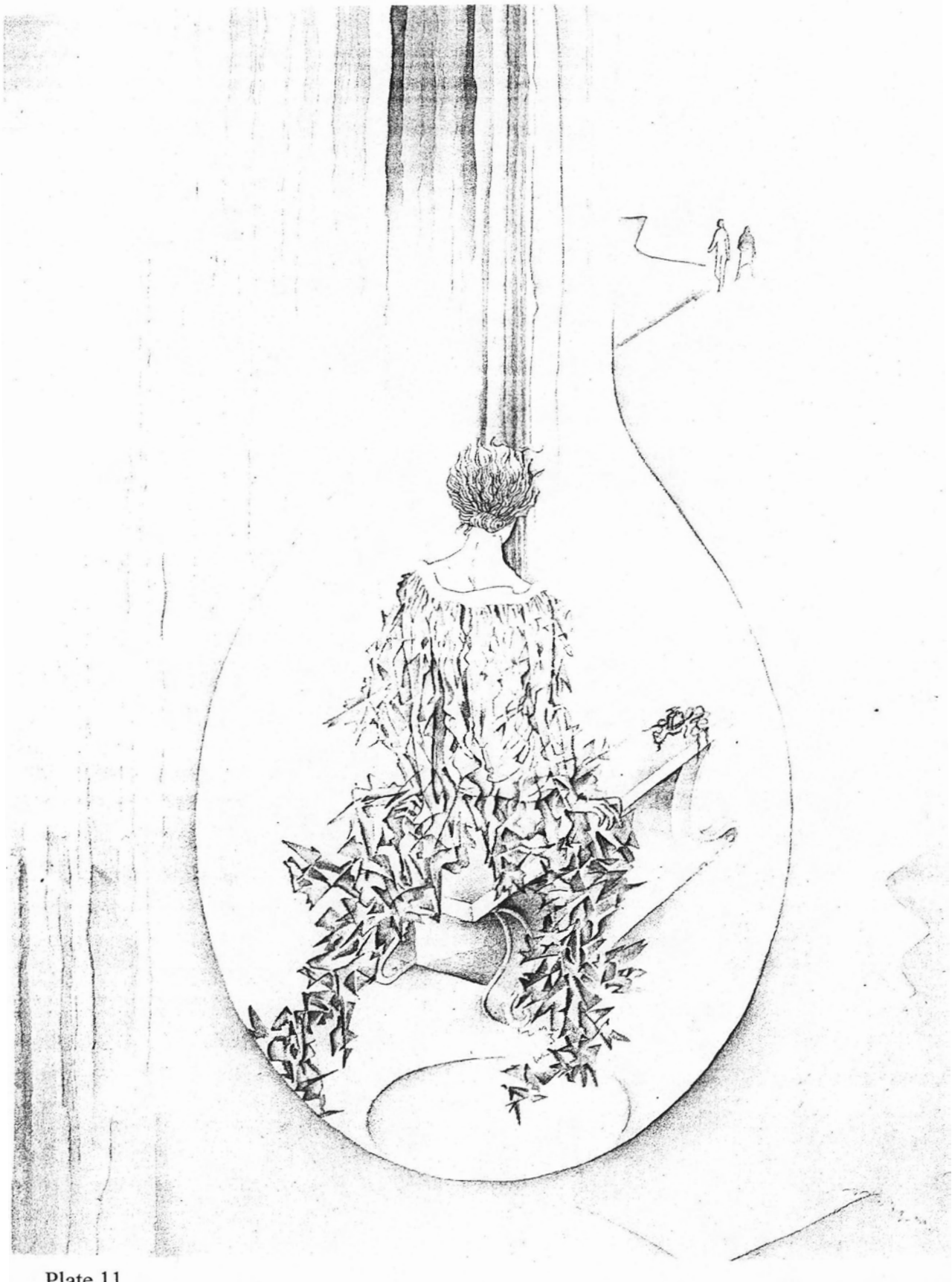


Plate 11



Plate 12

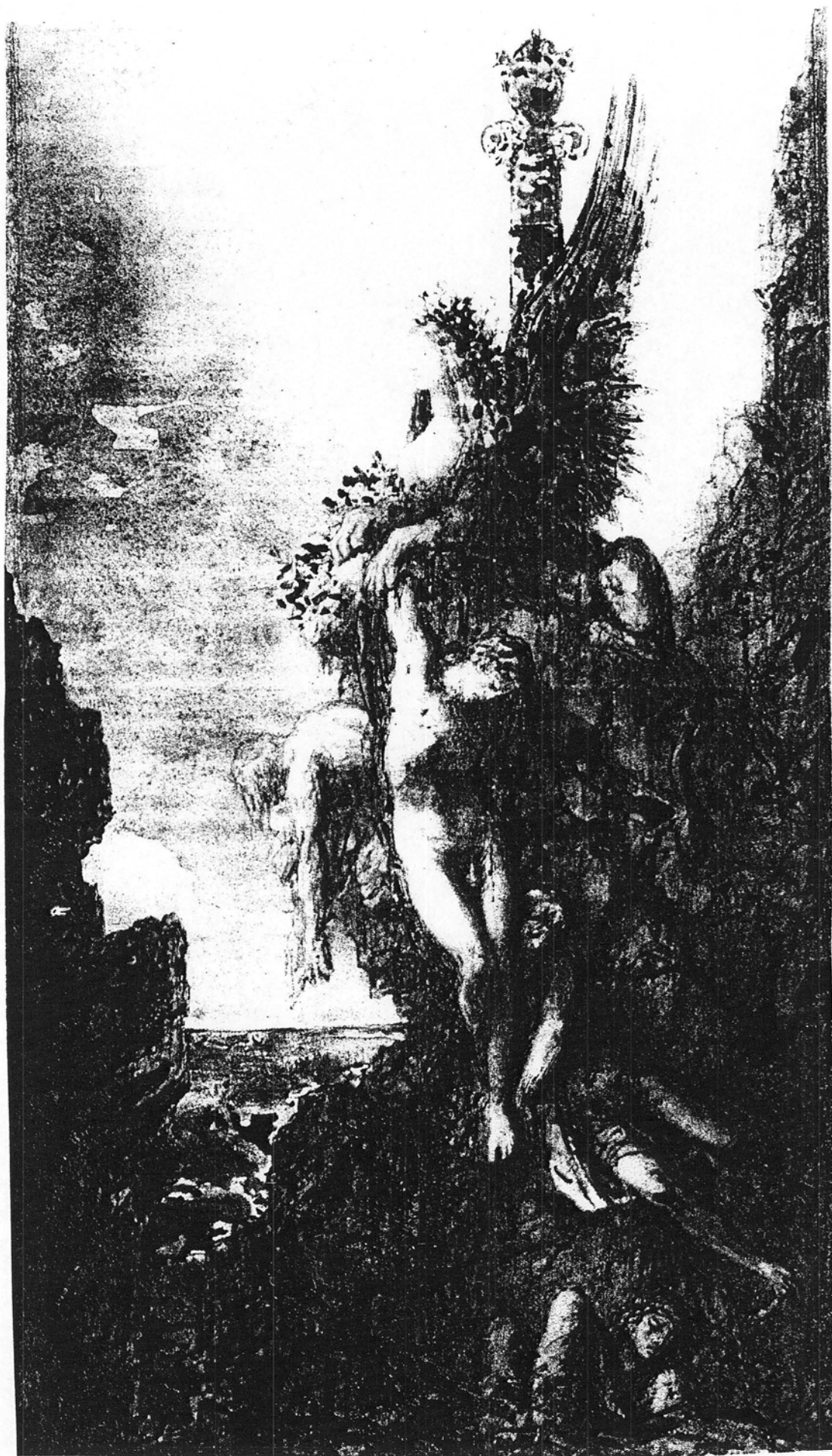


Plate 13



Plate 14



Plate 15

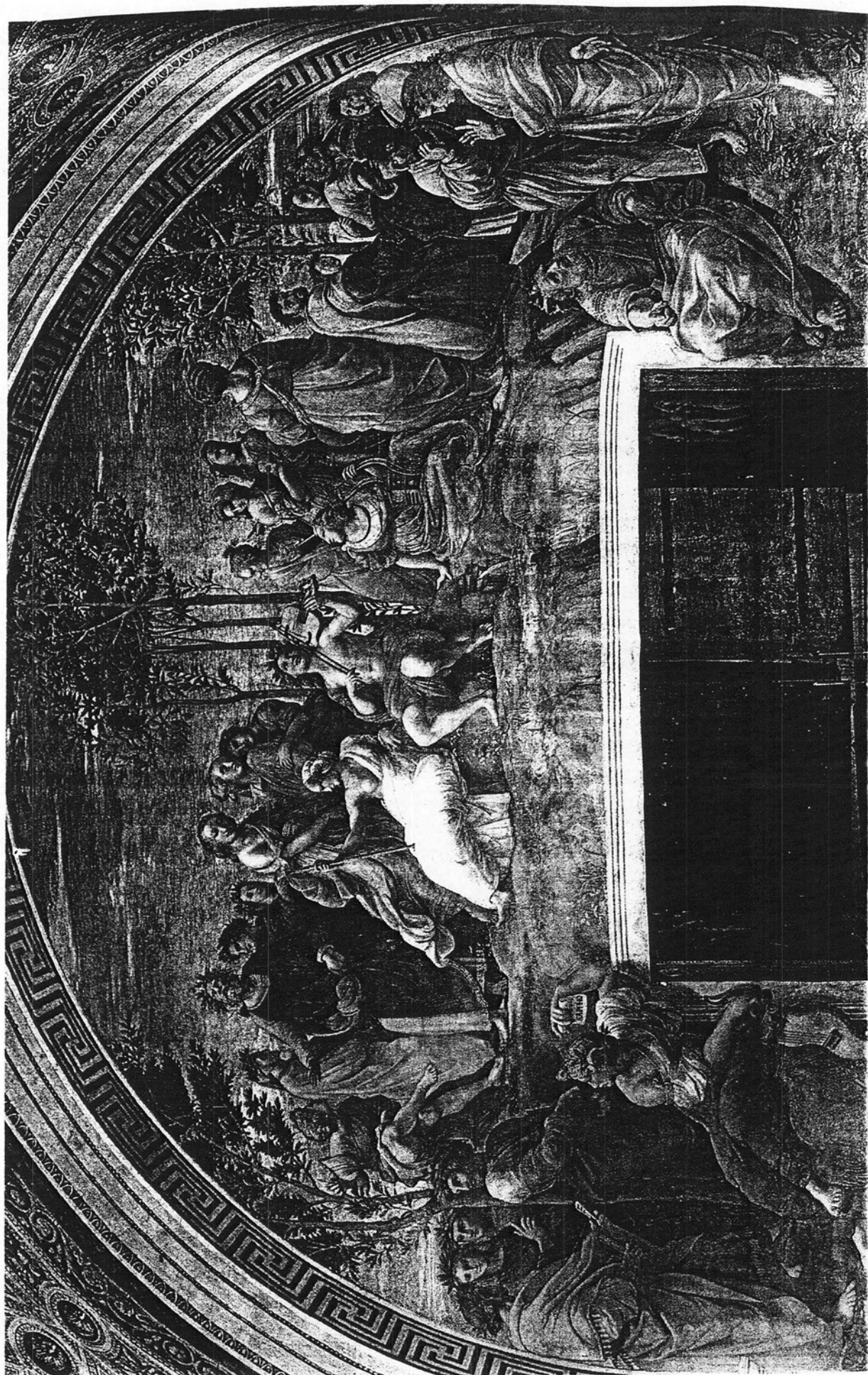


Plate 16

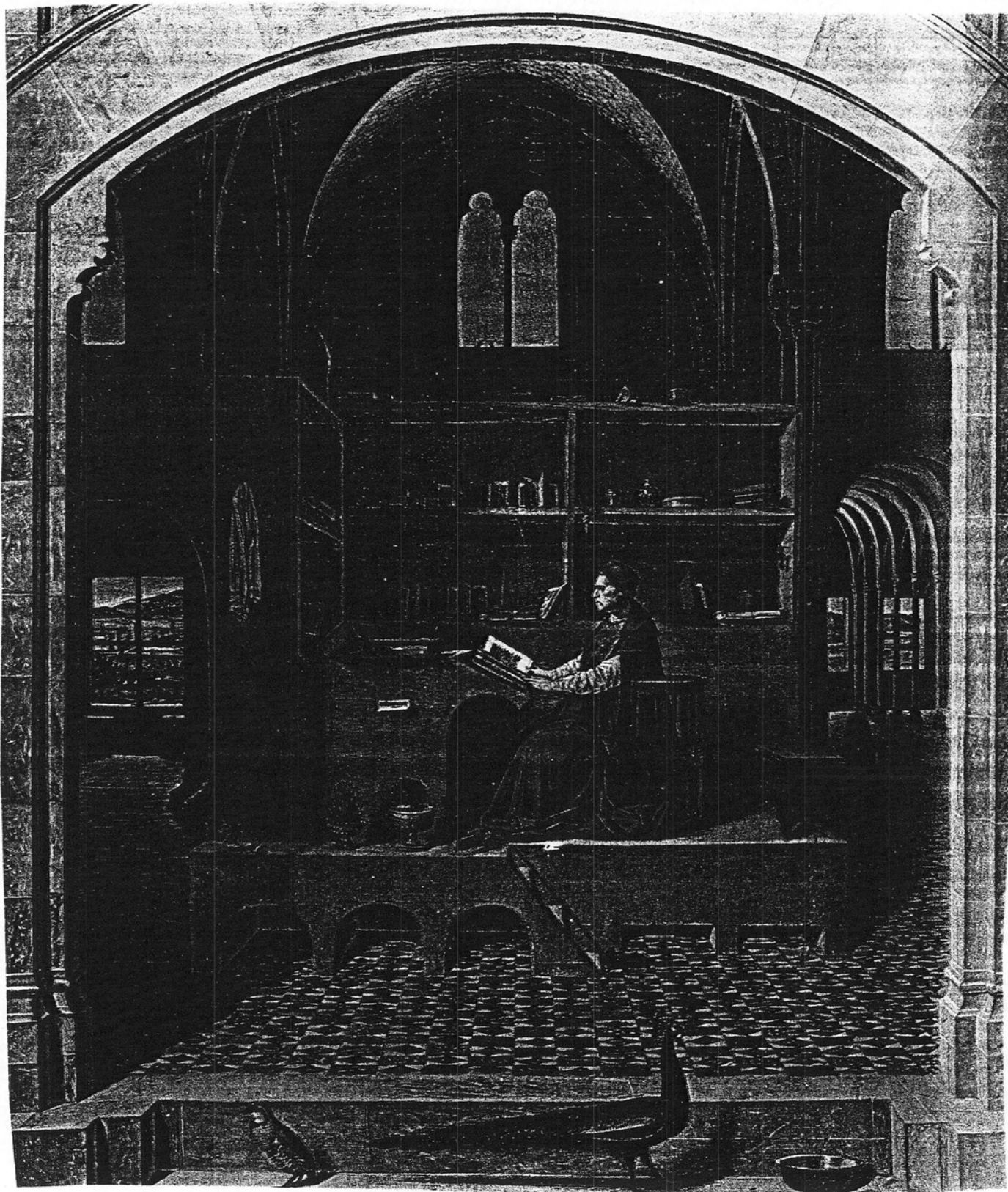


Plate 17

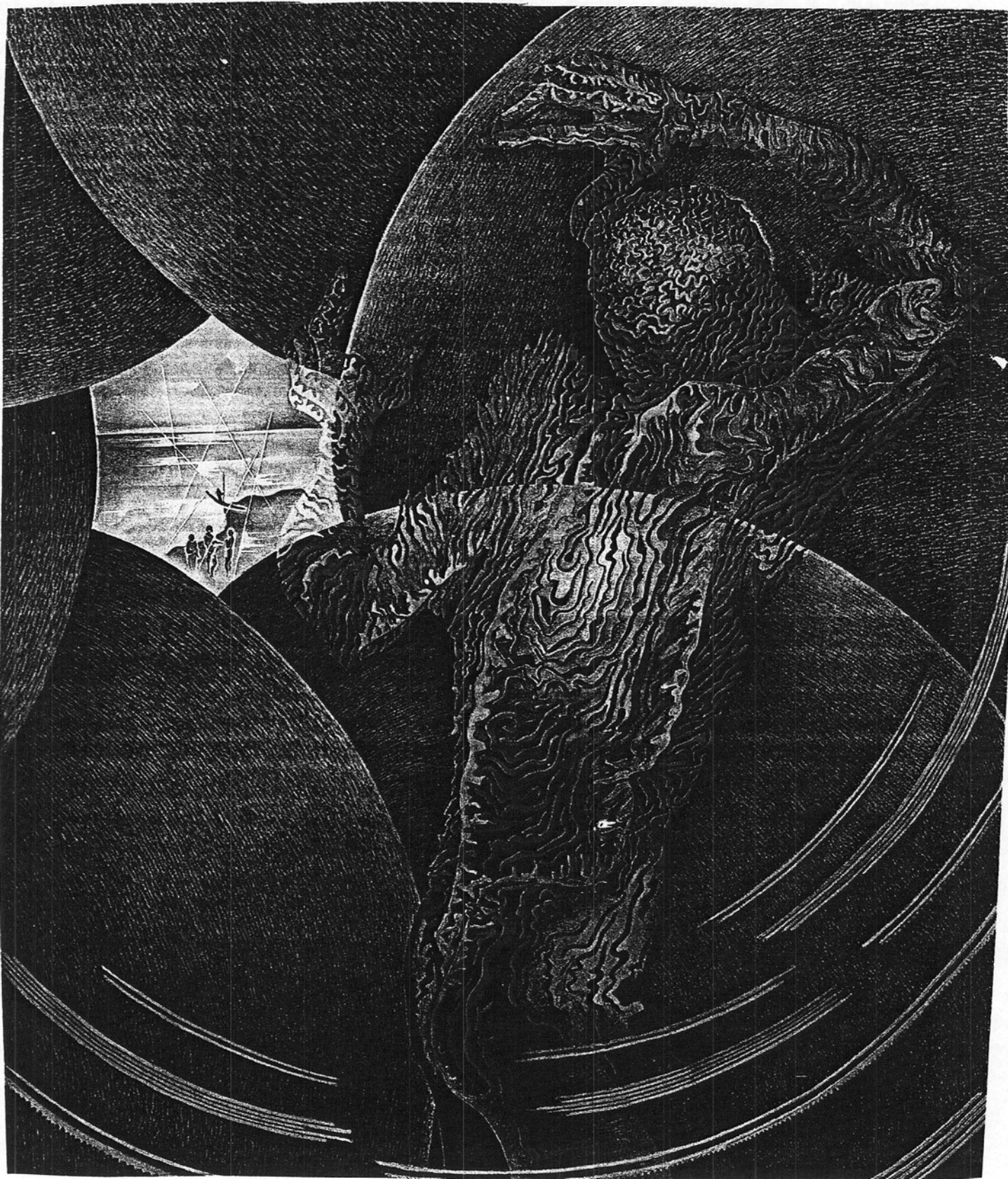


Plate 18