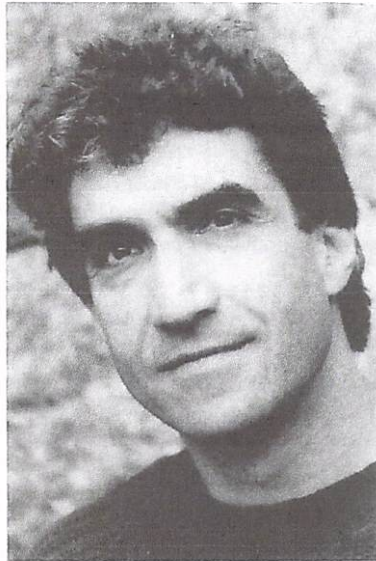


ROBERT PINSKY



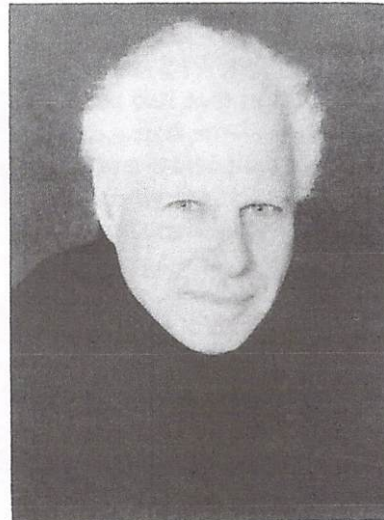
Robert Pinsky by Caroline Rose

Robert Pinsky's books of poetry include *The Want Bone*, *History of My Heart*, (awarded the William Carlos Williams Prize of the Poetry Society of America), *Sadness and Happiness* and *An Explanation of America*. Since 1989, he has taught in the graduate writing program at Boston University, returning to Boston after ten years in Berkeley, California. From 1978 to 1985 he was Poetry Editor at *The New Republic*. His work as a critic includes *Poetry and the World*, nominated for the National Book Critics' Circle award for criticism in 1988, and *The Situation of Poetry*. He is also the author of *Mindwheel*, a computer entertainment issued by Broderbund Software in 1984, and co-translator of *The Separate Notebooks*, poems by Nobel Prize Winner Czeslaw Milosz.

Robert Pinsky's verse translation of *The Inferno of Dante*, published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux in December, 1994, has been awarded the Harold Morton Landon Translation Prize.

MICHAEL MAZUR

Michael Mazur's work as a painter and printmaker is shown throughout the United States, and it has been included in many travelling shows in Canada, Europe, and South America. He is represented in Boston by the Barbara Krakow Gallery, and in New York by the Mary Ryan Gallery. An exhibition, "The Inferno, Monotypes by Michael Mazur," has been organized by the University of Iowa Art Museum, and will arrive at the Boston University Art Gallery in September 1995. He is a Visiting Lecturer in the Department of Visual and Environmental Studies at Harvard University for 1994-95, a position he also held in 1978 and 1990.



Michael Mazur by Joan Seidel

In addition to *The Inferno of Dante*, he has illustrated Richard Howard's award-winning translation of *Les Fleur du Mal* in 1982 and, recently, *Herna* by Melinda Marble. Michael Mazur lives in Cambridge and Provincetown, Massachusetts.

ROBERT PINSKY and MICHAEL MAZUR

A Conversation about *The Inferno of Dante*

The Inferno of Dante, a new verse translation by Robert Pinsky, with monotype illustrations by Michael Mazur, was published in December, 1994, by Farrar, Straus, & Giroux. The following conversation between translator and illustrator took place in the Woodberry Poetry Room of Harvard's Lamont Library on January 11, 1995.

Mazur and Pinsky's work was a true collaboration. In the catalogue for the traveling exhibition of Mazur's original monotypes curated by the University of Iowa Art Museum, Pinsky wrote: "From early on in this project, Michael and I worked together, frequently sharing drafts and studies. As it happened, we sometimes were at work on the same canto. When I saw the first group of studies in Mike's Provincetown studio, some of the images included in the final work, I realized how fortunate I was: the works reflected the artist's lifelong fascination with Dante's poem." In his own contribution to the catalogue, Mazur describes hearing Pinsky read a canto from his then just-begun translation to an audience in Provincetown: "In the late 1980s I experienced great difficulty with my work. I was painting every day but with a great feeling of futility. Nothing in the studio satisfied me. I entered my own 'woods.' That night . . . when I heard Pinsky read his translation, I rediscovered the *Inferno* at an important time in my own development: the opportunity was at hand to do something I had wanted to do all these years."

PINSKY: I'll start with an example that calls up for me the process of collaboration that had such a considerable effect on both the text and the illustrations—me faxing drafts to you, you snipping out passages to pin on the studio wall next to studies, me dropping by the studio, kibitzing about the studies, sometimes with our wives, our friends like Frank Bidart, debating which passages to use for captions or which version of a monotype to use for a particular canto—a process that depended upon your knowledge of Italian and your familiarity with Dante's *Commedia*. The example I'd like to begin with is the Gates of Hell and the early study based on the gates of Auschwitz. [Fig. 1] Maybe you can describe why it seemed a good idea at first, and why it soon came to seem a very bad idea.

MAZUR: As an artist, I could have thought of Rodin's Gates of Hell first—and in a sense I did: that large, almost triumphal arch, crowded with figures in various poses, taken mostly from Dante's narrative. But my absolute first thought came from a book cover and a movie: on the jacket of Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* and in Lanzman's film *Shoah* as a continual image, the very distinctive, memorable gateway of Auschwitz with the train tracks running through it, an almost gentle Gothic parapet penetrated by the slit of a gun emplacement. It simply came into my mind immediately, and the very first images I played with, quite early on—you saw them in Provincetown,

I think—were based on that gate.

I put those studies away and for about three months didn't work again on that particular Canto, but in thinking about it I became more and more uncomfortable with the Auschwitz image: despite the strength there might be in evoking a powerful 20th-century image, I came to feel both that the idea of the poem would be terribly abused by using that image, and that while souls are in Dante's Hell because of things they did—because of true guilt, true sin—the Auschwitz gate would be illustrating that meaning with people who are helplessly put in Hell, as innocents. So it came to seem a perversion to use that study. The actual illustration [Fig. 2] goes back to Rodin's idea of a triumphal arch through which you see the burning graves of the Heretics and the suggestion of a city (formalized but not unlike New York!).

PINSKY: On one level that is a simple, straightforward idea: the difference between an image of terrible justice and an image of terrible injustice. But on another level it seems to me to raise issues to do with the *Commedia* itself and with the process of translating the *Inferno* either into another language or into visual images—and those are issues regarding degree of explicitness. Certainly the history of your project, from your first studies to the final choices, tends to be a history of ever-increasing abstraction: greater generality of suggestion or implication, rather than explicit depiction. And that is an issue in the *Inferno* itself, since so much of the poem is highly explicit, local, topical; and yet the scheme is cosmic, generalizing, and transcendent.

MAZUR: Well, to an extent you have to set a program for a group of illustrations. You want to develop some degree of consistency among them so they don't lurch about from the very specific to the very generalized or abstract. They must fall somewhere in the large territory between those extremes. And that was a big question for me. For instance, the primary issue of how one envisions the soul. To begin with, is the soul—even though it speaks in Dante's poem—necessarily to be conceived as a human figure? Is it a detailed figure, if Dante sometimes recognizes a particular soul? More often, however, the souls recognize him. And more than once the pilgrim Dante says of some soul, "Do I know *you*?—as with Bruno Latini, where he does not immediately recognize the man. And repeatedly he says, "I see one who seems familiar," so there is a kind of clue or hint in the text toward not being too specific in the representation of faces, which I didn't finally do, although I made many studies that do try that direction. And another, related issue was whether to put Dante and Virgil in the illustrations. In an early study for Canto V, for the episode of Paolo and Francesca, there are two tiny figures on the right hand side, who are Dante and Virgil. Their representation more or less dates the study, because at a specific later point I decided that I didn't want Dante and Virgil in the illustrations at all. I wanted us to see what they experience, rather than seeing them experience it.

PINSKY: There are two elements in the spirit of the monotypes, in particular, that became guides for me in the work of translation: the way you

depict souls, especially crowds or hosts of souls; and your decision not to present images of Virgil and Dante.

The depiction of souls sometimes seems like just a little but unmistakable spurt of movement, a light, where your thumb or finger flicks the pigment very quickly and makes a little white blur. I'm thinking of the image where they are crowding into the boat, the souls everywhere but barely there like tiny bursts of flame or the wisps of fluff that each carry a seed. And that distinct but trembling existence of the soul, those diminished souls, nearly mere shadows or tricks of light, yet still human—the eerie pathos of that became part of my idea. It helped focus my idea of the poem and its idiom.

And the suppression of the images of Virgil and Dante, which is so different from the illustrations of Blake or Dore—the immediacy of the result came to embody for me the idea of conviction or belief, which is something you've spoken about in the pictures. You've said that irony has no place in relation to this project, that to do an *Inferno* that grins or winks at the reader, or that makes modern references in order to throw an ironic light on it, violates the nature of Dante's work. The conviction of the work still sometimes amazes me—a work in which he says, "I wouldn't have the courage to tell the next thing, so extraordinary, except that truth commands my conscience that I must tell it, that I really saw it." He raises the stakes to the degree of addressing the reader, with the opposite of irony, in order to say, "This really happened, I saw it."

That degree of conviction in the work requires commensurate conviction in the rendering of the work. And one way to attain that, in relation to older conventions, was for you to avoid the images of the two poets—images that may have been right in the convention of Blake or of Dore, but in the modern convention, in order to attain that conviction unhedged by irony, those two witnessing intermediate presences had to be avoided.

MAZUR: Right. An analogy is the voice-over: that in fact one hears the voice of the poet; and then one has to see where the narrative leads. If you try to imagine a contemporary film version, it would probably use cinematic techniques to convey the experience more like a fly on the wall than from a secondary position. What I had to do often was to imagine how you don't have to see an image only as he describes it, but how you might see things that the pilgrim Dante didn't see. For example, in the case of the simoniac Popes, what he sees is many pairs of legs which stick out of holes, with burning flames coursing over their feet [Fig. 3]. This torment is complicated by the fact that as a new soul comes to the same hole he drives his predecessor further down into the earth, as the newcomer will eventually be driven in turn. The souls of each churchman's feet will be burned only as long as it takes for his successor to appear. So you have an implied vision of a sort of ecology of hell, a kind of composting or compacting of souls. Dante's Hell is a landscape with a defined, limited amount of space. He even gives the dimensions in miles of the concentric circles, each one smaller toward the center. So we can envision the piled-up souls of the Popes [Fig. 4], while Dante the pilgrim sees only the legs and feet of the uppermost.

PINSKY: That makes me think of the extreme specificity of the poem; we've talked about the necessity to go away from the explicit toward the abstract. Yet it's also true that eventually the faces of specific people are recognized, and the Florentine accent is recognized—the linguistic reality is that specific—and we know how many miles across a specific circle of Hell is. The explanation of how each Pope or Bishop is crushed further down when another is piled on top is enormously explicit.

And that is one of the great appeals of this work—the way it includes such an immense trove of specific, personal detail within its elaborate formal scheme. That contrast—between a spilling human richness and a more impersonal theological structure—is represented for me by the contrast between the human, syntactical project of the sentences of the poem and the more impersonal structure of *terza rima*, or of thirty-four cantos, or three *cantiche*. The pattern of rhymes and those other divisions are formal, rigid, preordained, an abstract grid—like the divisions of Hell itself, in a way—and the breath impelled by each sentence is fluid, personal varying, rather eccentric—like the Pilgrim himself: he puns, he weeps, he discourses, he goes on rhetorical flights, all across the unrelenting formal grid. That rapid, fluid movement of the sentences, the *Commedia's* momentum, is like the theme of the poem, and that contrast between momentum and the form it crosses seems related to the poem's appeal. And that has been a considerable appeal. Bill Corbett says it is the single work of all time that has had the most words written about it.

MAZUR: I think he actually counted the cards in the catalogue at the Widener Library to arrive at that claim . . .

PINSKY: You would have to discount the Bible as a collaboration (or as dictated from Heaven). Maybe it's that "no single work by one author" has had so many words written about it.

MAZUR: Certainly a lot of artists have illustrated it over the centuries. As we've said before, Dante's poem is a kind of clock, a measure of human time. His book seems to have to be re-drawn and re-translated periodically, sometimes over short intervals of time. There's a continuing fascination, and a need to renew it. I think each artist who comes to it encounters the same kind of complexity, in oneself and in the work, as each translator does. Each succeeding artist brings a metier, a visual context, the rules of art-making at the particular time he or she is in, and in effect it becomes a challenge for each new person to gain admission into that club, and somehow pay one's dues.

For me the challenge was that although—very similarly to you—I had seen many versions, I needed to try almost to forget what I had seen. Yet I sought those earlier versions in my own mind, in my own impressions of them; often the pictures I have made refer to them directly. At the same time I had to establish my own identity as an artist, and the method of making the art is contemporary. For someone interested in narrative issues as an artist, it's just a joy to come up against the *Inferno*. In a way you compete with the past, and in another way you also invent the rules, and then have no

competitors. Each person paying these dues of contributing something, adding something.

I was extremely pleased with the fact that I was able to locate an image of the map of Hell in Canto XI, where it belongs because that is where Virgil describes the topography of the place to Dante. I think that this is a little invention of ours—I've never seen it done this particular way before. And someday someone is going to come up, later on, with another way of doing it.

PINSKY: I love that aerial view of Hell, with its overlay, and physically placing it at the exact point in the poem where Dante and Virgil sit down to accustom themselves to the stench, with Virgil filling the time with a lecture about the structure and organized landscape of Hell.

You used the word "rule" just now—inventing something like your own, personal rules for a project. That reminds me of the first time you and I saw all of the monotypes mounted for the show, when it first opened at the University of California Art Museum in Berkeley. I mean when we were walking the group of studies—"out-takes" as I call them—and came to that one image of the monster Geryon, twisting his snake-body down the picture, I said, "This one is great, why isn't it in the book." And you said, "Well, because I made a rule not to depict Virgil or Dante." And it turns out that you can just, barely make out these almost microscopic suggestions of two figures seated on Geryon's nape—Virgil and Dante! And my immediate response was that I would have used that study in the book for just that reason, to have one place where the rule was covertly violated, though no one would notice it without having been told.

MAZUR: You may be right—maybe I should have done that. But that was probably not the only reason I had not used that image. [Laughs.] I am now looking at the image we both laughed at a lot between us—the very early study I mentioned earlier for Canto V: Dante and Virgil are here, represented standing on what looks like a parapet or cliff, as they are described doing, where they stand seeing the souls of the lustful being blown about in the hurricane of Hell. I had to deal with what the lustful might look like when they are disembodied. There was a lot of reference in my mind to birds, to birds in flight—because the souls are compared to cranes, I think.

PINSKY: Cranes at one point, and also doves, and winter starlings.

MAZUR: And as I was doing the birds, sort of Van Gogh-ish wingshapes, very simple gestural work that you can make with a squiggle, of a bird, I realized that the shape that the bird in flight takes is the shape of the human lips: the interior line of the human lip. So I just naturally took the idea and started making the birds, and then the lips, and letting the lips float [Fig. 5]. And since the kiss of course is the ultimate moment in Canto V, I brought in the lips, the sensuality of the lips—there is even a reference to lips in Francesca's speech—I would let the lips float. Well, I was also thinking of Man Ray, and the famous painting in which Man Ray has disembodied lips floating in the sky. And that was the one I always liked, partly as a funny homage. And you saw it at one point, and you said—did you say it that first

time or only think of saying it?

PINSKY: Did say it, I'm afraid . . .

MAZUR: Yes. You said, "The lips—they suck." And we laughed about it, which was possible for me—and possible for you to say it—because I had already gone on from there, had a quite different idea for Canto V.

PINSKY: To me, the final choice is a wonderful example of approaching abstraction—a really ravishing, nearly abstract image, this sort of swirl, or helix, or ear-like shape formed by many souls flowing as pulled by a current—a beautiful image, with inside the swirl some souls as just wisps and some with suggestions of anatomy, intimations of muscles and limbs.

MAZUR: I had tried hard to get Paolo and Francesca into this image; everybody who has illustrated the *Inferno* has always tried to represent Paolo and Francesca. But it became another issue of becoming less specific, or less explicit, increasingly abstract. And I became taken with the idea of the hurricane and the sweep of what they must have seen when they first came upon the scene, before seeing Paolo and Francesca [Fig. 6]. And the shape became almost ear-like, suggesting intimacy and also sound—the whirlwind of the hurricane is described as almost unbearably loud—so there is a way in which one part of the body (the lips) was replaced by another, to express an idea.

As a kind of parallel process, why don't you say a little about the poem's opening lines, "Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita"—how did the translation of that passage evolve?

PINSKY: Certainly that passage was a crucial step for me, a crucial step in deciding to undertake making a version of the *Inferno*. I had executed translations of two cantos, XX and XXVIII, on commission, for the Ecco Press's volume of *Inferno* cantos by twenty different poets. Though I had a sneaking, vague thought of continuing through the whole poem, I didn't commit myself to it in my own mind for a while. I talked with Seamus Heaney, who had done a wonderful version of Canto I, and I guess I thought of the opening lines—by far the best known lines in the entire *Commedia*—as crucial. Seamus and I spent a morning reading and comparing and speculating, and I came away feeling encouraged.

I can remember liking a version of the opening lines that I eventually discarded—rather flamboyant, show-off feminine rhyme, less literal, but literal enough. Something like, "Midway along life's journey, I found I had wandered/ Into dark woods, the main road lost. Just to tell/ About those woods is hard—harsh, each step hindered// By a savage undergrowth. Remembering, I feel/ The old fear stirring—death is hardly more bitter." And so forth; I have it somewhere, but it feels less exposed to try it from memory! Anyway, rhyming "wandered" and "hindered," imitating the Italian disyllabic rhyme right away—it has a period quality, like the rhymes in Joyce's *Poems Penyeach*, a kind of Edwardian or Georgian quality of egregious, mannerist chiming on the rhymes. And it seemed pretty to me, I sort of liked it, for that and the immediate assertion of freedom. It was a way of responding to the fact that many readers know the lines, by challenging

expectation head-on, asserting that something quite different is being done here.

Gradually, in response to Seamus and Frank Bidart—not anything I remember either of them saying about that passage, but more to an emerging, overall vision of the project, what it should be—I decided that if I was going to do the whole poem I would have to quiet that first version down. And that was the stage when I arrived at the principle of never padding in order to make a rhyme—occasional twisting to make a rhyme is inevitable, but padding you can systematically avoid. I made it a rule for myself: when you are stuck, the thing to do is contract or compress your writing—don't move a rhyme word to the end by adding styrofoam. So the first tercet of the Italian, to stay with that example, is done in . . . I guess it's a little over a line and a half of English. And plainer than the "wandered / hindered" version: "Midway on our life's journey, I found myself / In dark woods, the right road lost."—which is an assertion of a different kind.

Another guiding principle, a kind of compass that took me through that particular revision and through the whole task, was creating a credible character: the illusion of a real person who is writing in English. This is among other things the story of a person: he feels terrible, then he gradually gets himself together to embark on a very arduous process—a journey, the journey of writing the poem as well as the imaginative journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. And that story of his, dealing with his sense of personal defeat or helplessness, is the story of that character. And the "hindered" and "blundered" etc. didn't create that character, didn't come from him in the right way.

For me the decision to translate the poem sentence by sentence rather than line by line, to make a translation of Dante's sentences, in English lines, rather than a translation of each of Dante's lines, in a stack held together by technically adequate grammar, was clarified by wrestling with those opening lines. It was a decision I had made intuitively, in dealing with XXVIII and XX (the first two cantos I did before beginning from Canto I), but the opening lines forced me to realize consciously what my method had to be, why and how it was my method. Without omitting or interpolating, one could compress the Italian into English syntax and a version of *terza rima*, imitating the form of the Italian lines as the English tries to convey the meaning of the Italian sentences.

MAZUR: I have to comment on that also, because actually that principle is right there in the collaboration. In a way your decision to move quickly into the description, with no lingering or static emphasis on his lostness and his predicament—to get a feeling of moving him directly into the action—probably influences my choices in how to illustrate Canto I, and to an extent even the whole book, in a funny way. It was the very first thing I did the day I started [Fig. 7]. I didn't even really look at the text very much. I thought of the "dark woods" and it would be very natural for me to make an image of that: I had made many images of dark woods in my previous work. In a sense I was introducing my own ego, or style, or vision, into the process,

in effect saying, this is Michael Mazur the artist, and this is what he does now, he'll take you further. Because of the simplicity and directness of your translation, I had to find a different direction: "And yet, to treat the good I found there as well, / I'll tell you what I saw, though how I came to enter / I cannot well say, being so full of sleep." When he gets through that, a bit later, he says, "Below a hill that marked one end of the valley / That had pierced my heart with terror, I looked up / Toward the crest and saw his shoulders already / Mantled in rays of that bright planet that shows / The road to everyone, whatever our journey"—the language of the English moving with that same quality from his negative predicament into his hope, in fewer lines, faster and more fluidly, than a line-by-line trot does. That probably influenced the fact that I abandoned my first conception of the dark woods and moved into the simpler, yet more evocative image of the hill and the bright light mantling it, and the planet—so that in fact I now had a much more fitting introduction to the entire *Commedia*, which this image serves the purpose of being [Fig.8]. And I can say something about Purgatory and Paradise, at the same time as the predicament, and that essentially solved the image I was looking for. And that image was both the very first image and the last image before the end of the book. The struggle toward that image became the root source for my work on the whole set of illustrations. And I think, as you said just now, that the straightforwardness of the beginning is appropriate—the poet is telling a story, not lingering on his initial predicament but moving on to the complexity and optimism of his journey.



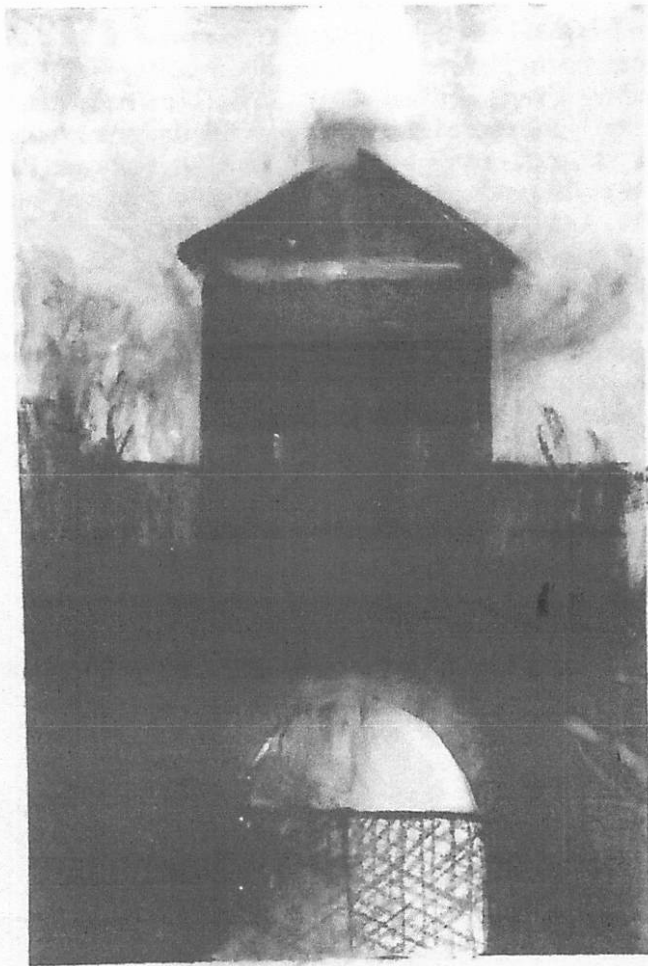


Figure 1. Auschwitz Gate. Study for Canto IX. Monotype and drawing by Michael Mazur, 1992.

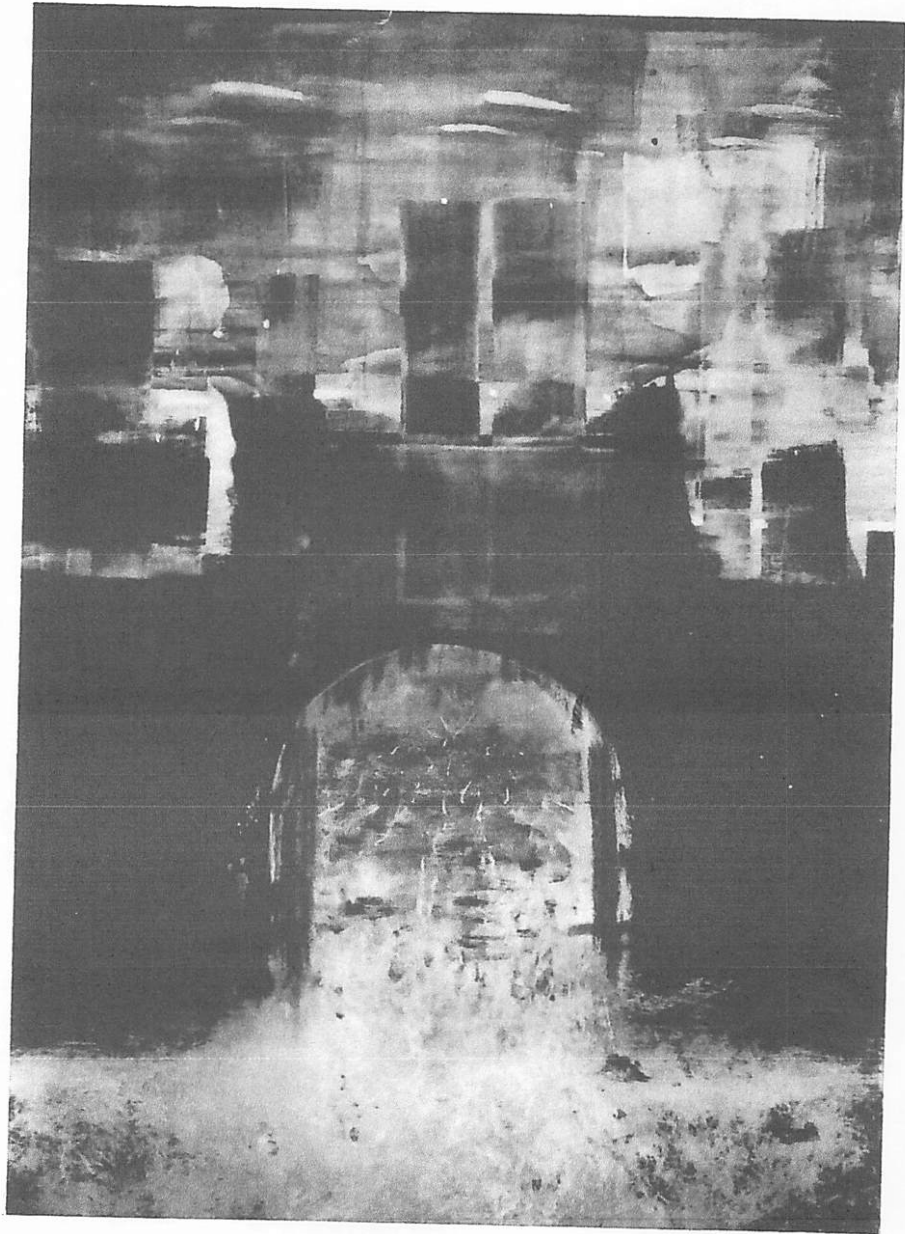


Figure 2. Canto IX. Monotype by Michael Mazur, 1993.



Figure 3. Study for Canto V. Monotype by Michael Mazur, 1992.



Figure 4. Canto V. Monotype by Michael Mazur, 1993.