

GIACOMETTI

YVES BONNEFOY



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ALBERTO GIACOMETTI

A BIOGRAPHY OF HIS WORK

*translated by
Jean Stewart*

Flammarion

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French Ministry of Culture and Communication

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Frontispiece:

Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Alberto Giacometti rue d'Alésia*, Paris, 1961.

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And finally, just as the book is about to be printed, I recall the person who is no longer present in rue Racine to see this project completed, Francis Bouvet. Francis very much wanted this book on Giacometti. I would like to believe that the work corresponds, more or less, to what he would have wished.

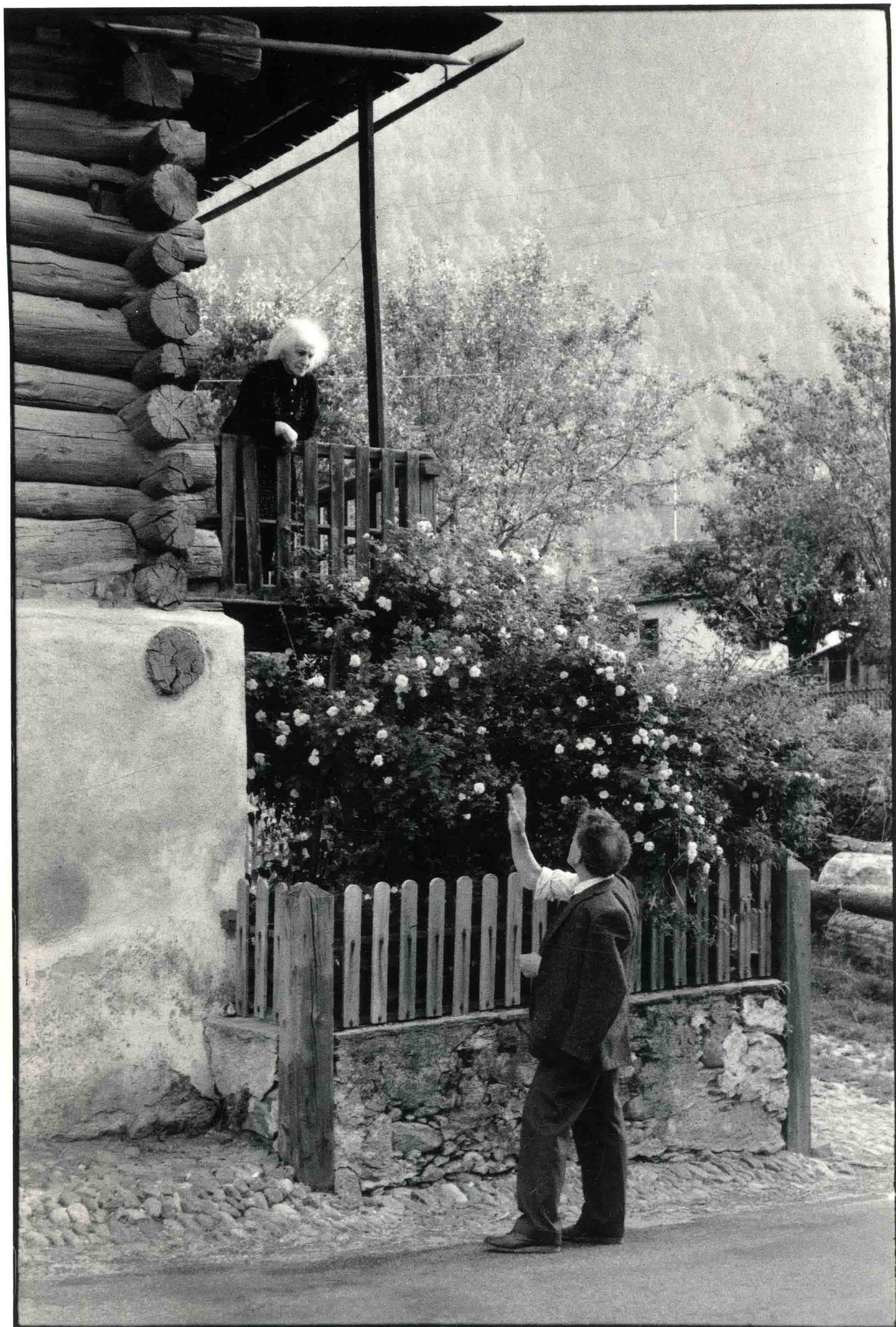
Y.B.

Oh! I see a marvellous and bright painting, but it is not by me, it is by no one. I do not see the sculptures, I see darkness.

Alberto Giacometti

His attention to himself never slackened, except during sleep which moreover was impeded by his abstinence (often he even forgot to take bread) and the continual orientation of his thought towards the spirit.

Porphyrys, *Life of Plotinus*



CHAPTER I

The Black Stone

I

As a first step towards understanding Giacometti, let us study his relationship with his mother. Everyone who knew Alberto at all intimately, especially those who had met Annetta, who died barely two years before her son, agree as to the exceptional quality of this woman, and perhaps even more as to the important part she played in the life and destiny of her whole family.¹ For instance, Jacques Dupin declared, 'She was the centre... the vigilant and silent guardian who seemed to keep a tradition alive by her presence alone.'² And Jean Leymarie stated, 'Carved out of solid rock like himself, Giacometti's mother was the guardian of the family and of the entire village, the deep-rooted source of their strength.'³ These tributes, and many others could be cited, are unequivocal, and they concur as to the characteristics ascribed to Annetta: strength of personality and perfect self-assurance. Within this little community Alberto's mother was the one person who knew things, who could state facts and recognize values, who could tell what one ought to want and what one must decide, and she was also the person who unhesitatingly expressed opinions which were often orders, whether about daily duties or the great crises of life. And since Giovanni, her husband, Giovanni the painter, sought seclusion in pursuit of his art, which she respected and helped as she could—in a way, he was the eldest of her children—she was obviously responsible to a great extent for shaping the development of her favourite son.

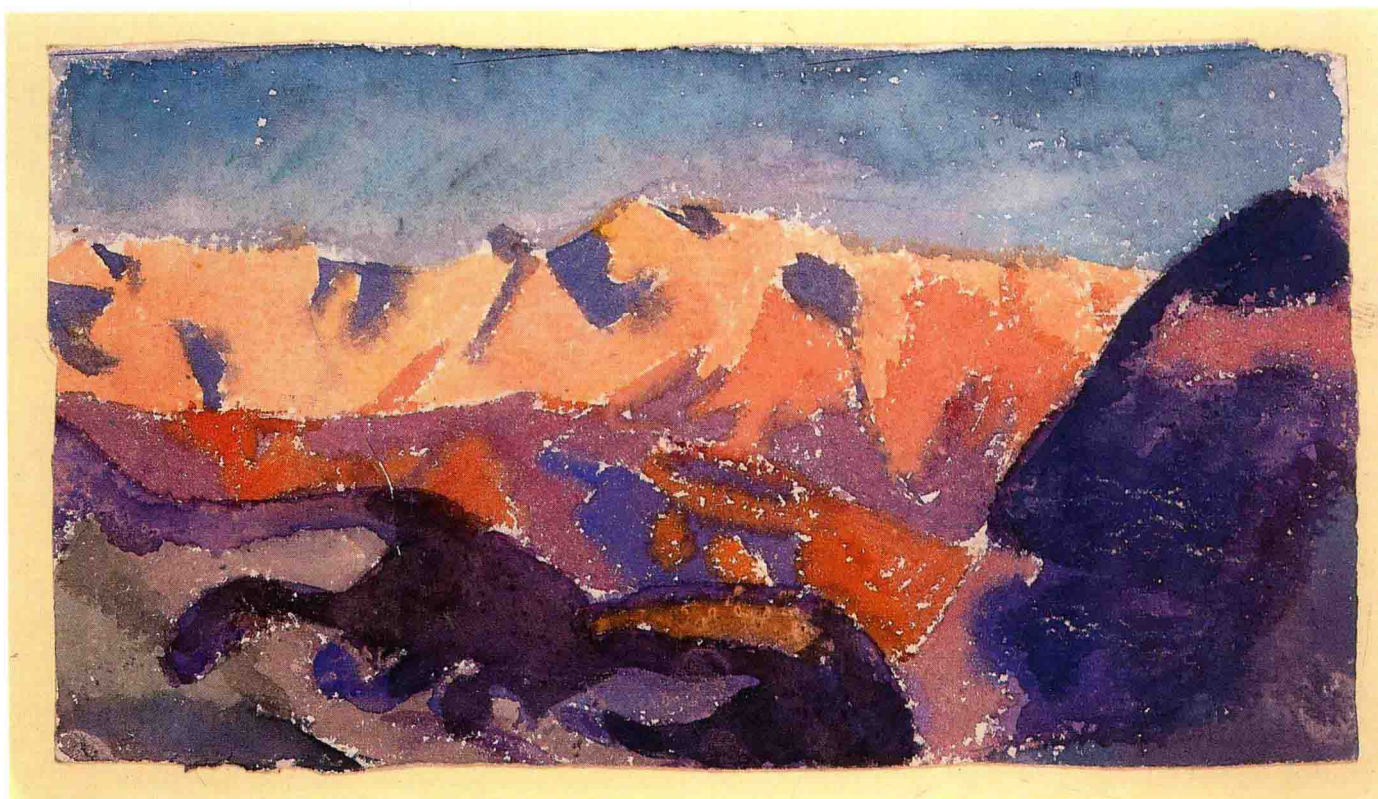
But this statement must be qualified by an observation which is essential for the correct understanding of Giacometti's relationship with his mother and his family. A woman of such eminent strength, who imposed her will with such a clear conscience and, moreover, whose moral worth was so evident within a tradition still steeped in Calvinistic austerity, not to say Puritanism, was after all someone who accepted the Law, who represented it and served its cause, and so one might picture Signora Giacometti as 'masculine', like Madame Rimbaud, for instance, that other great figure, who loomed over a modern artist's achievement and who lived at almost the same period and in a



2. *The Artist's Mother*, dated 1913-1914. Pencil, 36.5 × 25 cm. Alberto Giacometti Foundation, Zurich.

Left:

1. Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Annetta and Alberto Giacometti in Stampa*, circa 1960-1961.



3. *Mountain Landscape*, 1916-1919. Watercolour, 13.5 × 24.5 cm. Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Kupferstichkabinett.

similarly provincial and conservative social milieu.⁴ By exaggerating her responsibility for decisions and duties, Signora Giacometti too might have become the sort of person who represses those more spontaneous and playful tendencies which are sometimes called feminine, because we have experienced them or imagined them during the relationship between mother and child. This seems to be confirmed by Alberto's references to Annetta in his writings, such as 'The Palace at 4 a.m.' ('Le Palais à 4 heures du matin'), in which, as will be seen, the image of a rigid figure with 'phallic' connotations can be traced, a figure he explicitly identified with a recollection of his mother.

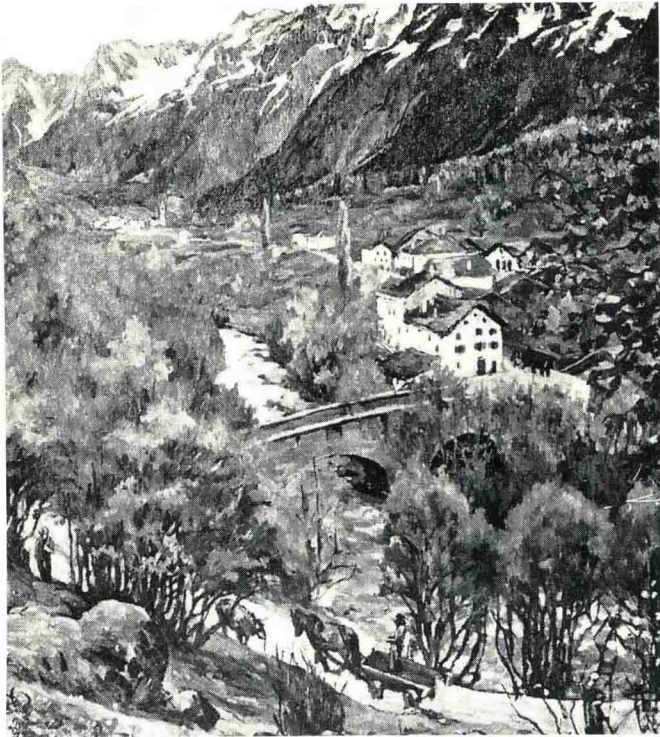
Yet Annetta is not so easily characterized; rather the evidence of the same witnesses and indeed that of her son should be remembered, which stressed Annetta's good nature and cheerfulness as much as her authority and, above all, the warm affection which springs from happiness. She represented not only the categorical imperative, but also laughter, country rambles, jam-making, and—thanks to her—there was much brightness, as Giacometti's first sketches prove, in their little house in the remote mountain valley, where winter lasted so long. Moreover, distinctions valid in a more abstract society are irrelevant when

applied to the tiny world in which the Giacometti family lived in the early years of this century. They dwelt in the Bergell Valley, one of the harshest regions of the Swiss Alps, between the Upper Engadine and the Italian frontier. Its inhabitants had been there in isolation since the beginning of time, and during the centuries in which travel became easier history did nothing to bring these mountain folk closer to their northern or southern neighbours, since they spoke an Italian dialect in a Romansh or German-speaking canton, and they followed a Calvinist creed, whereas other Italian-speaking communities in Switzerland, as elsewhere, were traditionally Catholic.⁵ But as much as they were separated from the cultures which surrounded them, they remained in contact with nature at its most unspoilt, with the wall of the Bergell Alp looming over the villages, and the footprints of wild animals daily visible in the snow. A step beyond their threshold, once the short village street was left behind, lay the impenetrable, inaccessible region; they knew its language, made up of silent footsteps, the cycle of the seasons, the berries in the sudden grass, the light. And in that world of harsh tasks and simple joys, the relationship between man and woman, for instance, surely was not quite what it had already become, for better or worse; by the beginning of the twentieth

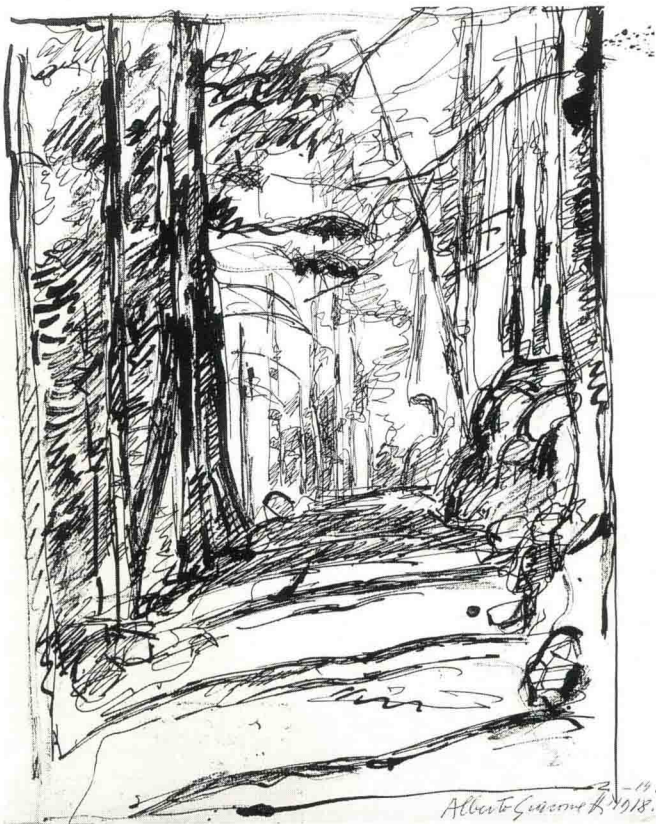
ill. 5



4. *Mountain Landscape*, circa 1918. Watercolour, 30 × 22.3 cm. Alberto Giacometti Foundation, Zurich.



5. Giovanni Giacometti, *The Bergell Valley*, 1890. Oil on canvas, 35 x 52 cm. Private Collection, Switzerland.



6. *Path in the Woods near Stampa*, dated 1918-1919. Ink, 30.4 x 24.7 cm. Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Kupferstichkabinett.

century, in towns elsewhere in Europe given over to trade and industry. When great symbols are recognized through the observation of nature, then the laws, values, which elsewhere are nothing but social forms, here will be interpreted, at least partially, as the reality of the earth, of the earthly place, which is both feminine and masculine.

Annetta's maiden name, it may now be pointed out, was Stampa, the very name of the village where, although born two kilometres away (at Borgonovo, where the churchyard is situated beside the little chapel), she came after her marriage to spend the rest of her long life. Surely no one could have embodied better than she the mutual intimacy of a community and a place, could have better responded to the vibrations and could have better benefited from the balance of forces which make up a place, and therefore, for her children, she must have been something more than a loving mother or a sound tutor, namely the very *bona dea*, the good spirit, who dispensed not only the gifts of the earth, but also participated in its being. This is admirably suggested by a photograph taken during a visit to the family home by Henri Cartier-Bresson, who was one of Alberto's friends.

Annetta is shown on her balcony, one morning during the brief summer which is so intense in high mountain regions. Already she was very old, but her white hair was so dense and dazzling that it seemed to belong to the flowers which surround her in the sunlight, and metaphorically, this implies that she represents the life of the earth. Her son, meanwhile, is shown standing in the street below, his jacket over his shoulder, looking up at her, saying goodbye. He is about to move away, but clearly only for a short walk in the woods, or rather for a few hours in his studio next door, and it is obvious that his goodbye promises a quick return. Annetta is the central figure and Alberto the devotee, who moved only a short distance away in the hallowed space and who has no conception of a longer journey at this precise moment. ill. 1

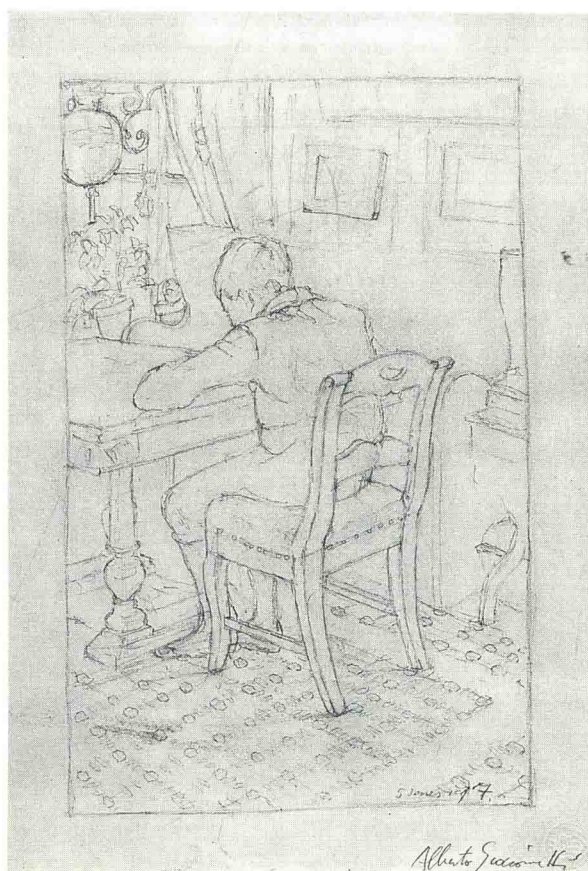
And in fact he never left for long periods, he never wanted to think he was deserting his childhood village, and his mother's house. True, he lived in Paris, he followed his art there, and thus fulfilled his destiny, but every year after he left Stampa in 1921 at the summons of his vocation, he went back there for weeks if not months at a time, settling naturally, after the death of Giovanni in 1934, into the studio where his father had worked every day since the beginning of the century. Also, until the end of his life, and in spite of his fame,



7. *The Artist's Mother (Knitting)*, 1913. Pencil, 34 × 26 cm. Private Collection.



8. *Self-Portrait*, 1918. Ink, 37 × 25.5 cm. Private Collection, Zurich.



9. *Diego Seated*, 1917. Pencil, 37 × 25 cm. Private collection.