

## BRUCE ELDER

It might seem odd in a personal statement about a filmmaker that I would want to reflect on the reasons for his interest in a poet long dead. But poetry meant a great deal to Stan Brakhage—one wouldn't be exaggerating to say that poetry was the place he really came alive. Stan Brakhage was a great reader of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Michael McClure, and Ronald Johnson—what he shares with many of these writers is a topic I have explored in my writings on the artist. But he was also a great reader of certain German Romantic poets, especially Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg) and Heinrich Heine, but also Holderlin (as well as later poets who follow in the Romantic mode, including Rainer Maria Rilke, whose poetry supplied the title for the sections in *The Dante Quartet*). In our many conversations, once we got the movies out of the way (and I am afraid that I was never much good at sharing the movies with him), and once the many tribulations each of us faced in earning our keep had been disposed of, poetry was the most frequent topic we discussed. And Brakhage talked about these German poets more consistently than about any others. He did go through a phase in which he talked about Alfred Lord Tennyson more than any other poet, and during the last year, a phase in which he dwelled on E.H. and A.M. Blackmore's translations from Victor Hugo; but Novalis and Heine were the poets he mentioned the most over a long period of time. Novalis seems to have been especially important—Brakhage did, after all, include the poet's name in the title of the film inspired by reading his *Hymnen an die Nacht*, and went to considerable lengths to introduce the poet to his New York audience when he showed the film there. Brakhage's interest in Novalis intrigued me (indeed as his interest in poets generally intrigued me).

For as well as a poet, Novalis was a writer with philosophical interests—"philosophical" according to the understanding of the time, that is, as offering commentary on the realm of the spirit, which is the repository of all truth, and which is disclosed through self-understanding. Brakhage shared many convictions with Novalis. For both, truth is as much an ethical as an epistemological concept (truth consists not in conformity to an external standard, but in acting in accordance with one's deepest convictions). For both, the most profound sort of truth was a form of magical truth rather than natural truth (to use a distinction that Novalis made in *Logological Fragments* 1:78). For both, knowledge culminated in a sort of mystical understanding of reality (in Brakhage's case, evident in works as far apart in time as *Dog Star Man* and *The God of Day Had Gone Down Upon Him*). But most important of all, both share a belief in the importance of an investigation conducted on an *ordo inversus*, through which a subject's intuitive and cognitive functions are fused (the first several times I heard Brakhage speak, the falsity of the distinction between emotion or intuition and reason was his central topic), and the self achieves consciousness of itself, allowing subject and object to become one. As Novalis conceived it, through the *ordo inversus*, the subject becomes object, the self becomes non-self, the symbol becomes the symbolized. I think that Brakhage's method of what he called trance is similar—the "internal" process becomes the object of observation and scrutiny (even the photographed object). But for Novalis, the key to transformation of the subject into the object, the self into the non-self is language. That is something that Brakhage would never have agreed to. On the other hand, I would. Arguing that difference was one of the keenest pleasures I had.

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