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Brakhage, Poetry, and the Larger Self

Stan Brakhage believed that a being larger than the individual self was the maker of his artistic works. He famously summed up that idea on the title page of his *Metaphors on Vision* when he stated that the phrase “by Stan Brakhage” on his films should be understood to mean “by way of Stan and Jane and the children Brakhage.”

A tension that permeated Brakhage’s filmmaking is that between the image conceived as representing the content of consciousness and the image conceived as a form that embodies the energies of a greater field of being. This tension is often figured as a struggle to break out of solipsism. *Unconscious London Strata* (1982), *Nightmusic* (1986), *Glaze of Cathexis* (1990), *Crack Glass Eulogy* (1992), *The Harrowing* (1993), *Paranoia Corridor* (1995) and *Polite Madness* (1996) suggest the terror and sadness of solipsism, while the *Pittsburgh Trilogy* (1971), *The Governor* (1977), *Christ Mass Sex Dance* (1991), the *Visions in Meditation* series (1989-90) halt the slide into solipsism through observation of the world outside consciousness. *Dog Star Man* (1961-4) and the Vancouver Island trilogy suggest the resolution of the tension through the self’s identifying with a larger matrix. The self’s isolation results from a disconnection from the “greater field of being” and the absorption of the subject into the phenomena that consciousness itself produces. Brakhage’s well-known interest in hypnagogic images, and his refusal to distinguish among perception, memory and hallucination (“Allow so-called hallucination to enter the realm of perception . . . accept dream visions, day-dreams or night-dreams, as you would so-called real scenes, even allowing that the abstractions which move so dynamically when closed eyelids are pressed are actually perceived”) makes solipsism a perpetual threat.

The unhappy consciousness is the consciousness locked inside the circle of its own being, isolated from the greater field. In late September 1966, while he was making *23rd Psalm Branch*, Brakhage wrote to the poet Robert Duncan explaining the role of consciousness in producing the images for that very troubled film. Those images, he wrote, represent “child’s views of images of war”

to be of the very rhythm the optic nerve pulses in its firing forth these pictures dredged from memory fund, and to be of the orders of that act of remembering. . . this is the closest I am enabled to come, at this time, to make visible the *being* of war’s *cause*. You do inform me well as to why the T.V. screen will *not* yield material for this insight, tho’ I would hope, in time (as I become attuned to my own nerve’s impulse in the immediate sensory receiving of images – as distinct from memories’ receipt) to break thru even the subversion of “the Advertiser.”

Time and again in his comments on his films, Brakhage returns to the position that the optic nerves themselves (which serve for him as a metonym for the physiological processes that condition our experience of visual phenomena) produce the disturbances that beset consciousness.

Brakhage longed to break out of the circle of consciousness by climbing out of the memory images and the hypnagogic images produced by the “back-firing” of the optic nerve. In his note on *Delicacies of Molten Horror Synapse* (1991) he identified the “molten horror” of the title as the TV, or even the film itself, with its four superimposed roles of hand-painted and negative television imagery since the film represents “the hynagogic process whereby the optic

nerves resist grotesque infusions of luminescent light.” We might be tempted, in trying to interpret this comment, to take consciousness as the pristine good entity, defending itself from the bad external (TV) object; but the film itself (with its strangely symmetrical images) more suggests the terror that besets a consciousness trying and failing to break out of its self-enclosure by identifying with a creative being that is both beyond and within itself. Films such as *The Process* (1972) and *The Harrowing* (1993), I believe, confirm these conjectures about the solipsistic pole in Brakhage’s *oeuvre*.

In a recent article, “Having Declared a Belief in God,” Brakhage deals explicitly with the terror of the self-enclosed consciousness. He accuses the traditional conception of God of simply projecting the self to all levels of being (or being-as-represented), from the microcosmic to the macrocosmic:

If the external be subject to one’s self, and if self be, thus, possessed by oneself, then all expletive [sic] becomes such muttering as an echo-chamber might be said to engender: the visual corollary to this word-trap would be mirror-reflecting-mirror’s imagery to some supposed infinitesimal microcosm . . . I see myself seeing myself infinitely from a felt base-stance in diminishing, albeit solid-seeming, variations which, at sight’s limit, opt, naturally enough, to be imagined and to be variably imaginable. The inverse of this imagined variability of one’s diminished self, would most reasonably be a macrocosm in which one’s self-shape didn’t exist at all, coexistent with an imagined BEING, larger and ever larger, multiply amorphous shape-shifting of oneself: this, then, is the classically baroque romance of self and God which Western aesthetics have engendered.

If the traditional conception of God is, as Brakhage says, “subject to one’s self,” it is locked within the circle of the self. It therefore lacks the power to release one from solipsism – for it is nothing more than the image of the self projected at larger and larger magnification into the beyond. In the sixth century B.C. E., Xenophanes proposed that “if horses or oxen or lions had hands they could draw with and accomplish such works as men, horses would draw the figures of the gods as similar to horses, and the oxen as similar to oxen, and they would make the bodies of the sort which each of them had,” and even that the characteristics of the gods revered by a particular group reflect the human characteristics of that group’s members: “Ethiopians say that their gods are snub-nosed and black, Thracians that theirs are blue-eyed and red-haired.”

I have suggested that a struggle between a solipsistic sense of the self and a sense of the self as embedded in, and ultimately identified with, a larger matrix is fundamental to Brakhage’s filmmaking. The importance of this tension in Brakhage’s work, and the centrality of the aspiration to identify with this larger force, makes it worth asking about the character of this “greater maker” that uses Brakhage as its instrument. In 1944, Jackson Pollock famously proclaimed to Hans Hofmann his reason for not painting from nature: “I AM nature.” That Brakhage’s aesthetic credo shares many tenets with that of the abstract expressionists makes it tempting to infer that Pollock’s assertion is one that could also have been made by Brakhage, and that nature is the “greater maker” of Brakhage’s films.

There is much to recommend that view. Certainly the iconography of *Dog Star Man* could be cited in its defence, for that film identifies macrocosmic and microcosmic nature and represents consciousness as an effect of the energies that permeate the cosmos. Astronomical footage showing flares leaping from the sun’s surface is rhymed with images of the internal body (a pumping heart, blood surging to and fro in the veins) to reinforce the comparison between the human and the cosmic scale and to imply, by this microanthropic/macrocosmic identification, that the universe is a giant organism whose being is no different from the Dog Star Man’s body. Furthermore, that work is a series of fragments, and the effort of the film is an

attempt at reparation for reality's sundered condition by embodying a world-view that mythopoeically identifies every part with the whole.

However, other films and other statements by the artist make clear that we cannot simply identify the "greater maker" with nature. Take *The Dante Quartet* of 1987, in which the problematic we are considering is central: the effort to rise out of the personal, limited self and to identify with the greater, creative self is its main theme. Of course, that theme is key to the Dantean original, too: at the opening of *Paradiso*, Beatrice chides the Poet: "You make yourself obtuse with false imagining; you cannot see what you would see if you dispelled it." (*Par. I*: 88-90). The first canto of *Paradiso* tells us that the Poet underwent a "transhumanizing" (*trasumanar*) change that words could not convey. Through this change the Poet came to recognize, as Beatrice explains, that a universal instinct penetrates all things, endowing each with a principle that carries it on its individual course through the vast sea of being (*Par. I*: 103-141).

The power that changed the Poet is crucial: Dante had beseeched "buono Appollo": "Enter into my breast, within me breathe the very power you made manifest when you drew Marsyas from his limbs' sheath" [*Par. I*: 19-21].) A breath that a god breathed into the poet transformed him.

Brakhage's *The Dante Quartet* concerns the hell of false (solipsistic) imagining, and the release from that hell by identifying with something higher – something higher that also breathes within him. Brakhage outlined the parts of *The Dante Quartet* in an interview.

The four parts are *Hell Itself*, *Hell Spit Flexion*, *Purgation* and *existence is song*. . . I made *Hell Itself* during the breakup with Jane and the collapse of my whole life, so I got to know quite well the streaming of the hypnagogic that's hellish. Now the body can not only feed back its sense of being in hell but also its getting out of hell, and *Hell Spit Flexion* shows the way out – it's there as crowbar to lift one out of hell toward the transformatory state – purgatory. And finally there's a fourth state that's fleeting. I've called this last part *existence is song* quoting Rilke, because I don't want to presume upon the after-life and call it "Heaven."

Most parts of *The Dante Quartet* are painted over photographic imagery that sometimes peeks through. *Hell Itself* is the only section that lacks photographic imagery. Thus that section suggests the self isolated from the greater field of being. Despite the textual basis within the Dantean original for the transhuman identification that the final section of *The Dante Quartet* figures, that section, as Brakhage notes, takes its title from Rilke. The title comes specifically from the *Sonnets to Orpheus* I, 3. The phrase that appears in the poem is actually the reverse of the title – it is "song is existence" ("Gesang ist Dasein"); in the poem, the phrase opens a gulf between the human and the divine, as experiencing the equivalence of song and existence is "an easy thing for God"; but, presumably, for humans it is more difficult. Thus the poem highlights the need for a transforming change such as Dante's Poet refers to.

"Gesang ist Dasein" could also be translated "singing is reality." It was probably the sonnet's expression and affirmation of the lyric nature of reality that piqued Brakhage's interest in Rilke, for the idea of song had long been important to him – in the late 1960s he created the *Songs*, a major serial work; in the 1970s he titled a work *Tragoedia*, alluding to the etymological origin of the word "tragedy" in "goat song"; and, more recently, he called a pair of films, *Self Song* and *Death Song*. He named another *The Earthsong of the Cricket*. The poem that inspired *The Dante Quartet* is a series of *canti*, and in this film Brakhage reached, through Rilke, an identification of existence (reality) itself with singing. With all this evidence, it seems certain that what Brakhage thinks about song will tell us something about the "greater being" through which

he escapes solipsism.

Rilke's poem asserts that it is not longing or passion that will enable humans to learn the true music for true singing comes from a different breath, a breath about nothing, a gust within God, a Wind. True singing results from abandoning desire, turning one's inner being nearly into nothing. True singing results not from identifying the self with nature, but from allowing the self to dissolve in a greater nothingness. That is the view of singing that Brakhage evolved towards. In Brakhage's later work, song represents "the greater maker" that the filmmaker strived to connect with, in order to break out of the circle of consciousness.

But that view of song is not the only one that Brakhage offered. He sometimes identified song more strictly with nature, rather than with a supernatural nothing. He said in an interview:

. . . I believe in song. That's what I wanted to do and I did it quite selfishly, out of my own need to come through to a voice that is comparable with song and related to all animal life on earth. I believe in the beauty of the singing whale; I am moved deeply at the whole range of song that the wolf makes when the moon appears, or neighborhood dogs make – that they make their song, and this is the wonder of life on earth, and I in great humility wish to join this.

Brakhage, then, offered two views of the nature of song. Though both treat song almost as metaphysical principle, the two views are contradictory. Sometimes he spoke as though he believes that nature embodies lyric reality, and at other times he treated lyric reality as something less material. His conception of the reality that is song is similarly conflicted: sometimes he conceives this "greater maker" to be nature and at other times he conceives of it as almost nothing – a gust of wind, a breath, pure movement, a nothing.

A similar tension between the conception of "the greater maker" as nature and as air, as breath or a nothing occurs in the work of the poet Charles Olson, a key influence on Brakhage's art. Olson refers to this larger dynamic that produces objects as "the field." In his famous manifesto, "Projective Verse," Olson wrote that if a man is "contained within his nature as he is participant in the larger force, he will be able to listen, and his hearing through himself will give him secrets objects share." This conception of the "field" was influenced by Alfred North Whitehead's attempt to develop a philosophy of organism, a metaphysical system that would accord with the modern scientific world view.

II

We lived far apart, he in Boulder, Colorado, U.S.A. and I in Toronto, Ontario, Canada – the expanse that separated us (as well as the modern oddity of long-distance friendships) were realities he often lamented. We saw each other whenever we could, but mostly we conducted our friendship over the telephone. The telephone calls often went on at length, and we would talk about many things: always the movies (a great topic with Brakhage, though I am afraid I was never much good in sharing in that enthusiasm), often the tribulations that an artist faces in making a living in the academy (a topic on which I was considerably better informed), usually fatherhood – but often the conversation got around to poets and poetry, our deep, shared interest. Over the years we talked about many poets, a few living, most dead. Sometimes, he read poems to me over the telephone (to ensure my renewed familiarity with them); sometimes we talked about what each of us remembered of a poet's works; and sometimes he would tell me anecdotes about the poets. He could tell me much about the lives of poets, for Brakhage was an avid reader of literary biography: I was often struck by the fact that he recounted the tales of writers from the eighteenth and nineteenth century in exactly the same manner that he recounted tales of poets with whom he had a close personal acquaintance. Clearly, through

reading, he could imagine the person's presence in the world, their conversation with friends, their generousities and rivalries and jealousies and kindnesses, almost as vividly as he experienced the conversation of flesh and blood people he knew.

Sometime in 1989 (I imagine), when the conversation rolled around to poetry, he posed the question whether I owned copies of the published portions of Ronald Johnson's long poem *ARK*. I allowed that, despite my awareness of his, and Guy Davenport's, enthusiasm for the work, I did not. Within a week, the volumes arrived in the mail – they were obviously new copies, and I wish that I had thought to ask him whether he had gotten them from Johnson himself. A while later, a typescript arrived in the post, with a note written on the top: "Dear Bruce – This/"Spire" by R.J. (from Kansas also by the way) much mixed with sea and sand and sky, of the mind, midst whirl of camera, catching light with Marilyn and Anton, 'up island' [at Parksville, on Vancouver Island] . . . hoping it moves you too. Blessings, Stan Aug', 1990." The typescript contained Spire 50 to 66, from Johnson's *ARK*. Brakhage soon called, to give me the telephone number at the motel where he and the family were staying: he wanted us to be able to talk about the new Johnson poems.

At that time Brakhage was shooting *The Child's Garden and the Serious Sea*, one of the masterworks of his later years. In his catalogue entry for that film, he wrote: "In poet Ronald Johnson's great epic *ARK*, in the first book *The Foundations*, the poem "Beam 29" has this passage: "*The seed is disseminated at the gated mosaic a hundred feet / below, above / long windrows of motion / connecting dilated arches undergoing transamplification: / 'seen in the water so clear as christiall' / (prairie tremblante)*" which breaks into musical notation that, "presto," becomes a design of spatial tilts: This is where the film began; and I carried a xerox of the still unpublished *ARK* 50 through 66 all that trip with Marilyn and Anton around Vancouver Island. As I wrote him, "The pun 'out on a limn' [a line from *ARK* 56], kept ringing through my mind as I caught the hairs of side-light off ephemera of objects . . ."

My relation with Brakhage was fairly complex relationship and receiving a gift like the completed parts of *ARK* illustrates that complexity: I write on avant-garde cinema, and his sending me this text could be an effort on the part of the artist to inform the critic about his motivations; it could also be the effort of a person to share his enthusiasms with a friend; and since I also am a filmmaker, his gift could also be effort at imparting inspiration. Complicating this tangle of possible reasons is the fact that *ARK* belongs to the lineage of Pound's *Cantos*, Williams's *Paterson*, Olson's *Maximus*, or Zukofsky's *A* – all works that I love deeply, as much as works produced in the twentieth century; so Brakhage may have speculated that *ARK* too would come to be (as it has) a work close to my heart. Further, Brakhage consistently celebrated my cycle of films, *The Book of All the Dead*, as a special achievement in a long form – and he may believed that I would feel a special affinity for *ARK*, since it too is a recent achievement in a long form. Moreover, Ronald Johnson's early work was allied with the Black Mountain school, and I have a fondness for poets of that provenance; further, Johnson's work was also rooted in the poetry of such great visionaries as Whitman, Blake, and Dante, poets for whom, as Brakhage knew, I feel deep passion. Johnson's early poetry owes much, too, to Charles Olson's notion of projective verse, a topic on which I was writing at the time, in connection with Brakhage's work, so he could have been encouraging me to further explorations of that mode (and his place in it). These possible motivations for sending me this gift are not mutually exclusive, and I suspect that all were factors; but their number makes the reasons for the urgency that Brakhage felt to share Johnson's work with me all the more complex to fathom.

Right now, however, it is the question of what Brakhage was trying to tell me about his own work that interests me most. Some affinities between Brakhage's films and Johnson's poetry, are obvious. Brakhage and Johnson are both among the rare contemporaries committed to the visionary strain in art. Like Brakhage's films, *ARK* is a paean to process, a hymn to light

(the concrete that Johnson offers in “Beam 13” brings the ideas of process and flux together as compactly as any of Brakhage’s films). Further, *ARK* begins with “a long time of light”; light evolved vision, so Johnson offers a Brakhagian account of Vision near the beginning of *ARK* that proposes the eye is the sun in another form – which finishes, almost, with the assertion “there began to be eyes, and light began looking with itself.” In *ARK*, matter produces consciousness: its straining for music produces Bach (this occurs in “Beam 7”); then, in Beam 14, generates

he who
obsessed by light,
possessed by sight.

(One wonders whether Brakhage might not have taken this to refer to himself, though for Johnson, of course, it referred to the poet.)

Both Brakhage and Johnson’s art lean towards the cosmological (the title of one of Brakhage’s films, *Stellar*, is, but for initial capital, the concluding line in Johnson’s “Beam 14”), and in both artists’ work, attention to detail, to the immediate particular, viewed with a Zukofskian objectivist clarity balances their cosmological interests. There is, too, a complex relation between the concrete and the visionary (the optical/cosmological) in Johnson’s writings, as there is in Brakhage’s filmmaking.

Those who know Brakhage’s writing or lectures on Gertrude Stein will know how often he referred to the famous “[a] rose is a rose is a rose,” especially in its original presentation, closed in a circle: Brakhage was fond of pointing out that that concrete contains references to “a rose,” to “Rose,” to “eros” (love), to “rows” (death), and to “arose” (resurrection). Johnson offered similar comments on his concrete,

earthearth
earthearth
earthearth
earthearth
earthearth
earthearth

He noted: “Earthearth is a linkage of ear to hear to heart. Art and hearth are also hid in it. All is at the core of fall. Even the stones here have overtones and the clouds may speak.”

ARK (to say nothing of Johnson’s other works) is an extraordinarily diverse collection – the poems it draws together range from concretes to lyrics (eg. the Palms, relatives of the biblical Psalms, in “The Song of Orpheus”) to collage works (*ARK* 26) to prose poems (*ARK* 12) to found poems (*ARK* 14) to works that, by including imitation bird song (another enthusiasm Brakhage shared with Johnson and with the composer Olivier Messaien), incorporate natural forms – among recent poets only Kenneth Patchen and Louis Zukofsky, it seems to me, have a similar range. But Brakhage’s films display a similar range: I can’t think of another filmmaker whose films span so great a range as that between *Anticipation of the Night* and *The Dante Quartet*, or between *Rage Net* and *The Mammals of Victoria*.

A further affinity: Brakhage desired to ground his cinema in the unique person that he was. He partook of that Emersonian desire to undo the deforming influence of culture, and to return to the authenticity of the self-reliant individual. Johnson held similar beliefs – in “A Note” on *ARK*, he wrote “ . . . I knew I’d my own tack to take. If my confreres wanted to write a work with all history in its maw, I wished, from the beginning, to start all over again, attempting to know nothing but a will to create, and a matter at hand.” Pound had defined the epic poem as “a

poem containing history” and made it his business to write an epic; Johnson separated himself from that ambition, wanting to get behind the distortions of history and back to the authentic individual. So did Brakhage, even while, I, as a filmmaker, continued to seek the Historical Sublime (so Brakhage’s sending me the completed portions of *ARK* may have been to suggest to me the error of my ways).

For Emerson, the experience of immediate moment and the immediate particular was the means to get back to the authentic self. Thus, in “Self-Reliance,” Emerson wrote that “These roses under my window make no reference to former roses or to better ones; they are for what they are; they exist with God to-day. There is no time to them. There is simply the rose; it is perfect in every moment of its existence.” In *ARK* 50, “Adamspire,” Johnson writes

*never were there such roses in
under the banner of summer.*

similarly affirming the utter uniqueness of the immediate particular (when seen in this paradisaical frame). And Brakhage, in *The Child Garden and the Serious Sea* finds himself in an (imagined) child’s garden, looking closely at the flowers.

Just slightly later in *ARK* than the concrete we quoted above, and just before the point in the *ARK*, where, Brakhage says, “the film began,” Johnson states: “:the mind become its own subject matter:”(*ARK* 25) Turning to “the mind’s reflection on itself” is certainly Brakhage’s method.

“Beam 29,” where *The Child’s Garden and Serious Sea* began, contains the lines

PIVOT means the-man-who-will-become-himself-centers-a-valley-through-which-circles
matter. . . . Voices begin in the waters.

(but will not unfigure the cut-glass prism
frozen in sunshaft)

Around the time he was shooting *The Child’s Garden and the Serious Sea*, my wife and I received a charming snapshot of Stan in Parksville, Vancouver Island, sitting in the sea-water like a baby in the bathtub, his attention focussed on his Bolex movie camera, like a baby’s on his rubber toy – and attached to the Bolex is a cut-glass prism. What he was filming, off Vancouver Island was

‘seen in the water so clear as christiall’
(*prairie tremblante*)

The Child’s Garden, *The Mammals of Victoria*, and *The God of Day Had Gone Down Upon Him*, films shot on Vancouver Island, all embodied Brakhage’s reflection on himself; it was:

AS IF
IN THE DEPTHS A MAN COULD SEE HIS OWN REFLECTION
ripple-counter-ripple

The ripples are surfaces on which the ephemeral appears arise and vanish into nothing.

ARK 30 is entitled “The Garden” and begins with the line “To do as Adam did,” a line which epitomizes both Johnson’s project in *ARK* and Brakhage’s in his filmmaking: like Brakhage’s films, the poem suggests analogies between light, life and physics; moreover, *ARK* as a whole draws analogies between the human body, the macrocosmic universe, and the

microcosmic universe (much as Brakhage's *Dog Star Man* did). In conversations, Johnson referred to his delight in finding the garden outside oneself; but this is surely part of the feeling that is suggested in Brakhage's use in *The Child's Garden and the Serious Sea* of photography, an art that depends on discovering the self in the world outside the mind; Johnson's poetry, like Brakhage's filmmaking, belongs to that moment in the English poetic tradition which was committed to uncovering the exquisite identity of consciousness and nature – a moment we call "Romanticism."

Spires 50-66 contain lines that equally well suggest the film.

never such
beautiful hullabaloo

from *ARK* 50, certainly puts one in mind of the fair to which film gives such prominent place. *ARK* 51, "Rungs I, The Pencil Spire," contains such lines as

and
bend luminous one giant flower

and
glass spied big as all outdoors & more

and
imaginations shone
august

that evoke the film.

ARK has a diurnal structure: "The Foundations" begins at sunrise and ends at noon, while "The Spires" go to sundown; Spires 50-66, the section of *ARK* that Brakhage tells us he was reading while shooting *The Child's Garden and the Serious Sea*, are the concluding cantos of *The Spires*, and so represent late afternoon and early evening. Brakhage entitled the third film in Vancouver Island series, *The God of Day Had Gone Down Upon Him*, and one might well conjecture it may relate to the third ("The Ramparts") section of *ARK*, which Johnson refers as "a night of the soul."

In *ARK* 34, "Spire on the Death of L.Z.," one of my favourite cantos, is an elegy of for Louis Zukovsky, Brakhage would have would read

this is paradise
this is
happening
on the surface of a bubble
time and again
fire sculpt of notwithstanding
dark

The appearance of Lord Hades in that verse means that Johnson's art has a new adversary: he must combat oblivion. That accords with the tone of the films that Brakhage photographed on Vancouver Island – and more than all the others, of *The God of Day Had Gone Down Upon Him*, which seems so elegiac, as are Johnson's Arches (cantos 69-99 of *ARK*), the poems that come after eventide in the work's diurnal structure.

