**Brakhage, The Dante Quartet, and the Poets**

Stan Brakhage released *The Dante Quartet* in 1987. Though this extraordinary film runs for only six-and-a-quarter minutes, it was years in the making – thirty-seven years, in fact, if we include the decades Brakhage spent studying the *Commedia*. To actually make the film, he worked nearly everyday, for six years, applying paint directly onto the film stock. The painting is entirely abstract, and though its visual dynamism reminds many viewers of a Jackson Pollock painting come to life, its spiritual character suggests a closer kinship with the paintings of Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Adolf Gottlieb. If Brakhage's rhythmic play of forms and shades recalls Rothko's colour fields, the fluidity of his streaming imagery calls to mind Newman's efforts to convert the plastic elements of art into a "mental plasma." Besides an aesthetic delight in the "ideographic" character of art, Brakhage shares with Gottlieb a deep concern with the body and a philosophical interest in the relation between bodily processes and thought.

Like several of the hallmark paintings of Abstract Expressionism, *The Dante Quartet* is strongly sectionalized. From a technical viewpoint the difference between sections can literally be measured in centimetres because Brakhage used different film formats as his "canvas." The format increases in size from section – 16 mm, 35 mm, 70 mm Cinemascope, and IMAX – though, of course, the size of his "canvas" never exceeds the miniature dimensions of the frames of his film stock. From a thematic standpoint the division of the film into four sections is clearly determined by Brakhage's literary model: the mathematically articulated structure of the *Commedia*. Section one ("Hell Itself") corresponds to Dante's underworld journey (*Inferno* 3-34), while section two ("Hell Spit Flexion") relates to the transitional zone of Ante-Purgatory (*Purgatorio* 1-9), section three ("Purgation") corresponds to the cornices and summit of the Holy Mountain prortion (*Purgatorio* 10-33), while section four ("existence is song") comprises the zone of the ten heavens, from the Moon to the Empyrean (*Paradiso* 1-33).

Brakhage handled the printing of the film in such a way that the visual forms in each of the sections have different sizes and shapes. In the first section, the painted forms cover the entire screen. In the second, they cover only a small rectangle in the centre of the screen, occupying between one quarter and one third of its area. In the third, they cover the entire width of the screen and the middle three-quarters (approximately) of its height. In the fourth, they cover the entire screen again, though the forms have greater depth and detail here than in the opening section.

The character of the painting also differs from section to section. The first section consists chiefly of gold, ruddy-gold, red, and blue forms applied to appear like gelatinous streaks on a clear ground. While the second begins with tight tiny coils against a dark ground followed by light sweeping colours which seem to etherealize towards pure colour dynamics, it soon develops into a dance of highly textured yellow, green, and vermillion forms punctuated by what looks like a light streaming from a circular object. The third weaves together white skeins against a dark ground, luminous blues against a lighter ground, and densely impastoed dark ruddy forms through which occasionally appear various photographed images – a man in a doorway, a framed photographic portrait of a man, circular forms. In the fourth, forms seem to surge downwards through the image, and then upwards, as if by reaction, in a wave-like movement superimposed at times over images of a volcano or of some unidentifiable spherical form.

Though Brakhage produced *The Dante Quartet* some thirty-five years into his career, Dante's poetry was not a new enthusiasm for him. He had been reading the *Divine Comedy* since high school. Though early poetic interests have a way of fading, in this case they did not, and we need to know why they did not. The greatness of the *Commedia* itself is one reason, of course, but surely other factors in his cultural formation may help us to understand why Dante

would continue to fascinate him for nearly forty years.

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**Brakhage and the Poets**

The persistence of Brakhage's interest in Dante is also due in some measure to the role that the American poets Robert Duncan and Charles Olson played in his aesthetic education. Widely recognized as the leading advocates of Open Form poetry, Duncan and Olson both served the young Stan Brakhage as mentors. Basing their poetics on a strong conviction that the form of a poem should not be imposed from the outside by the events or experiences motivating its composition, they insisted that the poem must develop from the inside out. In other words, the energy that inspires the poem should give rise to its shape. Poetry in their view has an urgent perlocutionary purpose, to get "[the] energy transferred from where the poet got it . . . by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader."

Accordingly, the Open Form poets associated the vitality of a poem with the force of speech itself, with speech's physical effects. In *Dante Études*, a series of forty lyrics dating from late in his career (1984), Duncan expounds his idea of human language as a "natural" phenomenon in the sense that it is energized and driven by the same forces that give rise to wolf howls, whale songs, and all other forms of communication in the animal world. Objecting in his third étude ("A Little Language") to Dante's doctrinal claims that animals have no need of language and that Nature abhors the superfluous, he draws complex analogies between human and animal communication and also between the resonant world of the senses and the echoing field of discourse (including poetic speech):

> ...And whales and wolves I've heard
> in choral soundings of the sea and air
> know harmony and have an eloquence that stirs
> my mind and heart – they touch the soul. Here
>
> Dante's religion that would set Man apart
> damns the effluence of our life from us
> to build therein its powerhouse.
>
> It's in his animal communication Man is
> true, immediate, and
> in immediacy, Man is all animal.
>
> His senses quicken in the thick of the symphony,
> old circuits of animal rapture and alarm,
> attentions and arousals in which an identity rearrives.
> He hears
> particular voices among
> the concert, the slightest
> rustle in the undertones,
> rehearsing a nervous aptitude
> yet to prove *his*. He sees the flick
> of significant red within the rushing mass
> of ruddy wilderness and catches the glow

of a green shirt
to delite him in a glowing field of green
– it *speaks* to him –
and in the arc of the spectrum color
speaks to color.
The rainbow articulates
a promise he remembers
he but imitates
in noises that he makes,

this speech in every sense
the world surrounding him.

In his rhapsodic fifth étude ("Everything Speaks to Me") he pushes these same analogies to their geophysical limits:

Everything speaks to me!     In faith
my sight is sound.     I draw from out
the resounding mountain side
the gist of majesty.     It is at once
a presentation out of space
awakening a spiritual enormity, and still,
the sounding of a tone
apart from any commitment to some scale.

The sea
comes in on rolling surfs
of an insistent meaning,     pounds
the sands relentlessly,     demanding
a hearing.   I overhear
tides of myself all night in it.

And in the sound
that lips and tongue
and tunings of the vocal chords
within the chamber of the mouth and throat
can send upon the air,

I answer.     It is my evocation
of the sound I'd have
return to me.   My word in speech
answers some ultimate need I know,

aroused, pours forth upon the sands
again and again
lines written for the audience of the sea

Affirmed in these lines is a notion of natural inspiration fundamental to Open Form poetics. In response to the age-old question, "What is the origin of poetry?" Duncan turned to the

psychology of perception to support his idea that all poetry – like all visualization and probably all thought – arises from forces beyond the self. This idea is crucial to Stan Brakhage's artistic principles and practices.

Whether directly through philosophical discussion or indirectly through poetic example, Duncan taught Brakhage an unorthodox yet potent method of reading based on a creative engagement with poetry as both a transformer and a transmitter of energy. Reading his own poems in this "energetic" way along with certain Great Works (like the *Commedia*) led Duncan to formulate a radically holistic conception of his art, or rather of Art itself as a single transcendent primordial "speaking" or "revelation," which begins to sound like an ideal conception of film, an archetypal talkie:

> This has always been the One Art – the revelation, the moving picture, the urgent speaking to us of the world we see that moved us to make even of the sounds of our mouths an answering speech, the informing dance of images into which the Eye opens. She sends Her bears to claw the architectures loose from perfection. The Opening of Way again, the Wound in God's side. Angry, confused, then a cloud in which the queen is hidden, the workers are released from the old order into the Great Work beyond their understanding. They must go beyond the bounds of their art.
>
> But the new sweetness!

Echoing the "new sweetness" in Dante's famous phrase "*dolce stil novo*" ("sweet new style": *Purg*. 24.57), Duncan's exclamation reveals his intense enthusiasm for Dante's writing. It was an enthusiasm extending beyond the *Commedia* to the *Rime*, as indicated by the title of the work cited above: "Structure of Rime XXVII." The composition of this sequence, which complements his *Dante Études*, would occupy him for most of his creative life.

No matter how deep an impression Dante was, through Duncan's mediation, to make on Brakhage, we would do well to consider the *prima facie* implausibility of perceiving any direct influence of the *Commedia* on *The Dante Quartet*. The two works seem worlds apart. The very title Brakhage chose for his film – with its echo of Duncan's *Dante Études* as well as Eliot's *Four Quartets* – would seem to highlight its anomalous remoteness from the Great Work. For one thing, the film is a very small work – in duration. For another, given the immense significance and familiarity of the tripartite division of the *Commedia*, Brakhage's decision to allude to it in a tetrapartite form seems odd indeed. Why four "movements" instead of three canticles?

The impression of oddity only intensifies with further meditation on the film. In what way can it possibly be regarded as a "Dante" work? Thanks to the mystical impulse of Duncan and Olson to "go beyond the bounds of their art," Brakhage's ideas about art and artmaking are radically anti-discursive, while Dante's critical engagement with philosophy and theology fills the *Commedia* with passages of scholastic discourse on many disputed questions. Nothing in *The Dante Quartet* corresponds, for instance, to the elaborate disquisitions on the generation of the human soul by Statius (*Purg*. 25.34-108) and Aquinas (*Par*. 13.52-72). While Dante is hailed for his splendid integration of thought and imagination in the *Commedia*, Brakhage is defiantly resolute in his opposition to art or literature produced according to aesthetic rules.

As anyone who explores the *Commedia* through its commentaries soon discovers, it is a massively compendious work. Generations of commentators have treated it as an anthology of poetic forms and philosophical ideas. But the encyclopaedic impulse to enshrine cultural traditions, to imitate famous predecessors, to renew the past for the present, and to carry the wisdom of the ages into the future is antithetical to the Emersonian cast of Brakhage's thought and vision.

Brakhage's renown as the pre-eminent maker of lyrical films further distances him from the compendious poet of the *Commedia*. Though the *Vita Nuova* sustains Dante's renown as the pre-eminent maker of lyrical poems in the *dolce stil novo* tradition, the *Commedia* is not a canzone or a sonnet or any other medieval Italian lyric form but a *sui generis* creation, a long allegorical narrative explicitly constructed as a critical response to the limitations of his youthful love poetry. Like the pilgrim's journey through the three realms of the afterlife, the reader's journey through the three parts of the narrative proceeds according to a clear principle of sequentiality: events are recounted in the chronological order in which they supposedly occurred – "ad una ad una" ("one after another": *Inf*. 3.116). While Dante sharpens the retrospective focus of typological narration to highlight his view of the past as shaping both the present and the future, Brakhage avoids any sense of the past in his work, and, like any good lyric "maker," subsumes all temporal modalities into the immediacy of the Now. Indeed, the remarkable compression of Brakhage's work is due largely to its being a recollection of the experience of reading through the *Commedia*, consolidated in the immediacy of the present.

How they relate words to images also sets the two makers, Dante and Brakhage, apart. Responding to the Dedalian arrogance of classical authors who asserted the superiority of rhetoric to all other arts, Dante humbly celebrates the miraculous synthesis of words and images in the "visibile parlare" ("visible speech": *Purg*. 10.95) displayed in the proto-cinematic tableaux on the walls of the first cornice of Purgatory. Brakhage, by contrast, proudly strives to free images from words. Like his English and American predecessors in the Romantic tradition, he confidently valorizes the role of the imagination in purging human consciousness of linguistic confusion. While language is an arena of moral engagement for Dante, who, anticipating Wittgenstein, identifies sin with the lack of verbal and intellectual clarity symbolized by the *selva oscura,* the textual world is seen by Brakhage as a labyrinth of deception from which images must be morally rescued and aesthetically distanced. Few representational forms appear in *The Dante Quartet* because, as the filmmaker points out, all representations are congregations of "nameable forms." Except for a few important exceptions we'll consider in due course, Brakhage's notable practice of creating "unnameable" non-representational forms by the direct application of paint onto film stock, sometimes in thick impasto, results in dynamic fields of "pure" imagery – Abstract Expressionism in motion. During the intensely creative period when *The Dante Quartet* was being made, he kept photographic imagery out of his work, to avoid any sort of depictions. Film, he believed, needed to be released from the domain and the domination of language.

The non-referential character of *The Dante Quartet* – its freedom from "pictures," as Brakhage calls representations of those congregations of "nameable things" – seems all the odder when we consider the immense attractiveness of the vivid (at times even hallucinatory) imagery of the *Commedia* for visual artists down through the centuries. For evidence of its long and enduring appeal, we need only look back at the Dante illustrations of Giovanni da Paolo, Botticelli, Michelangelo, Blake, Doré, and Dali. Starting with Boccaccio, Petrarch, and Chaucer, generations of writers have also been impressed with the intensity and precision of Dante's imagery. T.S. Eliot deliberated extensively on Dante's significance as a visionary poet and cultural icon, praising the *Commedia* for its "clear visual images" and "lucidity of style." Hell, insisted Eliot, is "a state which can only be thought of, and perhaps only experienced, by the projection of sensory images."

The radical oddness of Brakhage's project in *The Dante Quartet* makes it an artistic risk, and artistic risks tend to provoke hostile reactions even from critics who do not regard themselves as cultural reactionaries. We can see why his film is still regarded as "controversial" many years after its release by reflecting on the troubled reception-history of Pound's *Pagana Commedia*, which first appeared as *A Draft of XXX Cantos* in 1930. Pound's political folly alone does not account for the hostility still shown to his work: defending right-of-centre values,

visions, or viciousness didn't hurt the artistic reputation of Wyndham Lewis, say, or T.S. Eliot, or Leni Riefenstahl. The controversy still provoked by Pound's masterwork surely springs from the persistence of formalist critical norms, as we can see by comparing its reception to that of *Ulysses*, another work indebted to Dante. Critics have demonstrated at great length that Joyce's novel organizes a near plethora of observed particulars according to a "mythological method" of correspondence between Bloom's world and its Homeric-Dantean prototypes. Rigour of correspondence is thereby elevated to an aesthetic norm. But since the collage-like form of Pound's *Cantos* cannot be explained by this method, it is all too easily dismissed as formless. So too is the Open Form of *The Dante Quartet*.

If these works are indeed part of the "great blaze" of creativity for which the *Commedia* provided the "little spark" ("Poca favilla gran fiamma seconda": *Par*. 1.34), they inevitably bear a certain formal relation to it in the causal terms Dante himself established. But that relation is loose here rather than rigorous – an artistic choice on Pound's and Brakhage's part. Hence, in their lyrical mode of composition, which I would contrast with Joyce's structuring of *Ulysses* as a modern epic in prose, the correspondence between the *Commedia* and its flaming offshoots remains primarily teleological rather than typological.

Can we counteract a formalist devaluation of *The Dante Quartet* by deriving its oddly lyrical structure from Dante's strikingly original experiments with literary form? A tempting way to defend Brakhage's project would be to argue that the *Commedia* itself (despite its numerically "fettered" structure) strikingly anticipates certain characteristics of Open Form design. Like Pound's *periplum* or Brakhage's "Hell Spit Flexion," the flexible form of the *sacro poema* can accommodate sudden shifts in mood and direction reflecting the poet's unpredictable experiences in the tumultuous course of making his work. Dante seems to have highlighted this aspect of his allegory himself by charting its literal level as a journey in which the narrator is repeatedly taken aback by new experiences encountered along the "nuovo e mai non fatto cammino di questa vita" ("the new, quite untravelled road of this life": *Conv*. 4.12.15). By retracing the pilgrim's route through the poet's memory, the reader also embarks on an adventure into unexplored territory. Since the "cammin di nostra vita" ("journey of our life": *Inf*. 1.1) continually expands the horizons of this cross-cultural adventure, we may expect to open up new artistic territory in continuing Dante's quest to find "something new and previously unattempted in art" ("novum aliquid atque intentatum artis": *DVE* 2.13.13).

Extending this defensive line of argument, we could observe that the form of the *Commedia* is so open that its expansive plotting paradoxically implodes into breathtaking moments of lyrical synchrony. If the text, like "our life," leads us to encounter the new and the marvellous, and if the experience summed up by Brunetto's "Qual maraviglia!" ("What a marvel!": *Inf*. 15.24) is so forceful that the immediacy of the present overwhelms all other temporal modalities, then the very amazement afforded by the poem effectively undoes the successiveness of its narrative structure. "Ad una ad una" gives way to "ecco!" as the poem proceeds from the successive temporality of the journey through the earthbound cantos, which depict the realm of alienation from the Divine, to the quasi-divine temporality of the intensified lyric mode in the heaven-bound cantos, which subsume the past and future into the immediacy of the Divine. Like Pound's *Pagana Commedia*, the Sacred Poem integrates historical and mythical meditations with exalted lyrical passages.

A glance back at Dante's youthful work will confirm our impression of his experimental movement towards Open Form in the *Commedia*. While the *Vita Nuova* wraps a miscellany of disparate lyrical poems inside a courtship history which subordinates them "ad una ad una" to the coherent temporality of narrative, the *Commedia* reverses this effect by rising from the sequentiality of the journey plot to the spacious "ecco!" of the Empyrean's intensified lyric present. Dante's claim that the Sacred Poem was written as a whole only after he had been granted the vision of God described in the final canto is surely an apocalyptic topos, for the

*Commedia* does not really offer a retrospective view of its narrator's lightning-flash conversion from pilgrim to poet.

The *Commedia* departs from the *La Vita Nuova* in another way, one which bears on the open form quality of the work. The *Commedia*'s claim to have been constructed only after the Poet had been granted the visions described in the last cantica (and such moments as the protest right at the beginning of *Inferno*:

"Ahi quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura
esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte
che nel pensier rinova la paura!
Tant' è amara che poco è più morte;
ma per trattar del ben ch'i' vi trovai,
dirò de l'altre cose ch'i' v'ho scorte."(*Inf.* 1. 4-7)

> [Ah, how hard it is to tell what that wood was, wild, rugged, harsh; the very thought of it renews the fear! It is so bitter that death is hardly more so. But, to treat of the good that I found there, I will tell of the other things I saw there.]

are really only a topos, that the *Commedia* does not really offer a retrospective view of how the Poet came to be granted Vision, but actually embodies his struggle for vision. The *Commedia* gives too great evidence of patchwork composition to make the narrative's claims about itself truly believable: the topical, political concerns of *Inferno* seem remote from the philosophical and theological interests of *Paradiso*; and individual passage in the work seem like something that detached from the overall structure and stand alone, without adversely affecting the work as a whole. The *Commedia* seems a composition of diverse passages, tied together by the presence of common individuals (e.g., the Poet's guides), the unfolding of the Poet's and the progressive revelation the worlds beyond our own. And, at a deeper level, the narrative constructs the protagonist as an individual who, as he departs on his journey, is prone to error and (what is more important) to sin, in need of witnessing the Hell's horrors and of experiencing Purgatory's cleansing in order to prepare for the vision granted him in the end. That is, Dante's *Commedia* presents a person in the process of becoming worthy of receiving the Vision. The parallel that Dante constructs between the events depicted in the text and his own efforts at writing the text implies that Dante's artistic endeavour was an effort at spiritual preparation, to prepare himself to become an author worthy of *Paradiso*, with its visionary scenes.

From the viewpoint of Pound and the Open Form poets, what's at stake in Dante's spiritual progress from Hell to Heaven is as much the perfection of his poem as the salvation of his soul. His journey reveals that all poetic composition is an adventure – an unpredictable "*cammin*" in which the poet's worthiness to realize his creative ambitions is discovered to the reader. The unfolding form of the Sacred Poem is ambitiously experimental, then, because there is as much at stake for Dante in its *temporal* completion – poetic fame, political influence, personal vindication – as in the achievement of his great eternal goal. In fact, his fantasy of attaining the Beatific Vision beyond the worldly limits of fame, politics, and justice perversely functions as a perpetual sign of his astonishing literary success in the Here and Now.

The spiritual progress of the *Commedia*'s narrator to suggest the truth about all poetic composition: that it is an adventure that effort is a wager that the poet will become worthy of writing the poem (by being granted Vision). The protean shifts in genre, style, and tone in the *Commedia* reveal the poet pitching himself headlong into his work, adapting it to his changing circumstances, revising it as he trod the paths of exile, and taking the chance that the insights necessary to effect its closure would come to him during its composition. As for his *Pagana Commedia*, ironically, Pound could not bring it to completion: the conditions of his era defeated

him. Fascism failed to deliver the earthly paradise. His friends turned against him: "Their asperities diverted me in my green time," he confessed in a late, fragmentary canto. And so his version of the "poem containing history" was doomed to collapse into a heap of arcane fragments, disparate intertexts, quasi-lyrics which are not as capacious as they should be, and, like narratives, are retrospective. "I have tried to write Paradise," he lamented in the final fragment of the *Cantos*.

Unorthodox as this Open Form reading of the *Commedia* may sound – and it is bound to sound at least somewhat controversial because of its association with Pound – I am convinced that it is more than an idiosyncratic modernist interpretation based on subjective understandings of the creative process mediated from Pound through Olson and Duncan to Brakhage. Textual support for it is also to be found in Joan Ferrante's formalist analysis of Dante's "poetics of chaos and harmony." The *Commedia* progresses from the relatively disjointed plot-line of the *Inferno* to the all-encompassing circularity of the *Paradiso*, she points out, because the poetics upon which Dante based his mutating composition seem to have changed radically from canticle to canticle. Coherence grows throughout the work as its poetic design shifts from the imitation of chaos to the infusion of harmony. The *Paradiso* contains more sustained speeches with intellectually coherent arguments than the *Purgatorio*, which in turn contains more such speeches than the *Inferno*. While few cantos in the *Inferno* open with transitional devices, more of them do in the *Purgatorio*, and many more of them do in the *Paradiso*. Finally, the *Inferno* makes the least frequent use of enjambment, and the *Paradiso* the most frequent. Ferrante's meticulous study of continuity in the *Commedia* lends convincing support to the claim that the poem proceeds from the sequentiality of narrative time to the "all-at-once" temporality of the intensified lyrical mode. Her structural analysis confirms our tercet-by-tercet experience of the work as unfolding from chaos to harmony *naturaliter,* as if we were reading it in the immediate wake of its composition – an effect much sought after by the Open Form poets.

Those features can be accounted as an interest in textual dynamics – in what the text *does* rather than what it says. Duncan, for one, believed that Dante was interested not only in the allegorical production of meanings but also in "textual dynamics." Dante's famous aversion to translations of poetry implicitly affirms the importance of textual dynamics, for, as he argued with respect to his own lyrics,

> it would be against the canzoni's will, so to speak, that their meaning should be explained whenever it would be impossible for them to convey this together with their beauty. As regards this last point, everyone should recognize that no writing fashioned into a harmonious unity by its musical form can be translated from its original language without all its sweetness and harmony being destroyed.
> (*Conv*. 1.7.13-15)

Duncan understood Dante to mean here that the sound of a poem in its original language, the unique interplay of its metres, rhymes, alliterations, enjambments, caesuras, and so forth, can generate poetic meaning apart from the translatable significance of its words. Under Duncan's influence, Brakhage read Dante as a distinguished precursor whose interest in the dynamic effects of art – on the eye as well as the ear – foreshadowed his own fascination with the unorthodox aesthetics of Open Form. Duncan's view of the *Commedia* as a work-forever-in-progress, a quest for Vision which, to an extraordinary degree, calls on memory to discern and interpret the patterns arising from the unfolding succession of events, characters, speeches, allusions in the pilgrim's journey, goes some way towards explaining its appeal for Brakhage.