

## SEQ CHAPTER 1 Intertext in Stan Brakhage's 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch

Between 1964 and 1969, Brakhage devoted a considerable portion of his energies to a series of 8 mm films. By titling these works "*Songs*," Brakhage highlighted their relation to Pound's *Cantos*, to the *canti* that make up Dante Alighieri's *Commedia*, to the biblical Psalms and (at least regarding the particular work that is the subject of this essay) to the *Canticle (or Song) of Mary*. Most of these 8 mm. films were titled only by number, *Song 1*, *Song 2*, etc; but to the twenty-third *canto* in this series, Brakhage gave a special title, *23rd Psalm Branch*. The similarities most films in this series have to his 16 mm. works, as well as to their poetic and musical models, are clear.

By contrast, *23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch* relies somewhat less on corporeal effects. Partly that is because it is largely a found-footage film that incorporates newsreel, documentaries or feature film footage. In addition to the footage Brakhage shot for the film, the film draws on many sources of imagery whose cinematographic styles seem, in comparison with Brakhage's expressive camera handling, quite staid.

The film departed from Brakhage's usual forms and characteristic devices in other ways as well. In the work he did between 1952 and 1957, Brakhage had come identify authenticity with a form of Emersonian self-reliance that once could fairly call "individuality," and he associated, in a most extraordinary manner, individuality with a unique way of seeing. The many devices Brakhage invented in those years, and in the years shortly following, were all in the service of discovering, and conveying, his own unique manner of seeing.

But *23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch* is a crisis work, a work made in the grip of an emotional and spiritual crisis that impelled the filmmaker to break with his most cherished beliefs and to find the means, even means he would ordinarily have repudiated, to convey the depth of his anguish and despair. Among Brakhage's beliefs, none is more commonly cited than his belief in language's reductive effects. The young artist famously declared, near the beginning of *Metaphors on Vision*, "I suggest that there is a pursuit of

knowledge foreign to language and founded upon visual communication, demanding a development of the optical mind and dependent upon perception in the original and deepest sense of the word.”

To discover the nature of thinking prior to its being shaped by words was Brakhage’s project for more than four decades. However, in a significant departure from his usual practice, Stan Brakhage gave words an important role in *23rd Psalm Branch*. Brakhage was an erudite artist, and the intertextual allusions articulated through these textual incorporations are rich and wide-ranging. Because the film’s emotional meaning becomes clearer when the significance of these allusions are apprehended, I propose to examine three of the texts that appear in *23rd Psalm Branch* and their intertext—however, I omit consideration of an allusion of Louis Zukofsky’s “A,” because the implication of that text requires itself an extended commentary, which I offer elsewhere.

The first of these texts appears some time after Brakhage has established the range of visual forms that constitute the film’s principal materials: domestic images; images of the Colorado landscape; war images, including images presenting the disaster of war; and over-painting. It consists of words scratched into black leaders: “Take back Beethoven’s 9th, then,’ he said.” (The text is presented twice within the span of a couple of minutes.) Presumably the remark offers a caustic reference to the joyous choral conclusion of Beethoven’s final symphony—any hope that all humans will become siblings of one another (“*Alle Menschen werden Brüder*”) in an ecstasy of joy must have seemed vain in face of the carnage that was then taking place in Vietnam. When matters come to that, art seems pointless, and an artist whose hopes are dashed can do little more than take back his or her works in an act of defiance.

Those conjectures are certainly true. Nonetheless the intertextual allusion Brakhage makes through this incorporation suggests much more than just that. Moreover, the allusion is so much more precise than these remarks have implied: the incorporated text alludes to a passage from Thomas Mann’s *Doktor Faustus. Das Leben des deutschen Tonsetzers Adrian Leverkühn, erzählt von einem Freunde* (Doctor

Faustus: The Life of the German Composer Adrian Leverkühn, as Told by a Friend); the “he” in the expression is Adrian Leverkühn himself. When he makes that comment, Leverkühn is at war with himself; so, one suggestion Brakhage makes by introducing this allusion is that he is at war with himself.

There is yet more to the allusion. Mann’s *Dr. Faustus* is a novel written by an aging artist, in moral despair over his country’s complacent embrace of Nazism. It depicts Fascism as the tragic consequence of the creative process that overreaches itself because it is not bound to the Good, but is driven by the solitary artist’s mad ambition. The novel unrelentingly details the rise and fall of Adrian Leverkühn (“Leverkühn” could be translated as living audaciously), a gifted musician (modeled, as Mann admitted, on modernist composer Arnold Schönberg). Mann’s novel presents a portrait of a genius obsessed with achievement, narrated by the obsessed man’s friend Serenus Zeitblom (“Serene Flowering of the Age”). The action of the novel takes place in the years 1943–45, as Germany faces ruin. Leverkühn copes with the sense of imminent collapse by vying for the secret that will bring him renown (and so prosperity, and as well as a glory that might outlast the collapse to come). Leverkühn sells his soul to the devil for a generation of renown as the greatest living composer.

Prior to meeting the his Mephistopheles figure (in Palestine, Italy, in 1912), Adrian Leverkühn had become absorbed in Pythagorean doctrines of musical harmony, counterpoint and polyphony taught to him by Wendell Kretzschmar, a German-American lecturer and musicologist. Music, as Pythagoras (and Kretzschmar) taught, is a key to metaphysics, and it links human’s sensory constitution to the order of the cosmos. In this way, it raises consciousness above the transient and fastens it to the eternally enduring order of being: a central purpose of Thomas Mann’s novel is the expose the Fascistic potential inherent in human’s desire for order and for glory. But Brakhage’s aesthetics are based on ideas about the total integration of all elements of an artistic work and about harmonious form, and doubtless Mann’s novel caused him considerable consternation.

Mann understood the fascistic implications of this aesthetic (that is so closed to Brakhage's). Leverkühn associated himself with many hard, but clever, people. Their names tell us about their characters: Sextus Kridwiss (Bankrupt knowledge), an art-expert; Chaim Breisacher (Pulp-musher), a "racial and intellectual type of reckless development and fascinating ugliness"; Dr. Egon Unruhe (Dr. Unrest), a palaeozoologist; Georg Vogler (prattler), a literary historian; Dr. Holzschuher (Dr. Clogs), a Dürer scholar (Albrecht Dürer was a favorite of the Nazis); and the saturnine poet Daniel zur Höhe (Daniel on High). The goal of this group was to cast down the idols of the older generation (as the National Socialists maintained that the crisis of the time required them to do away with the values and practices that had developed in the recent past—or the various avant-gardes of the twentieth century strived to do away with Papa's art and Papa's Kino). The "torturingly clever" discussions at Kridwiss's *table-rond* declared the need to renounce bourgeois softness and to prepare for an age of pre-medieval harshness. So, as Kridwiss's colleague, Leverkühn came to repudiate values of love and human warmth and, as the Nazis had, to embrace irrationalist nihilism. Leverkühn wrote to Zeitblom that collectivism is the true antithesis of Bourgeois culture (to which Zeitblom offered the rejoinder that aestheticism is the herald of barbarism).

Leverkühn formed his pact with the devil after having contracted venereal disease while visiting a brothel, and his frantic activity and hateful associations began to affect his health: after striking his fateful bargain, he started to experience retching, headaches and migraines. (Brakhage, too, was often afflicted with illness.) Despite the toll his work had on his health, he continued to produce new, and finer, music, preparing the way for his great work *Apocalypsis cum figuris*. The novel has *Apocalypse* being performed in Frankfurt in 1926, under Otto Klemperer. Zeitblom describes the work as filled with longing without hope, with hellish laughter transposed and transfigured even into the searing tones of spheres and angels.

As Adrian Leverkühn begins to plan the second oratorio, *The Lamentation of Doctor Faustus*, in 1928, his sister's child, Nepomuk, was sent to live with him. This

beautiful boy, who called himself “Echo,” was beloved by all. As the work of gigantic dimensions developed in Adrian’s mind, the child fell ill and died, and Adrian, despairing, believed that he had killed him by gazing at him with love (contrary to his contract with the devil.

It is then that Adrian Leverkühn issues the declaration that Brakhage quotes in *23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch*: just a few days before his breakdown, after the cruel death of his beloved nephew, Leverkühn opposes his own last work to Beethoven, whom he casts as a the radical composer of enlightenment: “What human beings have fought for and stormed citadels for, what the ecstasies exultantly announced—that is not to be. It will be taken back. I will take it back,” Leverkühn says to his disciple Zeitblom, who replies, “I don’t understand, dear man. What will you take back?” Leverkühn answers simply, “The Ninth Symphony.” Thus, after observing the terrible suffering and death of a child, Leverkühn would rescind Beethoven’s renowned work. Because God does not permit such goodness and innocent nobility to exist in this world, goodness and nobility should not be celebrated in great works of art. What Leverkühn really protests, then, is the solace that art provides. He proposes to counter that tendency: “I will take it back.”

Leverkühn’s defiant gesture is even more sweeping. What he proposes to take back are all Enlightenment values. Schiller’s “An die Freude” was very much an Enlightenment text. “An die Freude” concerns brotherhood and freedom, equality and democracy—these are the values the Enlightenment produced. But Schiller’s ode proffers Enlightenment values in pagan (read, anti-Christian, anti-superstitious) form, for in the poem, “Freude” names the cosmic *energeia* that brings all beings and events to presence:

Blumen lockt sie aus den Keimen,	She lures flowers from the buds,
Sonnen aus dem Firmament,	Suns out of the firmament,
Sphären rollt sie in den Räumen,	She rolls spheres in the spaces
Die des Sehers Rohr nicht kennt.	That the seer’s telescope does not

know.

Thus, Leverkühn also attacks this faith in an all-pervading *energeia* that accomplishes the *dēmiourgos's* creative work, the *dēmiourgos's poiesis*. But there is another parallel that relates to the film's title. Zeitblom had asserted that Leverkühn's *The Lamentation of Dr. Faustus* negated "by its genius that transition of [Beethoven's] symphony into vocal jubilation"—this was the act of revocation (*Zurücknahme*) Leverkühn accomplished. No doubt, too, Brakhage, in his identification with Leverkühn, conceived of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch as a *Zurücknahme* that prevents the transition of artworks into jubilation.

In Mann's novel, Leverkühn's protest has many profound implications. I emphasize one of them: by making variation his principal working method, Beethoven had set music free—each variation departs from the general theme, asserting its freedom to individuate itself. Leverkühn (Schönberg), Mann implies, took music to a stage at which all musical elements could be integrated in a totalized organization. This entailed limiting the freedom to produce variations that are individuated by their musical character. Thus, he put music back into fetters. Taken as a political analogy, Leverkühn's/Schönberg's *Rückkehr*, the re-fettering of musical elements after Beethoven had liberated them, may stand for the antithesis in the dialectic of the enlightenment. What is especially important for our purposes, though, is that Brakhage was also committed to an aesthetic of total organization. The novel may have prompted Brakhage to feel anxiety over his possible similarities to Leverkühn, and that his interest in total organization now had refettered film imagery that the preceding avant-garde's his expressionist style (of those of his avant-garde predecessors like Maya Deren who many psychodramas) had liberated.

So 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch is a revocation of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. But it is also a revocation of another song of solace, perhaps the ultimate song of solace, and of the very idea of art providing solace. "No more art of solace," Brakhage is declaring. "No shepherd protects me. No green pastures are prepared for me. My soul finds no

refreshment. To be the true, honest filmmaker, I must acknowledge that all that is gone.” Perhaps he declares as well that what lies ahead can only be madness. So, in making *23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch*, Brakhage would compose not a *Lied an der Freude*, but its exact counterpart, “in the most melancholy sense of the word.” It will be a negation of the religious spirit, a work dealing with the devil as tempter, with apostasy, and damnation. Brakhage’s Faust cantata, the equal of Leverkühn’s, will not allow any consolation, appeasement, or redemption.

Brakhage clearly identifies with Leverkühn. What does this identification suggest? Possibly that Brakhage felt that like Leverkühn at the time that fictional composer proposed to retract Beethoven’s symphony, he had become hard—hardened by his commitment to a tradition of uncompromising rigour— but now was about to crack, broken by the experience of affliction and loss, of isolation from the common run of humanity. Another possible implication of the identification is even more troubling. A theme of Mann’s novel is the proximity of disengaged aestheticism and barbarism, of beauty and crime—of radical aesthetics and Fascism. Zeitblom says about Leverkühn’s *Apocalypsis con figuris*, that it had “a peculiar kinship with, was in spirit a parallel to, the things I had heard at Kridwiss’s *table-rond*,” the inter-war circle in Munich that Mann describes flatly as “arch-Fascist.”

Zeitblom refers to the “substantial identity of the most blessed and the most heinous, the inner identity of the chorus of angelic children and hell’s laughter.” If in *Apocalypsis cum figuris* there was hellish laughter transposed and transfigured into the searing tones of spheres and angels, we can be sure that in *The Lamentation of Dr. Faustus*, there would be a fall from the realm of angels, into hell. Likewise, Brakhage may well have felt that his own quest for order and form was a quest to transfigure brute reality into the beauty, and so a “reverse” was waiting for him—that he, too, was fated to descend into hell (or, perhaps, that the afflictions he experienced during the period he made *23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch* were evidence that he was already in hell).

*23rd Psalm Branch*’s despair concerning role of art has deep roots in the

conceptual and affective content of the film. As the film's frequent use of means for obscuring its photographic images shows, despair, anguish, and a pervading sense of menace can manifest themselves in as the negative hallucination that destroys all mental representations and opens a tear in the manifold of awareness. The destruction wreaked by the negative hallucination threatens one of Brakhage's most cherished beliefs—the Romantic belief, expounded with extraordinary force and beauty in his major mythopoeic film *Dog Star Man*—that the imagination is capable of reintegrating a disassociated sensibility in which reason and emotion have become separated. In the process of reconnecting reason and emotion, the imagination can also re-integrate human consciousness and nature. 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch reveals the effects of the loss of that ideal, of that hope being dashed: the mechanism of identification with the aggressor provides energy to the negative hallucination, which then answers the destructiveness of external world with a destructiveness of its own. What is more, the process reveals the impotence of imagination—negative imagery insists on penetrating into consciousness' inner recesses, and the self cannot keep it out, nor can the imagination (the self's true activity) transform it, so forcefully and insistently does it impose itself. And since the imagination cannot transform such brutally insistent imagery, and so cannot make the imagery its own, that imagery presents itself to consciousness as an alien entity.

While Brakhage had earlier accepted the Romantic belief that the imaginary is an agency that heals the breach between self and world, these dystonic images which have invaded the self's inner core seem to prove that that endeavour is in vain. The terrible force with which the imagery of the Vietnam impacts upon consciousness defeats the protections normally offered by the processes of projection and introjection, as it allows "bad objects" to enter the interior chamber of consciousness and fails to shelter "good objects" there—this is the meaning of the story of imagery of the Vietnam war entering the Brakhage household.

What is more, the twenty-third psalm of the Bible is a song of praise to successfully achieved introjection. The psalmist declares, "Yea, though I walk through

the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou *art* with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me” (*Psalms* 23: 4 A.V.). Internalizing love’s comforting capacity—a comfort experiences as belonging to a different order—is the essence of introjection. One can be even more concrete about the psalm’s allusions to the processes of projection and introjection: for the rod that the fourth verse refers is a club shepherds used to fend off wild animals, while the staff is a crooked instrument they used to keep the sheep from wandering off. One instrument kept the sheep within the protective fold, the other kept out beasts that threatened to attack and destroy the innocent creatures within the fold. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm’s image of the rod and staff relates to the opposition of inside and outside that is at the core of processing of projection and introjection—and that structures *23rd Psalm Branch*.

For a filmmaker who has celebrated the triumph of imagination, as Brakhage has, it is devastating to recognize the imagination’s impotence: it is hardly surprising, then, that he strove to refuse that insight. The desperate acceleration of the pace of the film conveys the anxiety Brakhage felt to demonstrate that, in the end, the creative imagination can prevail even over a destructive forces as strong and unrelenting as those unloosed by that blood-drenched century in which Brakhage worked. The feeling of devastation that follows on recognizing the imagination’s impotence is also indicated by the prominent role a dichotomizing structure has *23rd Psalm Branch*, a structure that opposes, in a highly schematized fashion, several types of images: images from the past with images from the present; images from Brakhage’s personal space (domestic scenes and the Colorado landscape) with images of the more distant, less personal spaces of the outside world; images of home with images of war; forms painted by hand with historical footage. The structuring principle behind all these oppositions is the highly fraught dialectic between personal space and the alien other that intrudes upon that personal space—a opposition that Brakhage’s imagination struggles (though at first without success) to maintain.

What gives that dialectical principle its affective power is the feeling of the

intractably factual quality of the alien destructive forms of the outside world as they intrude into the space of consciousness—that force with which these untransformed and therefore unassimilated images impose themselves on consciousness resembles the force with which television’s imagery of the Vietnam war intruded into the Brakhage household, imposed itself on the psyches therein, and created strife there. Television images imposed themselves on consciousness as an alien, mechanical imaginary that could not be assimilated into the self’s imaginary. Among the tragic losses the film treats are those of the mechanisms of projection and introjection that give the imagination (the self) a safe place to be. The self feels violated when violent material is harboured within the self: when the self is subjected to a violent invasion, the whole world becomes place of terror and destruction. This is indeed the *imago mundi* that *23rd Psalm Branch* presents.

The text “Take back Beethoven’s 9th, then, he said” is followed by a long panning shot of passing landscapes that are distinguished from those of the long prologue by being more legible. In keeping with the film’s structure of oppositions, Brakhage introduces many images of destruction into this lateral movement of the panning shot: a montage of explosions; then explosions combined with guns firing; the explosion of an atomic bomb; land submerged under a flood; a cannon firing; water bursting over a dam; more bombs; and a green-hued image of the façade of apartment being brought down by wreckers; burning buildings; a boat sinking; and bombs exploding in the sky. That the film evolves its structure from the polarization of opposites becomes even more evident as Brakhage intercuts brief shots of the Colorado landscape with historical footage depicting his a man working with a detonating device: the man sets everything in place, crouches near the device, and a bomb explodes—destroying an area surrounded mountains that resemble those that surround the cabin where Brakhage lived at the time he made this film (and featured in *My Mountain: Song 27*).

A passage of pulsating colour frames follows, then an image of the filmmaker sitting in the sun with his shirt off, composing a letter. The shot was taken with the

camera so close to the page he is writing on that its movement seems accelerated and we cannot see very much of the letter of he is composing. However, we can read its beginning, "Oh, Jane," written in the filmmaker's distinctive handwriting. Soon, "Dear Jane" appears, and then, as see "that was a tree in shape . . . the checker boards and zig-zags of Man . . . and the crystals which . . . to 50 thousand feet . . . wrinkles . . . [on a new line] Nature . . . also gorgeous." Evidently Stan Brakhage is describing to his wife Jane his responses to seeing the earth from a very high altitude: the use of expressions like "there was a tree in shape," "crystals," "wrinkles" and "gorgeous" prompts us to conjecture that the world strikes him, when seen from that height, as more tranquil and attractive than it seems when he is embroiled in those affairs. Of course, from such a height, the events seem remote: the tranquility that results from being so far above nature allows Brakhage to find a safe place for the self, above all that might assault him and invade him. But even this sense of security has a dark association: it is the result of transcending the everyday world, and the effort to find a realm above the everyday is exactly what Thomas Mann criticizes in *Leverkühn/Schönberg*.

The reference to zig-zags is signal: The psalmist, in the twenty-third psalm, declares that the Lord ". . . leadeth him] in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake." (*Psalms 23: 3, A.V.*) Or that is how the most familiar English translation (the translation with which Brakhage would have been acquainted) renders the original: a more accurate (if less poetic) translation of the original for "paths of righteousness" would be "paths of rightness," and some less distinguished translations actually give it as "right paths." As an avid reader of Olson, Brakhage would be likely to connect "right" with "straight" and to conceive of "the zig-zags of man" as paths of errancy. God's mild kindness, testified to by the psalm's image of the Good Shepherd, is needed to keep humans on right (straight) paths, and it is that kindness which the film calls upon to restore a sense of innocence and of being safe (of belonging to a flock of sheep tended to by the Mild Shepherd.)

After showing us these words, the camera whirls away from the letter (as though

to confirm that humans are constantly zig-zagging about, constantly on the go, and completely lacking roots), and we see stones, the ground sweeping by, flashes of sun with a bluish cast (possibly to convey that the filmmaker is seeing the air as filled with orgonic energy), and then hand-painted forms in a myriad of colours. The images of stones, dynamized ground, and (possibly) the sun filling the air with orgonic energy suggest Brakhage's efforts to endow the alien world of Nature with attributes of consciousness. The painting-on-film, on the other hand, suggests the realm of the subjective (as it so often does in Brakhage's films)—sometimes in an effort to obscure the internalized image, sometimes in an effort to reconnect the self to nature and to the human world (however violent they may be), and sometimes even in an effort express the energies of the external realm. True to the film's pattern of dichotomies, the following images present domestic scenes (i.e., of events belonging to the filmmaker's personal space): we see pictures of his home, images of his children playing naked and riding a sledge, less rapid shots of laundry hung out dry, which seem serene until one notices the ominous shadow of tree shadows cast on a sheet—the ominousness of these shadows is emphasized by the slower pace of these shots. There follow several static images of a mannikin's head, which lacks facial features that are joined by very disruptive and aggressive splice bars (which again provide evidence of the filmmaker's complicity in acts of destruction). Soon after the faceless mannikin's head, we see an image of a sleeping child, who reappears shortly afterwards with paint over her face: the relation between the child and the faceless mannikin is that between a personalized and impersonal imagery (another form of the relation between the personal and the alien realms).

Shots of clouds, taken from an airplane, follow; these images are marked with a very pronounced frame line across the top of the screen—another form that indicates the destructive impulses the filmmaker experiences. Violent bursts of clear leader strengthen the sense of that Brakhage is engaging in acts of formal violence. The montage incorporates images of the wings of airplanes, of the dead, of crematoria, with shots

taken from the airplane illustrating the idea of “zig-zigs” and “checker boards of man.”

Then the range of imagery expands somewhat, and the montage seems to hold a more dispersed set of images in a tentative unity. Night lights of a city appear, at first as superimposition. Then we see a newsreel image containing the name “NAGASAKI”; that image is answered with one presenting the New York skyline. The relation between the two images is a relation between “here” and “there,” between “America” and “the Far East”; it is therefore another version of the polarity between personal space and outside realm that provides the film with its central structuring principle and suggests that the filmmaker’s American homeland might be destroyed as Nagasaki was.

Consistent with the film’s dichotomizing structure, the texts that appear in the *23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch* can be grouped into three paired sets. The allusion to Andrian Leverkühn in Thomas Mann’s *Dr. Faustus* pairs with a text from Louis Zukovsky’s “A”-11 —the latter text, which includes the line “Song, my song, raise grief to music” I discuss elsewhere. The second pair of word sets appearing in *23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch* comprises the references to Jane Brakhage and to the *Canticle (or Song) of Mary*. In *23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch*, Jane is addressed almost as the protectrice, as a Marian figure. This reference is paired with an actual Marian reference, to the *Song of Mary*, or the *Magnificat*, which appears in Luke 1: 46-55. The reference to *Song of Mary* is brief, but very significant: we see the word “ficat” and, of course, conjecture that the characters are part of the word “Magnificat.” Like the allusion to Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony* with its *Lied an der Freude*, this allusion is drenched in significances that stem from the important place the *Song of Mary* has in the tradition of Western music. Latin and vernacular translations of the *Canticle of Mary*, of *Mary’s Magnificat*, have been integrated into the Roman Catholic Church’s liturgy from at least the time of St. Benedict and St. Caesarius (5<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> Centuries CE). The term “Magnificat” derives from the first words of that passage in the Vulgate, “Magnificat anima mea Dominum, /et exsultavit spiritus meus in Deo salvatore meo, /quia respexit humilitatem ancillae suae.” In the

Douay-Rheims translation, the text of the *Magnificat* reads:

My soul doth magnify the Lord.

And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.

Because he hath regarded the humility of his handmaid; for behold from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.

Because he that is mighty hath done great things to me; and holy is his name.

And his mercy is from generation unto generations, to them that fear him.

He hath shewed might in his arm: he hath scattered the proud in the conceit of their heart.

He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble.

He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away.

He hath received Israel his servant, being mindful of his mercy:

As he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed for ever.

These words are spoken by the Virgin Mary to her cousin Elizabeth. When Elizabeth praises Mary for her faith, Mary sings the *Magnificat* in response.

Amongst Roman Catholics, Mary is the “preferential option of the poor,” for the passage in Luke is thought to allude to the lived-experiences and piety of the ‘Anawim (i.e. the humble “Poor Ones,” poor in both the spiritual and material sense of the word), a Greek-speaking circle of Jewish-Christian house-churches known to Luke. The *Magnificat* addresses the daily struggle of Luke’s people of faith—Mary’s song speaks of the freeing joy of God’s redeeming activities, rescuing the humble from their suffocating world milieu. If the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm takes consolation in God’s power, the *Song of Mary* revels in the liberation that takes place as the spirit of God enters the souls of the poor and releases them to delight (the delight like that expressed in the vocal jubilation of the “Lied an der Freude” of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony). It is, then, a celebration of the God’s spirit breaking into the lives of the ordinary poor and transforming them.

But if, as I have argued, *23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch* is a *Zurücknahme* of the *23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm*, we might expect that it is also a revocation of the *Magnificat*. The *Magnificat* itself is a song that celebrates a new orientation, a homage to God's positive and life-transforming transformation of the lives of Mary and her contemporaries. As a song of new orientation, it represents the type of those antitypal "songs of new orientation" that appear in the First Covenant. Mary's "song of new orientation" closely parallels the *Song of Hannah*, Samuel's mother, in I Samuel 2: 1–10; indeed, there are conspicuous echoes of Hannah's earlier declarations in the *Magnificat*. For example, Hannah proclaims: "My heart exults in the Lord; my horn is exalted in the Lord . . . I rejoice in Your salvation" (I Samuel 2: 1, *cf.* Luke 1: 47). She characterizes herself as the Lord's "handmaid" four times (three times in verse 11 and once in verse 16), as Mary does twice, in Luke 1: 38 and 48. The mother of Samuel expresses her elation: "The Lord makes poor and makes rich; He brings low, He also exults. He raises the poor from the dust; He lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor" (I Samuel 2: 7–8, *cf.* Luke 1: 51–53). In addition, the Mary/Hannah parallelism continues from the *Magnificat* into Luke's second chapter. Mary presents her child, Jesus, to the Lord at the temple in Jerusalem (Luke 2: 22, 27); Hannah brings her child, Samuel, to the house of the Lord at Shiloh (I Samuel 1: 24).

Besides Hannah, another female canticle-singer that Mary is patterned upon is Judith, who is said to be "blessed among women" (Judith 13: 18; *cf.* Luke 1: 42 for Mary in Elizabeth's benediction), and who also sings "to my God a new song," a song for the oppressed and marginalized peoples (Judith 16: 1–17). And finally, the matriarch Leah, the wife of Jacob/Israel, provides another lyrical background through her response to her God-provided miracle sons: "Because the Lord has regarded my low estate . . . Fortunate am I, for all women call me fortunate" (Genesis 29: 32 and 30: 13). But Mary's self-description in the *Magnificat* moves well beyond the observations of Leah or Elizabeth, because now not only all women—but "all generations.

The new orientation for Sarah's and Hannah's and Leah's fortunes are grounds

for hope, for trust in Love's power. The many antitypes for Mary suggest that all woman are open to the Spirit's miracles. Hence, the rescinding of the Canticle of Mary and its antitypes entails rescinding the hope that God cherishes and tends to the poor, the hope that the spirit of God might enter the souls of the poor and releases them to delight. It is a rescinding of love (an act to which Leverkühn committed himself in his pact with the devil).

The third paired set of words Brakhage incorporated into *23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch* relates the phrases "I can't go on" and "I must stop! The War is as thoughts/thought (IDEAS, IMAGES), pattern. . . (RHYTHM) are—as endless as . . . precise as eyes' hell is!" In one set, these words appear as handwritten on paper; in the other, they appear incised into the film's emulsion. These words appear following a section composed of newsreel images of soldiers, parades, crowds, Hitler, Mussolini, and other public figures: the images are obscured by dots and circles stenciled over them (as Brakhage tries to deny the potentially traumatizing TV imagery). This passage involves a high-tension dialogue between this imagery and patterns of dots and circles layered over them: sometimes the imagery can be easily seen through the stenciling, while at other times the overlaid forms all but conceal the image from view. Then, as though out of nowhere, we see "I can't go on" scratched into black leader. (The text is obviously preparing us for a transition to Part II, when the filmmaker, somehow, will go on.) More stenciled dots and circles appear more explosions and more painted forms. Then we are presented with an intensely (violently) bright image of the filmmaker's hand holding a pen and writing, in black ink on white paper, "I must stop. The war is as in thoughts." The shot ends abruptly—violently, one might say—with a cut to black leader and the words "IDEAS," then "IMAGES" carved into the black emulsion. The roughly carved white letters on black ground end as abruptly as they started and the film returns to the intensely bright footage of the filmmaker jotting a note: he reconsiders what he had just written, crosses out the "s" on thoughts (with a diagonal line), then and begins writing another word (that begins with "p"). The alternation of images of intensely bright shots,

which have white ground, and the shots with a black ground create a prolonged sort of flicker effect. It also reinforces the suggestion made by having the writer first write “thoughts” and then cross out the “s”: the interpolation of black leader interrupts the writing of the note, suggesting the mental hesitations that result from attempts to form new thoughts—thus, it reinforces the sense that the film is presenting a dynamics of consciousness.

The phrase “precise as eyes’ hell is!” alludes to the concluding passage in a much read poem by Charles Olson, “In Cold Hell, In Thicket”:

precise as hell is, precise  
as any words, or wagon,  
can be made.

The relevance of that entire poem to Brakhage’s enterprise in *23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch* is telling. The second section reads:

All things are made bitter, words even  
are made to taste like paper, wars get tossed up  
like lead soldiers used to be  
(in a child’s attic) lined up  
to be knocked down, as I am

That phrase, “words even/ are made to taste like paper” articulates an allusion to Pound’s famous *Usura Canto*, “Canto XLV”

with usura, sin against nature,  
is thy bread ever more of stale rags  
Is thy bread dry as paper,

with no mountain wheat, no strong flour

Pound's Canto XLV is another song about the enfeebling of art and consciousness. It states his conviction that economic factors determine the superstructural features (the social relations and the culture) of given place and era: Pound's term for the cluster of economic factors that have enfeebled the culture of that era that began sometime in the 1200s (and, in his view, accelerated after 1656) is "usury." Olson's poem concerns the difficulty of trying to make art that will raise one's grief to art, while Pound's poem is even more despondent, for it declares that art is not possible in the era when usury has corrupted consciousness. Against that view, Olson continues to hold out the hope that art can give to dignity to suffering:

God, that man, as his acts must, as there is always  
a thing can do, he can raise himself, he raises  
on a reed he raises his

And there the line breaks off, as Olson's hopes for his reed song go unexpressed, likely even uncomprehended. It requires the greatest precision, the utmost of accuracy, to raise suffering

. . . raised

As though a word, an accuracy were a pincer!

This

is the abstract, this

is the cold doing, this

is the almost impossible

so shall you blame those

who give it up, those who say  
it isn't worth the struggle?

Brakhage longs to embrace Olson's hope that a song could raise his grief to a dignity, even if the task requires an almost superhuman effort. However, he has come to feel that that defeat is inevitable.

In the first section (here I use the word "section" to refer to what in more conventional poetry we call a stanza) of Part I, reads:

In hell it is not easy  
to know the trceries, the markings  
(the canals, the pits, the mountings by which space  
declares herself, arched, as she is, the sister,

We think of Brakhage's note in which (we conjecture) he told Jane about viewing a landscape from an airplane and examining the trceries of hills and valleys.

A new section begins three or four lines later.

How shall he who is not happy, who has been so made unclear,  
who is no longer privileged to be at ease, who, in this brush, stands  
reluctant, imageless, unpleasured, caught in a sort of hell, how  
shall he convert this underbrush, how turn this unbidden place  
how trace and arch again  
the necessary goddess?

Olson, Brakhage implies, understands the anguish felt by the artist who no longer feels he can convert grief into music. Brakhage seeks solace in knowing that he has a kindred spirit.

As this is a poem about Cold Hell, “In Cold Hell, in Thicket: II” begins with an allusion to Dante Aligheri’s *Inferno*.

ya, selva oscura, but hell now  
is not exterior, is not to be got out of, is  
the coat of your own self, the beasts  
emblazoned on you

. . .

Who

can endure it where it is, where the beasts are met,  
where yourself is, your beloved is, where she  
who is separate from you, is not separate, is not  
goddess, is, as your core is,  
the making of one hell

That, of course, is the very lesson that Brakhage learned—that the beast is inside him.

A few lines later Olson presents another view of a landscape from above—a landscape that was a battlefield.

. . . even from

the beauty of the rotting fern his eye  
knows, as he looks down, as,  
in utmost pain if cold can be so called,  
he looks around this battlefield, this  
rotted place where men did die, where boys  
and immigrants have fallen, where nature  
(the years that she’s took over)  
does not matter, where

that men killed, do kill, that woman kills  
is part, too, of his question

And extending the allusion to Dante's *Inferno*, II: 2 opens

That it is simple, what the difference is—  
that a man, men, are now their own wood  
and thus their own hell and paradise

“A man, men, are now their own wood” —what traps us is within us. The thought terrified  
Brakhage.

*23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch* is in two parts of approximately thirty minutes each. Brakhage uses words only in Part 1. That Part 1 is the part that deals explicitly with the Vietnam war makes clear that the crisis that prompts Brakhage to set aside (and only for this film) some long-cherished principles has to do with war. Part One includes newsreel footage from before and during World War II, “home movies” of the Brakhage household and natural environs, passages that have been painted with india ink (which cracks as it

dries, leaving fascinating patterns) and in various colors, and stenciled with black dots usually, usually in rows. (That Brakhage managed to paint and stencil on tiny, tiny 8 mm. frames reveals much about the obsession that drove the filmmaker at this point in his life.) The stencilling alludes to the dots of a television raster.

*23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch* is even more deeply rooted in studies of the history of National Socialism than the inclusion of imagery from that historical era suggests. In a troubled letter to Jonas Mekas, dated “Late Sept., 1967”), Brakhage writes.

I have, as you know, spent almost two years studying the phenomenon of War—with primary emphasis upon the vast mass of written and photographed material the Nazis left us . . . — and have made *23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch* out of the necessity to comprehend that studied material, particularly those images, which have been shoved at me in every conceivable distortion of ‘mass media’ since I was a child . . . I shall attempt, in this letter, to write about what I think did really begin my necessity to make *23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch* . . . : the similarities between the popular social movements late ‘20s, pre-Nazi, Germany and United States today.

Twenties Germany found itself in midst of a youth-originated Wanderlust [Brakhage is likely alluding to the Wandervogel] movement similar in some respects to several that occurred previously in that country’s history . . . but specifically emphatic with respect to the following ‘catchwords’, and the ideologies clustered loosely around them, as being “Good”: (1) “Free Love”/ “Sexual Freedom”; (2) “Brotherhood” (‘between ALL men’) / “Brotherhood-Sisterhood” (‘between men and women . . . happily there is no martialled “Sisterhood” that women have ever really fallen for outside that specific one which exists within the family); (3) “Nature Worship”; (4) “Anti-(‘Academic’)-Art” (I am referring specifically to the neo-“Dada” movement of that time . . . we might call it the “2<sup>nd</sup> Dada” movement, France’s being the “First” and our current “Fluxus”-etc. being the “Third”); (5) “Drugs” (the taking of same as ‘Religion’ . . . I make that specific qualification because, after all, humans have always been drugging; and those who primarily do so have always been telling the other that it “felt GOOD,” etc.: but there are particular times in history when the use of drugs has sought to sanctify itself thru its human ‘pushers’ by taking on ‘airs’ of “Religion” . . .; (6) and “Peace”!

I think the similarities between that time-and-place and this, between the “Wanderlust” and the “Hippie” movements, are apparent on the page” (Brakhage, *The Brakhage Scrapbook*, 124-5).

The Frankfurt school theorist Siegfried Kracauer linked the mystical and cosmic themes in German films of the Weimar era to proto-Fascist ways of thinking. It is interesting, in this connection that T.W. Adorno served as Mann’s advisor on musical topics when Mann was writing the book.

Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus: The Life of the German Composer Adrian Leverkühn, as Told by a Friend* trans. H.T. Lowe-Porter (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), 489.

Though Adorno had reservations about Romantic music in general, he did acknowledge

the importance of the spontaneously generated variation and criticized Schönberg because Adorno believed) his system destroyed the very spontaneity that gave emancipated music its essence. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, translated by Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster (New York: The Seabury Press, 1973), 22.

If Brakhage imaginatively engaged in that process, that would make it all the more difficult for Brakhage to feel that he is not complicit in the society's destructive bent—that he was not guilty.

Adorno remarked in *The Philosophy of Modern Music* that “what radical music perceives is the untransfigured suffering of man,” and celebrated artists' and musicians' usefulness in overcoming some of the social contradictions through the development of emancipated or autonomous art. (Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, 105.) Brakhage might have recognized his affinity with “the untransfigured suffering of man,” yet have come to believe that the resolute facticity of photographic and cinematographic images precluded raising the expression suffering to the status of an autonomous art.

The tonalities of colour fields and painting in *23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch* merit additional commentary. P. Adams Sitney reveals that among the texts that Brakhage studied while making *23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch* was Oswald Spengler's *The Decline and Fall of the West*. (v. P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: the American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2002), 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, 217). Spengler argued that each different people of each different age showed a different set of colour preferences. The Greeks favoured reds and yellows—red because it suggested life and love. Christians, in revolt against Greek “paganism,” favoured the opposite end of the spectrum, greens and blues, as well as whites: for them, red was too highly charged, because it was the colour of the sacred blood and yellow was a mark of shame, while cool colours like blue and green and white suggested contemplation and prayer. Later, the Romantics associated blues and greens with nature and white, the various shades of grey and black with abstract thought and the unknown.

Spengler's correlation of colour preferences with the characteristic feature of a culture might go a long way towards explaining Brakhage's use of colour. Spengler's commentary on Romantic colour preferences seems to me particularly promising. Edgar Allan Poe was one of Stan Brakhage's favorite poets (and, according to the radio series “A Test of Time,” Poe's “A Dream within a Dream” his favorite poem). Consider frequent reference to whites, greys, blacks and reds in *Tales of Horror*.

The images of the Brakhage home and of his children playing naked and riding a sledge and the early images of laundry on the clothesline could be taken too as Brakhage's efforts to identify with Zukofsky. That identification is soon forcefully undone.

Louis Zukofsky's Table of Contents for “A” gives the date of “A”-11 as 1950; however, it was likely composed in the first half of 1951.

It should be stated that in using the term “new orientation,” I am alluding to Walter Bruggemann's taxonomy of the Psalms. V. *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984).

In using the term “reversal,” I draw upon Steve Moyise, *The Psalms in the New Testament* (London, Clark 2004).

Charles Olson, “In Cold Hell, In Thicket,” in *The Collected Poems of Charles Olson*

(Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1997), 160.

*Ibid.*, 155.

Charles Olson, "In Cold Hell, In Thicket," in *Collected Poems*, 155.

*Ibid.*, 156.

*Ibid.*, 158.

*Ibid.*, 158.

*Ibid.*, 158.