“Moving Visual Thinking”:
Dante, Brakhage, and the Works of *Energeia*

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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*. He had worked on the preparation of the film itself nearly daily 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 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 centimeters because Brakhage used different film formats as his “canvas.” Though the format increases in size from section – 16 mm, 35 mm, 70 mm Cinemascope, and IMAX – the “canvas,” of course, never exceeds the miniature dimensions of the frames in 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”) clearly 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). The cornices and summit of the Holy Mountain (*Purgatorio* 10-33) correspond to section three (“Purgation”), and the ten heavens from the Moon to the Empyrean (*Paradiso* 1-33) are compressed into section four (“existence is song”).

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 six eighths (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 quality of the painting also differs from section to section. The first section consists primarily 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 *Commedia* since high school, he tells us. Indeed, shortly after he finished high school, a University of Denver journal published an article on Dante that he had written while still a high-school student. 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 over forty years.

1. Brakhage and the Poets

The persistence of Brakhage's interest in Dante is also due in some measure to the formative influence of American poets Robert Duncan and Charles Olson on 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 the social and psychological impact of speech acts. In *Dante Études*, a series of forty lyrics dating from late in his career (1984), Duncan expounds his concept 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 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 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 to make on Brakhage through Duncan's mediation, 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 emphasize 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 very 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. Inspired by its encyclopedic character, Ezra Pound strove to extend the medieval frontiers of knowledge into the modern world by fashioning his own poetic compendium of the important historical and cultural developments since Dante's day. Following Pound, I was motivated by Dante's universalizing vision to undertake *The Book of All the Dead*. Like Pound's *Cantos*, my film anthology can be "read" as a meditation on the multiple worlds of discourse contained within the *Commedia*; as a modernization of its summa-like survey of diverse modes of thought and means of knowing; and more concretely, as a projection of its dazzlingly complex homage to poets of earlier ages rendered through imitations of their style (which I read as embodiments of their way of thinking). But the encyclopedic 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 quite antithetical to the Emersonian cast of Brakhage's thought and vision.

Brakhage's renown as the preeminent maker of lyrical films further distances him from the the compendious poet of the *Commedia*. Though the *Vita Nuova* sustains Dante's renown as the preeminent 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.

How they relate words to images also sets the two makers 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 perceived 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 very 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 in order to avoid depictions of any sort. 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 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 enduring

appeal, we need only look back at the drawings of Zbigniew Pospieszynski and the sculptures of Andrew Pawlowski discussed in this volume. Their work, in turn, recalls 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 something of 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 even 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 plethora of observed particulars in accordance with 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 the 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 things 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). The *Commedia* accordingly presents "our life" not just as a sequence of distinct spiritual crises but also as a process of continual aesthetic discovery.

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

marvelous, 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 heavenbound 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. Instead, it embodies his long hard struggle for vision. The evidence of its patchwork composition is too abundant to render Dante's unitary claims about its miraculous genesis truly believable. For one thing, the topical satiric concerns of *Inferno* seem remote from the philosophical and theological interests of *Paradiso*; for another, the great set-speeches are clearly detachable from the overarching structure and can stand on their own without adversely affecting the work as a whole. At a deeper level, the narrator presents himself as a fallen soul who, at the start of his journey and for most of its unfolding, is bewildered by philosophical doubt and beset by deadly sin. Precisely because he desperately needs to witness the horrors of Hell and to participate in the cleansing rituals of Purgatory, he can elide his life with "our life" and construct himself as an everyman in the process of becoming worthy of receiving the Beatific Vision. The parallel he sustains between his struggle to complete the journey and his effort to compose the poem clearly implies that his artistic project – all along – was to prepare himself to become an author worthy of rendering visible the "invisible things of God" to all readers open to his high fantasy in the visionary scenes of *Paradiso*.

From the viewpoint of Pound and the Open Form poets, what's at stake in Dante's spiritual progress from Hell to Heaven is not so much the salvation of his soul as the perfection of his poem. 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 a great deal at stake for Dante in its *temporal* completion – poetic fame, political influence, personal vindication – besides 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.

If we interpret the supposedly eternal form of the *Commedia* in the most radically temporal way, which is how Pound interpreted it, its protean shifts in genre, style, and tone 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 the *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 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*, but 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 cogent 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.

Duncan, for one, believed that Dante was interested not only in the allegorical production of meanings but also in “textual dynamics”: what a text *does* rather than what it says. 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, is capable of generating 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 upon 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.

2. Brakhage and the Philosophers

The Open Form approach to the *Commedia* as an ongoing (and never-ending) quest for vision flies exuberantly in the face of the weighty Catholic tradition of commentary on the encyclopedic completeness or totality of Dante’s masterwork. Sustaining that tradition during the early twentieth century was Père Mandonnet, the great French Thomist whose doctrinally “Closed Form” reading of the poem endowed its diverse passages on nature, grace, love, sin,

and free will with the scholastic rigour and authority of the great summas of the thirteenth century. Though modernist in its aesthetic implications, Duncan's transgressive rejection of what we might call the orthodox "medievalization" of Dante nevertheless prompts us to consider how medieval culture construed the relation between word and image.

For Dante's contemporaries, painting was primarily the illustration of textually transmitted stories – scriptural tales, pagan myths, saint's lives, chivalric romances, local histories. Since medieval thought tended to relate painting and literature (or more precisely, narrative) through the operations of the soul, a harmonious triad of word, image, and subjectivity prevailed where Renaissance humanist thought, thanks to Leonardo da Vinci's treatise on painting, would routinely perceive a binary opposition between the arts of the eye and the ear. To understand the aesthetic consequences of the word-image-soul triad, let us turn to the philosophers whose meditations on perception and imagination influenced Dante's conception of the creative process. We need to consider the history of classical and medieval psychology at some length – despite its apparent remoteness from the creative process of filmmaking – because certain notions familiar to Dante and his scholastic predecessors are particularly important, I believe, for making sense of the otherwise rather peculiar (and even arcane) views I propose to advance about the relationship between the *Commedia* and *The Dante Quartet*.

Dante's recurrent comparison of the soul to a book goes back to an analogy developed by Socrates in the *Philebus* (38c ff) . Though this dialogue was not transmitted directly to the Middle Ages, the outlines of its arguments about sensation and intellection were known indirectly through the multiple currents of the Platonic tradition. Inscribed in the book of the soul are all the events of one's life, Socrates observed, the medium of inscription being sometimes words and sometimes images. Memory working with the senses is sufficient to record events in words, but for images to be struck into the soul, "another member of the soul's work-force" is required, namely "an artist, who turns the secretary's words into images in the soul." While the recording of events in words is a process of transcription reliably assigned to the scribe-like memory, the recording of events in images requires the artistry of the imagination. "The conjunction of memory with sensations, together with the feelings consequent upon memory and sensation," reflected Socrates,

> may be said as it were to write words in our souls. And when this experience writes what is true, the result is that true opinion and true assertions spring up in us, while when the internal scribe that I have suggested writes what is false we get the opposite sort of opinions and assertions....[But] please give your opinion to the presence of a second artist in our souls at such a time...[a] painter who comes after the writer and paints in the soul pictures of those assertions we make...[By his efforts we] as it were see in ourselves pictures or images of what we previously opined or asserted...Then are the pictures of true opinions and assertions true, and the pictures of false ones are false. (*Philebus* 38e-39d)

Though Plato is discussing psychological operations here, his philosophical focus is clearly epistemological. He is judging the value of the soul's powers of sensation, recollection, and imagination in relation to his prevailing dialectical project, which is to distinguish certain knowledge (*epistēmē*) from fluctuating opinions (*doxa*). In describing the formation of mental images by an inner artist, he is not celebrating the operation of a wondrous cognitive process beyond the comprehension of reason. His estimation of the worth of artists and artmaking, as we know from other dialogues, is too low to support such an interpretation of the passage. The

highest form of cognition for him is the purely intellectual apprehension of the Ideas or Forms. Below that is the understanding of mathematical truths, especially geometrical theorems, followed by the knowledge of sensory particulars. Lowest of all is conjecture, which results from a combination of judgment and perception occurring when the information provided by the senses is incomplete. This is the sort of knowledge Plato means when he speaks of the work of the artist which is the imagination. No mental image is formed when the mind apprehends an Idea through pure Reason; only the lower forms of cognition – sensory perception, imaginative intuition – are accompanied by mental representations. Since the inner artist only begins to work after the inner scribe has done his best to represent the assertions and opinions conveyed to the soul through the senses, the information encoded in mental pictures is more removed from reality and must therefore be less reliable as a source of truth than the verbal traces preserved in the memory.

Though the project of distinguishing true knowledge from mere conjectures takes precedence over every other consideration about the soul in this passage, a vigorous deconstructive dynamic will later impel something occupying the margins of Plato's text – or perhaps unconsciously lying within it – to the centre of philosophical debate over how the soul perceives the truth. Primary credit for this critical move goes to Aristotle, whom Dante will hail in Limbo as the "maestro di color che sanno" ("Master of those who know": *Inf.* 4.131). Prompted by a biological interest in change and process to focus on precisely *how* words and images are engraved upon the soul, Aristotle would question the validity of Plato's distinction between the "scribe" who writes words in the soul and the "painter" who fashions images in it. These psychological agents are not distinct, as Plato suggested, but are really the same. In fact, they are not agents at all in an anthropomorphic sense but rather aspects of an activity. In Aristotle's view, truths and falsehoods are imprinted on the soul by *energeia*.

The term is crucial to our inquiry. Aristotle, who coined it from the preposition *en* ("in") and the noun *ergon* ("action, work") sometimes used it in its etymological sense to denote "the state of being in action, at work, or in operation." As his thought developed away from the Platonic preoccupation with permanence, he extended the philosophical meanings of *energeia* to include "force," "activity," "active exercise of a skill," and in his influential analysis of change, "the process by which something is actualized" or "the development of something from potentiality to actuality." In the latter sense it approaches the technical meaning of *entelecheia*, which literally denotes "in-ended-ness" or "the state of having reached the end of a process." Aristotle often uses the two terms interchangeably. When *energeia* is synonymous with *entelecheia*, its metaphysical significance comes close to what Spinoza later means by "being" or what Heideggerians (myself included) sometimes designate as "be-ing."

In the middle books of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle links *energeia* with *dynamis*, the root meaning of which is "force," "power," or "strength." Its technical meaning in his thought is "the potential to become something." Every *energeia* correlates with some *dynamis*, he reasoned, and though the two may be distinguished at a conceptual level, their close relation in reality is analogous to that between form and matter. While *dynamis* is the unrealized potential to be a certain thing or to act in a certain way, *energeia* is either the full actualization of that potentiality or the movement towards that actualization. If we think of *dynamis* as unrealized potentiality, *energeia* becomes the process by which (or the state in which) that potential is actualized. So, at least, we are led to conclude from the usual textbook treatments of the subject.

However, George A. Blair has argued (and close examination of the *Metaphysics* bears him out) that Aristotle uses *energeia* to mean the particular activity that something has in itself, through being what it is. In other words, it is the activity belonging to something by virtue of its nature or its form – a formative process *in which* it actually becomes all that it can be. Surely that is why there's an *en* in *energeia*. If we recall that Aristotle conceives the soul not as a separate spiritual entity which invades or attaches itself to a body but rather as a life-endowing

form which serves to distinguish animate from inanimate substances, and if we deduce from his general definition of soul in the *De anima* (2.1-2) the particular doctrine that the human soul is the form that makes our bodies distinctively human, we may conclude that for human beings, as for other living things, *energeia* (as "be-ing") properly pertains to the soul. Moreover, if we ponder the implications of Aristotle's corollary doctrine that the soul is an inward power or capacity for functioning, our hypothesis that the soul is *energeia* will be confirmed by its role as the formative principle through which animate things have their being *as such*. Thus, for all beings with souls, *energeia* should be construed as a spiritual principle – though it is not a principle separable from the body in any substantial sense.

For Aristotle and his scholastic disciples, the soul represents the *first* activity of the body, namely its undeveloped potential to perform certain acts and to engage in certain behaviours. Most infants can be said to possess an undeveloped ability to study geometry, for example, and Aristotle would describe such an ability (using the terms *energeia* and *entelecheia* interchangeably) as the "first actuality" or "first fulfillment" of their nascent talent for finding the area of a triangle. An adult who has mastered geometry but is not currently proving any theorems has a different sort of potential, which Aristotle characterizes as a "second actuality" of the soul. When a child learns geometry, *energeia* is at play; similarly, when an adult geometer sits down and deduces a theorem, the second kind of potential is being actualized. His or her soul is in a state of action. Aristotle would characterize this state of being-in-action as a manifestation of *energeia*. *Energeia* displays itself when people or objects do something. It is the action that preserves things in their being, the force that realizes their "be-ing."

Aristotle's quasi-scientific approach to psychological functions makes him less inclined than Plato to downplay the role of the imagination in cognition. In Aristotelian psychology, which will exert an influence on Brakhage through Dante, the soul possesses an imaging function identified as *phantasia*. Unlike Plato, Aristotle does not claim that *phantasia* is called upon to form a judgment only when sensory information is lacking. What exactly Aristotle means by *phantasia*, and how he conceives the role of mental imaging in cognition, is difficult to determine from the brief and notoriously imprecise section of the *De anima* (3.3, 427a-429a) devoted to the imagination. But this much is clear: his view of *phantasia* as something more than a combination of perception and judgment required to compensate for the lack of perceptual data implies that it is an important power (in scholastic parlance, a distinct "faculty") mediating between sensation and intellection. The Aristotelian imagination serves to revive sense impressions in the form of *phantasiai* – dreams, afterimages, visual memories, mental pictures – which are in turn presented to the intellect for abstracting, organizing, interpreting, judging. Without perception there is no imagination in Aristotle, and without imagination there is no thought. The signal importance of his cognitive theory is that it does not disparage mental images *per se* (as Plato's epistemology does) but rather recognizes them as indispensable to all higher forms of cognition.

Since the Aristotelian soul uses the organs of the body for acquiring knowledge, its quest for sensation, pleasure, and knowledge must be fueled by its own internal *energeia* – the principle that preserves it in being through its act of be-ing. If the soul is in the end what the body does, what the body does can only arise through the soul's *energeia*. It is solely this principle of be-ing that allows us to engage in what Aristotle regards as the characteristic human activity – thinking. And thinking in turn gives rise to the expressive activities of speaking and picturing.

After Aristotle, the imagination comes to be valued as a miraculous power of visualization presenting objects and events to the inner eye as if they were actually present. That a skillful writer can arouse mental images with his words (Aristotle's *phantasiai* become *visiones* in Latin) is a commonplace of Roman rhetorical theory which will be passed on to the Latin Middle Ages through the *ars poetica* tradition. Reading Aristotle into Roman poetics, we

might call the power of words to arouse images in the mind of the reader or listener the peculiar *energeia* of language, for this power constitutes its be-ing. Cicero, Horace, and later writers of the Roman period tend to associate it with the capacity of language to convey emotion. If the reader or listener experiences the same *visiones* as the writer or speaker – and it is within the power of language to ensure that this happens – then the reader or listener will experience the same emotions as those felt by the writer or speaker. Pseudo-Longinus, for instance, argues in his treatise *On the Sublime* (as does Cicero in the *De officiis*) that poets must themselves feel the emotions they elicit through their writings, and that their capacity to imagine allows them to feel the emotions appropriate to the situations they describe. Quintillian instructs not only poets but also legal counselors (rhetors) to cultivate this power of transmitting *visiones* through the evocative powers of language.

Though *energeia* accounts for the persuasive impact of oratory, the emotive interaction of words and images does not constitute simply a model of consciousness in Roman rhetorical theory. Since consciousness itself is made up of nothing but words and images, the *energeia* of language itself must have a close relation to subjectivity. Words have the power to stimulate the mind of a listener or reader to create images and to formulate thoughts, and so, according to the classical mode of reasoning on these matters, speaking and writing must be closely allied with thinking.

With the revival of philosophy in the twelfth century, verbal and visual image production is conspicuously linked to the realm of subjectivity. Among the earliest medieval philosophers to confirm the connection between words, subjectivity, and *energeia* are the Augustinian mystics associated with the abbey of St. Victor near Paris. Hugh of St Victor, whom Dante will recognize among the highly energetic intellectual dancers in the Heaven of the Sun (*Par*. 12.133), defines human *energeia* as the third and highest power of the soul. "It is rooted entirely in the reason," he asserts in his most influential treatise, the *Didascalicon*,

> and exercises itself either in the most unfaltering grasp of things present, or in the understanding of things absent, or in the investigation of things unknown. This power belongs to humankind alone. It not only takes in sense impressions and images which are perfect and well founded, but, by a complete act of the understanding, it explains and confirms what imagination has only suggested. And, as has been said, this divine nature is not content with the knowledge of those things alone which it perceives spread before its senses, but, in addition, it is able to provide even for things removed from it names which imagination has conceived from the sensible world, and it makes known, by arrangements of words, what it has grasped by reason of its understanding.

Written sometime before 1141 as a pedagogical synthesis of Augustinian theology and Boethian philosophy with Pseudo-Dionysian mysticism, the *Didascalicon* represents image production as a central fact of mental activity. Recalling Aristotle through Boethius, Hugh teaches that the higher cognitive powers must depend on *phantasiai* because we think and reason with images, including images of things that only the imagination can represent.

The Aristotelian association of language with subjectivity is preserved and strengthened by the great scholastic philosophers of the thirteenth century. "The most obvious and broadest use of the term [*verbum*: "word"] is for something expressed by voice," notes Thomas Aquinas in his analysis of "the Word" as a Divine Name,

> and as to the two elements present in it, namely the

> utterance itself and its meaning, the vocal word derives from what is inward. For according to Aristotle [*De Interpretatione* 1.16a], an utterance is a sign of the mind's concept and, again, it issues from an act of the imagination [*De anima* 2.8.420b]. We cannot call a sound having no meaning a "word"; we name a sound uttered a "word," therefore, because it expresses the mind's inner concept.

Since the same *energeia* produces words and images, we might go so far as to say that words and images call subjectivity itself into being. While Plato clearly distinguishes the interiority of living speech and mental images from the exteriority of written language and graven images, Aristotle overrides this distinction by arguing that *energeia* produces words and images alike and thus effectively generates the inner life. This is the root significance of the triangular relationship among word, image, and subjectivity – all are connected through the single concept of *energeia*. From medieval commentary on *energeia*, we can develop a surprisingly Heideggerian conception of words and images as the House of Being, for words and images not only generate thinking but also preserve thought in its existence.

Aristotelian cosmology presupposes the transcendence of the Prime Mover, whose *energeia* or actuality is the metaphysical act of pure thought. Christian doctrine, by contrast, rests on the scriptural revelation that the Creator is mysteriously immanent in Creation and remarkably intimate with His creatures. In order to reconcile Aristotelian cosmology with the Christian hexaemeral tradition, Aquinas expands the compass of actuality to include beings as well as Being. His world-system accommodates not only the actuality of Being but also the actuality of the being of beings, the *energeia* of existence.

Aquinas's conception of existence as *energeia* in the sense of "actuality" has monumental significance for the development of Western metaphysics. By applying Aristotle's notion of *energeia* to the sheer existence of things rather than to their essence – the latter concept commonly suggesting transcendence – Aquinas evolves a new conception of the relation between Being and the existence of individual beings. In an early metaphysical treatise, he draws an analogy from the visual arts to expound his conception of the distinction between universal essence and individual existence:

> ...if there were a material statue representing many men, the image or likeness of the statue would have its own individual being as it existed in this determinate matter, but it would have the nature of something common as the general representation of many men.
>
> (*On Being and Essence* 3.7)

The statue exists in its own right as a hylomorphic substance, a particular block of marble shaped in a particular way, quite apart from its nature as a representation of what is common to many men, the essence of their human nature. Though essences are universal and so cannot be temporal, the way we apprehend the essence of a given thing is similar to the way we come to understand the essence through which existents are actualized. We are confronted with the existential fact of their being there, but through the exercise of intelligence, we come to apprehend the essential determinations that actualize their particular existence. From Aristotle, Aquinas takes over the belief that God's Being as the original and ultimate thinking subject is *actus purus* – pure, absolute *energeia* – without the usual distinction between potentiality and actuality pertaining to finite beings. In so far as anything displays *energeia* and is actualized, it is like the God who reveals his Being in the Tetragrammaton ("I am who am": Exodus 3:14) as pure act – pure *intellectual* act. Each thing, by virtue of its existence, manifests an *energeia*

related to the pure actuality of the Creator. *Energeia* sustains all beings in their existence.

Herein lies the great importance of Aquinian metaphysics to Dantean cosmology. Thanks to the Angelic Doctor whose immense intellectual energy guides and unites the otherwise disputatious dancers in the Heaven of the Sun, Dante comes to understand that the principle of actuality is not confined to some transcendental realm beyond the stars but is miraculously instilled in the existence of each and every creature. This Aquinian insight is expressed in the textual threshold of Dante's Heaven like a luminous inscription countering the dark words on the Gate of Hell:

> La gloria di colui che tutto move
> per l'universo penetra, e risplende
> in una parte più e meno altrove. (*Par.* 1.3-3)
>
> [The glory of the All-Mover penetrates through the universe and regrows in one part more, and in another less.]

When Dante wonders at his ability to pass through the celestial spheres like the penetrating glory of the All-Mover, Beatrice explains the miracle by expounding the Aquinian theme of the actualizing imprint of the Creator on everything in Creation:

> ..."Le cose tutte quante
> hanno ordine tra loror, e questo è forma
> che l'universo a Dio fa simigliante.
> Qui veggion l'alte creature l'orma
> de l'etterno valore, il qual è fine
> al quale è fatta la toccata norma.
> Ne l'ordine ch'io dico sono accline
> tutte nature, per diverse sorti,
> più al principio loro e men vicine;
> onde si muovono a diversi porti
> per lo gran mar de l'essere, e ciascuna
> con istinto a lei dato che la porti.
> Questi ne porta il foco inver' la luna;
> questi ne' cor mortali è permotore;
> questi la terra in sé stringe e aduna;
> né pur le creature che son fore
> d'intelligenza quest' arco saetta,
> ma quelle c'hanno intelletto e amore. (*Par.* 1.103-20)
>
> ["All things have order among themselves, and this is the form that makes the universe like God. Herein the high creatures behold the imprint of the Eternal Worth, which is the end wherefor the aforesaid ordinance is made. In the order whereof I speak all natures are inclined by different lots, nearer and less near unto their principle; wherefore they move to different ports over the great sea of being, each with an instinct given it to bear it on: this bears fire upwards toward the moon; this is the motive force in mortal creatures; this binds together and unites the earth. And not only does this bow shoot those creatures that lack intelligence, but

also that have intellect and love.]

When Dante enters the Heaven of the Sun, his eyes are dazzled by the stellar radiance of Aquinas as a blessed soul. Picking up where Beatrice left off, the great metaphysician traces the splendour of Creation (including his own brilliance) back to the Idea of its existence in the Divine Mind:

Ciò che non more e ciò che può morire
non è se non splendor di quella idea
che partorisce, amando, il nostro Sire;
ché quella viva luce che sì mea
dal suo lucente, che non si disuna
da lui né da l'amor ch'a lor s'intrea,
per sua bontate il suo raggiare aduna,
quasi specchiato, in novo sussistenze,
etternalmente rimanendosi una.
Quindi discende a l'ultime potenze
giù d'atto in atto, tanto divenendo,
che più non fa che brevi contingenze;
e queste contingenze essere intendo
le cose generate, che produce
con seme e sanza seme il ciel movendo.
La cera di costoro e chi la duce
non sta d'un modo; e però sotto 'l segno
idëale poi più e men traluce.... (*Par.* 13.52-69)

[That which dies not and that which can die are naught but the splendor of that Idea which in His love our Sire begets; for that living light which so streams from its Lucent Source that It is not disunited from It, nor from the Love which is intrined with them, does of its own goodness collect Its rays, as though reflected, in nine subsistences, Itself eternally remaining One. Thence It descends to the ultimate potentialities, downward from act to act becoming such that finally it makes but brief contingencies; and these contingencies I understand to be the generated things which the moving heavens produce with seed and without it. The wax of these and that which molds it are not always in the same condition, and therefore under the ideal stamp it then shines now more, now less....]

The clearest exposition of Aquinas's vision of God as the pure act of being is provided by Beatrice in the Primum Mobile while Dante is contemplating the procession of beings from the still point at the centre of existence. Everything that owes its existence to God "stands under" the Divine Splendour in the downwardly radiating circles of immortal and contingent substances:

Non per aver a sé di bene acquisto,
ch'esser non può, ma perché suo splendore
potesse, risplendendo, dir '*Subsisto,*'
in sua etternità di tempo fore,
fuor d'ogne altro comprender, come i piacque,

s'aperse in nuovi amor l'etterno amore.
Né prima quasi torpente si giacque;
ché né prima né poscia procedette
lo discorrer di Dio sovra quest'acque.
Forma e materia, congiunte e purette
usciro ad esser che non avia fallo,
come d'arco tricordo tre saette.
E come in vetro, in ambra o in cristallo
raggio resplende sì, che dal venire
a l'esser tutto non è intervallo,
così 'l triforme effetto del suo sire
ne l'esser suo raggiò insieme tutto
sanza distinzïone in essordire.
Concreato fu ordine e costrutto
a le sustanze; e quelle furon cima
nel mondo in che puro atto fu produtto;
pura potenza tenne la parte ima;
nel mezzo strinse potenza con atto
tal vime, che già mai non si divima. (*Par.* 29.13-36)

[Not for gain of good unto Himself, which cannot be, but that His splendor might, in resplendence, say, '*Subsisto*' – in His eternity beyond time, beyond every other bound, as it pleased Him, the Eternal Love opened into new loves. Nor before, as if inert, did He lie, for neither before nor after did the moving of God upon these waters proceed. Form and matter, conjoined and simple, came into being which had no defect, as three arrows from a three-stringed bow; and as in a glass, in amber, or in crystal, a ray shines so that there is no interval between its coming and its pervading all so did the triform effect ray forth from its Lord into its being, all at once, without distinction of beginning. Therefore order was created and ordained for the substances; and those to whom pure act was produced were the summit of the universe. Pure potentiality held the lowest place; in the middle such a bond tied up potentiality with act that it is never unbound.]

This ontological procession is noetically retraced in the downward spiraling of Dante's desire and will through the spheres in the final tercels of *Paradiso*, which record the genesis of the poem itself from the flashpoint of divine inspiration:

veder volgeva come si convenne
l'imago al cerchio a come vi s'indova;
ma non eran da ciò le propri penne;
se non che la mia mente fu percossa
da un fulgore in che sua voglia venne.
A l'alta fantasia qui mancò possa;
ma già volgeva il mio dissio e 'l *valle*,
sì come rota ch;igualmente è mossa,
l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle. (*Par.* 33.137-45)

> [I wished to see how the image conformed to the circle and how it has its place therein; but my own wings were not sufficient for that, save that my mind was smitten by a flash wherein its wish came to it. Here Power failed the lofty phantasy; but already my desire and my will were revolved, like a wheel that is evenly moved, by the Love which moves the sun and the other stars.]

As we noted above, this amorous actualization of spiritual and material existence – the divine *energeia* diffused universally throughout all beings – is conceived primarily as an intellectual principle in scholastic metaphysics. Since it is apprehended by the intellect, it must be akin to the intellect. Because of the miraculous diffusion of Divine Light, the physical world may be understood not only as the material image of God's Being but also as an ontological outpouring of His Power in every sense – intellectual, spiritual, emotional, erotic – even as a word or image may be considered the epistemological extension of a thought. Hence the power of words and images to reveal the being of beings.

Because divine *energeia* brings the creative impetus of God out of its transcendent enclosure and installs it at every level on the Chain of Being, Dante-pilgrim can perceive its lightning-flash or "fulgore" (*Par*. 33.141) in his soul. Its spiritual activity or "puro atto" (*Par*. 29.33) is to transform him into Dante-poet, the new maker of the ever-renewing *Commedia*. Irradiated with creative power, his whirling imagination is now able to fantasize into expansive existence a sacred poem which participates in the renewal of the world made possible by the immanent actuality that sustains beings in their being. The intellectual nature of *energeia* lifts his intelligence closer to the Divine Mind so that his reader's intelligence, in turn, can follow the ascending track of the poem by discovering God's presence at every level of the human soul. Sensations, memories, dreams, ideas – all are inwardly charged with *divina virtù*. Without Aquinas's conception of God's indwelling *energeia* as the ground of all existence, Dante could not have found the words or images to express the anagogic vision ultimately bestowed upon him. As the expressive extensions of his intellectual and emotional *esperienza* – the very stuff of subjectivity – his words and images together become the artistic paradigm for the "atto puro" through which all things in heaven and earth are moved towards their being.

3. Brakhage and the Self

No aspect of *The Dante Quartet* is more strikingly anomalous than its relentless focus on the filmmaker's subjectivity. The external world has all but disappeared in it, and we are presented only with the contents of a particular consciousness or of human consciousness generally. Bart Testa has argued that *The Dante Quartet* projects lyrically the total interior space from which Dante's narrative arises, and in this he is quite correct. Indeed, the fundamental anomaly from which all the other anomalous features of the film derive is its withdrawal into pure subjectivity – an *ingressus mentis* to the fantastic core of Brakhage's luminous creativity – which strongly contrasts with Dante's *regressus mentis* along the ascending route of negative theology from Creation to Creator. Where the *Commedia* (like *De vulgari eloquentia*) looks outward towards the achievements of Dante's predecessors, *The Dante Quartet* (like the *Dante Études*) looks inward to the mental processes of its maker.

At the time of making *The Dante Quartet*, Brakhage expressed his ambition to create an artistic vision of "moving visual thinking" – a process that filmmaking alone, he asserted, could truly capture. He also represented himself as an artist striving to envision what many poets and painters have longed to realize: the possibility of conveying the "primordial elements" out of which images and words evolve. In making such assertions, Brakhage seems to me to argue that film can convey the primordial elements out of which a resolved image forms. Underlying

his conception of the psychological origins of artistic activity, I believe, is a synthesis of Augustine's notion of *visio spiritualis* and Aquinas's revisions of Aristotle's idea of *energeia*. In so far as Brakhage's primordial elements are the spiritual contents that lie behind sense perceptions, they are like the spiritual vision described by Augustine as formed in the soul but only perceived "with eyes removed from that which we were seeing through our eyes." It is as though Brakhage were trying to discover these contents not just with his visual imagination but with his physical eyes as well, eyes *not* removed from the outward field of vision even though that field – the screen – paradoxically figures invisible processes deep within the soul. But since the primordial elements also represent for him an active principle resulting in image-formation, they resemble the *energeia* that calls subjectivity into be-ing. Brakhage's painting in *The Dante Quartet* not only makes visible what happens in his soul while he is reading the *Commedia*. It also conveys, by anticipating the images that make the *Commedia* so vivid, what he imagines went on in Dante's mind during the reception of the "alta fantasia" ("high fantasy": *Par*.33.142) from God.

The inwardness of *The Dante Quartet* (and of many other films in Brakhage's oeuvre) is a consequence of his desire to release *energeia*. Bernard of Clairvaux established the rule of silence to cultivate a similar inwardness, and his statements on the silent reception of the Word bear on Brakhage's films. The Bride of Christ, Bernard preached,

> wants to have the one she desires present to her not in bodily form but by inward infusion, not by appearing externally but by laying hold of her within. It is beyond question that the vision is all the more delightful the more inward it is, and not external. It is the Word, who penetrates without sound; who is effective though not pronounced, who wins the affections without striking on the ears.
>
> (*Sermons on the Song of Songs* 31.6)

As the Word, Christ is internal. His nature cannot be known through the senses because these are directed towards external things. The Word is not spoken. His function is to act. As action, He is *energeia*. To know the divine *energeia* one must turn inwards, away from language towards silence. This ascetic imperative underlies Brakhage's artistic impulse to escape the effects of language, to exchange a knowledge of divine edicts for a knowledge of the inner dynamics of divine action. That he understands the escape from language in mystical terms as a quest for divine vision explains why he accords it utmost importance. Indeed his frequent comments about the troubling nature of his artistic mission often sound like a description of that phase in the quest known as "the Dark Night of the Soul," the purgative phase that opens up a space for the Divine to enter into the confines of fallen human nature.

Brakhage's resolute effort to realize the purgative potential of film has resulted in a body of work deeply concerned with the exploration of subjectivity, and especially with the discovery of what he likes to call "primordial modes of consciousness." From the subjective character of *The Dante Quartet* follow all its other anomalous aspects: the use of an intensified lyric temporality; the avoidance of narrative (though the "Purgation" section does have a dramatic structure); and the interest in a more elemental form of thinking than reason. Indeed all these subjective features of his art derive from an aesthetic conviction – not so different from Dante's belief – that the role of art is to stimulate desire for divine vision, to rouse the will to creative action, to engage the imagination in the quest for wisdom. In other words, to impart *energeia*.

To clarify the connections between Brakhage's mystically charged ideas on art and the aesthetic principles behind Dante's world-reforming project in the *Commedia*, I shall follow three lines of inquiry. First, I shall consider how the idea of *energeia* shaping Dante's conception

of what a poem is (or ideally should be) might lead to the inwardness that marks *The Dante Quartet*. Second, I shall inquire whether the conception of poetry implicit in Dante's writing has anything in common with Open Form poetics, which, as I have shown, influenced Brakhage's understanding of the art of film. Finally, I shall try to explain why *The Dante Quartet* – withdrawn and introspective though it is – alludes to the imagery of the *Commedia* in a fascinatingly overdetermined manner.

Archibald MacLeish's famous dictum about the essence of poetry ("A poem should not mean / But be") would be close to right, I believe, if – and it's a big if – the metaphysics implicit in it were not so hidebound and constricting. His idea of poetry is grounded on a traditional Platonic doctrine of ontological transcendence that Alfred North Whitehead, among other philosophers in Aristotle's line, has taught us to doubt. Thanks to Whitehead's skepticism, we can no longer easily accept the metaphysical proposition that a hierarchical chain of beings exists with a pure unchanging Essence at its top. Its literary corollary is also unacceptable, namely that a poem can simply "be" in so far as it is perfectly wrought, formally immutable, and therefore akin to Transcendent Being. Whitehead has instructed us, as he instructed the Open Form poets through the enthusiastic mediation of Olson, that a dynamic conception of reality is closer to the truth because it acknowledges change without privileging the permanent over the impermanent. Even if we share MacLeish's skepticism about the value of a poem as a semiotic transformer, Whitehead would incline us to say "A poem should not mean, but *act*." I suggest – and Brakhage would certainly insist – that if a poem is truly something dynamic, the key difference between poetic language and ordinary speech is the quality (specifically, the intensity) of its dynamism. Brakhage and I would make the same point about film, contrasting the dynamic intensity of cinematic imagery with the casual flow of ordinary visual images.

Thanks to Erich Auerbach's groundbreaking rhetorical studies of the *Commedia* in the 1940s and 1950s, much scholarly attention has been devoted to the complex aesthetic implications of Dante's use of direct address to the reader. Certainly, we can acknowledge that the poet's rupturing remarks to the "lettor" in the liminal cantos on the border of Lower Hell (e.g. *Inf*. 9.61-3) not only sustain the meditation on poetic language initiated in *La Vita Nuova* but also anticipate his use of the ineffability topos in the superluminous cantos beyond the Primum Mobile (e.g. *Par*. 31.136-8 and 33.121-3). In addressing the reader, he creates a communal "here" in opposition to the solitary "there" at the eternal end of his quest. But his use of direct address also indicates that poetic language *does* something to somebody, that it has a "perlocutionary character" (to adopt a term from Grice). The plausibility of this interpretation becomes more apparent as we consider his lament in *De vulgari eloquentia* that the illustrious vernacular exists nowhere in *act* as a dynamic force capable of reforming the world of letters if not the world itself. In the Empyrean, under direct inspiration from God, he discovers that it is his responsibility to bring the illustrious vernacular into being, to actualize it, to release its *energeia*.

When the young Brakhage was formulating his aesthetic ideals, the perlocutionary force of poetic language was attracting considerable interest in critical circles because of its importance to the poetics of Olson and Duncan. Though they couched their exposition of the perlocutionary force of poetry in terms of dynamism, it was not the causal role of the author in poetic creation (as in Romantic poetics) but rather the psychological and social effect of the work on the reader that became the primary focus of their poetic theory. For Olson, who exerted an especially strong influence on Brakhage's ideas on art and art making, a "poem is energy transferred from where the
poet got it (he will have several causations), by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader." The key problem of Olson's poetics was methodological. As he himself put it in his typically propulsive manner:

> So: how is the poet to accomplish same energy, how is he,

> what is the process by which a poet gets in, at all points energy at least the equivalent of the energy which propelled him in the first place, yet an energy which is peculiar to verse alone and which will be, obviously, also different from the energy which the reader, because he is a third term, will take away?

This problem is really not so remote from the reception theory of Cicero, Quintillian, Augustine, and Hugh of St. Victor, who all wondered how language could be used by an orator or poet to engender in a listener or reader the same emotion – Olson would say the "same energy" – that initially prompted its expression.

The methodological solution offered by classical and medieval rhetorical theory was essentially the same as Olson's and, I would venture to argue, as Dante's and Brakhage's resolution to the problem: the poet accomplishes a transference of the same energy through the mobilizing effect of *energeia*. Brakhage is convinced that *energeia* as a primordial principle of be-ing is conveyed better through non-representational forms, because, as Olson would say, the image constitutes "a dead spot" (an element lacking dynamism) in a work. Brakhage also believes that the mind's deeper powers are manifested in sensations preceding those that evolve out of perseverant mental representations. Such sensations are simply surges and throbs of energy and are not formed into anything as stable and definite as an image or a concept. But the non-representational thrust of Brakhage's thinking about primordial emotions and subconscious energies should not obscure the deep connection between his theory of "moving visual thinking" and Dante's "alta fantasia" through the aesthetics of *energeia*.

While Olson and Brakhage accept the traditional doctrine that art expresses the subjectivity of the artist, they also refine its psychological implications by arguing that the primary function of art is to transfer the soul's *energeia* (the inner dynamics behind thought) from artist to audience. The doctrine can be taken in two directions. If the emphasis is on mental imagery as a form of thought, as Cicero and Quintillian developed it, then the greatness of an artwork can be measured by the vividness of the imagery it elicits. Because our most intensely felt images (of loved ones, say, or of favorite places) tend to be representational, the faithfulness of the image to what it represents becomes a key criterion of aesthetic value. Alternatively, if the doctrine is focused on *energeia* itself, as Duncan and Olson argued, then the content of the artwork becomes the unembodied "open form" underlying all subjectivity in a dynamic yet indefinite state. In this case, since the best way to convey the raw drive behind artistic creation is by non-representational forms, the key criterion of aesthetic value becomes the forcefulness of the art, its subjective dynamism. The deeper its impact on the soul of the artist and audience, the greater its worth as an art*work*. The idea that a poem achieves its effects by representing the dynamics of subjectivity is a basic truth for Brakhage, and he could have found it (or at least found it confirmed) in the *Commedia*.

These conjectures are supported by Olson himself in a poetic aphorism on which Brakhage commented at length in a Canadian music journal: "Of rhythm is image. / Of image, is knowing / And of knowing there is a construct." Recalling the traditional scholastic concatenation of sensation, imagination, and intellection, Olson suggests that from primordial experience (rather than sensory experience, as Aristotle had suggested) arise sensory images; from sensory images arise fantasies or thought images; and from thought images emerge the abstract concepts upon which knowledge is based. And what is this rhythm, the primordial experience of which inaugurates the whole process of cognition? *Energeia*, I suggest. It is the act of being, as Aquinas argued, or, as Dante redefined it in his direct addresses to the reader, the act of being creative.

But how does *energeia* act in a work like *The Dante Quartet*? By conveying both the process and the products of "moving visual thinking" – namely the primordial experience of that

mysterious subjective dynamism out of which words and images arise – filmmaking reveals the workings of the inner artist who inscribes words and images on the Platonic soul, or the operations of *energeia* by which potentialities are realized in the Aristotelian soul. Film recreates this energy not through "pictures" (whether these are representations of the contents of consciousness or as images of the objects apprehended by the senses) but through "rhythm" in Olson's cosmic sense. According to Brakhage, to conceive consciousness as a gallery of mental images is to fail to understand its essential dynamism. Since rhythm activates a dynamic identifiable with the workings of Aristotelian *energeia*, new possibilities for conveying the subjective dynamism of creativity must surely arise in the art of filmmaking with its intimate complicity of rhythm with visual form.

Brakhage (to the dismay of many film critics) likes to argue that film has made the mediation of the "precise, lucid image" unnecessary. What Dante could accomplish only through the mediation of allegorical words and symbolic images, the filmmaker can accomplish without detouring through the products of *energeia* – the actual forms sustained in existence by the principle of be-ing. Here again, Duncan's ideas about the creative life loom large in the intellectual background of *The Dante Quartet*. In a lecture delivered in 1965 to mark the seven hundredth anniversary of Dante's birth, Duncan contrasted the actualizing impetus of Dantean poetics with the world-condemning ethos of Buddhism and Gnosticism:

> In this poetics, the actual world and man are not weavings of a beautiful illusion, as in the Buddhist doctrine of Maia, nor are they in their matter bonds of evil and darkness to meaning, as in the gnostic vision, but the universe and our experience in it are a text that we must learn to read if we are to come to the truth of it and of ourselves.

Of the four levels of interpretation defined in the *Epistle to Cangrande*, the most significant for revealing the driving force behind Dante's creative life is, in Duncan's view, the literal – the very level most often overlooked by Dante scholars intent on fashioning grand theological arguments or abstracting mystical secrets from the *Commedia*. It is certainly not overlooked or discarded by the great poets who have read Dante, however, for they know from the operations of their own creativity, and from the age-old religious expressions of creative life, that mystical meanings can only be attained *per litteram* by sensing and understanding the individual "letters" (i.e. the concretely actualized particulars) in the "text" of the universe. "This creative life," he argued,

> is a drive towards the reality of Creation, producing an inner world, an emotional and intellectual fiction, in answer to our awareness of the creative reality of the whole. If the world does not speak to us, we cannot speak with it. If we view the literal as a matter of mere fact, as the positivist does, it is mute. But once we apprehend the literal as a language, once things about us reveal depths and heights of meaning, we are involved in the sense of Creation ourselves, and in our human terms, this is Poetry, Making, the inner Fiction of Consciousness. If the actual world be denied as the primary ground and source, that inner fiction can become a fiction of the Unreal, in which not Truth but Wish hides. The allegorical or mystic sense, Dante says in his letter to Can Grande, is the sense which we get through the thing the letter signifies. It is our imagination of what the universe means, and it

> has its origin in the universe. To put it another way, it is by the faculty of imagination that we come to the significance of the world and of man, imagining what is in order to involve ourselves more deeply in what is.

Duncan's argument in this passage resonates with a doctrine central to the medieval world-view: the analogical correspondence between mental processes and cosmic movements. His understanding of the mystical level of significance ("It is our imagination of what the universe means, and it has its origin in the universe") recalls the vacillation between meaning and reality so characteristic of scholastic philosophy. While Aquinas following Aristotle tended to link meaning with the intellect, Duncan associates it primarily with the imagination.

In the same lecture, Duncan affirmed the absolute value of the actual or concrete existent and described as "heretical" his identification of the actual with Dante's literal level of meaning. In fact his doctrine is not so heretical, for we have already seen that Aquinas's expansion of the compass of actuality to include beings as well as Being is a key to understanding the world-view of the later Middle Ages. Also resonant with medieval thought is Duncan's contention that the inner life and the outer life are not only analogous but mutually constitutive. It is a point made in his poetry as well as his poetics:

Sail, Monarchs, rising and falling
orange merchants in spring's flowery markets!
messengers of March in warm currents of news floating,
flitting into areas of aroma,
tracing out of air unseen roots and branches of sense
I share in thought,
filaments woven and broken where the world might light
casual certainties of me. There are

echoes of what I am in what you perform
this morning. How you perfect my spirit!
almost restore
an imaginary tree of the living in all its doctrines
by fluttering about,
intent and easy as you are, the profusion of you!
awakening transports of an inner view of things.

Duncan's poetry rings numerous changes on the Dantean theme that to see deeply into something external is to discover the self, and if the self is truly creative, the aesthetic effects of its energy will reflect at once the contents of the world and the contents of consciousness. With an ardour
reminiscent of Dante's anagogic excitement on the summit of Purgatory, Duncan expresses his yearning for mystical knowledge as a projection (rather than rejection) of his *visio corporalis*:

Come, eyes, see more than you see!
For the world within and the outer world
rejoice as one. The seminal brain
contains the lineaments of eternity.

The readiness with which Dante's scholastic authorities developed the notion of the active intellect suggests how strongly they believed in the possibility of the direct communication of inwardness. The foundations of their belief had been laid by Aristotle, of course, but also by

Augustine, whose notion of the inner life was deeply influenced by Neoplatonic psychology. Noting that different minds can share the same ideas and agree on the same truths, Augustine deduced that certain truths (such as the mathematical idea of oneness or the Idea of Truth itself) must eternally exist beyond the temporal multiplicity of human intellects. The Divine Mind, or God as Truth, therefore instructs all the different minds in creation. As the source of the agreement between minds, God must be our inner illuminator. Along with this doctrine, which lies at the epistemological font of Christian Platonism in the Latin West, Augustine also proposed that a power of mutual understanding exists between friends because of their common participation in Divine Reason. The minds of dear friends, he noted, often communicate with one another without a word being uttered.

Just as for Dante the purpose of a poem is to impart divinely creative *energeia* through the direct communication of inwardness; so for Brakhage the purpose of a "poetic film" is to impart the deeper layers of thinking from soul to soul. What are these thought-processes in "the seminal brain," these primordial feelings which both conceal and reveal "the lineaments of eternity," but the dynamic pulses and rhythmic rejoicings of *energeia* itself? These we take as a subjective sign of the immanence of the divine in the human. Since the intimate relation between the poet's temporal subjectivity and his timeless poem – an "offspring" of his mind which nonetheless has the potential to actualize an experience in time – recalls the ontological inseparability of the seed and tree in Aquinas's analogy, it must also be comparable to the metaphysical identification of God's essence with His existence. And God's essence, as Aquinas concluded, is pure *energeia* in the sense of Life Everlasting, the principle of be-ing without becoming. The text of the poem has the potential to animate the mind of the reader – a potential actualized in the act of interpretation. As it is being read, the text transmits *energeia* like a light flashing upon the soul and satisfying its desire for knowledge. By drawing attention to the perlocutionary effects of the poem, Dante's direct address to the reader stresses the transmission of this light from soul to soul.

Dante's long-term view of the *Commedia* as a "great blaze" enkindled by the "small spark" of his original act of writing down his experiences depends on a fervent scholastic belief that poems, indeed all works of art, are repositories of the psychic equivalent of potential energy (*dynamis*) which, under divine inspiration, may be converted to actualizing energy (*energeia*) and transmitted to receptive souls. In other words, the poet's flash of meaning summons thinking into be-ing. Here is St. John of the Cross's affirmation of the same doctrine:

> But, when [the soul] does not rest upon [sensory pleasures], but, as soon as the will finds pleasure in that which it hears, sees, and does, soars upward to rejoice in God – so that its pleasure acts as a motive and strengthens it to that end – this is very good. In such a case not only need the said motions not be shunned when they cause this devotion and prayer, but the soul may profit by them, and indeed should so profit, to the end that it may accomplish this holy exercise. For there are souls who are greatly moved by objects of sense to seek God. (*Ascent of Mount Carmel* 3.24.4)

By doing this, *energeia* transforms the recipient – beautiful sounds and stimulating objects can engender a higher form of awareness. Similar ideas were proposed, for example, by the Persian philosopher Al Ghazzali (a philosopher some of whose works certainly Dante knew, for he quoted from him in *Il Convivio*). That *energeia* transforms the recipient is (I believe) what Dante means in the *Epistle to Cangrande* when he states that the *Commedia* was conceived "not only for speculation, but with a practical object," which is "to remove those living in this life from a

state of misery, and to bring them to a state of happiness."   The poem has a practical object because it is a perlocutionary generator. And it is a perlocutionary generator because it stores up *dynamis* or potential energy and converts it into *energeia* or actualized be-ing .

4. The Man in the Doorway

After years of reading and re-reading the *Commedia*, Brakhage doubtless realized that his ideas on art and artmaking were strikingly similar to Dante's, and so it was probably to pay tribute to a kindred spirit that he made *The Dante Quartet*. But to say that the filmmaker makes contact with the poet through his belief in the transformative power of *energeia* does not mean that his film is only vaguely Dantean in spirit, that it makes no allusions to specific images in the *Commedia*.

While much of Dante's *Inferno* is played out in near obscurity – in mist, fog, smoke, and other materials that preclude clarity – "Hell Itself," the first and most anomalous section of *The Dante Quartet*, is a beautifully painted work, composed primarily of lucid blues, glowing golds, ruddy-golds, and reds, along with occasional splashes of green, all applied to appear like gelatinous streaks against a luminous clear white ground. Laced through these are sinuous lines of a cracked material – India ink, I believe. The internal divisions of the section advance towards thicker, more multi-coloured forms that occupy a greater portion of the screen, then retreat towards thinner washes of a single colour against a white ground.

This colour scheme has little to do with Dante's *Inferno*. When questioned about the obvious beauty of "Hell Itself," Brakhage retorted: "Hell must be beautiful. Otherwise people would not spend so much time there." This ironic comment echoes a theological warning issued by Duncan in his remarks about Ante-Purgatory in *The Sweetness and Greatness of Dante's Divine Comedy*: "in the midst of all our too human delite [sic] in whatever partakes of heavenly beauty there is danger if we take no thought of God and our eternal life."

If we read Brakhage's quip seriously in light of his resolute aesthetic opposition to what he calls "picture," we get the sense of an artist who believes that too great attention to external matters can distract us from concern with inner matters and from interior exploration. His mystical inwardness recalls not only the ruminative mentality of the souls in Dante's Purgatory but also the meditation of St. John of the Cross on the purgative function of the Dark Night of the Soul:

> I shall only add, in order to prove how necessary, for him that would go farther, is the night of the spirit, which is purgation, that none of these proficients, however strenuously he may have laboured, is free, at best, from many of those natural affections and imperfect habits, purification from which, we said, is necessary if a soul is to pass to Divine union. (*Dark Night of the Soul* 2.2.4)

Though the luminous state of divine union seems remote from the discontinuous streaks of "Hell Itself," the second section of *The Dante Quartet*, "Hell Spit Flexion," begins with tight tiny coils against a dark ground and light sweeping colours that seem to etherealize towards pure colour dynamics. Brakhage develops his vision of Ante-Purgatory by moving through highly textured yellows and greens to vermillion, along with forms that occasionally suggest a stream of light. In its sequence of colours and iconographic allusions, "Hell Spit Flexion" is clearly patterned on Dante's painterly description of the Valley of the Princes:

> Oro e argento fine, cocco e biacca,
> indaco legno lucido e sereno,

fresco smeraldo in l'ora che si fiacca,
da l'erba e da li fior, dentr' a quel seno
posti, ciascun saria di color vinto,
come dal suo maggiore è vinto il meno.
Non avea pur natura ivi dipinto,
ma di soavità di mille odori
vi facea uno incognito e indistinto. (*Purg*. 7.73-81).

[Gold and fine silver, cochineal and white lead, Indian wood bright and clear, fresh emerald at the moment it is split, would all be surpassed in color, if placed within that valley, by the grass and by the flowers growing there, as the less is surpassed by the greater. Nature had not only painted there, but of the sweetness of a thousand scents she made there unknown to us and blended.]

With Virgil and Sordello by his side, Dante waits for the sun to rise – both literally and spiritually – over the dark night of the souls in this valley. In "Hell Spit Flexion," however, not even the shade of a human being can be glimpsed in the background of the painting. Recognizable pictorial shapes disappear altogether, including the botanical forms of flowers and grass. Yet, even as Dante's scintillating combination of gold ("oro") with scarlet ("cocco') and white ("biacca") is recreated in Brakhage's colour field, so the mystical implications of the poet's prelapsarian palette remain in the filmmaker's luminous air (cf. "aere luminoso": *Purg*. 29.23). The exotic jewel-tones of the Valley of the Princes anticipate the dazzling dance of colours in the River of Light streaming down from the Empyrean ("nel verde e ne' fioretti opimo": *Par*. 30.111); similarly the flashes of clear light pouring into the reds and greens and golds of Brakhage's Ante-Purgatory look ahead to the rhythmic illuminations in the third section of the film.

"Purgation" is something of a palimpsest, the painted forms appearing mainly over the image of a man in a doorway which clearly recalls Dante's passage through the Gate of Purgatory (*Purg*. 9.76-145). Just as painful contrition blends with ecstatic joy in the emotional lives of the souls on the other side of this Gate, so two sets of colours are opposed in the dynamic painting of "Purgation": luminous blues against a light ground on the one hand; and on the other, curving skeins of white resembling the India ink cracks in "Hell Itself." Opposition between the two sets of colours also develops spatially. While the frames painted with the lighter colours are axially organized so that different tonal qualities appear on the left and right sides of the central vertical axis, the frames showing white lines against a black ground are painted all over with forms.

A dramatic conflict between these two sets of colours and spatially distinguished forms develops as the lighter forms assert themselves, pushing back the darker ones, which are in turn pushed back, until they assert themselves again, and again fall back. And so it goes. The clash of colours and forms engenders in "Purgation" a miniature drama, a kind of narrative suggesting the passage of time. In his note on *The Dante Quartet*, Brakhage glosses "purgation" as "transition." In view of this tactical definition, we should not be surprised that the third section of the film evokes the dynamic transitional character of Dante's second cantica, which constantly alludes – by way of contrast – to the static dead-endedness of the *Inferno*. (Compare, for instance, the expectant mood of the Princes in Ante-Purgatory with the perpetual frustration of the Noble Pagans in Limbo.) The purgatorial sense of passing time is reinforced by the occasional interruption of movement. At first Brakhage achieves this effect by holding a frame still, then fading to black. Later in the section, he holds on a darker image without fading

to black, and then gradually introduces a passage of lighter images.

Assuming that these opposing sets of colours have moral significance, we might easily suppose that whatever is being purged in “Purgation” is represented by the dark images. However, if we recall that for Brakhage the luminous beauty of “Hell Itself” threatens to distract the soul from the quest for wisdom, then we should probably question the reflexive associations of dark with evil or ignorance, and light with virtue or knowledge. Indeed, the darker, more heavily impastoed sections in the film may represent for Brakhage the deepening of mystical understanding – an interpretation consistent with Dante’s association of darkness with meditative concentration and spiritual focus throughout *Purgatorio*. “I made for me the shade that lessens excess of light,” the poet explains upon raising his hands over his eyebrows when a sudden burst of angelic light blinds him on the second cornice (“fecemi ’l solecchio, / che del soverchio visibile lima”: *Purg*. 15.14-15). After climbing to the next ledge, he enters into a dark cloud for a moment reminiscent of the polluted atmosphere of Hell. But purgatorial darkness is not demonic obscurity. Rather, it is a shadowy preface of the “Darkness which is beyond light” identified by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite as the mystical state of mind preceding divine illumination. St. John of the Cross associated it with the first theological virtue: “It is clear, then, that faith is dark night for the soul, and it is in this way that it gives light; and the more the soul is darkened, the greater is the light that comes to it.”

The darkness of the inner life itself is not what becomes visible at the end of “Purgation.” The final image in the section is a frozen frame subtly mediating between the passages of dark and light, which suggests that Brakhage’s aim is to strike a balance between outward perception and imaginative vision. Indeed what mediates between the conflicting colours and forms here is morally significant for the whole film. As one or other of the opposing forms begins to assert itself, a painted form of a third sort – composed of dense impasto in ochre or ruddy tones comparable to a highly textured bolus ground – almost always appears. As the conflict between dark and light plays itself out, the ruddy forms develop now towards, now away from, axial composition. If they advance towards the axis, the lighter forms begin to dominate the screen; but if they recede from it, the darker forms gain the upper hand.

Like the dynamics of repetition and inversion in *Purgatorio* 20, which opposes yet also fuses the sweetness of the Nativity story with the bitterness of satiric reflections on dynastic history, the clashing design of “Purgation” reveals in miniature the form-synthesizing power of the cosmos itself. While Dante understood this power in Aristotelian terms, Brakhage conceived it as a mystical mating of opposites in accordance with Open Form poetics. “Poems then are immediate presentations of the intention of the whole,” noted Duncan,

> the great poem of all poems, a unity, and in any two of its elements or parts appearing as a duality or a mating, each part in every other having, if we could see it, its condition – its opposite or contender and its satisfaction or twin. Yet in the composite of all members we see no duality but the variety of the one.

Perhaps the mating of dark with light at the end of “Purgation” is intended to purge the filmmaker’s (and the viewer’s) soul of anxieties resulting from the tumult of opposing forces in the world. The beneficent effect of perceiving “the variety of the one” amid the diversity of painted forms flows from the mystical understanding – an imaginative intuition shared by Dante – that all the momentous dualities and minute conflicts in life are really only passages in a vast cosmopoetic process tending towards unity.

The colour scheme in “Purgation” is morally significant in another Dantean sense. The range of shades chosen for the lighter images conforms to the colours of the three steps leading up to the Gate of Purgatory:

Là ne venimmo; e lo scaglion primaio
bianco marmo era sì pulito e terso,
ch'io mi specchiai in esso qual io paio.
Era il secondo tinto più che perso,
d'una petrina ruvida e arsiccia,
crepata per lo lungo e per traverso.
Lo terzo, che di sopra s'ammassiccia,
porfido mi parea, sì fiammeggiante
come sangue che fuor di vena spiccia. (*Purg.* 9.94-102)

[We then came on, and the first step was white marble so polished and clear that is mirrored myself in it in my true likeness; the second was darker than perse and was of a stone rugged and burnt, cracked in its length and in its breadth. The third, which lies massy above, seemed to me of porphyry as flaming red as blood that spurts from a vein.]

If Brakhage had a particular transition in mind when he was painting "Purgation," it was probably Dante's movement up these three tropologically colour-coded steps and through the Gate. This initiatory connection with the poem would explain the prevalence of the ruddy-hued forms towards the end of the third section. The two subsequent tercels in the passage, I think, lie behind Brakhage's choice of the photograph of the man in the doorway:

Sovra questo tenëa ambo le piante
l'angel di Dio sedendo in su la soglia
che mi sembiava pietra di diamante.
Per li tre gradi sù di buona voglia
mi trasse il duca mio, dicendo: "Chiedi
umilemente che 'l serrame scoglia." (*Purg.* 9.103-5)

[Upon this step the angel of God held both his feet, seated upon the threshold that seemed to me to be of adamant. Up by the three steps, with my good will, my leader drew me, saying, "Beg him humbly that he withdraw the bolt."]

Though no angel appears in the film, the angelic threshold, with its celestial flash of "diamante," is perhaps suggested by the white lines Brakhage painted over the image of the doorway.

The dynamic final section, "existence is song," consists of forms which seem to surge downwards through the screen, and sometimes upwards, as though by reaction, in a wave-like movement often superimposed over images of a volcano or of some unidentifiable spherical form. Like "Purgation," "existence is song" is divided by freeze frames into clearly defined subsections. In each, the wavelike action is presented several times. First a blue-and-white form surges down the screen, and then, in successive waves, yellow, gold and even black forms are introduced.

As befits the motif of the celestial journey, which Brakhage evokes with the spherical forms and surging clouds of blue in "existence is song," the conclusion to *The Dante Quartet* is transposed into the temporal mode of intensified lyricism. In this temporality the immutable Now of the Divine Mind is approached, and the brilliance of an enlarged present begins to eclipse

and may eventually even annihilate past and future. When Dante passes from the World of Becoming through the River of Light to the Rose, all his mental energies are consumed in the immediacy of perception – without recollection or anticipation. An ecstatic mode of temporal experience is engendered in the pilgrim (and subsequently in his readers) through which each successive moment presents itself as another instant in "the continuous coming-on of novelty." But this visionary "esperienza" brings with it a realization that with each successive instant, the "now" just before it must die – as though slain by the very novelty of this "coming-on" – to give way to the eruption of another moment of ecstasy. Behind Brakhage's experience of the intensified lyrical mode lies Duncan's Dantean conception of the creative process as the poetic manifestation of *energeia*:

> The configuration of It in travail: giving birth to Its Self, the Creator, in Its seeking to make real – the dance of the particles in which stars, cells and sentences form; the evolving and changing species and individualizations of the Life code, even the persons and works of Man; giving birth within Its Creation to the Trinity of Persons we creatures know, within which in the Son, "He," is born and dies, to rise as the morning forever announces, the Created Self, Who proclaims the Father, first known as he named Himself to be Wrath, Fiery Vengeance and Jealousy, to be made or revealed anew as Love, the lasting reason and intent of What Is – this deepest myth of what is happening in Poetry moves us as it moves words.

As the Son, the Creator's "Self," is being born, everything is drawn towards the cosmos-engendering activity of dance. Visible in the patterned movements of stars and cells and particles are the dynamics of an incarnational and incarnated *energeia* hardly different in essence from the radiance streaming from the self-actualized divinity in scholastic theology. But the dance, as an erotic form, requires sacrifice. In Brakhage's construction of time, the present moment must die. This sacrifice ensures that the Whole may be renewed and eternalized in God's Consequent Nature which, as Whitehead pointed out, is primarily aesthetic in its manifestations. At the microcosmic level of human life the self too must die – like its incarnate prototype in the Trinity – so that each of us may enter into the dance and experience the unfolding of the Divine Plan.

A visual construction appearing several times in "existence is song" clearly indicates the dense intertextuality of *The Dante Quartet*. As an image combining representational and non-representational elements, it may not be typical of the film as a whole, but I dare say that it is what most people are likely to recall after seeing the work for the first time.

This memorable construction consists of a layer of expressionist painting, of extraordinary beauty, underneath which appears footage of a series of fiery explosions. To use flames in the heavenly section of the film is certainly in keeping with the iconography of *Paradiso*. Dante enters into the Empyrean or "Fiery Sphere" after ascending through the nine heavens of the temporal world in his quest to attain the Beatific Vision. Fire is the predominant image in the empyreal cantos. Beatrice's illuminating love is compared to a "sùbito lampo" ("a sudden flash of lightning": *Par*. 33.46); the faces of the angels are ablaze with "fiamma viva" ("living flame": *Par*. 31.13); and Mary is hailed as the "meridïana face di caritate" ("noonday torch of charity": *Par*. 33.10-11). By placing the fiery explosions near the joyously sweet end of *The Dante Quartet*, Brakhage may well be looking back to the "incendio sanza metro" ("burning without measure": *Purg*. 27.51) through which Dante and all other heavenbound souls must pass in their purifying ascent from the Cornice of Lust to the Earthly Paradise. This was the

"foco che li affina" ("fire that refines them":*Purg*. 26.148) within which the repentant shade of the Provençal love-poet Arnaut Daniel hid himself, anticipating the mystical concealment of the Blessed within the flames of divine glory.

But the intertextual radiance of Brakhage's fire imagery in "existence of song" extends well beyond Dante's Empyrean to the flamboyantly allusive world of Ezra Pound. In the second chapter of his book on the Troubadours, *The Spirit of Romance*, Pound comments on Arnaut Daniel's use of the verb *esmirar* ("to refine") in relation to Dante's reference to the refining "foco" on the Seventh Cornice – a fire clearly enkindled there to transmute sexual desire into spiritual ardour. Pound knew that Dante imagined purgatorial fire as the element of transformation, the supernatural medium through which suffering is turned into song. If Pound's influence on Brakhage extends to Brakhage's reading of Dante, as no doubt it does, then we should expect the significance of the fiery passages in *The Dante Quartet* to be refined by Pound's typological erudition. Indeed Brakhage brought his Poundian understanding of typology to bear on the structuring of the film by paralleling the painted-over images at the end of "Purgation" with those at the end of "existence is song."

Since Brakhage is committed to the modern proposition that ardent sexual desire is among the highest forms of love, the medieval contrast between inflaming lust and refining love is not especially relevant to the psychological significance of *The Dante Quartet*. A hint of what the fire imagery might signify in the fourth section may be found in an earlier Brakhage film entitled *The Fire of Waters*. This curious title comes from a letter to Brakhage from the poet Robert Kelly, who observed "that man lives in a fire of water and will eternally in the first taste." Brakhage decided that Kelley's oracular line must refer to the biological-experiential conditions in which we have our being, that the water is our nearly liquid constitution and the fire the "sparking of the synapses" that ignite experience.

This poetic conceit makes fire intermediate between self and world, as if it were the quasi-mental, quasi-spiritual agent that animates matter. We might even stretch a point and refer to it as the *energeia* of our bodies. From Duncan, Brakhage learned that thought takes place in bodily processes and that corporal morphology determines imagination. "Man's myths move in his poetry as they move in his history," argued Duncan,

> as in the morphology of the body all his ancient evolution is rehearsed and individualized; all of vertebrate imagination moves to create itself anew with his spine. Families of men like families of gods are the creative grounds of key persons. And all mankind share the oldest gods as they share the oldest identities of the germinal cell...God strives in all creation to come to himself. The Gods men know are realizations of God. But what I speak of here in the terms of a theology is a poetics. Back of each poet's concept of the poem is his concept of the meaning of form itself.

For Duncan, the flow of language – especially poetic language – re-enacts the cosmic dance by resolving elemental life energies into a dynamic harmony. For Brakhage, the flow of moving colour in film does the same. And for both artists, poetry, painting, film, and the other arts imitate nature in their mode of operation by transmitting *energeia* (the principle of be-ing) from "the meaning of form itself" (the divine conceived in the artist's soul) to the world at large.

The painted-over images in "existence is song" may be viewed as a kind of palimpsest: a new aesthetic vision inscribed on an erasure. Following Brakhage, I have constructed my own Dante films as a palimpsest inscribed on the erasure of Pound's *Cantos*, which was itself inscribed on the erasure of Dante's *Commedia,* which, if we care to stretch the point, was inscribed on the erasure of Virgil's *Aeneid*, which in turn was inscribed on the erasure of

Homer's *Odyssey*. How much like lyrical temporality, the essence of which is the sacrifice allowing novelty to emerge, is the ongoing experience of this creative ritual of succession! From the long-range perspective of cultural history the form of the palimpsest seems entirely appropriate to a cinematic rendering of Dante's masterwork. Brakhage's use of the palimpsest is also consonant with the religious tenor (if not the hermetic expression) of Duncan's ideas on the nature of creativity itself. "To read the universe as a palimpsest," Duncan affirmed,

> "*from which one writing has been erased to make room for another*," and yet to find the one writing in the other, is to see history anew as a drama in which the One is in the many acts enacting Himself, in which there is an Isis in history, history itself being her robe of many colors and changes, working to restore in many parts the wholeness of What Is as Osiris. This is a form that exists only in the totality of being, a form in our art that exists only in the totality of that art's life; so that in any particular work this work appears as a faith or on faith.

Such faith has two aesthetic consequences, both evident in the work of Duncan and Brakhage. First, the sacerdotal conception of creativity as sacrifice decisively offsets the ironic mode of allegory so much in vogue during the twentieth century. Neither Duncan nor Brakhage is an ironist. Second, the artistic drive to participate in "the wholeness of What Is" leads away from fashionable postmodern fragmentation back towards the totalizing world-view of classical and medieval metaphysics. A tendency of postmodernist art and literature, from the 1960s on, has been to deny the image the transcendental status that it possessed from Antiquity to the Romantic era. Both Brakhage and Duncan strive to make abstract works that transcend the flux of phenomena, to construct a unitive vision of the Creator and Creation, through perfecting the coherence of the parts of the image and, thereby, deepening its connection to the Logos.

Art created in the mode of presentational immediacy all too easily slides towards solipsistic idealism. Since artists striving for intensified lyricism usually assume that meanings are divinely inscribed in what we behold, that we discover the self when we see deeply into something external, their work tends to represent the mind as the only real nature, the only guarantor of true presence. Duncan evinces this tendency in his poetry, as does Brakhage in his films. In attempting to recreate Dante's Book of the Universe, Duncan and Brakhage end up producing a purely ideal construct of their own subjectivity. The result for both is a radically subjective yet culturally reactionary oeuvre celebrating the triumph of their own imaginations, the cult of which they preside over with priestly solemnity. The intense inwardness of their aesthetic faith helps to explain Brakhage's conflicted response to the common assumption that cinema is essentially a photographic medium. He finds that his experience of things hardly accords with their outward appearance, of which merely the illuminated surfaces are captured by photography. What he strives to capture in his films is something quite removed from the photographable world – namely, "the form that exists in the totality of being," the divine force-field hidden beneath the universal palimpsest.

Discerning a connection between idealism and the divine inscription of meaning, Duncan was remarkably aware of Dante's understanding of its metaphysical basis in the operations of *energeia*. With an enthusiasm stemming from his recognition of the supreme aesthetic importance his great predecessor had placed on the actual, he extolled the literal level of meaning in the following rhapsodic gloss on the *Epistle to Cangrande*:

> This doctrine of the literal, the immediate and embodied sense, as the foundation of all others, is striking to the modern

> poet, for it very much is the meaning of the insistence of the Imagists upon the image in its direct presentation, from which all meanings may flow, as the primary in poetry, and of the abhorrence of all abstractions [note the Poundian inflections] if they be divorced from the primal reality of the incarnation. Not only in Theology but in Poetry too, something goes awry if in our adoration of the Logos we lose sense of or would be cut loose from the living body and passion of Man in the actual universe.

The exaltation of the literal level became an aesthetic credo for Duncan reminiscent of the fiery conclusion of Dante's credo in the Heaven of the Fixed Stars (*Par*. 24.145-7):

> With Dante, I take the literal, the actual, as the primary ground. We ourselves are literal, actual beings. This is the hardest ground for us to know, for we are *of* it – not outside, observing, but inside, experiencing. It is, finally, I believe, the only ground for us to know; for it is Creation, it is the Divine Presentation, it is the language of experience whose words are immediate to our senses; from which our own creative life takes fire, *within which* our own creative life takes fire.

The allusions to Duncan's poetics throughout *The Dante Quartet* reveal Brakhage's transgressive adherence to the unfashionably premodern doctrine that *energeia* transmutes confusion into beauty, suffering into song. The trial by fire at the end of the film teaches us that existence, which we may identify with *energeia* – with Aquinas's *actus* and Dante's *atto* – is inseparable from the song of creation driving the cosmic dance. Or as Eliot put it in the most Dantean of his *Four Quartets*: we are "redeemed from fire by fire" ("Little Gidding" IV.7). The redeeming fire is the *energeia* of experience moving all things to their destiny, which is to be in God's Light.

Notes

Some conventions in these notes:

Botterill is Steven Botterill, "Dante's Poetics of the Sacred Word." Philosophy and Literature 20, no 1. (1996): 154–62.
Duncan 1965 is: Robert Duncan, "The Sweetness and Greatness of Dante's *Divine Comedy*." San Francisco: Open Space.
Duncan 1968a is Robert Duncan, *Bending the Bow*. New York: New Directions.
Duncan 1968b is Robert Duncan, "Two Chapters from *H.D.*" Tri Quarterly 12 (Spring 1968). 67–98.
Duncan 1984 is Robert Duncan, *Dante Études. Ground Work: Before the War*. New York: New Directions, 1984.
Eliot 1929 is T.S. Eliot, *Dante*. Reprint London: Faber and Faber, 1965.
Ferrante is Joan Ferrante, "A Poetics of Chaos and Harmony." *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, 153–71.
Mandonnet is P. Mandonnet, *Dante le théologien: Introduction à l'intelligence de la vie, des oeuvres et de l'art de Dante Aligieri*. Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1935.
Olson 1967 is Charles Olson, "Projective Verse" in *Human Univese and Other Essays*. New York: Grove Press, 51–61.

Pound – all Pound references are to the *The Cantos*. Dates reflect chronology of publication.
Tambling (1988) is Jeremy Tambling, *Dante and Difference: Writing in the Commedia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988,