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The Awakening of Spirit: Artistic and Thematic Influences on the Evolution of Mark Tobey's 'White Writing'

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Abstract

This paper is a distillation of the author's dissertation submitted for the Degree of Master of Arts by Research in History of Art: Renaissance to Modernism to the School of Humanities at the University of Buckingham in September 2016. The dissertation sought to answer the question, 'What were the artistic and thematic influences on the evolution of the "white writing" style of the American painter, Mark Tobey?' Tobey's distinctive approach to abstraction brought him great acclaim and considerable success in the middle decades of the 20th century but today barely receives a footnote or a few brief sentences in art history texts and courses. It is the intention of this author to argue for the originality and importance of Tobey's contribution to modern painting, and explain how he arrived at this unique style.

This paper is divided into three parts. The first explores the artistic figures and movements that had an impact on Mark Tobey's early development. The second focuses on the wide and varied range of thematic sources for Tobey's painting throughout his life. The painter cited them as 'the Orient, the Occident, science, religion [and] cities…' In the third part, the years Tobey spent as a teacher at Dartington Hall in Devon will be examined, including the painter's travels to the Far East with his friend, the potter Bernard Leach, and the particular circumstances and influences that resulted in the painter's artistic breakthrough when he produced his first so-called 'white writing' paintings at Dartington.

Keywords

abstract expressionism
art history
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Mark Tobey
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Introduction

Mark Tobey was without a doubt one of the most cosmopolitan artists of the 20th century, living out his long life and career in New York City, Chicago, Seattle, Paris and Basel, Switzerland. He was honoured with some of the highest distinctions that the European art scene of his time could bestow. In 1958, alongside Mark Rothko, Tobey represented the USA at the 29th Venice Biennale where, out of some 3,000 works exhibited that year, Tobey's painting *Capricorn* was awarded the Grand Prize. Not since Whistler won the gold medal in Venice in 1895, had an American artist won it. Three years later, a major retrospective of Tobey's work was held at the Louvre in Paris, which was an unprecedented achievement for a living artist.

It might be expected that such accolades would have ensured that Tobey would be equally fêted in the United States and would today continue to enjoy an enduring popularity and significance among the artists of the 20th

century. Yet his influence on the emergence of what has been termed 'all–over abstraction' in the early 1940's, has been generally ignored. Even at a time when there were those among Europeans who considered him to be 'the foremost living American painter',[1] Tobey was often overlooked in his own homeland, his reputation overshadowed by the louder, more muscular practitioners of Abstract Expressionism, although he has sometimes been listed as a painter in that vein. In comparison to his contemporaries – Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning foremost amongst them – Tobey's name is hardly known, particularly in America.

Tobey's non-demonstrative personality, the small scale and delicacy of his works, his background in commercial illustration, his interest in Zen Buddhism and his dedication to the Bahá'í teachings with their accompanying spirituality and sobriety, his stated intention to convey a spiritual philosophy through his work and his distance both geographical and temperamental from the New York School – perhaps it was these factors that resulted in Tobey's name being deliberately, and almost completely, removed from the narrative of America's modern art history promoted by the critic Clement Greenberg. Dedicated to his mission that Pollock was the true American original, Greenberg appears to have consciously blocked Tobey's inclusion among all that was innovative and dynamic in American art in the middle of the 20th century. Greenberg even categorically – and erroneously – stated that Pollock had never seen any examples of Tobey's work. However, recent research has revealed that Pollock would visit Tobey's work at the Willard Gallery as early as 1944 and wrote to friends saying how impressed he was by it.[2]

Yet, with the inclusion of two Tobey paintings in the major Abstract Expressionism show at London's Royal Academy in 2016, and an ambitious retrospective held at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice in 2017, it appears that Tobey's work is ripe for reappraisal.

I. Tobey's Artistic Influences

Tobey's own artistic influences are not easily separated from the integral contribution made to his development by the insights and inspiration he derived from a wide variety of other sources – in particular city life, the Bahá'í and Zen teachings, science, nature and music. In chronological terms these interests were simultaneously woven in with his exposure to artistic stimuli; together both presaged the emergence of his unique personal style.

Tobey was an artist who understood and keenly appreciated the history of art, and whose own work was rooted in his knowledge, not only of his artistic antecedents, but also of what was emerging during his own time. As one writer puts it, Tobey's route was '[e]rratic but logical in retrospect...a rigorous discipline as well as a self-conducted apprenticeship'.[3] For Tobey, art represented the deployment of visual language that had its own centuries-old evolutionary narrative, a language which could – and should – be studied and learned by all inclined to continue making art. Tobey averred that, while artists certainly derive inspiration from the world around them as subject matter, the visual language with which they choose to respond is primarily built upon the breakthroughs made by others. 'You must have roots. You have to care about things and be excited by them,' he said. 'Art

comes from art,' he argued, 'as men come from men and flowers from flowers...'[4]

Tobey arrived at his own particular and, for him, most enduring, version of abstraction in the mid–1930s with a deep knowledge of the history and techniques of Western art, combined with an acute awareness of work being made by his contemporaries around the world, as well as of traditions not widely accessible to North Americans in the first half of the 20th century. He was a keen visitor to art galleries as well as other museums where he gained visual inspiration from the study of the microcosmic patterns in geological specimens. But it was through looking at art that Tobey was able to connect his own development – and aspire to longevity for his own work – with the achievements of the past. 'My sources of inspiration have gone from those of my native Middle West to those of microscopic worlds,'[5] Tobey said of his personal, developmental journey, yet there seems to have been little in his upbringing that would have naturally inclined him towards a career in art.

He was born on 11 December 1890 in Centerville, Wisconsin. He recalled an idyllic childhood spent fishing, swimming and playing by the Mississippi in Trempealeau. Tobey's only exposure to artistic activity during this period was his father's sketching of animals using a thick, carpenter's crayon or sculpting small creatures out of stone. In 1906, the Tobey family moved to the steel-manufacturing town of Hammond, Indiana, a suburb of Chicago. It was here that, for the first time, he experienced mechanized, urban America. The city also offered him his introduction to the fine arts, a passion that was actively encouraged by his parents. 'I was interested in everything when I was young,'[6] Tobey recalled, and this insatiable curiosity never seems to have deserted him. When the family moved into Chicago in 1909, he made regular visits to libraries and museums and started taking Saturday morning classes in watercolour and oil painting at the Art Institute of Chicago. One image that attracted him, and probably enticed him into his first career as a fashion illustrator, was the commercial depiction of the glamorous American girl. Tobey described it as 'the most beautiful thing you could put on canvas'.[7]

In 1908, Tobey was forced to abandon his studies when his father became unwell. He took various jobs, including in an iron and steel factory as an industrial designer. In his spare time, he was constantly sketching, refining his skills by drawing any subject he could. By the age of 20, he was working as an illustrator. In 1911, he went to New York City where he soon obtained a position with *McCall's* magazine and received classes from the painter and teacher, Kenneth Hayes Miller. Miller's depictions of classically posed, fashionable women in city settings appear to have made an impact on Tobey's own stylized rendering of the human form and excited his fascination with urban themes.

Tobey's own fashion illustrations were clearly a product of their time, dictated by the limitations imposed by the demands of the client. But his handling of tone and the active line shows how fine artists were commanding his attention. Masters of bravura brushwork such as John Singer Sargent, who possessed, as Tobey described it, 'the handling bug', were immensely appealing to him. 'Soon my eyes began to discern others,' he said, 'as the stately stars of the renaissance swung into view... Hals'

brush was lashed to Sargent's as the 'handling bug' bit deeply into all those like myself'.[8] It is evident from Tobey's own portrait drawings that he took figurative, classical draughtsmanship seriously and was soon accomplished at it. Between 1912 and 1917, when he was in his mid–twenties, he began to move away from the stylization of commercial design and, drawing from life, particularly experimented with studies of the human figure in motion and at rest. There was some success as a portraitist; an exhibition of his depictions of well–known figures was held at the Knoedler Gallery in 1917, displaying images of such celebrities as the opera singer, Mary Garden.

While he worked mostly in New York, it was on a return visit to Chicago in 1913 that Tobey saw the International Exhibition of Modern Art – which became known as The Armory Show – the first major exhibit of modern art ever staged in the United States. At the three locations where the works were displayed, some 250,000 Americans – who up until that moment were predominately familiar with classical, figurative art – encountered the full range of experimental styles from the European avant-garde: Impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism and even one piece by Kandinsky representing German Expressionism. The majority of visitors to the Armory Show, including Tobey, were largely dumbfounded by the explosion of vivid, non-naturalistic colours, the distortions of form, the abstractions celebrating a mechanized, modern world and other experiments on display. Even the former President Theodore Roosevelt publicly announced, 'That's not art!'[9] It was the works of the Cubists that provoked the most confusion, and Marcel Duchamp's Cubist/Futurist style *Nude Descending a Staircase*, painted the year before, became the butt of most of the jokes, newspaper cartoons and criticism. Tobey, along with most of the critics and public, found it incomprehensible, describing it as a 'chaotic explosion'.[10]

In 1918, Tobey made his own first important foray into modernism when he became a close associate with the Arensberg circle. During the final days of the Armory Show in 1912, journalist Walter Arensberg had reportedly experienced a sudden epiphany viewing the works on display. Fifty-one paintings by Picasso, Braque, 'Miro'and Juan Gris, covered the walls of his apartment on West Sixty–Seventh Street. It became a gathering place for the *avant-garde*, among them Duchamp and Francis Picabia; Americans Man Ray, Charles Demuth, Charles Sheeler and Marsden Hartley; the dancer Isadora Duncan; the writer William Carlos Williams and composer Edgard Varèse. Under the leadership of Duchamp and Man Ray, the circle would evolve into an American branch of the Dada movement. It was at the Arensbergs' that Mark Tobey's sensibilities appear to have finally become attuned to more contemporary forms of pictorial innovation. When he saw Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* again after his first encounter with it six years earlier, he described it as a 'wonderful abstraction'.[11]

A profound challenge that arose for Tobey around this time was the question of form in painting. 'The only goal I can definitely remember,' he later told an interviewer, 'was in 1918 when I said to myself, "If I don't do anything else in my painting life, I will smash form"'.[12] 'I felt keenly that space should be freer. As I remember, I really wanted to smash form, to melt it in a more moving and dynamic way'.[13] Tobey, by then, was familiar with Cubism's attempts to represent multiple views of subjects fragmented on a single plane, as well as Futurism's practice of capturing the speed and

dynamism of modern life, often by repeating subjects many times over as if in a multi–exposure photograph. But, while his muted palette was clearly influenced by Picasso and Braque, Tobey was not sympathetic towards 'the dismemberment, deformation, and fragmentation of the figure for mere shape and pattern, or its devaluation into still life'.[14]

> A terrible mutilation of the figure isn't very impressive either... I've seen pictures in which the human figure has been chopped up, looked like leprosy, chewed to bits by dogs. This is not to me humanistic art at all.[15]

Perhaps by wanting to smash or melt form, Tobey was aiming to reach deeper into the spirit of the subject or object in his painting, to explore its reality and its context within multiple planes of existence.

Seattle and Travels in Europe

Although Tobey seemed to be following a promising path as an artist in New York, he chose to move to Seattle in 1922 after learning of the existence of the Montessori-influenced Cornish School. It had been founded in 1914 by pianist and teacher Nellie Cornish. Tobey was unknown in Seattle when Cornish invited him to teach painting classes, but she recruited talent when she instinctively sensed originality and quality. Teaching launched Tobey into 'a period of much experimentation... It was here I finally realized I could penetrate forms'.[16] Thus, the majority of paintings and drawings that Tobey executed in Seattle display his interest in a kind of 'vitalism' – a theory that the origin and phenomena of life are dependent on a life–force or principle distinct from purely chemical or physical forces. Tobey's amoebic, botanic forms – some reminiscent of human flesh and hair – seemingly emerge from swirling currents of energy, subduing more formal geometric lines that suggest the built environment.

In the mid-1920s, eager for new visual and cultural experiences, Tobey made his first extended travels through Europe, the Mediterranean and the Near East. He stayed the summer and autumn of 1925 in Paris where he not only spent long hours closely studying the masterpieces in the Louvre, but was also able to open his mind more to modernism through the extended visits he made to galleries and museums. He further explored the works of Braque (whom he met), Picasso and André Masson, whose works appeared in at least three exhibitions while Tobey was in Paris. Masson moved from a Cubist/Futuristic approach to capturing movement to being among the first to attempt automatic drawing. In an almost trance-like state, he would allow his hand to move freely across the surface of the paper, producing a fluid and unconscious play of line. It was an approach that drew upon ideas emerging in Surrealism of the power of the unconscious and the dream.

In addition to painting naturalistic portraits and city scenes, Tobey's travels led to a further absorption of modernist influences. The mysterious compositions of Giorgio di Chirico, almost surrealistic stage set designs, combined with Cubism, also find echoes in Tobey's depiction of sparse or almost empty scenes; for example, *Near Eastern Landscape*, *Interior,* with its peculiarly dislocated, perpendicular fish in the right-hand corner.

Another source of great encouragement to Tobey was Marsden Hartley. Hartley was set upon a spiritual quest 'for art's deeper meaning beyond

the empirical world'.[17] Along with many of his contemporaries, Hartley was deeply affected by Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* and the German expressionist's assertion that, 'The mood of nature can be imparted ... only by the artistic rendering of its inner spirit'.[18] As early as 1912, Hartley had renounced still life painting in favour of a spontaneous abstraction, creating a series of Kandinsky-like images, scattered with lines, mystic symbols and colours picked for their particular resonance and meaning. Hartley had also associated closely with the Arensberg circle prior to 1920, but his and Tobey's paths may have crossed on a number of occasions. Hartley was an attendee at Green Acre, the residential spiritual retreat centre in Eliot, Maine. Hartley's friendship with Alfred Lunt and Harlan Ober led him into the then small circle of followers of the Bahá'í Faith. Green Acre was also to play a key role in Tobey's own attraction to the Bahá'í teachings. As a result of their interaction, Tobey too ventured into creating sensuous, swelling, curvaceous shapes, to depict an idealized state or place, based on people, plants and elements of landscape. Reminiscent of Hartley's landscapes, Tobey's work began to deploy outlines, thick paint, arbitrary use of colour and ethereal light, as in *Toward the Light*.

Tobey also began to experiment with Japanese methods of two–dimensional composition. His long affair with the calligraphic line, however, truly began when he met a young Chinese painter, Teng Baiye, who was completing his graduate studies in art at the University of Washington. Alongside his teaching responsibilities at the Cornish School, Tobey set time aside to study calligraphy with his new friend, who was also lecturing at his university on aesthetics. The life and movement Teng gave to his brushwork made a strong impression on Tobey, who 'found that one could experience a tree in dynamic line as well as in mass and light'.[19] From Teng, Tobey began to be exposed to a different approach to painting which recognized 'the difference between volume and the living line – a means of opening solid form, giving tangibility to empty space, and of breathing life into static Western realism'.[20] On one particular occasion in 1929 when Tobey was looking at a goldfish tank, Teng asked him why Western artists painted fish only when they are dead.[21]

II. Tobey's Thematic Sources

Despite the pictorial similarities between his mature works and those of his contemporaries, Tobey railed against his style being described as 'pure abstraction'. 'I know very little about what generally is termed abstract,' he said. 'Pure abstraction would mean a type of painting completely unrelated to life, which is unacceptable to me'.[22] Even at times when his imagery was at its most abstract, the title he gave to a piece was often suggestive of some natural form or phenomenon that might offer a clue to its inspiration or meaning. Rather, his very diverse sources were firmly rooted in 'the Orient, the Occident, science, religion [and] cities...'[23]

Innovation and the quest for knowledge held much excitement for Tobey. 'I am accused often of too much experimentation,' he said, 'but what else should I do when all other factors of man are in the same condition? I thrust forward into space as science and the rest do'.[24] Tobey had a lifelong love affair with the natural world and, unlike many of his American contemporaries – particularly those termed Abstract Expressionist – he rarely

abandoned references to nature. Perhaps he was inspired by his early love of Blake with his professed ability 'to see a World in a Grain of Sand and a Heaven in a Wild Flower'.[25] Tobey could find reflections of the immensity of space in the patterns of a single leaf or rock, 'as though the whole world were contained therein and from a leaf, an insect, a universe appeared'.[26] The forms, textures and colours of fossils, minerals and crystals became a particular source of inspiration for Tobey. The patterning in such specimens would provide the starting point for many of Tobey's paintings. 'On pavements and the bark of trees I have found whole worlds',[27] he said.

It might seem an anomaly that an artist who responded to the natural world with such passion could find an equal fascination in modern cities. From the time in 1906 that he and his family moved from rural Wisconsin to Hammond, Tobey found mechanized, urban America a profound source of fascination. Quite aside from the exposure to the fine arts that life in the city offered, his visual sense was captivated by the market places, the electric lights and signs, the variety of buildings, the microcosmic patterns in the most mundane of physical phenomena and the spirit and density of human life. This feeling was particularly captured in his stepping out into the streets of New York City on Armistice Day 1918 and being carried along by a dancing, heaving mass of humanity, 'completely integrated with the mass spirit',[28] as he put it.

Despite his 20th century Western sensibilities, Tobey was not sympathetic to the Communist–leaning inclinations of many of his contemporaries, disagreeing with its fundamental atheism. 'When godlessness is taught to the young they are godless and will remain so,'[29] he said. There was always a yearning for transcendence in Tobey's painting, which he described as 'more subconscious than conscious', a 'kind of self-contained contemplation... One is so surrounded by the scientific naturally one reflects it, but one needs... the religious side. One might say the scientific aspect interests the mind, the religious side frees the heart. All are interesting'.[30]

In 1918, at the age of 28, Tobey thought of art as a 'medium through which one could experience inspiration, therefore heightening the value of living'.[31] Yet with all this, he said,

> [W]hen I went out into the social world I found that while art was discussed, liked etc. that it appeared to have but a small influence on the spiritual side of these people. I remember one night after an evening at a party in Marcel Duchamp's studio, while waiting for an elevated train, I kept wondering if by chance there might be something else greater than art. This idea remained with me for several days – during which I thought considerably about the expression, 'the love of God'. What it is, what it could mean to one like myself. This led to prayer to know about this profound state. [32]

At a dinner party in New York, he met the portrait painter Juliet Thompson and afterwards, since they both lived in the same direction, the two walked home together. Before they parted, Thompson asked Tobey to sit for her. It was while posing in her studio that Tobey noted a photograph of a man with a white beard, wearing a turban. Tobey thought the face remarkable but felt no particular curiosity to find out any more about it. However, during the period of sitting for Thompson, Tobey felt that he had a 'very strange and

powerful dream which concerned this person in the photograph, or seemed to. When I told Miss Thompson about the dream she grew quite excited but didn't say anything'.[33] The picture was of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

At Thompson's instigation, Tobey was invited to visit Green Acre and stayed for several months. While knowing little of the Bahá'í Faith's tenets, it 'gradually dawned' on him, 'that this little group of people with their prayers, their smiling faces, and their unbounded enthusiasm regarding this new religion really had a new spirit; anyway something I couldn't exactly put into words, but convinced me that what they believed was the truth'.[34]

In 1919, Tobey himself is mentioned in a letter to Juliet Thompson from 'Abdu'l-Bahá in which he asks her to '[c]onvey warmest, most loving greetings to Mark Tobey on my behalf'.[35] In that same message, 'Abdu'l-Bahá delineates a spiritual perspective on the value of making art which would be of profound significance to Tobey, and indeed all artists in the Bahá'í Faith to this day:

> I rejoice to hear that thou takest pains with thine art, for in this wonderful new age, art is worship. The more thou strivest to perfect it, the closer wilt thou come to God. What bestowal could be greater than this, that one's art should be even as the act of worshipping the Lord? That is to say, when thy fingers grasp the paintbrush, it is as if thou wert at prayer in the temple.[36]

Encountering the Bahá'í Faith undoubtedly provided Tobey with the spiritual direction he had been seeking. His interest in the coming together and cross-fertilization of Eastern and Western culture, of science and religion, of nature and modernity, must have been further excited by the Bahá'í teachings.

After this time, Bahá'í concepts of unity, the 'progressive revelation' of God to humanity, the forces of spirituality versus materialism, the positive and equal value given to diverse elements, the dominance of light over darkness, become manifest in Tobey's painting. Initially he attempted to depict explicitly Bahá'í themes, portraying martyr and prophet figures, or visualizing a future era of universal peace. *Rising Orb* – a study for a mural – suggests the arrival of a new revelation from God into the world in the form of a sun at dawn and the commotion it stirs in both the human and angelic realms.

When Tobey made his first of two pilgrimages, Shoghi Effendi[37] told him that it would not be appropriate to paint the Faith's prophetic figures, but that he could, if he wished, depict the early, self–sacrificing heroes of the religion. Shoghi Effendi also said to him, 'Art must inspire. Personal satisfaction is not enough'.[38] Tobey was greatly relieved that Shoghi Effendi stated that there could be no such thing as 'Bahá'í art' at such an early period in the Faith's development. He saw this as a great liberation. A set of beliefs that had no iconic tradition enabled him to visualize Bahá'í concepts freely and develop his own pictorial expression, without feeling that he was bound to convey ideas in a prescribed or restricted way.

III. Writing a Painting

Mark Tobey finally arrived at his 'white writing' style in 1935, while a teacher at Dartington Hall school in Devon, England. Four years earlier, Tobey had received an invitation to teach at Dartington as a result of his being

acquainted with Beatrice Straight – a drama pupil at the Cornish School – who was the eldest daughter of the heiress, Dorothy Payne Whitney Straight, one of the richest women in America in the early 20th century. She had established Dartington Hall in 1929 with her husband, Leonard Elmhirst. Their school was a hotbed of new thinking, where Eastern thought combined with modern theories about the relationship of people to each other, to the environment, to culture, extending out to the entire planet. To realize her vision, and inspired by the model of the Cornish, Straight personally invited to Dartington those artists whose beliefs she respected and which corresponded to her own. Her sense that a fundamental unity could be found at the heart of all things made Tobey a natural fit for the school.

Tobey would go on to become Dartington's most influential and longest serving member of staff, returning repeatedly there over a period of eight years. By all accounts, Tobey became known as a remarkable teacher. On one particular occasion he observed that his students needed to loosen up. '[L]eave your boards – dance! Let go! That's better – dance, you emotionally tied–up English! Now stand up and dance with your chalk on your drawing boards!'[39]

Curiously though, there is little evidence that Tobey himself was loosening up in his own work. Certainly he continued to experiment with a hybrid of motifs and compositional ideas – some of them fusing European classicism with Cubism and what he observed from his new friends among the English modernists, such as Ben Nicholson. There remained a sombre, heavy formality to Tobey's paintings. Yet Dartington would also expand Tobey's outlook even further; the site was rich with Indian dance, Japanese prints and ceramics and Oriental calligraphy. Tobey mingled with some of the most progressive minds of the period, many of whom were opening Westerners' eyes to the East. Tobey was by all accounts successful at attracting a number of his colleagues and new friends at Dartington to the Bahá'í teachings. A kindred spirit was found in Bernard Leach, who had devoted his career to seeking a bridge between Eastern and Western cultures. 'Mark Tobey was the profoundest influence in my life,' wrote Leach. 'It was through him I became a Bahá'í'.[40] Others who responded to Tobey's spiritual convictions included the South African artist Reginald Turvey – an old friend of Leach's from their days at the Slade School – and the painter Cecil Collins who had moved with his wife to Totnes near Dartington after becoming friends with Tobey, and later became a full-time art teacher at the school.

Bernard Leach had arrived from his home in St Ives, Cornwall, to teach pottery at Dartington not long after Tobey's arrival. To learn more about making stoneware in larger quantities than he had been able to achieve in St Ives, Leach secured funding from the Elmhirsts for a visit to Japan in 1934. Dorothy asked him if he would like Tobey to travel with him at their expense, and Leach – who had grown close to Tobey – was very happy at the prospect. Tobey's sojourn in the Far East would have a major impact on the future course of his artistic pursuits, unexpectedly inspiring a visual language to express his ideas in an entirely unique way. In Shanghai, he spent several weeks studying calligraphy intensively with his friend Teng Baiye. During time off, Tobey was dazzled by the congestion, the traffic,

the dance halls, the night-time buzz and the neon signs of Shanghai, which reminded him of New York. After China, Tobey travelled on to Japan. While he had been thrilled by the dynamism of Chinese cities, he appears to have been equally seduced by the quietness and simplicity of the Japanese aesthetic. Most of his time in Kyoto was spent practicing and watching archery. On one occasion at the monastery, Tobey was given a freely brushed, *sumi* ink painting of a large circle upon which to meditate. The experience made a lasting impact upon him.

Soon after arriving back at Dartington, Tobey sat down one night and spontaneously created a small work, in tempera on cardboard that depicts a continuous, tangled mesh of white lines, occasionally woven through with darker blue and black threads, and an amoeba-like shape trapped at its centre. Tobey later entitled his picture, *Broadway Norm*, saying that it evoked for him New York City's renowned street, with its citizens and visitors caught in the lights. For Tobey, the lines seemed to trace the buzzing around of people and traffic while, at the same time, entangling them all in the unifying energy of the environment. This painting represented the beginning of the turning point in Tobey's approach. A few nights later, Tobey painted *Broadway*. Drawing on his imagination and his training with Teng Baiye, Tobey translated his memory of New York into a swirling, pulsing calligraphy, expressing his personal experience of the nightlife of the city. No one was more surprised at the creation of *Broadway* than the artist himself; he said he had had no conscious plan to create a calligraphic painting. It seemed simply to develop like a kind of dance or music making. 'I've painted *Broadway* which I must say astonishes me as much as anyone else', he wrote to friends in Seattle. 'Such a feeling of Hell under a lacy design – delicate as a Watteau in spirit but madness'.[41]

'At last,' Tobey said,

> I had found a technical approach which enabled me to capture what specially interested me in the city – its lights – threading traffic – the river of humanity chartered and flowing through and around its self-imposed limitation, not unlike chlorophyll flowing through the canals of a leaf. Line became dominant instead of mass but I still attempted to interpenetrate it with a spatial existence. 'Writing' the painting, whether in colour or neutral tones, became a necessity for me. I often thought of this way of working as a performance, since it had to be achieved all at once or not at all –the very opposite of building up as I had previously done. In the process I probably experienced the most extraordinary sensations I have ever had in art, because while one part of me was creating these two works, another part was trying to hold me back. The old and the new were in battle. It may be difficult for one who doesn't paint to visualize the ordeal an artist goes through when his angel of vision is being shifted.[42]

Despite his pictorial discovery at Dartington in the autumn of 1935, his internal struggle between the old and the new remained with Tobey, who continued to pursue multiple approaches to painting. 'I must say I don't see much future for the white writing,'[43] he initially stated. In the 1950s, he put himself through intensive training in Japanese *Sumi* techniques, using opaque black ink thrown and splashed in a controlled way onto paper. The restless experimenter could never be satisfied with just one approach to

picture making. Yet it was the 'white writing' works that he produced over the subsequent decades of his life that won Tobey most acclaim, especially in Europe. In masterpieces such as *Edge of August* (1953), this approach reached its apotheosis. As if in a piece of music, Tobey strives to evoke the essence of an ineffable feeling, the almost unnoticeable transition between summer and autumn, perhaps between East and West, or one era and another. All of this is conveyed with minute, calligraphic marks which *en masse* shimmer like a waterfall through a pale tonal spectrum. This is not 'action painting'; it is supremely controlled and deliberate, inviting the viewer to immerse himself in dimensions beyond the physical.

Surrendering to the 'calligraphic impulse' opened up new horizons for Tobey. With it, he discovered a visual medium by which he 'could paint the turmoil and the tumult of the great cities, the intertwining of the lights and the streams of people caught up in the mesh of their net'.[44] But his 'white writing' was not just a means by which he could express the energetic hubbub of city life. As with Chinese and Japanese characters, or the calligraphic work he may have seen in the Holy Land, Tobey learned to convey meaning through line. His 'white writing' brought a coherence to his many diverse preoccupations: his seemingly dichotomous fascination both with urban living and the patterns in nature; the harmonizing and unifying of the spirit of humanity with its material environment; the quiet contemplation of Zen meditation with the rhythms of music; the tensions between spirit and form, between classicism and modernity, between the world of bodies and the worlds of God, between the microcosm and the macrocosm.

While Tobey's formal, visual sources were varied, his Bahá'í beliefs had given his work its spiritual context as well as the freedom to find his own pictorial language to express it. The Bahá'í recognition of 'the primal oneness deposited at the heart of all created things',[45] prompted him to give equal weight and value to the diversity of the visual elements that inspired him, while at the same time stimulating in him a quest to establish their unity and interdependence. 'The writing style is not an abstraction,' he said. 'Each line has a purpose and a meaning important to the whole. And here I must emphasize it is the whole which is important'.[46]

Conclusion

Tobey's journey to discovering his own voice had been a long and tortuous path. In sum, in his teaching or in his works, he seems to have been essentially engaged in a quest to find an art that awakened spirit, which reconciled the ethereal and material aspects of life and nature. One appreciation, written after he died in 1976 at the age of 86, stated that Tobey 'could appreciate and respond to the physical beauties of the world to an extraordinary degree, yet he was always aware that there was much more than this, and his painting stretched to discover new means and dimensions of expression and vision, offering special insight into man's eternal quest to grasp the nature of reality'.[47]

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