

Mark Tobey's City Paintings Meditations on an Age of Transition Julie Badiee*

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Abstract

Mark Tobey's City Paintings have traditionally been interpreted as joyous evocations of the energy inherent in the modern urban scene. This article looks at the evolutionary character of Tobey's City Paintings during the decades of the 1930s, '40s, and '50s, and points out that they may instead be understood as modern reinterpretations of the traditional themes of the Apocalypse, Hell, the Day of Judgment, and the New Jerusalem. This interpretation finds its roots in the study of the relationship of Tobey's City Paintings to the artist's long held beliefs in the Bahá'í Faith and to specific Bahá'í teachings concerning the Book of Revelation and the coming of a New Age. The article also looks at the overall influence of the Bahá'í Faith on Tobey's work and draws parallels between major themes in the City Paintings and important Bahá'í scriptures, including *The Seven Valleys*. In this connection, Tobey's City Paintings can be understood as symbolic of the various stages in humanity's spiritual quest, ending with the theme of the resolution of opposites and a celebration or the essential unity of all creation.

Résumé**

C'est en tant qu'évocations joyeuses de l'énergie inhérente au monde urbain du XX^e siècle que les Peintures urbaines de Mark Tobey ont été généralement interprétées. Cet article entend étudier le caractère évolutif des Peintures urbaines de Tobey des années 30 aux années 50 et propose, au contraire, que ces peintures peuvent faire part de réinterprétations modernes des thèmes traditionnels de l'apocalypse, de l'enfer, du jugement dernier et de la nouvelle Jérusalem. Cette position se base sur l'étude des rapports entre les Peintures urbaines de Tobey et la croyance inébranlable de l'artiste, pendant des années, en la foi bahá'íe et en certaines interprétations bahá'íes concernant le Livre de la révélation et la venue d'une nouvelle ère. En outre, cet article examine l'influence générale de la foi bahá'íe sur les oeuvres de Tobey et met en parallèle les thèmes majeurs présents dans les Peintures urbaines et les écritures bahá'íes les plus importantes, tel que les *Sept Vallées*. De la sorte, les Peintures urbaines de Tobey peuvent être interprétées comme autant de symboles représentant divers moments dans la quête spirituelle de l'humanité. À la fin de cette quête se trouvent le thème de la résolution des opposés et une célébration de l'unité essentielle de toute création.

**Translation provided by Martine Motard-Noar.

Resumen*

Las Pinturas Urbanas de Mark Tobey se han interpretado tradicionalmente como evocaciones alegres de la energía inherente en el ambiente urbano moderno. Este artículo examina el carácter evolutivo de las Pinturas Urbanas de Tobey durante las décadas de Los 30, 40 y 50, y destaca el hecho de que se las puede entender como reinterpretaciones modernas de los temas tradicionales del Apocalipsis, el Infierno, el Día del Juicio Final y la Nueva Jerusalén. Esta interpretación se basa en un estudio de la relación entre las Pinturas Urbanas de Tobey y las enseñanzas Bahá'ís sobre el Libro de la Revelación y la llegada de la Nueva Era. Este artículo también examina la influencia de la Fe Bahá'í en la obra de Tobey y destaca las semejanzas entre los temas principales de las Pinturas Urbanas y escrituras importantes Bahá'ís, incluyendo *Los Siete Valles*. En este sentido, se puede entender las Pinturas Urbanas de Tobey como símbolos de las varias etapas en la búsqueda espiritual de la humanidad, la cual termina con el tema de la resolución de opuestos y una celebración de la unidad esencial de toda la creación.

*Translation provided by Thomas Deveny.

In the years since the death of Mark Tobey in 1976, the artist has remained somewhat of an enigma to art critics and historians. His work is difficult to fit into any of the conventional categories of American art, and he has been linked stylistically to such divergent expressions as Sumi ink paintings, Zen calligraphy, synthetic Cubism, Abstract Expressionism, and even medieval manuscript illumination. Appreciation of Tobey's work reached a highpoint in Europe in the late 1950s and early 1960s when he won a first prize at the Venice Biennale, had a retrospective at the Museum of Decorative Arts at the Louvre, and was considered one of Europe's most celebrated artists. In contrast, he has generally not been as appreciated in the United States,

although his work has been highlighted at exhibits at the Museum of Modern Art, the Seattle Museum of Art, and the National Portrait Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution.

A recent show at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. centered on Tobey's "City Paintings," a series of visual meditations on twentieth-century urban life, a theme that had occupied the artist for over forty years (Rathbone, *City Paintings*). The paintings, which range in date from 1935 until Tobey's death in the mid-1970s, can be both visually and iconographically complex, mirroring the paradoxical character of the artist himself. This article attempts to explore the impact of Mark Tobey's beliefs as a member of the Bahá'í Faith on this series of paintings and to show that the works reflect a lifelong fascination with the apocalyptic imagery of our time.

Tobey's interest in the theme of the city had begun years earlier when he first came to New York in 1911 as a young man escaping the confines of his family and of the Midwest. Within a short time Tobey had become a portrait painter and was exhilarated by meeting such important artists as Marcel Duchamp and Georgia O'Keeffe. It was in the city, too, that Tobey was first introduced to the Bahá'í Faith, a religion which was to have a lifelong influence on him.

The artist's memories of that time were heightened by the great celebrations in the streets after the end of World War I. For Tobey, the New York of 1918 was "dynamic lights, brilliant parades and returning heroes" (Dahl, *Art and Belief* 4). Broadway became the centre of Tobey's recollections about this time, but it wasn't until some years later that he expressed his vivid memories in paint. The result was the brilliant and frenetic *Broadway* (fig. 1), painted in 1935. Ironically, this work was done when Tobey was on the faculty of Dartington Hall, a school for the arts in Devonshire, England. *Broadway* was actually conceived in a country atmosphere where the night was so quiet that "you could hear the horses breathing" (Seitz, *Mark Tobey* 49).



Fig. 1. MARK TOBEY. *Broadway*. 1935. Tempera on masonite board, 26 X 19 1/4". The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Arthur H. Hearn Fund, 1942)

In the same year, Tobey also painted *Welcome Hero*, another interpretation of his experience in the post-war celebrations in New York. In this painting, the canyons of the city are filled with an even more intense riot of lights and color, and turbulent crowds rush into the streets. The moving lines of the crowds in the streets, the city lights, and the general sense of exuberance are expressed through the dense energies of what was later to be called Tobey's "white writing." Inspired by the traditions of Oriental calligraphy the artist had studied during a trip to China and Japan during the same year, Tobey had by now found themes that would continue to emerge for the rest of his career: a fascination with the energy of the city, interest in "writing a picture," and finding an artistic means of uniting Eastern and Western traditions. Although Tobey called the creation of *Broadway* and *Welcome Hero* "the most revolutionary sensations I have ever had in art" (Kuh, *Voice* 237), it wasn't until almost a decade later that he returned to this style. In the late 1930s the artist left his position at Dartington Hall and, sensing the imminent outbreak of war in Europe, returned to the United States. Although he made several trips to New York, a growing negative attitude toward that city and opportunities for work in Seattle convinced him to settle for a time in the Northwest.

It wasn't until the 1940s that Tobey again returned to the theme of the city. However, his interests began to take a different turn. He became fascinated with the crowds in the marketplace in Seattle and spent hours sketching the down-and-out types who congregated there. Hunchbacks, drunks, and the lost men and women of the seamy underside of the city obsessed him (Seattle, *Retrospective*). The sadness, loneliness, and futility of those who tried to anesthetize themselves from their own emptiness by drink, drugs, or sex became the subjects of several paintings that depicted the city in a sinister and chaotic way.

Still using New York as the subject of his meditations, Tobey introduced this new theme on a large scale in *Broadway Boogie* (1942) (fig. 2). The city street in this painting is jammed not with celebrating figures but with masked creatures who seem to swirl through the metropolis seeking freedom from their personal hells. A central, nude cavorting figure projects an initial feeling of gaiety, however, the beings below become more terrifying the closer one looks. To the left, a man and woman embrace as large bird-headed figures flank them to the left and right. The left side of the painting is filled with masked faces, many of them disembodied. The carnival atmosphere of Tobey's earlier *Welcome Hero* has escalated to a scene of emotions run riot. The undercurrent of a malevolent element in the "Great White Way" has become the main theme.



Fig. 2. MARK TOBEY. *Broadway Boogie*. 1942. Tempera, 301/4 x 231/2". Private Collection

Similar subjects can be found in Tobey's *Electric Night* of 1944 (fig. 3).¹ Again, the human figures sink to the bottom of the painting where they slum~ in alcoholic stupors or sob in despair. Tobey now shows us the hidden interior of the lonely. A nude woman weeps into her hands as she sits beneath a lamp on her living room couch while a drunk stumbles beneath a street lamp (fig. 4). Haunted faces peer out of confining cubicles, and a large dominating woman hovers above. Crowds surge out into the streets. They do not wear the false masks of gaiety this time but stand crushed together in that forced intimacy of the modern city. The shop fronts and marquees define the perspective, and the reflected lights of the city taper off into the black night.



Fig. 3. MARK TOBEY. *Electric Night*. 1944. Watercolor, tempera on paper mounted on panel, 17 1/2 x 13".
Seattle Art Museum (Eugene Fuller Memorial Collection)

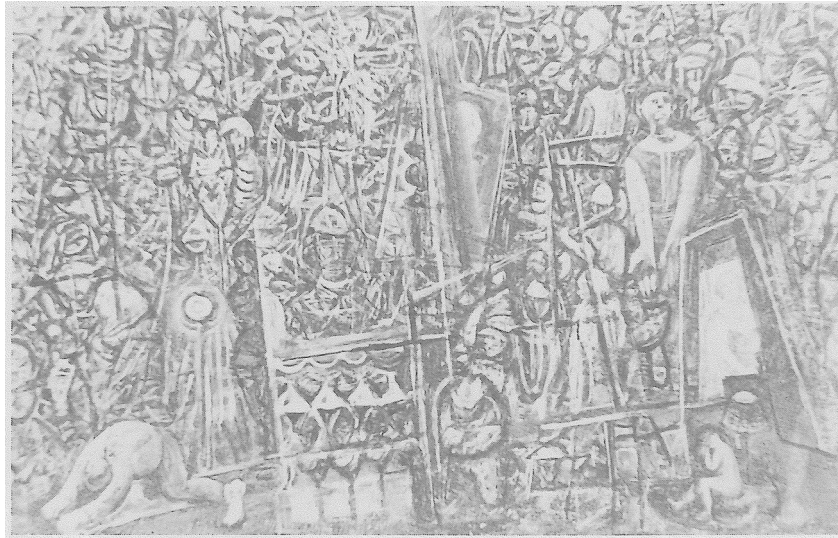


Fig. 4. Detail of figure 3

It is in *Broadway Melody* (1945) (fig. 5) that the theme of underlying menace reaches its climax. At first the almost hallucinatory energy of the canvas gives the impression that this is a kind of *Welcome Hero* of the 1940s, a wild celebration at the end of the war. However, many of the unsettling elements of the 1942 *Broadway Boogie* reappear. The same bird-headed figure appears in the bottom centre of the composition. Above it can be seen a creature who is swallowing an unhappy soul whose legs appear kicking and struggling in an attempt to get free (fig. 6). To the left, a figure is seated at a table, but a body stiffened by rigor mortis lies upon its surface. Strange, hybrid beasts inhabit the bottom of the picture like creatures from another realm. The recognizable progression of the street and shop signs which appeared in *Broadway* now disappears in a massive jumble of light and form; the city is slowly falling about the figures in the street. A large disembodied ear hovers at the top of the painting, and the words “will do” appear in conjunction with the word “tomorrow” which appears once as a fragment and once in its entirety.



Fig. 5. MARK TOBEY. *Broadway Melody*. 1945. Tempera on board, 237/8 x 171/8". The University of Michigan Museum of Art, 1949 (Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Roger L. Stevens)

The theme of the modern city as a frightening centre of anxiety, loneliness, and depravity is not a new one in modern art. Edvard Munch interpreted it in his 1892 painting *Evening on Karl Johanstrasse*. The theme of the crowds jostling into each other in near hysteria is powerfully evoked in Ensor's *Entry of Christ into Brussels* or the terrifying urban landscapes of George Grosz. Tobey's inspiration surely derived from this northern European tradition and from the modern theme of the city as a place of loneliness and despair. But his strongest influence may have come from an earlier source, the sixteenth-century paintings of Hieronymus Bosch. In making this connection we may understand Tobey's vision of Broadway to be not one of celebration or a light-hearted tribute to the creative energies of Broadway but instead a depiction of hell—New York as a kind of modern-day Garden of Earthly Delights. In his paintings of Broadway in the 1940s, Tobey suggests the modern city as a theme with greater implications and symbolism to it than he had approached in previous treatments of the subject.



Fig. 6. Detail of figure 5

Tobey's links to Bosch become clear when *Broadway Melody* and *Broadway Boogie* are compared to the Hell panel in Bosch's famous triptych (fig. 8). Many elements are similar: the bird-headed creatures, the hybrid beings, the hallucinatory faces, and the frantic energy which borders on hysteria. The legs protruding from the mouth of the beast in *Broadway Melody* (fig. 6) are reminiscent of the hapless soul being devoured by the seated being near the bottom of Bosch's panel (fig. 7). The mouth of hell devouring sinners, of course, is also a common theme in northern medieval art. The disembodied ear, which appears prominently in *Broadway Boogie* (fig. 2), *Broadway Melody* (fig. 5), and *Flow of the Night* (1943), is almost a direct quote from Bosch.



Fig. 7. Detail of figure 8

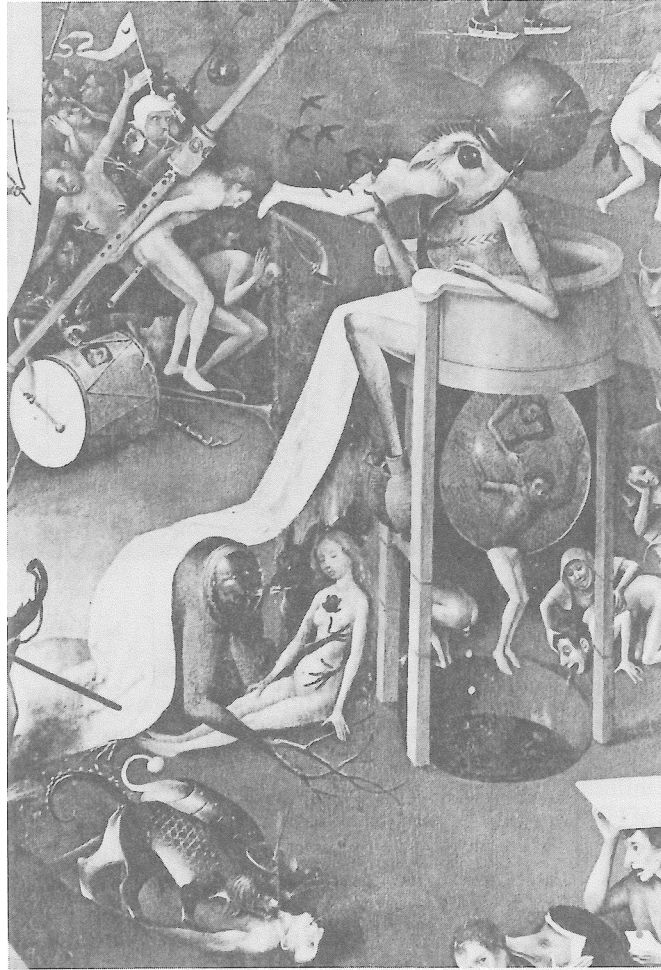


Fig. 8. HIERONYMOUS BOSCH. *Hell*, right wing of *The Garden of Earthly Delights* triptych. Oil on wood, 865/8 x 381/4", Museo del Prado, Madrid

The compositional device in which the figures tend to settle toward the bottom of the painting, while the structures of the city range above, appears in both the Hell panel and Tobey's vertical format for his City Paintings. The use of medieval imagery reveals what must be understood as a modern interpretation of the Last Judgment. It is no surprise that Tobey's theme of the city as hell culminates during the 1940s when many of the world's great cities were being bombed into scenes of devastation far more terrible than any ever imagined by Bosch. In referring to Broadway, Tobey wrote: "Such a feeling of Hell, under a lacy design ..." (Callahan Papers). Like Bosch, Tobey seems to have been overcome with visions of a heedless humanity careening toward a final and complete destruction.

To understand the development of the theme of the city that Tobey evolved in the 1940s, one must become familiar with Tobey's beliefs. Tobey had become an adherent of the Bahá'í Faith about 1918. His involvement in this religion remained a lifelong commitment that had a major effect on the themes and iconography of his paintings. Tobey continually expressed his own belief in the importance of the Bahá'í Faith for his work:

I've been influenced by the Bahá'í religion which believes that there has been one religion which renews itself under different names. The root of all religions from the Bahá'í point of view, is based on the theory that man will gradually come to understand the unity of the world and the oneness of mankind. It teaches that all prophets are one, that science and religion are the two great powers which must be balanced if man is to become mature. I feel my work has been influenced by these beliefs. (Kuh, *Voice* 239)

In a 1971 interview Tobey said:

I believe that a considerable amount of what might be called my better work is derived from Bahá'í love. That, I think, has had the strongest effect on me. (Yamada, *Dialogue* 304)

Tobey was introduced to the Bahá'í Faith through his friendship with the artist Juliet Thompson whom he

met in New York City during his first stay there. She was a member of a small group of Bahá'ís who were actively involved in teaching the tenets of the new religion in the United States. Bahá'í beliefs emphasized the coming world civilization in which human beings would eventually learn to live together in peace. Teachings such as the agreement of religion and science, the equality of women and men, the oneness of the human race, and the establishment of a world government would, according to the Bahá'ís, radically change the way we live and raise the entire human race to a new level in its long development.

Bahá'í communities were typically very diverse and included a mixture of Orientals and Occidentals. The Bahá'ís were also racially integrated, a rarity in 1918. This was the world to which the young Mark Tobey had been drawn, and he spoke with great love of “this little group of people with their prayers, their smiling faces and their unbounded enthusiasm ...” (Kelley, “Mark Tobey” 38-39).

These Bahá'ís believed themselves to be living in one of the great periods of change that occur at regular intervals in human history. According to the Bahá'í teachings, these advances have been brought about by great teachers, such as Moses, Buddha, Christ, Muhammad, or others whom history has not recorded. The appearance of these teachers accounts for the fundamental changes in history and the founding of new civilizations. The central message of the Bahá'í Faith is that its founder, Bahá'u'lláh, is the most recent of these great teachers. His message of global unity is tailored to modern needs and contributes to the eventual development of a world civilization.

The Bahá'í scriptures describe this period in history as the “Promised Day” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 239), the period in which the old world dies, and the labor pains of a completely new way of life begin. This is the “time of the end” described in allegorical terms in the Book of Revelation. The “new heaven and new earth” appear at this very moment and will grow to become the Kingdom of God on Earth.

The Bahá'í writings stress the need for the individual believer to purify his or her life so that each member of the human family can help to create a new race of people so developed spiritually that war, hatred, and division will be virtually eradicated. Bahá'ís think of themselves as living in an age of transition; they, like the early Christians in decadent Rome, are quietly sowing the seeds of a new system of belief and moral development.

Tobey's approach to the City Paintings of the 1940s is more clearly understood in the light of these Bahá'í beliefs. Returning to *Broadway Melody* (fig. 5), we can now see it as a vision of the old world, one in which despair reaches a climax in our great age of transition. Unheeding humanity goes about its pursuit of the physical pleasures unaware that the new age has dawned. Tobey looked upon the confused citizens of the city with compassionate empathy and a sense of poignant loss for the waste of human potential. “How strange,” writes Bahá'u'lláh, “that while the Beloved is visible as the sun, yet the heedless still hunt after tinsel and base metal” (*Seven Valleys* 39). The use of the compartmentalized spaces stresses the theme of people closed in and unaware of the “new day.” Tobey's depiction is almost a literal illustration of the following words of Bahá'u'lláh:

The world's horizon is resplendent with the light of the Most Great Luminary, yet the generality of mankind perceive it not. (*Tablets* 236)

This vision of a human race lost in confusion and cut off from contact with a divine Reality seems to be the underlying theme of Tobey's City Paintings of the 1940s. The events of World War II must have seemed to Tobey but a sad confirmation of the plight of humanity. Throughout the 1940s, though, Tobey's visions of destruction alternate with those of salvation. The city is hell, but a hell that always contains the possibility of a transformation into heaven. In *The New Day* (fig. 9), probably painted in the same year as *Broadway Melody*, Tobey explores this theme. Now the city is the New Jerusalem, which has appeared on the earthly plane. The confining and divisive rooms at the bottom of the painting are dissolved in the new light of understanding. The appearance of this New Jerusalem, the City of God, marks the beginning of a New Age in which the higher consciousness of the human race will transform human existence into the Kingdom of God on Earth. The relationship of Tobey's Bahá'í beliefs to this vision is indicated by the inclusion of small turbaned figures, which are very reminiscent of photographs Tobey would have seen of 'Abdu'l-Baha and other important figures in the early history of the Bahá'í Faith (figs. 10 and 11).

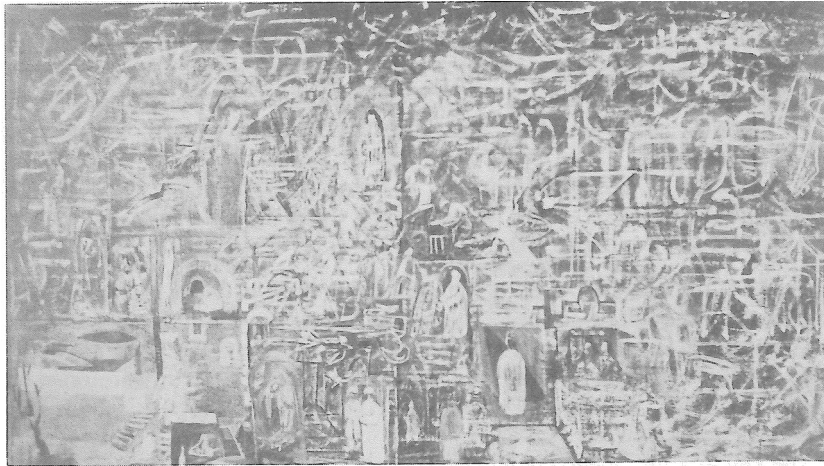


Fig. 9. MARK TOBEY. *The New Day*. 1945(?). Tempera, 123/8 x 231/8".
 Courtesy of the Archives of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States

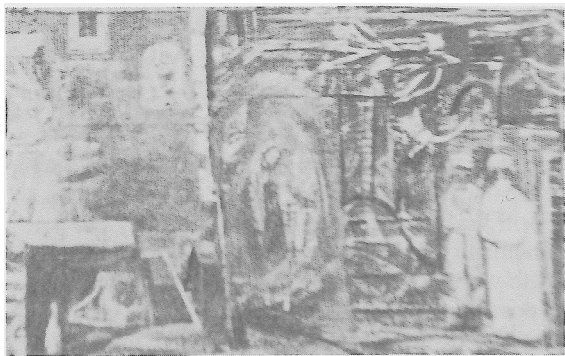


Fig. 10. Detail of figure 9

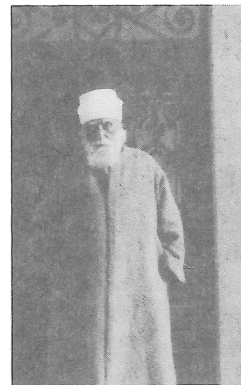


Fig. 11. Photograph of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, c.1920.
 Haifa, Israel

At the top of the composition, the structures of the city dissolve into slashes of paint that have been called Tobey's "white writing." The artist describes this writing as symbolizing "higher states of consciousness" (Tobey, "Mark Tobey Writes" 22). In the upper left section of *The New Day*, a shimmering translucent haloed woman appears. The following passage from the Bahá'í writings indicates she could be associated with the symbolic appearance of the New Jerusalem, which is to appear at the beginning of the New Age.

O ye beloved of God! O ye children of His Kingdom! Verily, verily, the new heaven and the new earth are come. The holy City, new Jerusalem, hath come down from on high in the form of a maid of heaven, veiled, beautiful, and unique, and prepared for reunion with her lovers on earth. The angelic company of the Celestial Concurrence hath joined in a call that hath run throughout the universe, all loudly and mightily acclaiming: "This is the City of God and His abode, wherein shall dwell the pure and holy among His servants." ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 12)

In *The New Day*, Tobey has united his own interest in the city with a theme that has a long tradition in Western art in which the dream of the City of God has been an ageless ideal. In describing the Bahá'í concept of this vision, however, Tobey explained that the new heaven and the new earth were ones of "understanding," that they were symbolic concepts and "not physical things" (Tobey-Seitz Interview).

The key to a full understanding of Tobey's City Paintings, however, lies in recognizing their reference not only to what Bahá'ís consider the fulfillment of traditional Christian symbolism but also to specific Bahá'í sources. One text in particular seems to have had a strong impact on Tobey's iconography of the city. This is a small book entitled, *The Seven Valleys*. Written in answer to questions posed to Bahá'u'lláh by a student of Sufism, this book was one of the few available to the early Bahá'ís in America. Tobey wrote:

There was a spirit there. There wasn't much literature to go by, mostly *The Hidden Words* and *The Seven Valleys*. Both became constant companions to me. I felt that these works conveyed a Truth. It sang in my heart. (Hoffman, "Psychology" 233)

The Seven Valleys is a mystical work in which Bahá'u'lláh outlines the progress of the spirit as it moves through its journey to God. There are seven valleys through which the seeker must pass until she or he is divested of self and attains an understanding of true reality. In each section of *The Seven Valleys*, the journey of the seeker is described. As the seeker passes through the valleys of search, of love, of knowledge, of unity, of contentment, of wonderment, and of true poverty and absolute nothingness, the seeker moves beyond the ties to the physical world to “swim in the sea of the spirit, and soar in the holy air of light” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys* 28). In the first section of this book, Bahá'u'lláh writes:

The stages that mark the wayfarer's journey from the abode of dust to the heavenly homeland are said to be seven. Some have called these Seven Valleys, and others, Seven Cities. (*Seven Valleys* 4)

The reference to the stages of consciousness as “Cities” may have influenced Tobey to return to his theme of the city and to invest it with a deeper meaning, one which would tie in with his studies of *The Seven Valleys*. It appears then that in Tobey's paintings of New York or Seattle the artist intended more than simply records of specific locales. By relating them to the symbolic Seven Cities of Bahá'u'lláh, they can also be seen as representing different stages of consciousness or states of being. Therefore, the lost souls of *Broadway Melody* or *Electric Night* are symbolic of those who are as yet unaware of their spiritual nature. They are, in the words of Bahá'u'lláh, “completely veiled” for they still live in the “abode of dust” (*Seven Valleys* 4).

Later paintings of the 1950s and 1960s may be interpreted as attempts on Tobey's part to find a visual equivalent for the other cities described in *The Seven Valleys*. His paintings have titles like *Universal City*, *Golden City*, or *Plane of Poverty*. These works have a luminous quality which appears to take its inspiration from the Seventh City of Bahá'u'lláh in which the seeker will “swim in the sea of the spirit, and soar in the holy air of light” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys* 28). In a work like *White Night* (fig. 12), Tobey moves beyond figural imagery and envisions the city as being composed of delicate lines of radiant light. Soft as smoke, trembling as the single strand of a spider's web, and energized with what Tobey called “The Universal Light” (Dahl, *Art and Belief* 52), his line appears to escape the bonds of the mere physical and moves beyond the confines of space and time into a greater dimension of experience. Here, Tobey's main themes come together: the triumph of the spiritual over the material and the creation of a visual equivalent for the goal of humanity's spiritual journey.

Throughout his entire work, Tobey used light to express divine illumination, a metaphor with universal roots in both the Eastern and Western traditions. For Tobey, light was “a unifying idea which flows through compartmented units of life, bringing a dynamic to men's minds ever expanding their energies toward a larger reality” (Janis, *Abstract* 87).

This obsession with light became central to Tobey's paintings in his later career, as a representative listing of some of his titles shows: *City Radiance* (1944), *Electric Night* (1944), *Prophetic Light* (1958), *Illumined Plane* (1959), *Lovers of Light* (1960), *Strewn Lights* (1960), *Mystery of the Light* (1969), and *Morning Light* (1970).

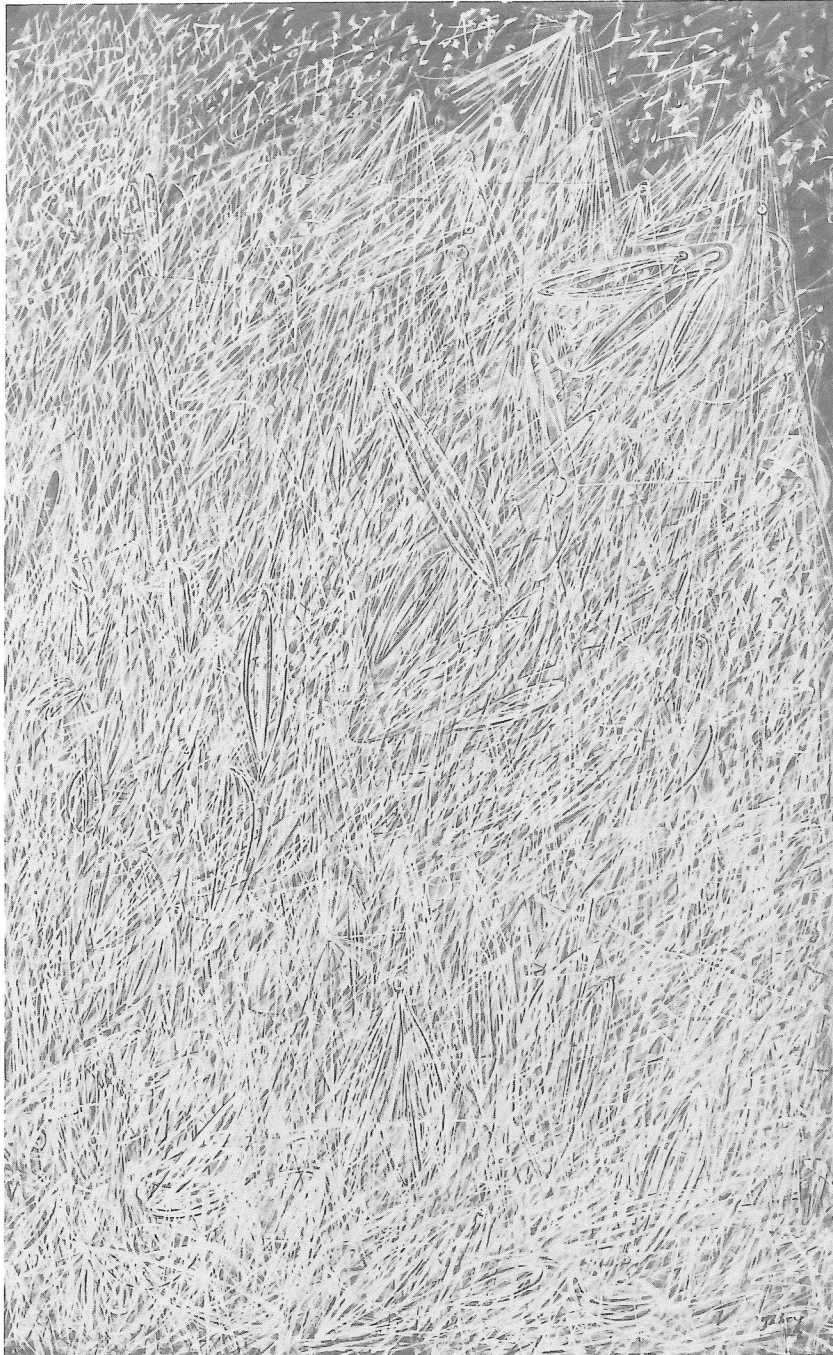


Fig. 12. MARK TOBEY. *White Night*. 1942. Watercolor, tempera on cardboard on masonite, 22 1/4 X 14". Seattle Art Museum (Gift of Mrs. Berthe Poncy Jacobson)

In some of the City Paintings, however, light does not always suggest a higher state of consciousness. In the series done in the 1940s, Tobey seems to have been interested in contrasting the harsh artificial light of the cities of humans with the divine light of the New Jerusalem. In *Electric Night*, the drunk stumbles under a glaring street light, and the nude woman cries in despair beneath her living room lamp (fig. 4). The gleaming artificial lights of the city add to the unnatural gaiety of the scene, but they function as poor compensation for the misery below. Tobey's views concerning technology, unplanned growth, and the continual alienation of humans from their urban environment are well documented. They are perhaps best summarized in his painting, *Void Devouring the Gadget Era*. For Tobey, the irresponsible use of technology without a moral or spiritual guideline has led to the terrible excesses of our time. His painting is a chilling view of our potential for self-annihilation.

In the last decades of his life, Tobey explored means by which he could transcend these contradictions and move beyond the traditional Western divisions of light vs. darkness, good vs. evil, spirit vs. matter, and creation vs. destruction. In this, he again drew upon the Bahá'í Faith and its central teaching of the unity of the entire fabric of creation. As outlined in *The Seven Valleys*, an understanding of the essentially unified character of the cosmos, in spite of its seeming divisions and polarities, is essential to spiritual growth:

After passing through the Valley of knowledge, which is the last plane of limitation, the wayfarer cometh to

THE VALLEY OF UNITY

and drinketh from the cup of the Absolute, and gazeth on the Manifestations of Oneness. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys* 17)

The unity of all earthly creation is the theme in a 1959 painting, *World* (fig. 13). Visions of the whole Earth and the understanding of our planet as a fragile craft adrift in the darkness of space are commonplace to us now, familiar as we are with the stunning photographs sent back from the first visits to the Moon. In 1959, however, no photographs of Earth from space were available. Yet in his *World*, Tobey seems to have captured that exquisite, fragile, yet miraculous quality of Earth as seen from space, as well as a sense of the interrelatedness of the ecosystems upon which we all depend.

“The Earth has been round for some time now,” writes Tobey, “but not in man’s relationship to man, nor in the understanding of the arts of each as part of that roundness. As usual, we have occupied ourselves too much with the outer, the objective, at the expense of the inner world wherein true roundness lies” (Miller, *Fourteen* 70).

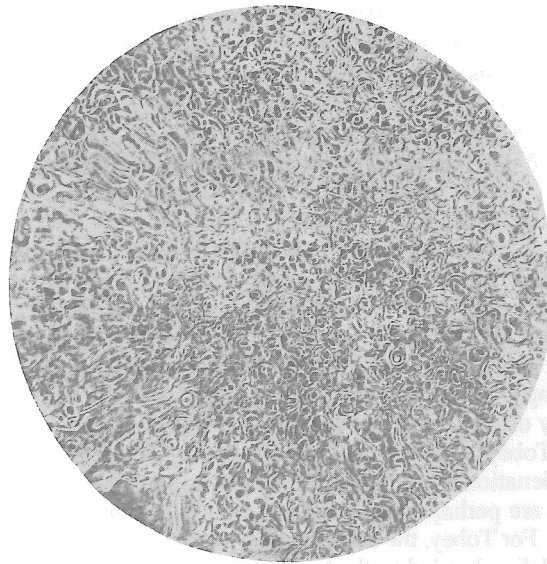


Fig. 13. MARK TOBEY. *World*. 1959. Tempera, 113/4" in diameter. Collection Miani Johnson

This emphasis on roundness, on unity, and on intuitive vision marks his creative output in the last years of his life (Ashton, “Rondeur parfaite” 66). In Tobey’s final paintings the concept of heaven or hell exemplified by the city has been replaced by the abstract vision of a world filled with the mystery of divine energy. Here, in the Seventh City of Bahá'u'lláh, where “even the veils of light are split asunder and vanish away” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys* 39), those who reach this station may “soar in the heaven of singleness” (*Seven Valleys* 41). In his last paintings, Tobey was inspired by this vision of a cosmic unity in which the opposites of light and dark, suffering and ecstasy, ignorance and knowledge, and heaven and hell are resolved.

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