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**Histories of the Transcendental in Art:  
Romanticism, Zen and Mark Tobey.**

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PhD Thesis  
1999.**

## **Abstract.**

This thesis deals with notions of the transcendental and art by investigating the two traditions of Romanticism and *Zen* respectively, in relation to the life and work of the American painter Mark Tobey.

Responding in part to my reading of Robert Rosenblum's Modern Painting the Northern Romantic Tradition (1975), the thesis begins by attempting to imagine the possibilities for a discourse about art and the transcendental by looking at Neoplatonic and Mahayana Buddhist ideas in relation to ideas of the transcendental. A hermeneutical methodology is suggested as a framework by which art may be seen in terms of a transcendental language.

A central assumption of the thesis is that different histories or positions of the transcendental and art are identifiable. By analysing European Romantic responses to ideas of the transcendental and presenting them alongside *Zen* positions such differences may be revealed and 'official' histories challenged. For instance, Romantic languages about 'oneness' and 'purity' are radically challenged by the Nagarjunan notion of *sunyata* and its insistence upon a thorough deconstruction of Being.

Mark Tobey is introduced as a painter whose *Zen* interests from the early nineteen thirties disturbs his place within an orthodox reading of American and European modernist art. Tobey's relationship to Abstract Expressionist painters is explored and a close analysis of his journey to China and Japan in 1934 is undertaken within a broad historical context. Questions of Tobey's interests in *Zen* during a period when Japan was moving towards a radical nationalism, and his search for an 'authentic' Japan are investigated. Tobey's appropriations of *Zen* 'calligraphy' through his 'white writing' technique is also explored in relation to his 'overtly Oriental' works from 1956-7 and their potential to be read in terms of *Zen* notions such as *sunyata*. The thesis suggests an 'alternative-*Japonisme*' context for Tobey's *Zen* interests, placing him at a distance from orthodox histories of *Japonisme*, and nearer to the late nineteenth century appropriations of Buddha images by Odilon Redon and Paul Ranson. Tobey's affinities with Piet Mondrian are then analysed, and their shared Neoplatonic ideas revealed.

The different possible histories of the transcendental in art are hopefully investigated by this thesis, opening up alternative positions which can rupture 'standard' Occidental histories of art and their privileging of Western philosophical and mystical discourses.

## **Acknowledgements.**

I would like to thank the following people and institutions for their kindness and assistance:  
The archive staff at Dartington Hall (Devon), the monks of *Empuku-ji* (Yawata), The National Arts Library (London), The Tate Gallery Library (London), The Library of the Theosophical Society (London), The staff at The Library of Keio University (Tokyo), The Mingei Museum (Tokyo), The staff at the Japan Times Archives (Tokyo), Art Catalogue Library (Tokyo), David Reason, Yuko Kikuchi, Peter Moore, Thomas Joshua Cooper, Peter McDonald, and Roger Cardinal.

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## **Preface.**

The paintings of Mark Tobey have a renown for expressing transcendental ideas. His works are often referred to in terms of religious metaphors or revelatory experiences drawn from diverse sources. Jose Angel Valente claims that:

....it is probably no exaggeration to say that, in Tobey, one of the richest spiritual adventures of twentieth century art is traced.<sup>1</sup>

Joshua C. Taylor suggests that an encounter with a Tobey painting can lead to forms of spiritual enrichment, much like earlier forms of devotional religious art. The image acts like a charged sacred space through which the viewer can experience a sense of 'release'.

A painting by Tobey has always provided a view into a private world of vision and spirit rather than an invitation to a critical world of schools and trends....Tobey's painting, with its demanding intricacies and its ecstatic intensity, provides a way to the spirit, to that point at which aesthetic refinement becomes identical with spiritual release.<sup>2</sup>

A similar point is expressed by the German critic Werner Schmalenbach.

In the works of Tobey one must follow all the linear irritations and turmoils in order to experience to what extent all the movements of lines are movements of the spirit. To be sure, one can understand them simply as movements of the hand, the brush, and this alone can be proved. There is, however, no doubt about the fact that one is confronted with a spiritual act, as though a human spirit should make itself manifest here in the soundless movements of the lines.<sup>3</sup>

For Schmalenbach Tobey's images are not merely painted surfaces, but also spiritually significant gestures that track the artists most profound thoughts.

The critical language around Tobey thus often leans heavily on *more than aesthetic considerations*, employing philosophical and religious terms that attribute his images with meanings over and above their appearance as painted marks on a surface. The contention of this thesis is firstly to expose some of these 'other' languages, and to question them. They are languages which Jean-Francois Lyotard has described as 'the sublime':

I shall call modern the art which devotes its 'little technical expertise', as Diderot used to say, to present the fact that the unrepresentable exists. To make visible that there is something which can be conceived and which can neither be seen nor made visible: this is what is at stake in modern painting.<sup>4</sup>

Lyotard sees the efforts of successive avant-garde's in terms of their testimonies to the sublime, to presenting the unrepresentable, and in this respect Tobey's images are accommodated. Lyotard's 'sublime' offers one way of imagining art's relationship with ideas of the transcendental. It also assumes that ideas about the transcendental or the sublime remain important areas of study for art historians.

The subject of this thesis covers ground that remains highly contested. In the first instance, it is my intention that this contributes something new and valid to the debates within the field. In particular, I have tried to avoid presenting a definitive history, and rather approached the subject from what I think is a position that opens up possibilities of investigation, as opposed to present a polemical stance. The nature of my approach has thus been investigative and presentational as opposed to definitive and conclusive. In this sense it is a thesis which borrows its methodologies from the subjects of its investigation, incorporating visual analysis and historical research from art history, and philosophical and religious speculation from the fields of philosophy and the study of mysticism.

In the second instance, I am indebted to numerous other scholars who have written in this field. In particular I would mention one important pioneering work, for it both defined a new field within Western art history to a large degree, and inspired other writers to pursue researches into kindred areas: the book is Robert Rosenblum's Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition, Friedrich to Rothko, first published in 1975. Rosenblum's emphasis upon the religious dynamics underlying much modern Western art, and his implicit challenging of the so called School of Paris aesthetics, in favour of what he termed a 'Northern Romantic Tradition' opened up radically new avenues for inter-disciplinary researches into art that straddled the realms of philosophy, social history, and religious studies. The debt of this thesis to Rosenblum's work is therefore significant, yet, by no means is it wholly accepting. It challenges some of Rosenblum's assumptions regarding the idea of the transcendental, its universality, and some of the artists who remained marginalised within his argument. Rosenblum states the intentions of his thesis as follows:

The gist of my ambitious argument is this: that there is an important, alternative reading of the history of modern art which might well supplement the orthodox one that has as its almost exclusive locus Paris, from David and Delacroix to Matisse and Picasso. My own reading is based not on formal values alone - if such things can really exist in a vacuum - but rather on the impact of certain problems of modern cultural history, and most particularly the religious dilemmas posed in the Romantic movement, upon the combination of subject, feeling, and structure shared by a long tradition of artists working mainly in Northern Europe and the United States.<sup>5</sup>

His thesis goes on to trace a largely chronological alternative history of European art, through the lens of what he refers to as 'the religious dilemmas' first identified in the Romantic movement. In response to his approach, I have tried to introduce two further elements within this general field of inquiry; one asks what the nature of the religious element Rosenblum identifies may be, and whether this can be applied generally in referring to a transcendental art. In response, I identify Neoplatonic thought and its discourses of 'purity' and 'truth' as forming one important philosophical and mystical foundation in Europe that justifies art to express the transcendental. I contrast this with a Zen Buddhist discourse of the transcendental which emanates from the writings of the second century Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna and his radical critique of 'pure' Being.

A second aspect of Rosenblum's thesis which I address concerns his representation of artists, reflecting the sub-title of book, 'From Friedrich to Rothko'. Rosenblum does not consider the role of other, non-European traditions such as Buddhism, as sources which artists have appropriated in order to express ideas of the transcendental. My intentions have thus been to identify these marginalised, 'other' sources from within a European Romantic model, and present them, in Rosenblum's term, as significant *alternative alternatives* to both a Paris based and Northern European based history of modern art. I therefore argue that through exploring the work of artists such as Odilon Redon and Mark Tobey, and their interests in the 'Orient', alternative readings of Western art history and its expression of transcendental ideas are possible.

My investigation of Oriental sources as vehicles for transcendental ideas also challenge orthodox histories regarding the so called 'influence' of the 'Orient' on European art. Unlike the *Japonisme* thesis and its emphasis on the stylistic 'influences' of Japanese prints and decorative arts on European Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, my argument attempts

to examine the potential role of the philosophical and mystical aspects from the 'Orient' during the early Modern period. In adopting this position I also recognise another study of pioneering importance. David J. Clarke's work, published in 1988, entitled The Influence of Oriental Thought on Postwar American Painting and Sculpture, initially presented as his PhD thesis, explored the philosophical influences of the Orient on American artists from the mid 1940s to the mid 1960s. Clarke structures his argument around a specifically American art history that, in his view, enabled a unique interaction between East and West.

American artists from the 1940s were not the first modernists to learn from Oriental philosophy, and Kandinsky, amongst others, was touched by it. However, the Americans engaged in a deeper study of a wider variety of Eastern traditions (with farther reaching effects on their art) than artists of previous generations. Whilst there was a contemporary interest in the East amongst European artists the geographical position of the United States, with one coast facing Europe and the other the Far East, made America the key location for the meeting of East and West.\*

Clarke's thesis charts this interaction through themes such as the 'Void' and 'Continuum', also including Tobey's interests in the East, amongst a wide range of American artists who he quotes at length. Whilst Clarke's approach explores this 'influence' by analysing individual artist's statements within the general themes he identifies, it will be my intention to provide a somewhat broader historical perspective that considers the reasons why some artists looked 'East', and how one may potentially analyse their appropriations. In this regard I propose an 'alternative-*Japonisme*' thesis that reconsiders orthodox histories of *Japonisme* by investigating the Buddha paintings of Paul Ranson and Odilon Redon from the late nineteenth century and their assimilation into wider universalist discourses of the time.

Mark Tobey was chosen as the primary figure of study because of his ambiguous position within 'official' Western art histories. This meant that different readings of his life and work were possible, incorporating European Romantic traditions and those of Zen art. Furthermore, Tobey's journey to China and Japan in 1934 represented an early example of a Western artists appropriation of Oriental calligraphy and Zen ideas. Other artists were considered including Julius Bissier, André Masson and Morris Graves, but they developed their responses to Oriental ideas in the late 1940s and 50s, when interest in the 'East' was popular amongst many European and American artists. Tobey's ambivalent position within

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'official' histories is thus closely interwoven with his pioneering appropriations of Zen calligraphy and ideas; it is thus necessary to analyse in depth his 1934 trip to the 'Orient' and his stay in a Zen monastery in Kyoto. His significance lies precisely in this sense of historical un-rootedness, enabling alternative histories and positions to be explored. It is therefore *around* Tobey that I hope to *imagine* different histories of the transcendental in art and thereby contribute to a less formalist reading of 'art history' as a historically determined and Euro-centric endeavour.

- <sup>1</sup> Jose Angel Valente, 'Mark Tobey or The Enigma of the Limit', in Mark Tobey (cat), Galeris Jorge Mara, Madrid. 1994.
- <sup>2</sup> Joshua C. Taylor, 'Looking at Tobey's Pictures', in Mark Tobey. Art and Belief, Arthur L. Dahl and others. George Ronald, Oxford. 1984. 27.
- <sup>3</sup> Werner Schmalenbach, 'Concerning the Art of Mark Tobey', Between Worlds. Works 1935-1975(cat), Museo d'arte Mendrisio and Museum Folkwang Essen. 1989. 65.
- <sup>4</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, 'What is Postmodernism?', (1982), cited in Art in Theory 1900-1990, Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.), Blackwell, Oxford, 1992, 1013.
- <sup>5</sup> Robert Rosenblum, Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition, Friedrich to Rothko, Thames and Hudson, 1975, 8.
- <sup>6</sup> David J. Clarke, The Influence of Oriental Thought on Postwar American Painting and Sculpture, (originally PhD thesis, Courtauld Institute, London), Garland Publishing, New York and London, 1988.

## Part I. Discourses.

### *i) Finding Positions.*

Writings on art and ideas of the transcendental are not new. All have, in varying ways, attempted to make sense of how we can see an artistic object as the embodiment of transcendental ideals, or offer criteria for judging art to be transcendental. This thesis seeks to find *its* position within this contested field of discourses. Three recent texts which have investigated art and ideas of the transcendental may be identified as preliminary markers for this study.

Roger Lipsey's 1988 study entitled An Art of Our Own. The Spiritual in Twentieth Century Art provides a historical survey of the influence of the spiritual on twentieth century art movements and individual artists. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona's edited collection of essays from 1984 entitled Art, Creativity, and the Sacred brings together essays by art historians, philosophers, artists and theologians. And the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's 1986 exhibition catalogue entitled The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985 offers a collection of highly varied and scholarly essays on the dialogue between art and spirituality during the last one hundred years. All three attempt to present theories and ideas about how art has related to ideas of the transcendental and the religious in a secular age; they thus present different *histories* of this relationship, but crucially also different *discourses* regarding the ways in which we may interpret and judge that relationship.

A common methodology that one encounters in the literature and in wider public discussions on the subject may be referred to as the 'identification' discourse. It is a discourse that seeks to identify a type of art that is 'transcendental' by virtue of its aesthetic or narrative superiority over other kinds of art, its 'seriousness', or equation of the artist with some form of mystical ability to infuse his work with 'transcendental qualities'. The consequence of this approach is necessarily reductionistic, resulting in disputes about what is and is not 'transcendental'; the prospect for constructive critique and dialogue is buried under a perpetual barrage of attack and counter-attack. Underlying the 'identification' discourse is an assumption that paintings carry profound meanings *in themselves*, separated from historical or social contexts or the ideas that viewers bring to them.

Roger Lipsey tends towards the 'identification' discourse, referring to 'brats and seekers' in his 1988 study. He identifies Andy Warhol and other Pop artist's as 'brats'

whilst equating 'serious' spiritual artist's as 'seekers'. Lipsey initiates a distinction between so called 'brattish' artists, obsessed with commercial success, subverting authorship, and drawing from the material world for inspiration, and the serious works of artists who have carried on 'the spiritual tradition' in art and whose work is thus somehow more 'authentic'.

Lipsey refers to the works of artists such as Robert Smithson, Beverly Pepper, Andre Enard and William Bailey as 'spiritual' and serious, a group of artists that he refers to within the 'EarthWorks Movement', often also called Land Art, because of its affinities with ancient sacred sites and temples. This is despite the fact that many Land artists approached their work with a sense of opposition against the museum and gallery systems of the time, thus operating on an important critical level. In contrast, Lipsey is critical of 'brat' artists such as Andy Warhol, whose work he claims is not 'serious', although 'entertaining, intriguing, and confrontational'. This narrow view informs Lipsey's choice of contemporary 'spiritual' artists, who all seem to share similar attributes such as 'meditative', 'contemplative', 'primal', and 'stillness'. For Lipsey, to refer to a 'spiritual' art is also to employ a specific language and discourse about what the 'spiritual' is; it is crucially able to be *described* and *identified* against other positions. It is a methodology which cannot accommodate a diversity of positions both on the part of the artist or the viewer in relation to what may be considered 'spiritual', nor does it approach the question of engaging with art as a truly inter-relational act in which multiple layers of meanings and feelings may emerge.

One of the dangers of referring to a transcendental art is therefore to speak about it as if it occupied a unique position of privilege. Not only does this limit the ways one can approach the field, but it also assumes an ontological superiority of one position over another. By claiming that Warhol's art is not 'spiritual' Lipsey also implicitly contends that his art *is not as good* as that of Smithson or Pepper. This is a dangerous line of argument, which ultimately rests on how Lipsey constructs Warhol or Smithson as *human beings*. Is Warhol's art 'brattish' because he is insufficient as a person 'of spirit'? Is Smithson a 'seeker' because he is a better human being than Warhol?

Lipsey's language does not enable the possibility of what Paul Ricoeur refers to as the 'disclosure of possible worlds', rather using language as a form of closure in which specific defining boundaries are established. Ricoeur's understanding of hermeneutics stems rather from the capacity of language to open up new worlds in which it may be possible to imagine other possibilities. To confront works by Warhol or Smithson is thus to *allow* them the

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'texts'. The hermeneutical methodology which I propose attempts to listen to many different 'voices', initiating a living exchange of question and answer in which the viewer always extends *reciprocity*. The task is not one of *identifying*, but of *seeking to understand* what one confronts. This does not mean merely looking at the art object, but enveloping its immediate and historical contexts, the human being behind it and our own assumptions; in the words of Hans-Georg Gadamer, the text or the painting must remain a 'partner in conversation'.

Philosophically, Lipsey's approach stems in large part from the writings of Immanuel Kant and in particular the first part of the third Critique of Judgment concerned with the Critique of Aesthetics. In this treatise Kant writes about the detachment of art from the practical concerns of life, and for the first time, expounds the 'aesthetic' as a significant and independent category of human experience. In doing so, he claims that aesthetic judgment or taste is also disinterested and independent of all interests. Thus he writes:

*Taste* is the faculty of judging of an object or a method of representing it by an *entirely disinterested* satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The object of such satisfaction is called *beautiful*.<sup>1</sup>

From such a position it is but a short leap to claim that there is a kind of transcendental art that truly reflects *the* transcendental, and that such an art is truly universal because it is also totally disinterested and 'pure'. Indeed, Kant explains what he calls the 'second moment' of aesthetic judgment by referring to the universality of the beautiful. But, as the critic Peter Burger has pointed out, such claims to universality and disinterestedness must also be seen to reflect particular class and social positions. He writes:

What this category (the autonomy of art) cannot lay hold of is that this detachment of art from practical contexts is a *historical process*, i.e., that it is socially conditioned.<sup>2</sup>

The approach I intend to take in this thesis is sympathetic to Burger's position but not to the exclusion of denying any possibility for a transcendental art. It is not to try and define or characterise a certain kind of art called 'transcendental', but to try and highlight some of the different positions - including those highlighted by Burger - which inform a consideration of the *possibility* of a transcendental art. It is necessary to adopt a methodology which

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respects the multiple and divergent *possible* meanings of the term, and insist that we grant the term adequate space in which to *reveal its* meanings. It is a methodology which must commit itself to broad-ranging analyses; an identification of different histories, philosophies, biography, critique, and the close study of specific paintings.

ii) *Religious Art / Transcendental Art.*

From the outset it is necessary to distinguish between religious art and transcendental art. One of my assumptions is precisely that one can identify significant differences between orthodox forms of religious art and what I refer to as transcendental art. By differentiating the two, one may avoid a reductionistic Kantian approach that endeavours to identify a 'truly' transcendental or religious art.

Religious art may be understood to represent an art of explicit religious images and iconographies intended for specific religious settings. Transcendental art, on the other hand, may be seen to represent an art that is not necessarily an art of specifically religious intentions or dimensions, but may rather refer to an art that is synonymous with the broader term 'transcendental'. The distinction I am attempting to make revolves around, on the one hand, an understanding of religion as institutional, traditional and ritualised and, on the other hand, the recognition of a type of experience or state which may be defined variously, dependent upon how one understands the term 'transcendental', or considers an art work's quality or content. At the outset it is possible to say that a religious art refers to its own constituency and context: it is an art which claims the religious as its principal provider of meaning. In contrast, a transcendental art lacks a defined constituency and context, *rather only becoming meaningful through specific dialogues with it.*

In formal terms, a transcendental art may be different from a religious art in that it does not have to express or refer to an established religious tradition. What often defines or characterises a transcendental art at an important formal level is its lack of overt reference to religious traditions, and its attempts to evoke the transcendental *precisely through its lack of traditional religious motifs or conventions.* How one understands the term transcendental is thus of crucial significance, providing the context which enables one to see, for instance, a tree as symbolic of spiritual growth or light as an indicator of ascension. Whilst religion is most often allied to notions of belief, obedience and ritual around powers considered to be divine within an institutional setting, the term transcendental perhaps remains more imaginary and less fixed. To refer to a transcendental art must thus also be to refer to *specific understandings* of the term dependent on contexts, whereas to refer to religious art is to talk within the general category of the term religion. Furthermore, to distinguish between these two terms is in itself indicative of certain historical and artistic changes which I propose: the term religious art can be seen to represent an artistic form that

A religious art may be exemplified by the Byzantine art of the icon, for example, which is primarily concerned with images of saints or other religious figures. The icon is believed to be sacred and to facilitate contact with the figure portrayed through a specifically religious visual language that is enshrined in certain rules and criteria which dictate their form and usage. Moreover such images often rely on their immediate environment for meaning, incorporating itself as elements of religious architecture or furniture. An iconic art may be considered to be a religious art precisely because it serves a formal purpose within a wider religious tradition, which in the case of the icon was the early Byzantine and later Orthodox churches. Leonide Ouspensky talks about the icon in the following way, supporting the notion that it was an art intimately related to traditional religious tradition.

...Just as the symbolism of the first centuries of Christianity was a language common to the entire Church, so also the icon is a language common to the entire Church because it expresses the common Orthodox teaching, the common Orthodox ascetic experience and the common Orthodox liturgy. The sacred image has always expressed the revelation of the Church, bearing it in a visible form to the faithful, placing it before their eyes as an answer to their questions, a teaching and a guide, as a task to accomplish, as a prefiguration and the first-fruits of the Kingdom of God.<sup>3</sup>

An aspect which becomes apparent from the above quote, is the functional nature of a religious art. Ouspensky interestingly refers to the icon as a 'language' expressing a common teaching and tradition, implying that one must also be familiar with this language in order to fully understand its significance. Moreover, it is an art form that utilises a specific iconography and subject matter which derives from formal religious sources.

Similarly one may point to various forms of Buddhist art as an example of religious art. As with the Orthodox icon, Buddhist art may be understood to represent the visual expressions of the Buddhist religious tradition; it seeks to express specific religious ideals through the forms of Buddhist iconographies and symbolism. It is a religious art because it endeavours to illustrate and embody the religious traditions and doctrines of the Buddhist faith.

The Buddhist art historians, Takichi Irie and Shigeru Aoyama refer to Japanese Buddhist art in the following way.

In Buddhist art, as in all religious art, certain details - hand position, clothing

style, hair style, objects carried - symbolise fundamental religious ideals and long-lasting traditions. The artist is ever aware of these. A Buddhist sculptor creating a triad fully recognises the inter-relationship of the central figure, the supporting figures - usually one at each side - and the viewer, and his cognizance gains expression in his creation. If the viewer cannot identify the figures or realise the various relationships in a triad, he misses the religious significance of the artistic image.<sup>4</sup>

Once again, as in the case of a Byzantine iconic art, it is the identity of the art object with its religious tradition and environment which identifies a Buddhist art as a religious art. As Irie and Aoyama make clear, the viewer is drawn into a complex and systematic artistic structure resting upon religiously significant details such as hand positioning or clothing style. To see a Buddhist sculpture simply as an ornamental figure thus lessens its specific religious significance and role. A religious art therefore generates value and significance precisely because of its relationship with traditional religious cosmologies. And in this relationship it assumes that the viewer is also aware of certain religious ideas by which the art becomes more than simply its material parts and incorporated into a broader symbolic structure.

And yet such an identification runs the risk of being too rigid, disregarding forms of religious art which also serve the purpose of evoking or inducing specific forms of transcendental or mystical experiences. We may say that certain religious rituals or practices encourage specific understandings and experiences of the transcendental, whether this be through Christian metaphors of ascension and Light, Hindu notions of union with *Brahman*, or Zen Buddhist terms such as *Satori* or awakening. Thus, beyond the formal religious characteristics of a religious art - images of saints, protectors, or divine stories - are their religiously *affective qualities* which often correspond with ideas about the transcendental. In this respect, some forms of religious art may be understood to directly evoke or express ideas about the transcendental. A good example of this inter-relation is provided by the mandala iconographies of certain Buddhist and Hindu religious arts.

Mandalas are usually referred to as images composed of various elements enclosed in a square or a circle, and represent a significant part of much esoteric Buddhist practice and art in Central and East Asia. They are used as a means towards contemplation and concentration and may thus be referred to as aids in inducing certain mental states akin to mystical or transcendental states, as interpreted by various sects. For the Japanese Shingon sect for example, the mandala could represent the phenomenal world of the everyday juxtaposed with the noumenal world of the spirit, and by methods of meditation on such images

together with other rites the believer's task was to realise Buddhahood in this human realm.

The mandala occupies an interesting role here; arising out of systematic religious structures, but also pointing towards certain types of transcendental experience. In the mandala image we are faced with an example of a religious art which also transgresses explicitly into the realms of a transcendental art. And yet, like the Orthodox icon, the mandala is functional in the sense that it serves certain religiously defined ends and it is precisely because of its close links with such religious objectives, however transcendental, that the mandala may still be considered to represent a religious art. Despite recognising that a religious art may also represent transcendental aims, the distinction of a religious art may nonetheless be upheld on the formal grounds that it represents an art that identifies with specifically religious traditions and institutions.

### *iii) Transcendental Experience.*

In contrasting the terms religion and the transcendental as I have done above, it also becomes possible to broaden the discussion to include a consideration of how some writers have attempted to refer to transcendental experiences. This is useful to consider because it provides methodologies which may be compared with the one I suggest for the purposes of understanding transcendental art. It also reminds us of the experiential dimension of the term transcendental and the diverse ways in which different people have talked about it. Unlike scholars such as R.C. Zaehner who attempt to give more value to experiences of unity with God - what he calls 'introvertive mysticism' - and consequently regard nature mysticism or other non-religious type experiences as somehow less 'true', I prefer to adopt the positions of writers such as William James or Marghanita Laski, who emphasise the diverse and different nature's of such experiences as being equally valid. It seems that any attempt at trying to categorise or validate such experiences is ultimately futile, and that one might instead consider these extra-ordinary experiences to rest upon a continuum which changes according to each individual's context, background and expectations; strict categorisations are extremely difficult to sustain in view of the subjective natures of such experiences and the dependency for communicating the experience upon language.

In this spirit I intend briefly to look at William James' notion of religious experience and Marghanita Laski's notion of ecstatic experiences. Both approaches accommodate the hermeneutical proposition I advance by considering a wide range of experiences as transcendental without categorising them strictly as religious or otherwise. Under their respective headings of 'religious experience' and 'ecstatic experience', both writers

accommodate a wide diversity of experiences and accounts from orthodox religious mystics experiences, aesthetic experiences, nature mysticisms and experiences emanating from activities such as sexual love or drug ingestion. The significance of this methodology for the present thesis is its proximity to my understanding of transcendental art as distinct, but not rigidly so, from traditional forms of religious art, and its potential to signify many different forms of expression which are not necessarily religious. To think about transcendental experience in this way is thus also to provide further support for imagining transcendental art.

The American psychologist William James offers an account of religious experience which stems from his identification of two distinct types or experiences of religion, one which he calls institutional religion and another which he calls personal religion. James provides examples of what he means by institutional religion, pointing to the domains of theology, ceremony, ecclesiastical organisation and worship amongst other things. Of institutional religion James says.

Were we to limit our view to it, we should have to define religion as an external art, the art of winning the favour of the gods<sup>5</sup>

Clearly James refers to the outward, physical manifestations of religion; their organisational and ritualistic elements. As to what he terms personal religion, James refers us to the domain of individual, subjective experience. It is personal religion which encompasses the realm of religious experience.

The acts to which this sort of religion prompts are personal not ritual acts, the individual transacts the business by himself alone, and ecclesiastical organisation, with its priests and sacraments and other go - betweens, sinks to an altogether secondary place<sup>6</sup>

James understands personal religion to occupy a more profound seat than institutional religion, citing as support of his contention the thesis that the founders of every church owed their power and authority originally from direct, personal experiences of the divine. It is the realm of personal religion which for James thus represents what he means by religion, and he defines it thus:

Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far

as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine<sup>7</sup>

To refer to religious experience within the Jamesian orbit therefore, is to refer to any kind of experience which relates to one's understandings of the divine. As a definition of religious experience this is rather vague, and yet it accommodates a wide diversity of positions and experiences which are ultimately underpinned by the subjective response of the person having the experience. In the context of imagining a transcendental art, James' definition provides one measure which significantly does not resort to an overtly institutional religious language nor attempts any reductionistic strategy of categorising certain experiences over others. James even refers to some drug-induced or alcoholic experiences as having mystical significance, although he does stipulate that the divine must involve solemnity and gravity. Despite James' widely varying accounts of religious experience and his individualistic stance towards them, he assumes such experiences to be essentially directed towards a notion of a divine as he understood it, and as some critics have pointed out, this revealed his essentially Protestant context.

Another approach that perhaps echoes much of James' approach is encountered in Marghanita Laski's book Ecstasy. A Study of some Secular and Religious Experiences. Like James, underlying Laski's methodology is an assumption that ecstatic experiences are varied and fluid. She does not attempt any rigid categorisation of experiences, rather emphasising their subjective feelings which include religious as well as non-religious languages. Laski's term 'Ecstasy' may be replaced by the term 'transcendental', reflecting a broad range of feelings which she grouped under the headings of 'feelings of gain', 'feelings of loss', and 'quasi-physical feelings'. It may be useful to list these feelings, which may also contribute towards considering a transcendental art.

a) unity, eternity, heaven; new life, satisfaction, joy, salvation, perfection, glory; contact; new or mystical knowledge. b) loss of difference, time, place; of worldliness, desire, sorrow, sin; of self; of words and/or images and/or sense; up-feelings; inside-feelings; light and/or heat feelings; enlargement and/or improvement feelings; liquidity feelings; feelings of calm, peace.<sup>8</sup>

Some of these words have obvious religious connotations whilst others do not. Laski stipulated that for an experience to be considered an 'ecstasy' the subject had to claim at least two of the feelings from a) and one from b). Like James, it is a methodology which does not rely upon distinguishing between religious and non-religious experiences, although often an

experience may reveal strong religious connotations. A particularly valuable aspect of Laski's study is the inclusion of two 'control' groups in addition to her questionnaire respondents. She randomly chose written accounts of ecstatic experiences from literary sources and religious sources to compare with her own research group. Laski's study therefore places equal significance between accounts by poets, religious mystics, and 'ordinary' people who responded to her study. Laski is fully aware, moreover, of the different contexts, 'triggers', and languages available to different groups for the purposes of experiencing ecstasies. She thus asserts that:

My description of ecstatic experience is intended to apply to all ecstasies whether they have a religious content or not. Most descriptions of mystical experience refer only to religious experiences - taking religious here to mean, here, having a content claimed to supply or correspond with or justify religious beliefs.<sup>9</sup>

What becomes apparent from Laski's investigation is the significance of context in determining the nature and expression of transcendental experiences. Thus, for religious mystics the nature of their experiences will be largely moulded by their beliefs, rituals and iconographies, whereas for the Romantic nature poet it may be moulded by his temperament, use of language or religious education.

And yet one may nevertheless still differentiate between what Peter Moore calls mundane religious experiences - activities such as prayer, liturgical singing and specific rituals - from what he refers to as transcendental religious experiences. The latter would closely relate to James and Laski's notions of transcendental experience. And yet even this is a distinction which cannot be codified, for the nature of such experiences means that one must remain as accommodating as possible. In a similar manner it is my contention that to imagine a transcendental art must also be to employ a methodology which remains as fluid and adaptable as possible. Although my strategy in this thesis is not concerned with identifying a transcendental art because of its direct associations with the kinds of transcendental experiences explored by James or Laski, their *approach* towards what constitutes transcendental experiences may be echoed in my approach towards what may constitute a transcendental art.

*iv) Imagining the Transcendental.*

*The Transcendental as 'That'.*

It is now necessary to turn to the term 'transcendental', and investigate its various meanings. I intend to concentrate on two specific understandings of the term; one through the Neoplatonic tradition and the other through the Zen Buddhist tradition.

In isolating Neoplatonism I am aware that one also engages in a process of selection. I could have chosen to isolate, for instance, the Hellenistic mysticism of Gnosticism, or mediaeval Rosicrucianism as philosophies which have referred to the transcendental, but my reasons for choosing to isolate Neoplatonism are twofold: firstly because of Plato and Plotinus' crucial significance in the wider development of European thought and Christian theology and their continuing importance in the critical writings of recent philosophers and art theorists. Both Plato's notions of Two Worlds - of Reality and Appearance - and Ideal Forms, and Plotinus' mystical formulation of Platonic themes in relation to the revelation of true beauty, represent fundamental elements in the development of European Christian traditions of art and art criticism. The lineage of thinkers in Europe who developed and expounded upon Neoplatonic themes is both impressive and significant: from Augustine in the period of late antiquity, through Italian humanists such as Marsilio Ficino who translated Plato, to Cambridge Platonists such as Robert Cudworth and Henry More in the seventeenth century, and figures such as Schelling, Berkeley, Hegel and Goethe in more recent times.

Secondly, Plato's theory of the Ideal can be said to rest at a key juncture in European notions of the transcendental. Principally through the writings of Plotinus, Plato's ideas about Ideal Forms sustains the basis of a comprehensive metaphysical and mystical system, which gave prominence to the notion of transcendence or 'going beyond', and which was later developed by Augustine into a broader Christian theology which emphasised a return to one's self and God through a moral and mental ascent. Although Plotinus stresses that the Intelligible realm is discovered within ourselves, as soul, anticipating the subjective directions of modern European philosophy to some degree, his conception of 'two worlds' and the language he uses in order to express this, can be interpreted as resting upon a specific notion of the transcendental as a reality that is fundamentally different to that of everyday experience. Even Plotinus' internalised model of the One as residing within the soul, can thus be seen in terms of two distinct notions of reality.

'true' and 'pure' as opposed to mere 'appearance', or *mimesis*. Many of the artists I refer to in this thesis utilise this defence in order to claim their art as 'transcendental', assuming the Neoplatonic division between Appearance and Truth. We see, for instance, in Mondrian or Kandinsky's writings, an apology for their art in terms of ideas about 'purity' and 'essences', and a corresponding assumption that their art is not concerned with representing or imitating the world. There is thus a strong case for referring principally to Neoplatonism in this thesis as a significant tradition out of which many artists and writers have defended and proclaimed their art to *be* transcendental. And yet it is my contention that in investigating the work of Mark Tobey a strictly Neoplatonic reading is insufficient, failing to consider different understandings of the transcendental. Thus I would assert that Rosenblum's trajectory of inquiry through a Northern Romantic Tradition, cannot fully explain or account for Tobey's art as transcendental. Other approaches are necessary.

In positing such an approach I assume what may be termed a contextualist position regarding an understanding of the transcendental. An implicit aspect of my thesis is also a critical opposition to the assumption that all notions or experiences of the transcendental are the same. Whilst religious writers such as Walter Stace and Aldous Huxley posit a universalist thesis regarding the essential similarity of all mystical or religious experiences, my position is perhaps closer to that put forward by Steven Katz in his 1978 publication Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis. Katz's contention is that all experiences, whether mystical or non-mystical, are shaped by the concepts the subject brings to his or her experience, and that the forms of consciousness one brings to experience set structures and limiting parameters on what the experience will be like. This is important to mention, for one often encounters art historians or critics adopting the universalist position of Stace or Huxley when referring to art in relation to spiritual or mystical positions.

Stace's typology of mystical experience, for example, draws attention to nine features of mystical experience which he believes underlies all mystical experiences regardless of culture or religious tradition. Indeed, he argues that where mystics' reports differ from one religious tradition to another, the differences refer to interpretations which clothe an essentially singular experience. For Stace, as for others such as Huxley, all mystical experiences are marked by a feeling of undifferentiated unity or non-plurality therefore; it is a position which disregards the importance of cultural, psychological, religious, or environmental contexts, opting for a universalising argument.

The understanding of the transcendental which I propose in this thesis rather rests on the Katzian assumption that all experiences and understandings of the transcendental are

essentially different, and anticipated by various aspects which one brings to it. It is thus my contention that one can distinguish between a Neoplatonic and a Zen Buddhist understanding of the transcendental, amongst other positions such as those provided by Hindu, Sufi, Taoist, or Catholic traditions. Katz illustrates his contextualist position by answering Stace's contention that the Reality of which many mystical traditions speak is the same, pointing to the textual differences one encounters in different traditions.

Every system and every mystic has made claims to ultimate objectivity and to have discovered Reality, but the claims are more often than not mutually incompatible. For example, while objectivity or reality (Reality) in Plato and Neoplatonism is found in the 'World of Ideas', these characteristics are found in God in Jewish mysticism and again in the *Tao*, *nirvana*, and Nature, in Taoism, Buddhism and Richard Jeffries respectively....as presumably few of my readers have had a mystical experience, perhaps this point can be reinforced by comparing the terms 'Reality' in, say, Marxism, where Reality is equated with the economic and material, as against Freudianism where Reality is defined in terms of the psychological or alternatively in empiricism where Reality is equivalent to the sensible or that which is derived from the sensible as compared to the Idealist 'Reality' which is ideational and non-sensible.<sup>10</sup>

To speak of 'Reality' as an undifferentiated unity cannot therefore account for this multiplicity of meanings. In a similar way I contend that one cannot refer to a single 'transcendental', but must situate each instance of it within certain contexts. If we accept this approach, it seems legitimate to employ this typology to the study of art, and try to understand different images as also arising out of different structures of the transcendental. The artist, like the mystic, generates expectations regarding what, why and how he will paint the transcendental, that are intentional and culture-specific. It thus seems reasonable to try and reveal some of the crucial intentions and structures which inform the artists treatment of the transcendental through paint. As Katz says of mystical activities such as meditation or fasting, there is a self-fulfilling prophetic aspect involved which shapes the mystics experience: in a similar way we may see artist's attempts to evoke the transcendental in different traditions as involving a self-fulfilling prophetic dimension that crucially shapes and moulds the work itself.

I propose below to outline some of the central features of Neoplatonic philosophy, in relation to its understanding of the transcendental. Neoplatonism may be understood as an essentially mystical development of Platonic philosophy that originated in the third century,

flourishing particularly in Syrian, Athenian, and Alexandrian schools of philosophy. Although many of its principle concerns can be seen to have developed from Plato and Aristotle, Neoplatonism may be said to place greater emphasis upon the aesthetic, cosmological, and psychological aspects of Platonic thought, addressing in particular the issue of the individual's relationship to the One. I shall refer below to Plato and Plotinus, and formulate my reading of Neoplatonism around these two figures. In doing so, I can hopefully present one metaphysical understanding of the transcendental that, I believe, sustains and authenticates much European art from the Romantic period onwards.

A significant feature of Neoplatonic thinking may be identified as a search for immutable essences or truths. The philosopher Herbert Marcuse refers to such thinking as essentialism, outlining its chief features as:

..the abstraction and isolation of the one true Being from the constantly changing multiplicity of appearances.11

This essentialist position is fully present in Neoplatonism, which further inaugurates an ontological separation between reality and appearance, corresponding to the the world of spirit and truth, and the material world of recognisable things. We encounter Plato's explanation of this in his discourse concerning beauty and its recognition.

In Phaedrus Plato analyses the reaction of the soul to the presence of beauty - which he does by employing the analogy of the lover's reaction to the beauty of his lover. This reaction is understood to be a recollection or a reminding of the Form of beauty seen by the soul in a previous and more untainted existence. Beautiful objects therefore remind or suggest a world of perfect Forms. Plato's assumption is that beauty (which he equates with the Good) resides in a pure realm beyond that of our everyday existence: when we experience beauty we thus experience a *remembrance* of a pure and absolute beauty. Plato's metaphysics discriminates between the appearance of things and their reality, which holds its essence or Form, and his entire metaphysics is grounded in this division. Beauty is thus not *in* the world, but rather reflected *through* it via one's remembrance of it.

The allegory of the Cave in Book Seven of Republic further develops this division between the Intelligible world and that of Appearance, telling the story of a man who is gradually led away from his experience of looking at the shadows of flames on a cave wall, to experiencing the light of the fire itself, and finally the light of day via sunlight. The allegory develops through a process of revelation to greater levels of the source of light,

and the truth of Reality. This division arguably permeates much European philosophy, initiating a dualism between universal and particular, internal and external or good and bad that has reverberated through its history. Plato's discourse is one that places primacy upon conceptions of hierarchy, division and transcendence through looking inward to one's soul, where one can recollect, through memory, Ideal Forms of Beauty and Good. Such a philosophy thus also places considerable significance upon a conception of the self as autonomous and ultimately able to transcend the objective world of things; it is a self that has recourse to purity and pure knowledge.

In the philosophy of Plotinus we are offered the possibility of ascending from the material world of the senses to the world of the One. His development of Platonic philosophy led to a unique and close-knit metaphysical system that rested on the dominant themes of the One, the Intellectual Principle, and Soul. Like Plato, Plotinus regards ultimate reality to be the One, ineffable and indescribable, and yet he differs from Plato in affording artists and philosophers the possibility of attaining higher levels of reality through contemplation and practice. Many writers have consequently referred to Plotinus as one of the fathers of the Western mystical tradition. He writes:

Withdraw into yourself and look. And if you do not find yourself beautiful yet, act as does the creator of a statue that is to be made beautiful: he cuts away here, he smooths there, he makes this line lighter, this other purer, until a lovely face has grown upon his work. So do you also: cut away all that is excessive, straighten all that is crooked, bring light to all that is overcast, labour to make all one glow of beauty and never cease chiselling your statue, until there shall shine out on you from it the godlike splendour of virtue, until you shall see the perfect goodness surely established in the stainless shrine.<sup>12</sup>

Plotinus alludes to the discovery of an inner being that is 'godlike' and pure by a process of 'withdrawal', or inward looking, that may be comparable to mystical practices. He refers to this 'inner being' as Soul, distinct from body, and the cause responsible for life which remains and moves towards the One, divine reality. To remember or reawaken Soul is thus to return to union with the One. Outward forms are seen to darken and obscure Soul or inner beauty, by leading one to forget the true nature of it. Appropriately, the above passage describes this process as a kind of a mystical transformation or awareness, through the metaphoric device of the sculptor carving a statue. As the sculptor chisel's further into the statue, he also seems to attain a greater degree of clarity which, perhaps appropriately, is described through metaphors of light. Plotinus furthermore, stresses the idea of struggle or

suffering in order to achieve a state of spiritual enlightenment, and he advises us to 'never cease chiselling your statue'. The use of a sculptural metaphor is perhaps appropriate, emphasising the reductive aspects of Plotinus' mysticism. The assumption is that matter is heavy and burdensome and should be stripped away in order to reveal essential truths behind it. Yet, Plotinus is careful not to deny the possibility of everyday or ordinary experiences to provide appropriate glimpses of the higher Forms, and in particular, he refers to aesthetic enjoyment as one 'lower' means of attaining some measure of supreme vision. Despite his recognition of 'lower' means though, Plotinus urges everyone to strive towards the One.

A significant issue that emerges out of Plotinus' writings is his tentativeness regarding the means by which one could ascend upwards towards the absolute. Although he mentions the importance of rigorous intellectual and moral preparations, as well as of spiritual contemplation it is in a letter to Flaccus written when Plotinus was fifty six, that he reveals in the most direct language the practical aspects of moving towards the divine.

You can only apprehend the Infinite by a faculty superior to reason, by entering into a state in which you are your finite self no longer - in which the divine essence is communicated to you. This is ecstasy. It is the liberation of your mind from its finite consciousness. Like can only apprehend like; when you thus cease to be finite, you become one with the Infinite. In the reduction of your soul to its simplest self, its divine essence, you realise this union - this identity.....I myself have realised it but three times as yet...<sup>13</sup>

Following a Platonic line, Plotinus sees liberation to lie in the 'reduction of your soul to its simplest self, its divine essence'. The process is one of identification, of becoming one with the Infinite. Indeed, the divine essence is 'communicated to you': there is a notion that divinity lies outside or beyond us and that we must become one with it in order to experience liberation and ecstasy. The central word in this text is 'identity', for it is through *identifying* with the divine that one becomes free. To identify means to retain a sense of self and other: it necessarily involves something with which *I* identify. There is thus a goal or objective in the Neoplatonic view towards which one strives. This sense of separation forms a crucial basis for Neoplatonic understandings of the transcendental, differing significantly from Zen Buddhist notions about reality and one's place in it.

It may be useful to equate this conception of identity, with the religious scholar, R.C. Zaehner's, notion of a theistic form of mysticism which also depends upon an idea of union without merger. Underlying this view is also an assumption of a return or reversion to purer

realms beyond the world of material forms. Indeed Plotinus frames this in another metaphoric and spatial sense by referring to the notion of the Fall in Enneads.

..the fall of the Soul, is this entry into Matter: thence its weakness: not all the faculties of its being retain free play, for Matter hinders their manifestation.<sup>14</sup>

Concepts of transcendence and the transcendental thus become central pillars within the Neoplatonic system. Significantly, while Plotinus' use of the word 'Fall' implies a downward motion, the Soul necessitates an upward motion of transcendence in order for it to realise ultimate mystical participation in the One. Implicit in Neoplatonic discourse is thus an urge for flight, for elevation and space, in contrast to a sense of downward fall or descent into the world of matter. Neoplatonic metaphysics thus locates meaning to ultimately reside in a realm above that of everyday material existence, encouraging spatial metaphors of the 'beyond' or 'behind' in both a literal spatial sense or an internalised sense in the manner of Plotinus' formulation. Transcendence, in the Neoplatonic tradition, thus necessarily requires an understanding of reality as dualistic, and predicated upon opposites such as matter and spirit. It assumes a crucial distinction between the person in the material world, and a higher reality that is significantly different from it, thereby also exercising the concept of the transcendental as predicated upon this division.

#### *The Transcendental as 'This'.*

The Kyoto philosopher Masao Abe formulates a view of Zen emptiness or *sunyata* that is both highly revealing and critical. He begins by looking at the Greek and Christian view of being and non-being.

In ancient Greece, just as darkness is considered to come to exist where light is lacking, non-being is understood to 'appear' when being is lacking. ..In short, the ancient Greeks understood non-being merely as the privation of being and hence exhibited an affirmative attitude toward this life.<sup>15</sup>

Abe contends that in the Graeco-Christian world-view 'being' has consequently been represented as superior to 'non-being'. In the Western philosophical tradition the Cartesian 'I' is thus seen as a 'ground' from which 'truths' are judged. Furthermore from an ethical point of view 'being' is identified with 'good' while 'non-being' is seen as the metaphysical source of evil. Abe rightly challenges this assumption, deconstructing its hierarchy.

...the notion that Being in some way has priority over 'non-Being' is common to both Platonism and Christianity. However, as stated above, there is in reality no ontological ground on which Being has priority over non-Being; Being need not be assumed to be superior to, or more ultimate than, non-Being. The point at issue lies in how the *negative principle* should be understood in relation to the positive principle.<sup>16</sup>

This critical stance perhaps shares some ground with the deconstructive strategies of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida who adopts similar lines of critical investigation to question the supremacy of the spoken word over the written within Western philosophy. Derrida's deconstructive critique gives prominence to the concept of *différence*, a form which permits speech and writing but that never allows for a point of 'origin' for enunciation. The notion of the *logos*, the Word, is for Derrida an example of one such 'origin' that assumes a privileged source and role for language. As such it must be deconstructed and its 'myth' revealed.

Abe's main concern is with the Buddhist notion of emptiness or *sunyata*, a term which suggests similar philosophical ends to Derrida's *différence*. Abe confidently asserts that, although Asian traditions have much in common with Western notions of humanism:

...Taoists and Buddhists, however, have maintained that the idea of nothingness is ultimate, and in this sense they have no Western counterpart.<sup>17</sup>

Abe contends that Buddhists advocate the notion of *anatman*, or absence of an eternal self, as well as the notion of *anitya*, or impermanence, both of which *sustain* this understanding of nothingness. For Buddhists the idea of an eternal God or truth is fundamentally inadequate for all things are regarded to be *impermanent* and also wholly *dependent* on other things. It is a philosophy of relationality and flux in which the Self cannot be 'held'.

From the fundamental ideas of the absence of an eternal self, impermanence and relationality is thus implied the negation of Being and substantiality. From such grounds the idea of *sunyata* is sustained. Abe, referring to the second century Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna, refers to emptiness thus:

..Nagarjuna not only rejected what came to be called the 'eternalist' view, which proclaimed the reality of phenomena as the manifestation of one eternal

and unchangeable substance, but additionally denounced its exact counterpart, the so-called 'nihilistic' view which insisted that true reality is empty and non-existent. He thus opened up a new vista liberated from every illusory point of view concerning affirmation or negation, Being or non-Being, as the standpoint of Mahayana Emptiness, which he called the Middle Path.<sup>18</sup>

The principle foundation of Mahayana Buddhist thought is thus a commitment to a thoroughgoing deconstruction of both the Self and the Buddhist teachings. The Zen school, a development of Mahayana teachings, manifests this commitment to deconstruction fully. Indeed, as the philosopher David Loy has suggested, the classic literature of the Nagarjuna Madhyamika school, the *Mulamadhyamikakarika*, proclaims in its very first verses an intensive critique of the notion of Being. It advocates a position in which Being and non-Being are permanently *under erasure*. There is no point of rest or of 'origin' to which Being can return or move towards transcendently, but only what Nagarjuna refers to as an 'exhaustion of all theories and views'. Loy refers to the attraction of Being as that which provides 'grounding' for transcendental experience.

Being means security, the grounding of the self, whether it is experiencing something transcendent or intellectually sublimated.....We want to meet God face to face, to see our essential Buddha-nature, but trace/*sunyata* means we can never catch it. Then the solution somehow has to do with not-catching, with no longer needing to bring these fleeting traces to self-presence.<sup>19</sup>

Nagarjuna writes about the technique of *catuskoti*, or four-pronged negation, which can free one from the partial and distorted perceptions of attempting to take any sort of ultimate philosophical position. Loy's interpretation of *catuskoti* suggests that it does not refer to any distinction between an 'apparent' world and a 'real' world to which one is 'opened up'; rather, taking his cue from the Madhyamika tenet that 'samsara is nirvana' (suffering is liberation), Loy interprets Nagarjuna's *sunyata* as the world as it is. Any notion of transcendence is negated in favour of a position which sees all things, including language, as participating in the reality it manifests. This conception of emptiness thus envisages a spiritual realisation in which language and the material world *continue* to function. The Zen tradition's central use of language in the form of *koan*, the writing of poetic verse, its depiction of nature in paintings, or the spiritual importance of seemingly mundane activities

such as cooking, cleaning and gardening all emanate from such a commitment to a deconstructive *sunyata*.

It is really formless in the sense that it is liberated from both 'form' and 'formlessness'. Thus in Sunyata, Emptiness as it is is Fullness and Fullness as it is is Emptiness; formlessness as it is is form and form as it is formless.

20

It is significant to note that the Sanskrit word *Sunyata*, meaning emptiness, derives from the root *su* meaning 'to be swollen'. The usual English translation of 'empty' and 'emptiness' should therefore also be supplemented with the concept of 'potential' or 'pregnant with possibilities'. An emptiness that is also 'swollen' with potential may reflect a more useful translation. This echoes Derrida's notion of the *trace*, the impulse within language which both composes and erases itself.

Unlike the Graeco-Christian tradition, from a commitment to emptiness, positive and negative principles have equal force; one is not given any ontological priority over the other. The Chinese characters for *Mu* (non-being) and *U* (being) thus hold equal force and are relative to one another. It is out of such engaged practices and philosophies that we may begin to contextualise Zen art therefore. The philosophical, spiritual, and creative basis of Zen arts may be seen to be the specific Buddhist understanding of the notion of Emptiness. A Zen art could be said to echo or 'scratch', a Zen Buddhist experience of Emptiness/Potential.

The idea of Emptiness/Potential is one that challenges Neoplatonic thought in fundamental ways. Nagarjuna's negation of both Being and non-Being results in a profound disruption of the notion of the transcendental in the Neoplatonic sense, by negating all possibility of a truer, more pure Self or realm which exists beyond or behind that of nature and matter. Within a Zen Buddhist cosmology therefore, the Platonic idea of Two Worlds cannot be substantiated, nor its allied notions of Remembrance or the Soul. There is nothing to be transcended in the same way as there is in the Neoplatonic model; rather all things undergo a *perpetual erasure* and disruption within which there is no *absolute point* in the Platonic sense. If there is a point, I suggest that it would be to remain Empty and Potent; in other words, to remain aware, attentive and engaged *in* the present reality, full of its ordinariness.

This is why the Zen arts have always sought to remain attached to nature and the

everyday. It's paintings are content to depict natural objects and forms; tea-making, gardens and numerous other more mundane activities are considered just as significant as each other for, within a commitment to *sunyata*, they are *potentially liberating*. This is why every simple activity that the monk does within the monastery, from going to the toilet to walking, is strictly codified in rules. In a sense, the Zen monk is just an 'empty' vessel into which thoughts, actions and objects enter, only to be succeeded by others. This is the crucial difference between classical Neoplatonism and Zen; one seeks 'closure' in 'truth' whilst the other is content to remain 'floating', finding successive 'truths' in the passing of moments.

v) *A Hermeneutics of Looking.*

The experience of confronting specific works of art is crucial. I propose to refer to a transcendental art through a process of dynamic and disruptive relations with art, which we may call a hermeneutic dialogue. This is to say that one must consider the *relationships* that are initiated when we look at a painting or piece of art. What is going on when one confronts an image? Why do certain images have certain expressive powers? What am I, as the viewer, contributing to or denying an image when I confront it? Rather than attempting to extract definitive meanings from a painting, a hermeneutic position privileges the processes which are initiated during the act of looking, and the questions which arise from this.

Beginning to discuss the possibility of a transcendental art is also to understand that art emerges out of specific discourses and narratives, which we crucially also participate in. The cultural historian Marina Warner expresses this clearly:

The language of vision has a syntax, grammar, vocabulary, a history and a changing development over time; its intelligibility depends partly on handed down expressions, on habitual ways of envisioning, on codes known, assembled and disassembled in cognitive patterns that have been learned and passed on...<sup>21</sup>

To imagine a transcendental art is to acknowledge that how we see and understand art is crucially constructed by codes and histories; encountering art is thus always a process of *composition* in which we seek to understand it by *making sense of it for ourselves*. Warner's assertion that the language of vision is *learnt* demands that we become conscious of how we see, and thus also exposed to many different ways of seeing. This is a radical proposition precisely because it urges us to *imagine* possible worlds, rather than seek definitive 'truths'. The capacity to imagine from different positions is also the basis for dialogue, the model underpinning the hermeneutic position.

The implication of such a position is that how one thinks about a transcendental art will necessarily depend upon how one understands terms such as transcendental - the philosophical and religious aspects - what kind of position an art work takes in relation to the term, the historical and social contexts of an artist or work, and what kind of relations emerge between a work and its viewer. The task thus moves away from being a distinguishing of formal characteristics within a painting that make it transcendental - as we

can do easier with a religious art perhaps- to one of exploring the inter-relations that exist between art and its reception as well as within the art work itself. The task is one of probing rather than of pursuing, of analysis rather than settling.

We may quote Hans Georg Gadamer speaking about the importance of this relational approach regarding hermeneutics, and replace his references to a text with the phrase 'transcendental art':

It is no exaggeration to claim that a poetical text is a partner in conversation. Furthermore, the literary text speaks to us only so long as it is and remains such a partner, and not merely an object of objectifying research.<sup>22</sup>

The essence or style of a transcendental art cannot be identified as we can do easier with a term such as Impressionism; rather one may consider a transcendental art and its meanings only through a process of reciprocation and mutual dialogue. To complement Gadamer's hermeneutic perspective it may also be useful to refer to Merleau-Ponty's ideas about language and meaning, for he also proposes a dialogical approach. We may perhaps expand his use of the word 'language' to embrace a visual as well as a verbal language:

Nowhere does it (language) stop and leave a place for pure meaning; it is always limited only by more language, and meaning appears within it only set in a context of words. Like a charade, language is understood only through the interaction of signs, each of which, taken separately, is equivocal or banal, and makes sense only by being combined with others.<sup>23</sup>

What Merleau-Ponty's idea provides for a study of a transcendental art is a recognition that there are no 'pure' or fixed laws in art or indeed that the 'seeing self' is a fixed agent who 'receives' pure messages. An inquiry into the possibilities of a transcendental art is necessarily also a study of the dialogical process which underpins all our processes of seeing, understanding and attributing meaning to art. An important aspect of the hermeneutical position as I understand it here is thus also an ability to *imagine* differently and from different positions, calling to mind Paul Ricoeur's fundamental idea that the self is never sufficient unto itself, but constantly seeks out signs and meanings in others. To look at art is therefore also to summon what Hannah Arendt calls 'the presence of others'.

The power of judgment rests on a potential agreement with others, and the

thinking process which is active in judging something is not, like the thought process of pure reasoning, a dialogue between me and myself, but finds itself always and primarily, even if I am quite alone in making up my mind, in an anticipated communication with others with whom I know I must finally come to some agreement.<sup>24</sup>

Arendt's position enables judgment to be infused with a sense of great potential which emanates from the constant possibility of 'anticipated communication with others'. The self thus comes to occupy many positions as opposed to remaining a central point of emanation, and out of this *diffusion* it can hear other voices and other truths. In this spirit, I propose to outline four important aspects which should be considered in addition to the philosophical, religious and historical aspects, when we think about the possibilities of a transcendental art. These are: transcendental qualities, transcendental content, the perspective of the viewer, and artist's intention.

### *Transcendental Qualities.*

Perhaps one of the most common approaches to identifying art as transcendental has been to try and distinguish its formal qualities. It has been the approach taken by writers as varied as Rudolf Otto, Joshua Taylor, Donald Kuspit and Roger Lipsey. What they have attempted to do in various ways is to distinguish the formal pictorial and aesthetic qualities of images which are thought to correspond to certain transcendental qualities. Otto, for instance, has tried to identify certain formal elements within art works which evoke or stir what he calls Numinous feelings in the viewer, whilst Taylor has tried to categorise images by their affective qualities. In this respect, one may for instance, equate formal characteristics such as 'emptiness' or 'geometry' with certain ideas and understandings of the transcendental dependent on certain contexts.

The idea that mystical experience is unique is expounded at length by the post-Kantian German theologian Rudolph Otto in his book *The Idea of the Holy* - a work which also concerns itself with exploring the dynamics of the mystical experience in relation to other human experiences including visual arts.

For Otto, the object of transcendental or mystical experience is 'wholly other' to anything human, moral, rational or aesthetic and he calls the distinctive qualities of this experience the Numinous, taken from the Latin word *numen* meaning deity. Otto's primary motivation in identifying the Numinous was to distance the specific characteristics of

religious experience as distinct from words such as 'holy' or 'sacred', words which he thought had come to refer to something very different to what they originally had referred to. For Otto, religious experience had come to be seen in almost exclusively moral terms, dampening its original and distinctive qualities, which he sought to revive through the concept of the Numinous. The Numinous points therefore to something other than experiences of moral goodness or reason - it refers to an *overplus* of meaning that cannot be put into words. Otto specifies that:

...it will be useful, at least for the temporary purpose of the investigation, to invent a special term to stand for 'the holy' *minus* its moral factor or 'moment', and, as we can now add, minus its 'rational' aspect altogether.<sup>25</sup>

The 'special term' which Otto employs is the Numinous and refers to a realm of experience that lies wholly beyond ordinary, rational consciousness. Perhaps one may speak about it as something akin to a feeling or presence rather than as any solidly definable experience. Otto talks around the term, stating that there is no religion in which the Numinous does not live as its innermost core, also saying that it is something that comes 'of the spirit'. The nature of the Numinous thus resists definition, or rational comprehension, for it is something above and beyond even words such as 'holy'; it is by definition, transcendental. Although Otto cannot say what the Numinous is, he nevertheless assumes its very real existence as the central core or pillar of religious experience for it is a reality that can be stirred into the consciousness by other human experiences.

Even though the Numinous is ineffable, Otto contends that it can be evoked or reawakened in the memory by other kinds of experience. Otto's typology of mystical experience is interesting, recognising a dimension of experience that is 'wholly other' and Numinous, yet which also offers the potential for a reawakening of the Numinous experience through other experiences. In this context, Otto explicitly refers to art and its contemplation as potential reminders of the *Numen*, contending that religious, psychological or artistic discourses can evoke feelings of the Numinous by providing useful analogies, or what Otto calls 'ideograms', that serve a symbolic purpose. Otto's assertion is that art can activate or provoke the Numinous experience.

The first characteristic Otto mentions is enormity of size, drawing attention to the monumental religious art of ancient Egypt, India and the European Gothic. Interestingly Otto relates monumental size with the motivation of trying to preserve the Numinous in solid

form - he implies that largeness, and by implication, the dwarfing or overpowering of human scale, is crucially related to the preservation of the Numinous.

The motive underlying the erection of those gigantic blocks of rock, hewn or unworked, single monoliths or titanic rings of stone, as at Stonehenge, may have well been originally to localise and preserve and, as it were, to store up the numen in solid presence by magic...<sup>26</sup>

Otto's notion of monumental sublimity may be related to Burke's idea of sublime terror, or to Kant's understanding of the sublime as the rational containment of excess or immensity. For Kant the sublime rests upon a relation between perceptual and imaginative excess and rational containment; in other words, the sublime (which Otto arguably replaces with the term Numinous) is the result of an interplay between an incapacity to comprehend powerful or monumental objects and the rationalising of this incapacity.

Otto proceeds to allude to the sensation of magic, or the magical impression, which certain kinds of art and symbols convey. His conception of magic seems not to be connected to occult practices rather serving the more simple purpose of pointing to a certain feeling or element which one may sense from specific types of art. Otto provides the example of the arts of China, Japan and Tibet as types of art which possess a richness and depth of 'magical impression', and he quotes an article by Otto Fischer which praises the Numinous quality of Chinese landscape painting. One may usefully ask here whether Otto equates the magical with the Numinous and we may turn to his own words for an answer. Otto clearly states that the magical is a dimmed and suppressed form of the Numinous, and that in great art this magic is superseded by the Numinous. The magical thus seems to represent what might be called a primitive form of the Numinous.

Otto goes on to mention the portrayal of space or of emptiness in Chinese and Japanese painting as arts which may evoke the Numinous. Emptiness and empty distances, Otto contends, are the sublime in the horizontal. The verticality of monumental size is complemented with the lateral perspective of vacant space, of sky. It is particularly interesting and significant that Otto identifies emptiness as a Numinous-evoking characteristic, considering that a strong European conception towards space has been to fill it, to *make* it space by means of addition or action. Otto's perceptive sense draws us to consider the emptiness within Chinese architecture, and particularly the Imperial tombs of the Ming emperors at Nanking and Peking, as well as to what he refers to as the 'factor of the void' in Chinese painting. Otto's sensibility towards this use of emptiness is expressed

in his writing:

Not only are there pictures upon which 'almost nothing' is painted, not only is it an essential feature of their style to make the strongest impression with the fewest strokes and scantiest means, but there are very many pictures - especially such as are connected with contemplation - which impress the observer with the feeling that the void itself is depicted as a subject, is indeed the main subject of the picture.<sup>27</sup>

There is a surprising sense of respect and reverence in Otto's comments regarding Oriental painting, and an important realisation that different traditions express the Numinous in different ways.

The use of darkness is the final visual way Otto identifies by which the transcendent can be evoked as, for example, we see in the architecture of many European Gothic cathedrals. Otto insists that darkness is specifically effective when contrasted with some vestige of brightness - the notion of shade or shadow is thus elevated and Otto seems to suggest that it is in the interplay of opposites that the transcendental is evoked. The implication of this characteristic seems to lie in its abilities to evoke mystery and uncertainty; darkness prevents us from seeing clearly, from comprehending objects and thus also serves the important Numinous function of expressing a sense of fear, or the sublime. Otto alludes to the use of darkness in religious architecture, but one may also discern its presence in paintings by Caspar David Friedrich which illustrate night scenes as spaces of spiritual transformation.

As other non visual means by which the Numinous can be evoked Otto points to the power of sound and silence. He recalls Bach's Mass in B Minor as an example of the effective use of silence in music as well as referring to the uses of liturgical languages that are rarely understood or to specific religious words such as AUM.

Otto calls his ideas regarding the evocation of the Numinous the 'law of the association of feelings', although he explicitly states that the Numinous remains utterly distinct from all other experiences. In other words, it is not that some feelings, such as the sublime, are transformed into Numinous feelings, but rather that they evoke the Numinous through retaining their differences. It is the religious subject who shifts from the experience of the sublime to that of the Numinous and not the feeling which is transformed. At the core of Otto's ideas is thus the contention that there are profound qualitative differences between the sublime and the Numinous, a view which seems perhaps somewhat rigid and mechanistic in

its implied conception of consciousness. Otto regards the Numinous experience as quite distinct from all other experiences, and denies the possibility that experiences may rather rest upon a shifting continuum or spectrum.

The implication of Otto's ideas for art concerned with expressing the transcendental is considerable. He attempts to identify the major features within art which can effectively evoke the Numinous, and in this respect his project is extremely useful for a study into the nature of a transcendental art. Importantly Otto does not suggest that certain kinds of art contain or possess some innate Numinous quality; rather his proposition seems merely to ascertain certain formal aspects of art which *heighten* the Numinous sense, such as size, spatial usage and qualities of light. And yet, there is a sense that the Numinous to which Otto refers is embedded in specific philosophical discourses such as Neoplatonism. Although he refers to Chinese and Japanese art, his classification seems ultimately to rest upon quite specific understandings of what the Numinous is, that derive primarily from his Protestant theological background. The notion of the Numinous, in this respect, is necessarily specific to certain positions and discourses. Otto's thesis advocates a system of *symbolism* by which one may encounter the transcendental.

In contrast to Otto, the American art historian Joshua Taylor approaches the question from the perspective of the *affective* qualities of images. He suggests two categories or ways in which visual forms express the transcendental, and their inclusion here may add another dimension to Otto's characteristics.

The first category Taylor identifies is what he refers to as a 'will to form' or 'unitive' art and is characterised by its capacity to draw one into a sense of perfect unity, order and completion. A unitive art seems to refer to the capacity of images to evoke a sense of wholeness and security, and interestingly all of the examples he gives of this category seem to reflect images which are enclosed and self-sufficient. Taylor cites a number of paintings as representative of the unitive category, including, Mondrian's *Tableau I*, Kandinsky's *Fuge*, Barnett Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimus* and Josef Albers *Homage to the Square*. He says that these and other works:

...allow you to be in harmonious spheres, to join in...with a larger order without describing it. With a power of transport, such works seem to come from nature; but the artist uses the senses as only the means to spiritual

unification by the discovery of perfect designs.<sup>28</sup>

There is a sense in which these images have the capacity to make one forget about the immediate present; a sense in which they transport and transform the viewer and thus seek to evoke a transcendental experience. From the examples Taylor gives of unitive images, one may tentatively suggest that they are all images which place primacy upon the ground as opposed to the figure and employ the canvas as an expansive space. They may usefully be compared to what Otto describes as the 'sublime in the horizontal', images which emphasise the 'void' or monochromatic fields of plain colour.

The second category which Taylor suggests is referred to as a 'will to fellowship' or a 'communitive' art and makes one aware of individual relationships. Whether figurative or abstract, the 'communitive' style makes the viewer aware of one's own distinct bodily presence by affirming a human dimension - a dimension of a human 'other'. Taylor illustrates this category with images such as Millet's *Sower*, Van Gogh's *La Berceuse*, Nolde's *Last Supper* and de Kooning's *Woman, Sag Harbor*. He says that these works:

Never allow you to separate yourself from others and human kind - never allow us to forget we are members of a physical race.<sup>29</sup>

Significantly the communitive category reflects images which attempt to represent human relationships and figures; they are in this sense rooted within a human dimension, but often highly exaggerated or distorted. In all of the examples he gives, one can suggest that the figure has been intensified, heightened and exaggerated, and thus also transformed into a vehicle for transcending the ordinary human figure. In de Kooning's *Woman* series, for instance, one is faced with qualities of distortion that 'cut up' the human form, with qualities of roughness. If the unitive category rests largely on abstract images of absorption, the communitive category remains related to ideas of narrative and the recognisable.

Taylor's categories also relate images to definitions of mystical experience. On the one hand are images of a 'unitive' kind, which express a notion of mystical experience as essentially unitary, whilst on the other hand are images of a 'communitive' kind that express mystical experience as one of a detached or separated union. In this respect an affinity may be identified with R.C. Zaehner's distinction between Monistic and Theistic mystical experiences, which largely echoes Taylor's division. Significantly, and in contrast to Zaehner, Taylor does not consider either the unitive or communitive modes as more

'spiritual' than the other, preferring to see them as two different means serving two different religiously described ends. Like Zaehner, Taylor also considers mystical experiences to be potentially very different; unitive forms may echo monistic type experiences whilst communitive forms reflect theistic experiences. One may, with caution, even identify 'communitive' images as representing largely figurative or representational expressions and 'unitive' images as usually more abstract and non objective, although Taylor admits that some images often convey both a unitive and communitive aspect at different times and at different viewings, citing Josef Albers' square paintings as an example.

Whilst the methodologies adopted by writers such as Otto or Taylor serve a useful purpose by broadening the way we can imagine a transcendental art, it is also necessary to adopt them with some caution. Formal characteristics, such as size, or adjectives such as 'silence', may help in providing the viewer with certain markers around which one can see and think about a transcendental art, and yet it seems best to utilise such qualities within a wider hermeneutical approach that takes other factors into account. Considering the aspect of quality alone, one is in danger of adopting a reductionistic approach.

### *Transcendental Content.*

Transcendental content refers to overt or culturally recognised symbols of the transcendental within paintings or other art works. Just as an image which shows a scene from mythology or history may be said to express a content that refers to such subjects, thereby acquiring its reference and meaning, certain images may also be said to express a transcendental content through their reliance upon specific symbols, scenes or objects. The case of religious art in Europe, for example, be cited as a good instance of an art form which derives meaning and significance from its religious content.

Transcendental content does not necessarily have to be 'religious' in nature, but merely suggest or allude to ideas about the transcendental that are culturally prevalent or recognised. One can perhaps detect a widening of the definition of content, from referring to what a painting *formally* shows, to what it *potentially* shows through allusion or suggestion. Thus, for instance, what may be seen as a bird image, may for a Jungian psychologist for example, acquire a significance that identifies it as a 'symbol of transcendence'. In other words, dependent upon one's cultural and psychological setting, specific images may offer different meanings and suggestions.

specific images may offer different meanings and suggestions.

We may perhaps discern two principal ways in which the transcendental has been expressed in art. The first is through explicit or exact references to the transcendental within a given cultural context. This may be the bird image in the Jungian setting, or more overt religious iconographies in the case of religious art. Within this category, the transcendental content may be closely related to some narrative structure - usually religious - which explains the image as transcendental. The second category is through hidden or implied references to the transcendental and may include abstracted or non-objective material which hold strong evocative strength. Thus motifs such as clouds, empty fields, amorphous patches of colour or other abstract arrangements may *remind* the viewer of the transcendental. Both approaches point to the transcendental by means of allusion and metaphor, suggesting certain ideas or themes either by utilising culturally explicit motifs of the transcendental or by using psychologically affective motifs which do not rely upon explicit symbols or images. It may be useful to look briefly at some examples of these two ways which modern artists have used to express transcendental content.

Mondrian's 1901-11 triptych entitled *Evolution* (Fig.6) may be considered as an example of a work representing explicit transcendental content. It depicts an androgynous figure in three stages of spiritual evolution or growth against a striking blue background. The posture of the figure in the three sections strongly suggest a process of spiritual transformation centred largely around the gradual opening of the eyes. When installed, the central panel is placed slightly higher than the flanking images, suggesting similarities with forms of religious triptychs and altar paintings. Mondrian clearly intended the viewer to stand in awe before the work, a response which is easily felt.

In a similar way, his 1901 painting entitled, *Passion Flower*, in which we see a woman with her eyes closed in what could be seen as a meditative trance, overtly uses an image which suggests a transcendental mystical moment. The woman's eyes are closed and she grasps a flower by her chest as if praying. The image utilises a recognised religious posture in this instance to suggest a transcendental content. It also refers us back to a pre-Raphaelite tradition of depicting women in dramatic or intense poses such as we see in the works of Millais.

With the advent of a non-objective or abstract art in the first decades of the twentieth century, we see that representational or explicit references to transcendental themes are subsumed by an attention to form, colour and scale. Although an overt transcendental content was gradually dissolved, some artists continued to evoke the transcendental through

a language of abstract forms and colours. Influenced by a knowledge of other religious and mystical traditions and by the liberation of content from form which Cubism had initiated, the transcendental content in many modern paintings are depicted by circles, pale-coloured patches of colour, swirling masses of paint or simple, abstracted symbols. Subject matter was no longer confined to religious saints and biblical scenes as artists looked instead to nature and natural forms, distant cultures, to geometric shapes or to colour in order to evoke the transcendental.

We are confronted with such a non-objective reference to transcendental ideas in Theo Van Doesburg's 1915 painting *Cosmic Sun*, in which we see a large pulsating orb rising over a dark ground. The image employs a simple mandala-like circle, evocative of nature and natural processes, to evoke the transcendental. There is no recognisable form in the image, although we can discern a slight hilly landscape in the foreground. Rather the viewer is immediately struck by the image's centrality as it draws one into its white centre. We are given clues about the meaning of Van Doesburg's image from its title, as well as from knowing that the artist was particularly interested in mystical ideas. He was a close friend of Mondrian and, from his writings, we can deduce that he was interested in the notion of spiritual auras as espoused by the Leadbeater's. Van Doesburg's painting does not express the transcendental by referring the viewer to familiar religious symbols or narratives, but rather attempts to illustrate the artist's own conception of the transcendental. In this sense the image is made significant by the artist's transcendental *intention*, rather than by the image's significance as a transcendental object or symbol.

Referring to Mark Rothko's paintings in the Houston Chapel, Rosenblum sums up this decisive point regarding the recognition of non-objective images as transcendental:

It is as if the entire content of Western religious art were finally devoid of its narrative complexities and corporeal imagery, leaving us with these dark, compelling presences that pose an ultimate choice between everything and nothing. But the very fact that they create their own hierarchy of mood, shape, and sequence, of uniqueness and duplication, of increasingly dark and sombre variations of plum, maroon, and black, suggests the presence here of some new religious ritual of indefinable, yet universal dimensions. And in our secularised world, inherited from the Romantics, a world where orthodox religious ritual was so unsatisfying to so many, the very lack of overt religious content here may make Rothko's surrogate icons and altarpieces, experienced in a nondenominational chapel, all the more potent in their evocation of the transcendent.<sup>30</sup>

What all of these transcendental images have in common, it may be argued, are explicit or often abstract visual or textual references to the transcendental which are shared within a culture; *they all represent culturally recognised images about the transcendental*. The transcendental content of modern art works cannot be said to be obvious or natural in any universal sense. Rather, their transcendental significance is the outcome of specific cultural, philosophical, or religious codes that inform and construct that meaning.

*The Perspective of the Viewer.*

Another position we can take is to trace a transcendental art by the subjective response of the viewer; in other words, what is considered to represent a transcendental art would depend upon how one understood and related to the notion of the transcendental. Thus for instance, if one understood the transcendental only in relation to strict religious practices or doctrines, one's relation with art might also be affected by this. My point here concerns the epistemic assumptions one *brings* to seeing images and art; what one sees is therefore largely dependent upon the discourses and codes which inform one's processes of seeing. Thus Roger Lipsey's choice of 'spiritual' artists is informed by his specific assumptions about what he considers 'spiritual'. Whilst for Lipsey Andy Warhol does not represent an artist of 'spiritual' intention, for others such as the American art historian Jane Dillenberger who has written a book about Warhol's 'religious' pictures, he clearly does. Marcel Duchamp's legacy as a calculated conceptual artist has also been questioned by many who rather see in his work a profound religious search for meanings. His infamous 'ready-made' *Fountain* (1913), an inverted urinal placed in a gallery, might seem like a crude, ironic gesture to some, or in its brutal avoidance of peripheral symbolisms and decoration be regarded as a sincere statement of reality as it was perceived by the artist. Duchamp's radical gesture poses the question of whether we the viewer can imagine art in different ways; in its apparent contempt for 'traditional' forms of art it also urges us to recognise that our 'seeing' is a constructed process.

A recent example of this subjective importance was provided in the American artist, Bill Viola's video installation, *The Messenger*, displayed at Durham Cathedral in early 1997. Different people saw the art work in very different ways. The artist and many others understood the work to illustrate profound and perhaps, transcendental themes associated with the work's central image of a naked man floating underwater. The image did not

appropriate traditional religious imagery in any obvious way, but implied a number of related ideas regarding baptism, death or ideas of birth. Furthermore, the image of a naked human figure in a Christian context might have referred one to traditional images of Christ on the cross. In addition to such pictorial or metaphoric qualities, the work also functioned in architectural terms, juxtaposing video technology against a traditional religious interior. These views were not shared by all, and the work had to be covered during the day for fear of offending some visitors to the cathedral. Viola's intervention in the cathedral was both challenging and profound; it presented different people with a radical image that could be interpreted in different ways. Like its title, the work functioned as the point of axis for divergent positions and agendas. *Messenger* made the viewer aware of the inherent *differences* that inform any act of looking.

#### *Artist's Intention.*

An exploration of the nature of a transcendental art must also consider the stated or implied intentions of the artist. This may involve reading about an artist's life, analysing his writings and letters, or collecting writings about him by critics and commentators. Whilst intention may mostly be attributed to a single artist, there may be occasions when one must also consider the intentions provided by a group of artists or tradition. This may be the case for some types of religious art, for example, which exist within a broader religious structure that gives it meaning and artistic intention. Whilst the transcendental intentions of an artist such as Wassily Kandinsky are ultimately personal, those of the Zen painter must be seen to exist within a broad doctrinal framework that emanates from Buddhist teachings and contexts.

As one example of artist's intention I would like to look at the writings of Paul Klee. Whilst very much a part of the generation to which Kandinsky and Mondrian belonged and sharing many of the same views about art and its purpose, Klee also offers different formulations of a transcendental art that does not solely emphasise 'pure' abstraction. As Mark Cheetham argues, Klee rejects the rhetoric of purity, which for Mondrian and Kandinsky formed the basis of their transcendental project. Klee's major essays appear between 1918 - 1928, paralleling many of the ideas of Kandinsky and Mondrian. Indeed, Klee's 'Creative Credo' of 1918 was written as a response to Kandinsky's 1913 essay

'Painting as Pure Art'. In 'Creative Credo' Klee expounds a familiar Neoplatonism that opposes reality with appearance, writing his now-famous line, 'Art does not reproduce the visible but make visible'<sup>31</sup>. Throughout his early writings Klee asserts this Neoplatonic vision, drawing upon ideas of memory, appearance and truth, and writing that the source of true artistic vision lies in 'the cosmic bond that descends from above'<sup>32</sup>. Cheetham usefully summarises Klee's Neoplatonic debt before exposing his differences from it.

Klee's characteristic signs of motion and direction, the arrows, here point to the empyrean apex of a triangle that itself recalls Kandinsky's famous image of spirit's inner progress up the pyramid in *On the Spiritual in Art*. Like Kandinsky and Mondrian, Klee had a strong desire to ascend the metaphysical ladder and a concomitantly Platonic sense of the erotic.<sup>33</sup>

Unlike Kandinsky and Mondrian's transcendental project, Klee's formulation of purity is different, and his works rarely utilise completely abstract compositions. Whilst Klee's art was undoubtedly driven by a transcendental urge, we can also see him presenting a different conception of it in his writings. In writings as early as 1905 Klee states that although he respects the purification of the pictorial space, this must only be a means towards the development of a deeper content. Thus Klee's practice remained rooted to nature and its observation, with little movement towards total abstraction. His painting expresses nature's constant dynamism as opposed to a transcendental end-point in which natural forms have been dissolved. He writes in his lecture notes:

Form must on no account ever be considered as something to be got over with, as a result, as an end, but rather as genesis, growth, essence....(life) is a circulatory process in which movement is of the very essence, and in which the question of a start thus becomes irrelevant.<sup>34</sup>

Klee clearly opposes the essentialist metaphysics of Kandinsky and Mondrian in postulating this position, crucially choosing to remain *in* the material world of nature rather than ascend totally from it. Klee's transcendental art does not rely upon 'reduction' but rather 'dialogue' with nature. There is thus an important element of *discursive* practice in Klee's formulation of the transcendental which allows it a potential for social and political critique. Precisely by his rejection of a total and unquestioned transcendental is Klee able to formulate another valid strategy of expressing it. Klee's intentions thus form a crucial base from which one may read his images as transcendental, and point out the potential differences between his

ideas and those of other artists such as Kandinsky.

What the hermeneutic proposition advances is a questioning attitude towards any engagement with a text or a painting, by making the reader or viewer aware of the processes of reading or looking; it privileges the *relationships* between a painting and its viewer and hence also the importance of *imagining* possible worlds.

## **Part 2. Histories.**

### *i) Romantic Possibilities.*

From the mid-eighteenth through to the early nineteenth century we may begin to distinguish between an earlier form of religious art, tied largely to an institutional religious framework and dedicated to depicting traditional religious scenes, and a transcendental art. The range of ways that an artist could depict the religious and the sacred greatly broadened during this period, reflecting a confluence of various factors including the emergence of new ideas as espoused by political thinkers such as Rousseau, philosophers such as Hegel and Kant, and the broadening possibilities of subject matter. I propose in this chapter to identify a current in European painting, often encompassed by the term 'Romanticism', that no longer felt able to refer to itself as a religious art, yet which continued to try to express notions of the sacred through other means. The term 'Romanticism' is a contested one spanning numerous countries and artists, and yet it can usefully be used to refer to a specific *zeitgeist* which flourished through Northern and Western Europe from the late eighteenth century through to the mid nineteenth century.

E.H. Gombrich refers to the period from roughly the mid-eighteenth century to the mid- nineteenth century as 'The Break in Tradition'. The term usefully summarises a period of European art history which saw radical changes in varying spheres, often characterised by a tension between contrasting styles or attitudes. The Schlegel brothers, for instance, distinguished between a 'romantic' art that emphasised the associative aspects of picture-making and a 'classical' art that dwelt on formal values. Such distinctions had been identified earlier in the 1750s by the classicist Johann Joachim Winckelmann, who in his treatise of 1755 had suggested the imitation of the virtues of Greek art which, in his view, reflected 'noble simplicity and calm grandeur'. Challenging Winckelmann's classicism were the ideas of thinkers such as Edmund Burke who published his treatise on the notion of the 'sublime' in 1757. From the mid eighteenth century therefore, various ideological, aesthetic and philosophical battles began to be fought which were to eventually coalesce into what is termed 'Romanticism'. I shall briefly outline three significant areas of development which contextualised artists abilities to express transcendental ideas in their images.

*Techniques.*

Art historians often refer to the French Revolution of 1789 as ushering in new ideas and practices about art and its wider relationships to culture and society. It can indeed be regarded as symbolic of smaller, but equally significant, revolutions in the way artists related to the notion of style, mark-making, or what they perceived to be their role within the larger culture. The widening acceptance of new subject-matter was perhaps one of the most visible and direct manifestations of such artistic revolution, radically challenging orthodoxies of the past. Images of religious saints, biblical scenes and classical mythologies were augmented by images of contemporary history, landscapes, visions of primitive peoples or places and personal visions. The artist was afforded a new sense of authority as a producer of cultural images in a way that earlier painters could not do. Gombrich, for example, points to John Singleton Copley's 1785 painting entitled *Charles I demanding the surrender of the five impeached members of the House of Commons, 1641*, as an example of how painters increasingly began to portray recent political events - often to the distaste of the establishment. Copley's image is significant because it reflected the artist's own interpretation of recent political events in the manner of the journalist, rather than as a painter of 'favourable' court histories.

Landscape painting was perhaps the most significant area in which Romantic ideals were developed, simultaneously challenging the traditional limitations of the genre and suggesting radical new solutions to the ways in which landscape could be presented as *significant in itself*. John Robert Cozens' painting *View from Mirabella 1782-3* (Fig.1), shows a new and bold sensibility which imagined the landscape as enigmatic. Unlike the nostalgic and idealised landscapes of a Claude Lorrain or Antoine Watteau's scenes of gentle woodland gatherings in which the landscape was invariably subordinated within an overall narrative scheme, Cozens' landscapes from the late eighteenth century portray nature as a monumental stage in which light and shade play central, metaphoric roles. A comparable development was occurring in Northern Europe at the Copenhagen Academy of Art where painters such as Jens Juell (1745-1802) were expressing nature in more emotive lyrical terms. Affected by the mysticism of poets such as L.T. Kosegarten, Juell and his followers at the Academy, such as Philip Otto Runge and Caspar David Friedrich, were to initiate a revolution in the way landscape was depicted. It would perhaps be fair to say that what was significant in many works of this period was an expansion of the possibilities of earlier

subject matter, but injected with a new awareness of the *expressive and metaphorical potentials of painting*. Indeed the term 'romantic' had by the late eighteenth century come to mean for academic theorists and the admirers of classical art those emotive extremes that lay beyond the proper reach of 'art', reflected in Sir Joshua Reynolds' talk to the students of The Royal Academy in London in 1772 in which he equated the expression of passion to 'distortion and deformity' in the most beautiful faces. William Vaughan identifies the first use of the term 'romantic' to a letter written by Franz August Klinkowström in 1804 which he refers to the work of the German artists Franz and Johannes Riepenhausen. Their outline drawings were interpreted by critics such as A.W.Schlegel in terms of their *evocative potential* as opposed to their formal clarity. Whilst images of myth, religion and landscape continued into the nineteenth century, the way artists and critics *imagined* them altered substantially in line with broader cultural, philosophical and economic developments.

Many Romantic painters encouraged a renewed recognition of the emotional and spiritual qualities of the brush-stroke. The brush was seen not simply as a tool for applying paint to the surface of a canvas, but also as a potentially affective and emotionally charged device. To artists such as Turner, for instance, the brush functions as an extension of the artist's soul or creative impulse, mediating his spontaneous ideas and images into actual lines and shapes. There is thus a new emphasis upon the brush and brushstroke as intimately related to *subjective* emotions or visions, rather than as a tool with which to *copy* the world. And yet, paradoxically, it is necessary to note that many Romantic images utilised a style of clear outline drawing which had been used by the Neo-classicists of the late eighteenth century. The drawings of Franz and Johannes Riepenhausen for instance, reminiscent of the engravings of Martin Schongauer, were praised by A.W. Schlegel for their evocative potential and abilities to stir the imagination. Likewise the drawings of Samuel Palmer draw heavily on the engraving language of Dürer, but infuse it with an uncanny and dark sentiment that recalls a world of fairy-tales and magic. Although apparently 'realistic' looking and full of detail, Palmer's images are not 'natural' or well-proportioned, but reflect a radical sense of *unease* with the world that distorts it. In many of Friedrich's images too, one sees this slight in-balance of form or pose which adds to an overall sense of mystery and ambivalence. It is as if the artists' well developed skills as draughtsmen were subtly undermined by the style of the child or the satirist.

The history of European painting from at least the Gothic period may be said to have

stressed the notion of picture-making over any idea of the brush as a carrier of spiritual truths. Painters such as Giotto (1267-1337), for example, essentially copied established patterns, by trying to imitate real life. By the fourteenth century, the painter's role was to represent nature and real life in the most faithful way, and hence the brush-stroke was denied any emotive or spiritual significance. With the Renaissance, this concern for faithful representation may be said to have been perfected by painters such as Jan van Eyck (1390-1441) from northern Europe and Piero della Francesca (1416?-1492) working south of Florence in Italy. To look at a painting by van Eyck, such as his *The Betrothal of the Arnolfini* of 1434, is like looking at a photograph - everything is immaculately detailed, and we do not see any signs that the image was even painted by a hand holding a brush. For painters such as van Eyck, all brush-strokes were in the service of a greater clarity and realness that would render the world as if one were actually looking at it.

There are, of course, notable exceptions to this. In many of Tintoretto's (1518-1594) paintings, for example, such as *Saint George and the Dragon* (1555-58), one sees areas of the picture shimmering with the marks of his intense brush-work. The castle in the background and the patch of ground behind the horse both *look* painted, and this emphasises an emotive quality which is clearly lacking in the realism of van Eyck. Interestingly, as Gombrich points out, Tintoretto was criticised during his time by critics such as Vasari for his lack of 'finish', 'eccentric taste' and 'crude' strokes, echoing the derision of early Chinese *Zen* painters by the established literati. Tintoretto's fluid style was perhaps taken further by the painter known as El Greco (1541?-1614), whose paintings look even more explicitly *painted*, and hence also *approximate* in comparison to van Eyck. In El Greco's images we witness the brush mark as intimately linked to the artist's activity, and thus we are made aware of the painting *process* as well as its end product.

And yet, even these painters used the brush mark within an established and coded artistic schema that concerned itself primarily with notions of representation or recording. The end point was still to show the world or represent events, and the principle subject matter for this remained, for the most part, the church, court, and state. In doing this, the artist's own emotions, thoughts and desires were essentially deemed irrelevant, although they invariably and necessarily expressed themselves.

The significance of many Romantic painters, I suggest, is their merging of an expressive brush-stroke with new subject matter and attitudes, that resulted in images which, for the first time, expressed not merely an ideal or classical *representation* of the world, but

*their expression* of it. The difference perhaps lies in the degree of explicitness with which Romantic artists painted, also revealing a gradual loss of ‘rules’ and ‘correct procedures’ which had governed European painters up until then. Indeed, explicitness implies a sense of ‘baring all’, of *uninhibited expression*, which could manifest itself most obviously in the physical act of applying pigment to canvas. For the Romantic artist, the moment when the brush touched the surface of the canvas represented a junction between what Roger Cardinal refers to as the ‘rift between the actual and the ideal’.<sup>35</sup> Invariably that ‘ideal’ was a desire for alternatives which directed itself through the subject of the artist.

### *Philosophies.*

The writings of Rousseau and, in particular, the notion of a state of innocence which could be rediscovered through exploring one’s own private emotions and predilections urged many Romantic artists to investigate ideas of the primitive through a revival of classical art or by looking to the ‘darker’, unconscious aspects of human emotion. His call to ‘innocence’ was also an implicit critique of the humanism of the Enlightenment, the formalism of Rococo and courtly art and what he saw as their mechanical treatment of human nature. What Rousseau proposed was a return to nature, the spontaneous and the organic, ideas that were echoed in the writings of Friedrich Schiller in Germany for instance, who pointed towards the child as the symbol of “what we must again become”. Rousseau’s treatise on education, *Emile* of 1762, considers the development of the child growing up in the country and advocates a nurturing close to Nature.

In the twentieth century the Blue Rider Group in Germany manifested these concerns fully in their publications of 1911, which juxtaposed drawings by children with African carvings and paintings by living European artists such as Franz Marc. One of the central principles underlying the presentation of works in such a manner was a continuation of Romantic ideas about the archetypal roots of creativity; the further ‘back’ one journeyed thus also indicated a greater degree of ‘purity’ and ‘naturalness’. An important aspect of Rousseau’s ideas was a philosophical legitimation of fully exploring one’s emotions, even if this meant physical danger or social disturbance; for Romantic poets and painters, this was translated into experiments with opiate drugs, solitary treks into the wilderness or the adoption of eccentric manner and dress. A satirical engraving from 1825 entitled *The Romantic* depicts a man sitting on some rocks deep in thought wearing a large flapping cloak over an unbuttoned waistcoat. The man’s hair is unkempt and billows in the wind.

The idea of the Sublime was important. Burke's 1757 publication Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful proposed a psychological approach, concerned with the roots of emotion, that not only dealt with beauty and perfection but also with notions of repulsion and darkness as properties which could arouse feelings of sublimity. For artists this supported the idea that art could be strongly *suggestive* by alluding to specific themes and motifs or by appealing to emotions of terror or fear. This was vital for Romantic artists as it gave a new importance to the disturbing and the hidden, which by implication, pointed to an art of *suggestion*. The images of shipwrecks by Joseph Vernet, for example, painted in the mid-eighteenth century suggest a Burkean sense of excess and abandonment which is later further focused and made extreme in a painting such as *Arctic Shipwreck* by Caspar David Friedrich painted in 1824. In presenting his thesis Burke can be seen to have contributed greatly to a new awareness of what art could do, and in what subjective ways it could be appreciated.

In Kant's critical philosophy, another articulation of the sublime is offered, in which through contemplating nature one experiences perceptual and imaginative excess that is contained by reason. Kant called this the 'dynamical sublime', an awareness that arises from realising that one can never wholly comprehend the vast powers of nature perceptually, but which can only be comprehended in ideas, by reason. Implicit in Kant's formulation of the sublime is an assumption that by contemplating nature one can experience profound moments of self-discovery which intimate an ultimate reality beyond our everyday subjective impressions of it. The painter facing a landscape could now feel, as he painted it, that he was somehow deeply related to it at a spiritual and unconscious level. Furthermore, he felt that he had the capability to enter this realm through contemplation and expression. A crucial association was thus reestablished between the artist/viewer and the image before him, one that was not based primarily on formal measurements or lines of perspective, but on *feelings and aspirations*. If, as Kant contended, the sublime could be experienced in nature's vastness, then for the painter this also set an implicit *challenge* of creating images which could evoke and approximate sublime emotions. In other words, it offered artists a new and significant subject-matter that both referred back to older traditions of religious art, but through a radical understanding of secular prospects as *potentially* transcendental.

Underlying the thinking of Rousseau, Burke and Kant as well as the gradual shift in acceptable subject matter was a new sense of artistic freedom that was no longer tied to a Renaissance academic paradigm, but which regarded the artist as an autonomous, expressive

being. The artist could express *desires* without being restricted by any hegemonic academy or court that dictated taste or style. As Arnold Hauser puts it:

The romantic movement now becomes a war of liberation not only against academies, churches, courts, patrons, amateurs, critics, and masters, but against the very principle of tradition, authority and rule.<sup>36</sup>

The 'war of liberation' which Hauser refers to can equally be seen in terms of a psychological *release* from older 'principles of tradition, authority and rule'. In this respect Romanticism stands in a long tradition of avant-garde positions which have also reacted against 'tradition', by challenging tastes and aesthetic values. Its stance in relation to 'established' religion and its heralding of personal mysticisms are manifestations of its intense desires to break free of the rigid psychological conventions of an earlier age.

The European conception of the artist as an expressive individual is central to the present thesis, providing a fundamental impetus for many artists to pursue the idea of the transcendental through painting. Hauser provides a concise description of this move:

The Revolution and the Romantic movement mark the end of a cultural epoch in which artists appealed to a 'society', to a more or less homogeneous group, to a public whose authority he acknowledged in principle absolutely. Art ceases to be a social activity guided by objective and conventional criteria, and becomes an activity of self expression creating its own standards; it becomes, in a word, the medium through which the single individual speaks to single individuals.<sup>37</sup>

The emphasis is upon a transition from a notion of community to one in which the individual reigns supreme, speaking to 'single individuals'. In other words we may say that the authority of the religious *sermon* was undermined by a recourse to personal *religious experience*. Like the figure who stares out *alone* across a misty landscape in Friedrich's *The Wanderer above the Sea of Mist* (1810), the Romantic artist appealed to private truths via private dialogues with private Gods.

### *Religions.*

The urge to reconcile reason with emotion is a central preoccupation of much Romantic art and literature, manifested in Novalis's urge for a 'higher science' that would fuse reason with a poetic spirit. It was felt that knowledge could be broadened and bettered by the

inclusion of poetry, painting, religion and philosophy. The ideal was for the artist to be both scientist and prophet, rationalist and humanist; in other words he was not merely an artisan painter, but a figure of authority who claimed a special knowledge that often derived from religious sources.

The sanctity of mystery was also emphasised by a fascination with dreams and the unconscious. Romantic thinkers and painters, such as Carl Gustav Carus, did not perceive the unconscious in scientific terms but rather saw it as a potential (and trapped) reservoir of creative and spiritual energy: it was seen as the channel or link to more profound, inner domains, echoing the ideas of Rousseau. For Carus, the faculty of psychic insight had to be developed in order for man to recognise the 'Idea', a term which he used to describe the unifying force which shapes all things. Such a theoretical base thus elevated the significance of 'twilight' states such as sleep, dreaming, trances, illness, love and solitude. Underlying much Romantic thought is thus an urge for extreme psychological states in which one's individual self is subsumed into a greater unconscious Nature which is equated ultimately with God or the transcendental. The use of opiate drugs, for instance, was seen to lead to greater levels of creativity and inner awareness: Thomas De Quincey's publication of *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* in 1822 pioneered a new form of confessional drug literature that powerfully conveyed his experiences under the influence of opium<sup>38</sup>.

The Romantics' passion for intense personal experience was further supported by significant developments in the established churches and theology. In Germany, Friedrich Ernst Daniel Schleiermacher hoped to revive Christian belief in radically new terms, publishing *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultural Despisers (Reden über die Religion an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern)* in 1789. This was a plea to recover the spiritual centre of Christianity by rejecting outer rituals and cultivating private experiences of a mystical kind. His preachings emphasised subjective responses before divine mysteries and may be seen to have represented a new kind of religious tendency in post- French Revolution Europe. In Britain another strategy was adopted by the Cambridge Camden Society, founded in May 1839. They favoured the readoption of rituals by The Church of England, in order to replace its worldliness with a sense of Gothic otherworldliness, mediated by gargoyles and incense. The Camdenians in many ways represented a religious Romanticism that encouraged feelings of mystery, a respect for symbolism and ecclesiastical high art.

The profusion of so called 'dissenting' churches throughout Europe and America during the early nineteenth century may also be seen as part of a wider fervour concerning personal religious experience. Steve Bruce interestingly points out that this profusion of Free

personal religious experience. Steve Bruce interestingly points out that this profusion of Free Churches in the mid-nineteenth century may be seen as one manifestation of the fragmenting of an all powerful and unitary Christian faith that had been set in motion from the Reformation<sup>39</sup>. One of the results of such fragmenting was also a greater scope of religious views, including a growing enthusiasm for personal, 'mystical' religious experiences. Schleiermacher and the Camdenians may then be seen to represent this wider tendency towards diversity.

The other important development that has a bearing on the question of a transcendental art was the introduction of the study of comparative religion from the 1830s onwards. In this regard we may note Frederick Denison Maurice's 1847 series of short sermons entitled The Religions of the World, which sought:

...for truths underlying the various forms in which men expressed their worship.<sup>40</sup>

One year after Maurice's sermons, in 1848, Max Müller published the first of his six volume translation of the Rigveda at Oxford, attracting considerable attention from Anglicans such as Pusey, who related Muller's studies to the conversion of British India to Christianity. By 1860, Oxford had established its first Sanskrit Chair, thereby also contributing to the growing field of Orientalist scholarship which shadowed Western Imperial expansion.

It would be foolish to presume a causal relationship between any of the factors mentioned above and a definitive 'transcendental art'; rather, what can be said is that these factors cleared a space in which artists began to approach painting in different ways, with different notions, and with different desires. Romanticism enabled artists to imagine the function and techniques of art-making in different ways; as the poet P.B. Shelley said in A Defence of Poetry (1821), artists express in their creations 'less their spirit than the spirit of the times'. Above all, what Romanticism enabled artists to do was to think about painting in terms of its affective, emotive power; the image could be more than simply a representation or a narrative, but appeal directly to the viewers feelings.

The English artist, William Blake, may be briefly considered here as an early Romantic artist who embodied many of the aspects I have just mentioned. Although he often used Christian imagery in his drawings, it was not in a conventional, narrative sense, but

rather as symbols or signs within the overall structure of his illuminated prophetic books. For Blake, the rational had little to do with creativity, which was rather strongly allied with his visionary experiences. His images strongly reveal a desire for that 'ideal' which Roger Cardinal speaks of, incorporating intense private communication with a private 'God'.

From around 1810 a new younger generation of artists began to take Blake's work more seriously and he mixed with occultists and astrologers such as Robert Varley, who regarded him somewhat as a patriarch. An image such as *Whirlwind of Lovers* from 1824 (Fig.2), three years prior to his death, is indicative of his visionary temperament: it shows a mass of figures in a whirlwind ascending towards the sky. The picture in many ways reflects the new possibilities for the artist of this period: it does not explicitly show figures of religious authority in any traditionally composed manner ascending to Heaven, but rather evokes elemental and mystical powers - the whirlwind rises out from a raging sea - and the notion of the 'unity of things', emphasised by the large circular loop made by the whirlwind as if to suggest a returning from where it came. The image also incorporates an emanating Light - perhaps from the sun - as a metaphor for spiritual growth. Blake seems to imply that we, like the whirlwind, ascend upwards towards an all-infusing Light.

Thinking about Blake's images, one must inevitably ask why they represent such differences to what had come before them. Indeed, could we not say that Blake's paintings continue within a European Christian tradition of religious painting? Certainly the references in many of his images draw from biblical sources, illustrating a narrative in a similar way that stained glass windows in Christian churches retell stories from the New Testament. And yet I suggest that his images occupy spaces which transgress any such simple demarcation between religious and non-religious art. Thus for instance it is worth noting that Blake often used contemporary scenes and themes from London, around which he hoped to reveal *his* vision of the Kingdom of God on earth. He was an artist who did not have to rely upon conventional religious sources, but created his own cosmologies, as his poems testify to. It is this difference or disjuncture that created the conditions for the possibility of a modern transcendental art: traditional religious art was augmented by a modern art that was no longer bound by strict rules, languages or conventions dictated from Rome or any other religious authority. The 'cultic' qualities of Blake's art is thus an interesting side issue, raising the question of whether such private interpretations of religion are essentially similar to the positions of 'cult' religions. In looking at his images today, do we partake in a Blake cult? Indeed, his images do not 'function' like the picturesque images of Lorraine, which assume a presence as beautiful objects to be *shown*; rather in Blakes small drawings and paintings

we are faced with personal testimonies, a kind of art which has parallels with *art brut* in its intense commitment to expressing the visions and ideas of one man. Our relationship to Blake's images as 'art' is therefore always shadowed by the knowledge that we are also peering into a diary or secret imagination. This ability for pictures to *move* or *offend* the viewer is an important underlying dimension of Romantic art.

*ii) A Camouflaged Transcendental.*

Romanticism's chief means of expression was arguably landscape painting, not as a descriptive activity, but rather as the communicator of felt, visual experiences. Standing before a landscape the artist began to attribute it with a significance which it did not possess in earlier decades: it could thus begin to symbolise and allude to greater things beyond the realms of the human. In short, the artists' relationship to nature radically altered so that he was no longer a dominating, manipulating agent of nature, but one fragment within its larger Whole. A sense of respect for landscape developed that recognised both its beauty and dangers, as well as its perceived function as an emblem of the transcendental. In this capacity the landscape can be viewed as representing a sense of loss or deficiency, in that it hinted at something beyond it: the artist thus attributed to it emotions of yearning and hope.

By the 1760s and 1770s artists such as George Barret and Caspar Wolf were painting landscapes in a manner that highlighted their emotional and enigmatic qualities. Although a painter such as Jacob van Ruisdael had painted reflective scenes of the Dutch landscape during the mid-seventeenth century, their images do not express nature as enigmatic or symbolic of other profound thoughts. Rather in Ruisdael's scenes, such as *A Pool surrounded by trees* (1665-70), we see a woodland scene that presents itself modestly and with a high degree of realism in its treatment of light and shade flickering through the trees. Compared to an early Romantic landscape such as that by Cozens, which we have already looked at, Ruisdael's image seems tight and somewhat enclosed; the view remains relatively 'near', emphasising the trees in the foreground more than any expansive vista or sweeping sky. Seen alongside a painting by Juel or Friedrich, Ruisdael's landscape is of a fundamentally different order.

Nature began to be painted as a secular expression of an essentially religious sentiment, in many ways replacing more traditional religious iconographies and themes. In a letter sent to his mother from the Niagara Falls, the Irish poet Thomas Moore provides a good account of how landscape features could be experienced as affective and numinous:

I felt as if approaching the very residence of the Deity; the tears started into my eyes; and I remained, for a moment after we had lost sight of the scene, in that delicious absorption which pious enthusiasm alone can produce. We arrived at the New Ladder and descended to the bottom. Here all its awful sublimities rushed full upon me. My whole heart and soul ascended toward the Divinity in a swell of devout admiration, which I never before experienced.<sup>41</sup>

Moore's impassioned account may be referred to as an example of an elemental experience in which natural phenomena are experienced on raw or 'primitive' levels of conception. The idea of communing with nature is one which was popular among Romantic artists and writers, suggesting the significance of private dialogues with forces thought to be greater than oneself. For example, Book One of Wordsworth's epic poem *The Prelude*, published in 1814, contains a fine example of this sentiment: the author describes rowing out into a lake at night, surrounded by 'huge peaks' and 'the silent lake'. The idea of *fleeing* is one that recurs in many Romantic works. Hauser refers to this in the wider context of an escape from the classical restrictions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The escape to Utopia and the fairy tale, to the unconscious and the fantastic, the uncanny and the mysterious, to childhood and nature, to dreams and madness, were all disguised and more or less sublimated forms of the same feeling, of the same yearning for irresponsibility and a life free from suffering and frustration - all attempts to escape into that chaos and anarchy against which the classicism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had fought at times with alarm and anger, at others with grace and wit, but always with the same determination.....Whenever the romantics describe their outlook on art and the world, the word or the idea of homelessness creeps into their sentences.<sup>42</sup>

Within this context it is possible to see nature and landscape as providing a central means of escape: it was literally wild, untamed and usually remote, providing the perfect setting for the artist to be alone. Moreover the notion of 'homelessness' as described by Hauser may be related to a Neoplatonic reading of the transcendental. Plotinus' formulation of the One in terms of a Fall from an original state of Being is called to mind. Many artists actively sought elemental inspiration by trekking ever further into remote natural areas in order to feel the rawness and immediacy of landscape. Friedrich's numerous trips to the mountains at

Riesengebirge and Ruegen Island in the Baltic Sea are illustrative of the attraction of wild locations for the purposes of sketching and seeking inspiration. This physical relationship with nature in all its forms and temperament's is perhaps transplanted directly into the paintings of artists such as Turner or the German Carl Blechen.

In mid-nineteenth century America the work of Luminist painters such as Frederic Edwin Church (1826-1900) and Thomas Cole (1801-48) also reflected a Romantic attraction to vast natural vistas and spectacles. In an age when the locomotive had begun to replace the frontier wagon, many American artists, like their contemporaries in Europe, looked for a sense of divinity and rest in the landscape, employing a rhetoric of awe and sublimity in order to express their feelings. For example, in Fritz Hugh Lane's (1804-65) luminist seascapes of the New England coast we can observe a finely balanced realism with a sense of numinosity that is reminiscent of Europeans such as Friedrich, and yet which differs from them in their imagination of space and light which seems vaster and more unrestrained. This sense of numinosity, achieved mainly by Lane's evocation of large, empty areas of sea and sky, may be said to rest in particular on the Ottoean characteristic of the numinous as *majestas*, or overpoweringness. By juxtaposing recognisable scenes such as coastlines with vast, empty skies, Lane manages to at once attract the viewer to familiar images, and overpower him with adjacent areas of desolate canvas.

This shift towards viewing the natural landscape as animated by a sense of spirit or divinity is profoundly significant. In some senses these Romantic artists were reestablishing human links with the natural world, based upon a conception of nature as essentially mysterious and magical. This was in response to a Protestant reformism that had tried to establish a purified form of Christianity by eradicating the archaic idea that spiritual power pervaded the natural world, particularly at sacred places, and in spiritually charged material objects. The Protestant zeal for purification necessarily involved the disenchantment of the world as all traces of magic, holy power and idolatry were seen as superstition and thus against the will of God. Truth was sought in a God that remained unsullied by the materialities of the natural world. Arguably the Protestant Reformation thus prepared the ground for the mechanistic revolution in science in the following century, when Man's dominion over nature became nearly complete, and against which the first wave of Romantics passionately fought. The first tentative movements towards reinvesting nature with a sense of mystery and meaning in the late eighteenth century thus constituted not only a significant development in art historical terms, but also a profound *challenge to a Protestant cosmology* which saw nature as inanimate and exploitable. This pantheistic urge

was shared by Nature Philosophers such as F.W.J.von Schelling, Carl Gustav Carus, and Johann Wilhelm Ritter, all of whom affirmed the unity of creation, a notion of a Wondrous Whole and a renewed sense of the mystical in their writings. Everything, including nature, was reinvested with meaning and ultimately derived its Being from a benign Universal Spirit.

The German painter Caspar David Friedrich is an artist who strongly expressed this sense of the innate divinity of landscape, and in many ways may be considered to be the artist who most directly challenged the authority of earlier academic models of landscape painting by elevating its status to one comparable to earlier forms of religious art. Joseph Leo Koerner refers to Friedrich's *Tetschen Altar Piece or Cross in the Mountains of 1807-8* (Fig.3) as a work which embodied this sense of challenge and innovation as regards landscape in a significant manner. It is one of Friedrich's best known paintings, showing a cross on a rocky hill-top surrounded by tall fir trees. From beyond the hill top five rays of light stream upwards, like search-lights, bathing the scene in a reddish orange glow. Friedrich first showed this work to the public in 1808 in his Dresden atelier, prior to its departure for a small chapel in Tetschen Castle. The installation of the work in the atelier and the resulting flurry of critical reaction to it are two important factors which should be considered. The work was conceived to be placed in a small chapel, and to complement this setting, Friedrich framed the image in a heavy gilded basket-arch shape reminiscent of earlier traditions of Christian sacred art. It was placed in his atelier on a large table covered in black cloth and the windows were veiled to dampen the light entering the space so as to imitate the diffused light of a chapel. On entering the room, visitors seemed to sense that they were entering a religious space. Marie Helene von Kugelgen wrote of her experience:

Yesterday I crossed the Elbe and went to Friedrich to see his altar painting. There I met many acquaintances, among them Chamberlain Riehl and his wife, Prince Bernhard, Beschoren, Seidelmann, Volkmann, the Bardus, etc. Everyone who entered the room was deeply moved, as if they had set foot in a temple. The loudest brawlers, even Beschoren, spoke quietly and solemnly, as if in a church.<sup>43</sup>

The account is significant in its use of a religious metaphor. Clearly Friedrich had installed the work in his atelier in a manner that provoked comparisons with an altar-piece, even though the image lacked an orthodox Christian altar iconography. Rather it is an image that

seems to show, first and foremost, *landscape* as the carrier for religious insights. In its treatment of light - which plays a strong metaphoric role - its obscuring of the figure on the cross, and depiction of the hill-top, Friedrich's image rests finely between a traditional conception of religious art, and a genre of Romantic landscape painting that had begun to infuse nature with transcendental qualities. The painting is also interesting as an object which generates *desires* for the religious, as von Kugelgen's account suggests. The work successfully merges a religious sculpture, shaped appropriately, with a landscape image that does not offer itself as a religious narrative. Friedrich's brilliance is precisely his ability to stir such desires to *imagine* the transcendental without resorting to traditional iconographies or narratives, and thus offer an experience of the sacred which, on the surface, seems 'universal' and secular.

It is also interesting to consider how the painting was received. One of its most ardent critics was the Dresden critic Freiherr von Ramdohr, who championed academic classicism in the arts. To him, Friedrich's image was a deviation from all that he considered 'essential', celebrating a sense of irrationalism that stood opposed to ideas of order, compositional clarity, antique style, balance, and reason. There is a sense in which we may view Friedrich's painting here, as exemplifying the 'Break in Tradition' about which Gombrich speaks. Ramdohr's rejection of Friedrich's painting was then, also a rejection of a new attitude or culture represented by Friedrich and other Romantic artists. His sense of distaste is apparent in the following statement which appeared in his review of the installation in 1809:

That mysticism which currently slinks in everywhere and wafts towards us from art as from scholarship, from philosophy as from religion, like a narcotic vapour. That mysticism which substitutes symbols and fantasies for painterly and poetic images, and which wishes to confuse classical Antiquity with Gothic carvings....That mysticism that sells word games instead of concepts, builds principles upon far-fetched analogies, and everywhere seeks to merely *sense* what it should either know and recognise or else modestly be silent about.<sup>44</sup>

The 'mysticism' to which Ramdohr refers can be identified precisely as the emergence of Romanticism in Germany during this period.

Friedrich increasingly transformed references to traditional religion such as crosses or churches, and built up a corpus of images that represented landscape and its changing

aspects as intensely enigmatic, transformative and potentially transcendental. In other words, he kept these traditional religious motifs in a radically *camouflaged* manner that relinquished their traditional iconographies in favour of supernatural mists or diffused mountain light. We may see the beginnings of this development in *Cross in the Mountains*, where Friedrich retained the cross emblem within nature to evoke the transcendental, although it shares an equal significance with the mountain it stands on. Friedrich's most radical gesture may be regarded as his *concealment* of traditional religious motifs within the landscape, retaining their significance without showing them explicitly as religious symbols. In doing this, Friedrich may also be seen to have fully unfurled the Romantic search for the transcendental outside established religion, and projected it into the natural world.

This is though, a development which may be traced in an earlier form of Spanish visionary painting from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Victor Stoichita's study into this genre of painting distinguishes its narrative element, referring in particular to certain Biblical scenes such as the Resurrection, Transfiguration, Ascension and Assumption as providing the core dramatic visual moments within which visionary experiences could be painted. In other words, these narrative sources provided painters of the period with a visual language that enabled them to paint what was deemed unpaintable. As examples, Stoichita refers to works such as Juan de Flandes *Ascension* (c.1500) and El Greco's *The Resurrection* (before 1610), both of which depict dramatic narrative scenes that remain fairly faithful to the Biblical stories. Stoichita proceeds to distinguish several pictorial strategies adopted by Spanish painters for the purposes of representing the invisible, foremost of which was the image of the luminous cloud. The relevance of this in relation to the narrative element is that we are presented, in paintings such as El Greco's *The Resurrection* or *The Vision of Saint Francis*, with two distinct elements: the *narrative*, depicted by figures of saints, their postures and contexts, and the *depiction of the vision* itself through motifs such as clouds and light. Stoichita provides textual material from theological sources that recount these narratives by referring to particular visual qualities such as 'superb light' or 'dazzling cloud', and in most cases he argues that painters drew from such sources for their visual metaphors.

The significance of this for painters such as Friedrich lies in his development of a largely non-narrative painting that *continued* to evoke the transcendental through motifs such as clouds and light. Thus a painting such as El Greco's *The Vision of Saint Francis*, which shows Saint Francis and a young novice witnessing a vision that is represented as a

luminous cloud in the upper corner, contains within it a significant motif that may also be found in many Romantic works by Turner or Friedrich. Indeed, we may recount the treatise on representing the Sacred offered by the art theorist Cristoforo Sorte in 1580 and call to mind Friedrich's depiction of landscape.

In my opinion colours that are too determined or substantial should not be used; on the contrary they should be soft and suave, capable of representing a superhuman substance and the divinity in its pure and simple state. Moreover, it should be understood that the divine things that sometimes appear are always accompanied by a graceful splendour bathed in a soft light and an (implied) perspective of distances, which remains neglected by many artists because it requires more than one level and more than one horizon.<sup>45</sup>

Sorte's statement is appropriate for two reasons: firstly, it clearly owes a debt to Neoplatonism in its assumption that there is a 'superhuman substance' and 'divinity' which can be represented by artists, and secondly the motifs he highlights such as 'soft and suave' colour, 'soft light' and 'perspective of distances' may all be recognised in varying degrees in Romantic portrayals of the transcendental landscape. Friedrich's mature landscapes are thus in many senses the evocation of such sentiments, *minus* the overt narrative and iconographic elements associated with Biblical scenes. Rather for Friedrich, clouds and light *themselves* are sufficient as indicators of the transcendental. Furthermore, rather than inserting figures within his paintings as witnesses to the visionary moment as El Greco does, *we* the viewer are the implied witnesses of a transcendental scene that displays itself fully in the painting. Yet, in paintings such as *Woman at a Window* (1822) where Friedrich shows a figure with her back to the viewer looking towards the landscape, one can identify similarities with certain paintings by El Greco such as *The Vision of Saint Francis* or *The Vision of St John on Patmos (The Immaculate Conception)* (c.1580-85), where figures are seen to be looking away from the viewer towards the visionary depiction. Certain key motifs and strategies used by Friedrich can therefore be detected in an earlier form of visionary religious painting.

*Morning Fog in the Mountains* of 1808 (Fig.4), is an image in which the viewer seems to be positioned on the crest of a hillside, looking across a large valley at the side of a misty mountain. Although painted during the same period as *Cross in the Mountains*, it does not utilise any references to a Christian tradition, rather depicting a mountain-side shrouded in a moving mist. The landscape seems to be breathing or exhaling a thin fog that

sweeps across the valley, that perhaps echoes similar images of misty landscapes by Japanese Zen painters such as Sesshu. Tall, arrow-like trees that perhaps allude to the cross protrude out of the mist, adding to a sense of immensity, barrenness and solitude, and the faint hump of the mountain in the centre creates a triangular composition within the picture, implying an upward motion that is strengthened by the trees. Within a Romantic model, the picture may be both a homage to the latent spiritual powers in nature and an allusion to transcendental states of consciousness. Its receding sparseness and use of fog as a veil evoke a sense of spiritual potential that recalls Novalis' words, 'the world must become romanticised': does not the distant summit imply a higher place, a purified consciousness, towards which we must strive? The painting is at once both invitingly simple, but also suggestive of deeper meanings, and it is this sense of tension that is often expressed in Friedrich's landscapes. On the one hand we are faced with an obvious picture of landscape and its references to place, light and perspective; and yet simultaneously we are invited to imagine this landscape as more than what it is, as a site of fragility. The implicit message in many of his works is that the landscape is akin to a stage-set, waiting to be animated by our *desires for it to be transcendental*. Indeed in many of his paintings we see distinct motifs that serve to heighten this sense of tension.

*Morning Mist in the Mountains* employs the phenomenon of fog or mist to suggest a subtle and mystifying sensation: fog represents ethereal qualities, it constantly shifts with the winds, transforming everything it caresses. It cloaks the landscape, creating a feeling of uncertainty and often fear. Koerner refers to its appearance in the Bible - Genesis 2:6 - as an agent of animation, turning barren hills into lush green forests. We are here presented with a two-fold movement: one of *concealment* and one of *generation*. Like the puff of smoke that traditionally accompanies a magician's spell, fog in Friedrich's images may also be seen to embody both aspects. Whilst in a painting such as *Ship on the Elbe in Mist* of 1821 (Fig.5), mist seems to be used for the purposes of cloaking, and hence obscuring, objects such as the ship, in paintings such as *Morning* of 1821, or the famous *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* of 1818, mist can be regarded as an active agent of *origination*. *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, for instance, shows a man standing over a misty ravine; the implication is that once the fog clears, one will be faced with a new sense of space, or a renewed sense of Being.

One of the principal ways in which many Romantic painters alluded to ideas of the

transcendental in nature was thus through evoking its constantly changing properties of light, colour, and shape. The crucial veil between a world of matter and that of spirit or soul is recognised in most Romantic landscape paintings, and suggested through devices such as lighting or atmosphere. In maintaining this notion of a veil, Romantic artists considered the canvas in terms of its affective qualities; the picture not only showed certain scenes or objects, but also sought to evoke certain feelings in the viewer.

If the romantic landscape had a function, it was to be a reminder of a purer, spiritual domain that forever lay just behind or beyond the awesomeness of mountains or a calm mist shrouded field. The intention of the Romantic painter was not simply to recreate an objective world, but rather to infuse the objective image with a subjective significance that ultimately derived from spiritual sources. Nature is essentially *witness* to the sacred, a space which also enables the viewer to desire what Moore describes as ‘awful sublimities’. In these crucial senses, Romantic work was not only metaphoric, but also implicitly philosophical, critical, and indeed escapist.

### *iii) Neoplatonic Positions.*

Plato’s distinction between Appearance and Reality, illustrated most famously by the allegory of the Cave in chapter 9 of *Republic*, can be detected as a central underlying assumption in the work of many artists from the Romantic period onwards, manifesting itself in a variety of ways in their images. Three characteristics can, I think, be identified as common pictorial strategies used by artists to express this understanding of the transcendental: Light, the idea of a cloak or veil that hints at a ‘beyond’, and the idea of ascension or upward motion. Often allied to these characteristics are notions about longing, of suffering, mystical awakening, or escape. Here, though, I shall briefly outline the three themes identified above as powerful and frequent expressions in many artists’ works which we can consider alongside other elements such as context, reception or artistic intention.

#### *Light.*

The idea of light as an indicator of spiritual or inner truths is espoused by Plato in *Republic*. Although he does not attribute to it any specific symbolic quality - as in the New Testament, for example, where God is equated with the ‘Light of the World’ - Plato utilises light as a metaphor to illustrate his argument regarding Appearance and Reality. In the text, Socrates proposes the “Simile of the Sun” in order to explain and extend the analogy

between the visible and intelligible realms by pointing to the relationship between light and seeing, and contrasting this with the relationship between goodness and knowledge, or truth. Plato here equates light with goodness by giving them equal status as *revealers* of truth, and in doing so he implicitly accords light with greater positive significance than darkness. Plato writes:

Well, here's how you can think about the mind as well. When its object is something which is lit up by truth and reality, then it has - and obviously has - intelligent awareness and knowledge. However, when its object is permeated with darkness (that is, when its object is something which is subject to generation and decay), then it has beliefs and is less effective because its beliefs chop and change...\*

Plato here assumes a relationship between light and knowledge, and a corresponding relationship between darkness and belief, decay and change. The metaphor is one which, moreover, accords primacy to the sense of vision, for light is also equated with sight in Plato's discourse. In the analogy of the Cave Plato pushes this metaphor further, writing of the ignorant man's gradual revelation to the light of fire, shadows cast by the sun, the night sky, and eventually sunlight itself. In this gradual process of *revelation to light*, Plato asserts the central axis of his philosophy: that of two worlds of Appearance and Reality.

This understanding of Light as metaphoric source and revealer of the transcendental is seen in a number of paintings by artists such as Friedrich, Schinkel, or Turner to stunning effect. Light is not merely painted in their images to aid in greater realism or sense of perspective, but rather tends to play a crucial symbolic role as an *indicator* of transcendental truths. In Friedrich's 1822 painting *Moonrise on the Seashore*, for instance, we see three sitting figures gazing out across a calm sea at an evening horizon. The light of the slowly rising moon, acts as the image's central focus, and the subjects in the image all look towards it in silent contemplation. The image offers an implicit message about communing with nature on one level, but also about the attractive power of light as the source for higher thoughts. Friedrich's use of moonlight as opposed to sunlight is interesting, reflecting a Romantic interest in night as the topos for transformation and revelation through activities such as dreaming.

In Karl Friedrich Schinkel's 1813 painting, *Gothic Cathedral by the Water*, a similar concern with the symbolic qualities of light are explored. The painting shows a monumental cathedral on the banks of a river, looming high over surrounding houses and people who

remain hidden in its considerable shadow. Beyond the cathedral we see the radiance of what looks like a setting sun, which outlines the building with an orange glow, heightening its significance. It is important that we see the cathedral from its shadow side, for it situates us in darkness together with other figures by the river who sit idly chatting or who haul large sacks on their backs. The painting seems to suggest that we, like these figures, can look up at the cathedral bathed in its luminous glow and aspire towards greater things. Like the man who turns away from the cave wall in *Republic*, Schinkel confronts us with an image of light as revealer of spiritual truth. That the source of light in his painting comes from behind a religious building is, I think, confirmation of such a view, although Schinkel does not abandon the institution of the church altogether. Rather, the light may be seen here in two very differing ways: on the one hand the light may be seen as *confirming* the authority of the church, providing a halo around the building, whilst on the other hand it can be seen as *overpowering* the very materiality of the church by shining its rays onto the whole landscape.

Light as symbolic of spiritual awakening is further developed and utilised by Piet Mondrian, who uses it to effect in his 1910-11 triptych, *Evolution* (Fig.6). Here we are faced with three large nude figures in varying stages of spiritual evolution. The right hand panel shows the figure in shade, its head leaning back fully. The left hand panel shows the figure with its head slowly rising forward, and two six pointed stars flanking the head. In the central panel we see the figure with its eyes wide open staring straight out at the viewer, surrounded by what could be a bright aura. Thus we see in the triptych three stages of spiritual growth, paralleled by three stages of light, moving from darkness, to dim light, to brightness. Mondrian's use of light in this painting suggests his association of spiritual maturity not only with bright light, but also seeing.

### *Concealment.*

Another commonly used pictorial device to suggest a Neoplatonic transcendental is the veil, or other similar means of concealment. Its significance often lies in its capacity to suggest something or somewhere beyond it, serving an important function as a *divider* of space within a painting. The relevance of such strategies to Neoplatonic ideas is clearly to allude to two worlds or realms: the Material and the Real. Once again Plato's allegory of the Cave may be seen to epitomise this division of reality into the Intelligible world and that of Appearance, and within this discourse notions of veiling or concealing have a significant

metaphoric purpose. Plotinus, for instance, affirms the ineffability of speaking about the One, doubting whether one can speak 'about' it. In chapter five of *Enneads*, Plotinus formulates this dilemma clearly, in a sense, anticipating many artists' resort to strategies of allusion.

How do we then speak about it? We say something about it, but we do not say it, nor do we have knowledge or thought of it. How then do we speak about it, if we do not have it? "

In this context, themes of veiling or hiding can be regarded as one pictorial strategy for referring to the transcendental Other. Artists such as Friedrich, for example, utilise mist or fog as vehicles for natural concealment, as well as the motif of the window as a symbol of containing inner space from outside space and initiating feelings of longing, through looking out of them. We see this clearly in, for instance, his painting *Woman at a Window* (1822) where we are confronted with the back of a woman looking out of a shuttered window from a darkened room. In this painting, the window serves the function of framing the composition and providing a dividing surface between indoors and outdoors. The viewer is therefore 'inside', looking 'out' with the woman in the painting although unable to see what she sees. The viewer is thus simultaneously situated physically 'inside' but psychologically 'outside'. In the plainly titled *Fog* from 1807 the viewer stands on a rocky seashore looking out across an almost completely concealed sea view. Out of the fog emerges the shadowy shapes of empty boats. Underlying these paintings is Friedrich's strategy of placing the spectators in the foreground of his paintings looking away to the skyline.

Turner also uses a similar strategy in many of his landscape paintings, by applying paint in thin, watery washes over large areas of the canvas, creating luminous patches of colour that serve as buffers or veils. In *Norham Castle*, for example, from 1840, we see the faint shadow of a castle in the middle distance shrouded in what could be an early morning mist. The sunlight is concealed, and we are left with a scene that strongly suggests more than it shows. Turner provides certain visual clues - such as the castle in the distance or a solitary deer in the foreground - but beyond this, one is faced with a whiteness that acts as a shroud, hiding the full view which could in turn allude to a fuller degree of poetic or spiritual realisation.

*Ascension.*

William Blakes' painting, *Whirlwind of Lovers* (Fig.2), to which I referred earlier, can be seen as incorporating an example of the third characteristic I outline here: that of ascension or moving upwards. The art historian J.E. Cirlot describes the symbolism of ascension thus:

The symbolism of ascension or ascent has two main aspects: externally a higher level in space signifies a higher value by virtue of its connection with the symbolism of space and height; and, secondly, it pertains to the inner life, the symbolism of which concerns the 'upward impulse' rather than any actual ascent.<sup>48</sup>

Cirlot presents two important aspects of the meanings of ascent, one concerned primarily with its spatial aspects, and the other with its psychological aspects. Both may be said to play central roles in many European paintings about the transcendental, deriving their significance in part from Plato's association of moving upwards with higher knowledge and revelation. In *Republic* chapter 9, he discusses the role of philosophers within the republic, comparing their study with the idea of ascent, in the manner of climbing a mountain.

'Our job as founders then,' I said, 'is to make sure that the best people come to that fundamental field of study (as we called it earlier): we must have them make the ascent we've been talking about and see goodness.'<sup>49</sup>

A relationship is established between the notion of ascension and good knowledge in Plato's discourse, a relationship which also implicitly rests on the assumption that descent means returning to the world of matter and belief. Plato refers to this in relation to the philosopher who must descend to the republic in order to rule.

So each of you must, when your time comes, descend to where the rest of the community lives, and get used to looking at things in the dark.<sup>50</sup>

This notion of different levels of reality between which one can ascend and descend is perhaps exemplified in Philipp Otto Runge's work of 1807 entitled, *The Times of Day*. Often heralded as the start of German Romantic painting, Runge's image incorporates four themes: morning, day, evening and night, painted as four separate images. The paintings rely heavily upon the pictorial structure of plant growth, with their compositions generally

moving upwards from the bottom of the page. In *Night*, for instance, we see a large sunflower at the bottom of the image upon which children and angels rest, symbolising sleep and the realm of dreams. Its composition draws one's eye from the lower images of the sunflower upwards towards the female figure of Night, who sits flanked by genii and angels. In formal terms at least, Runge's images seem to draw heavily upon the notion of moving upwards through different terrestrial and spiritual spheres as expressed by varying deities, plants or postures.

The expression of ascension can also be seen in many artists treatment of religious buildings including churches, cathedrals and graveyards which echo traditional explanations of Gothic architecture. Not only does church architecture spatially stretch upwards via tall spires and towers, but it also provides a powerful metaphoric meaning through its religious significance. For artists, it can be said to represent a subject matter which links the earthly with the heavenly, acting like sites of intercession between two realms. Schinkel's *Cathedral* from 1811 demonstrates this enigmatic quality of church architecture in a manner that is neither too literal or sentimental. The painting's central focus is the twin spires of the church, which function like two large arrows pointing upwards to the sky. A similar investigation may be seen to have continued in many of Mondrian's middle period paintings of church facades or in Lyonel Feininger's interpretation of gothic churches.

*iv) Modern Continuations.*

If nineteenth century European painters such as Friedrich and Blake began to develop new contexts in which the artist could relate to ideas of the transcendental by exploring new subject matters, artistic attitudes, or philosophical positions, the turn of the century may be seen as developing these ideas to their logical conclusions, as well as greatly expanding the vocabulary with which painters could explore such issues.

There are two significant developments within late nineteenth century and twentieth century interpretations of the transcendental that are of significance here: one encompasses a move away from realistic paintings depicting landscapes or scenes towards non-objective, abstract images, and the other is a broadening of the ways in which artists have approached the idea of the transcendental itself to incorporate non-European religious traditions and practices. Thus we see in the paintings of Kandinsky, for instance, a development from images of identifiable figures, landscapes or objects towards a painting style that eventually reduced the canvas to a surface covered in colours, lines and blotches. Likewise we see in the work of artists such as Odilon Redon and Paul Gauguin tendencies towards looking to non-European cultures for inspiration on both a formal pictorial level as well a philosophical one. These developments form the broad framework within which an artist such as Tobey may be analysed.

*v) Breaking Free.*

Robert Rosenblum offers an alternative reading of European art history that considers the ongoing significance of the idea of the transcendental at the dawn of the twentieth century.

....outside France, the evolution of an art that could be totally freed from the depiction of the material world was prompted by dreams of mystical and spiritual realms. In their transcendental ambitions, these dreams perpetuated the Romantic search for an art that could penetrate beneath the material surfaces of things and extract a religious essence.<sup>51</sup>

For artists such as Gauguin, Ranson, Redon or Kupka, the visible world of objective forms was less significant than the inner world of spirit. Developing Romantic ideas further, they saw artistic truth and validity as increasingly emanating from a painting that originated in the subjective feelings of the artist as opposed to an outer world of forms: in Neoplatonic

fashion, matter was heavy and burdensome, obstructing a lighter sphere of the spirit. For increasing numbers of painters therefore, 'true' painting was one in which the image became object-like, autonomous (like music), and free from all mimeticism. The idea of the painting as a window looking out into a world of recognisable objects - we may recall Friedrich for example - could thus be replaced by the idea of the painting purely *as painting*: the image as two-dimensional and *cleansed* of material associations. Art could be unbounded and purely expressive: it could, many thought, directly transmit human emotions.

The Symbolist critic T  odor de Wyzewa, writing in 1895, encapsulates a modern sense of freedom which many artists felt during the late nineteenth century, carefully framing his sentiments around a critical view of art and life. His statement anticipates later theories of abstract art, as articulated by painters such as Kandinsky, and also implies a Neoplatonic view in which the artist is given the privileged task of creating a better world, above and beyond the present:

...we have been the slaves of the world, and the sight of this world, where we engaged our interests, has since ceased to give us pleasure. And the Life which we had created - created in order to give us the joy of creating - has lost its original character. It is necessary therefore to recreate it; one must build, over and above this world of defiled, habitual appearances, the holy world of a better life: better, because we can make it intentionally, and know that we make it. This is the very business of Art.<sup>52</sup>

In the light of de Wyzewa's statement, one of the ways in which we can understand modern artists' continuing interests in the transcendental is through seeing it as offering art and the practice of art, a seemingly *ultimate break* with tradition. Paradoxically, one could argue that the very subject which had largely sustained that tradition - religion - was being heralded as its radical successor by some artists during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And yet, as painters such as Friedrich had begun to explore, how religion and its experience was understood by artists was significant; in other words, the ways in which religious ideas and issues were appropriated by many modern artists within their work represented radically new and critical differences to earlier forms of academic painting. A broadening notion of the transcendental provided many artists with a subject matter that, on the one hand, challenged academic traditions, yet also maintained links with it by referring to ideas of divinity, spirit, universalism, and humanism. Whilst styles and forms changed radically, it can be said that many of the 'great' themes which had underlined

older forms of religious art in Europe continued to be investigated. Referring to the arts of the late nineteenth century, Norbert Lynton also seems to support such a view, saying that:

Art abandoned, or seemed to abandon, its duty of instructing, but that did not mean it was willing to yield its high status to books, newspapers, and films. Like music it aimed at an even more exalted plane: that of religion - and in seeking that role it sought also its primordial place at the centre of human existence.<sup>53</sup>

As Lynton seems to suggest, transcendental ideas provided art with a new validity and legitimacy through which it could stand alone and proud. Indeed we should view the transcendental in the context of a wide pool of resources and influences from which modern artists could be inspired; freedom from traditional academic attitudes made it possible for artists and people in general to appreciate many kinds of older art and the arts of distant cultures. It is thus significant that 'Primitivist' discourses concerning European artists' appropriation of non-European art emerges strongly in the modern period, alongside the emergence of comparative religious studies and related movements such as Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society. The art historian Meyer Schapiro identifies that this widening of art's boundaries also necessitated a new kind of subjective approach to art that was more free and emotionally engaging:

The change in art dethroned not only representation as a necessary requirement but also a particular standard of decorum or restraint in expression which had excluded certain domains and intensities of feeling. The notion of the humanity of art was immensely widened. Many kinds of drawing, painting, sculpture and architecture, formerly ignored or judged inartistic, were seen as existing on the same plane of human creativeness and expression as 'civilised' Western art.<sup>54</sup>

The transcendental continued to provide a valid and significant source from which modern art could plunder in order to construct itself anew, alongside other ideas and tendencies such as the fascination with 'primitive' or exotic cultures, folk arts and the like. Whilst perhaps 'widening the humanity of art', as Schapiro suggests, one can also identify a greater sense that art and artists were somehow 'outside' social life, and in opposition to it; in Clement Greenberg's reading, the avant-garde was the historical agency which functioned to keep culture alive in the face of capitalism. Romantic assaults upon the traditional

academy and other institutions can be seen conversely as having made the artist ever more special within society, a figure of invariably masculine aesthetic authority who stood apart from it.

*vi) Presenting the Unpresentable.*

By the turn of the century the question of what was to replace the missing object, in the form of human figures, landscapes or history scenes, was actively answered by many artists who turned towards a transcendental art that appealed solely to an 'inner spirit'. For Nabi artists such as Ranson or Serusier for instance, art was to become the means by which one could realise divine truths, it became an act of religious significance. The 'mystic' painter faced the canvas as a seer or visionary who could communicate cosmic truths, thereby also implicitly assuming a new role as teacher and sage. Indeed, for artists such as Kandinsky, Mondrian, Malevich or Newman, their role as painters was augmented by their role as *philosophers* or scholars who would wish to express complex ideas through texts in addition to their paintings. In many ways this widening of the artist's role must be viewed as an important aspect of modernism, resulting in the capacity of artists to become critically articulate and self-aware and thereby laying the foundations for much of the art of the twentieth century. It also meant that artists such as Marcel Duchamp or Hans Arp could investigate potentially transcendental ideas without recourse to making particular artistic objects as such, but by contextualising their activities within theoretical discourses that 'explained' or 'elucidated' ideas. A trend may thus be sensed in much modern art towards investigating different ideas and positions of the transcendental through critical or ironical positions that do not borrow from 'traditional' religious languages or images. This development has tended to produce an ever broadening diversity of approaches to investigating transcendental ideas, and inevitably also caused much disagreement and debate.

The question of how artists could portray the transcendental in their images remained, though, a serious issue at the turn of the century. Many painters increasingly turned to totally non-objective expressions, whilst others maintained varying degrees of relation to recognisable forms for the purposes of symbolising a spiritual realm. Below, I intend to outline two different strategies utilised by artists in this period in order to explore a Neoplatonic notion of the transcendental: both can be viewed as consistent with the Romantic paradigm. I shall confine my outline to those artists who actively sought to express transcendental themes and images in their work and through their statements.

express transcendental themes and images in their work and through their statements.

*Nature.*

As we have seen, the use of nature and natural views for the purposes of inducing a sense of divinity in the viewer of a painting has its most obvious sources in the landscapes of Romantic painters such as Blechen or Friedrich. Nature remained a dominant theme for many artists working in the first decades of the twentieth century, though often in less literal ways. Whilst artists such as Blechen and Friedrich usually depicted the landscape realistically, but with a sense of enigma, there is a sense in which many modern artists distorted or extremitised the landscape in order to express powerful emotions or abstract ideas.

On the one hand landscape continued to symbolise majesty, height and space in the form of dioramic vistas: nature alluded to Otto's sense of the Numinous, as something vast, wild and primal. For example, Van Gogh's 1889 painting *Starry Night* is referred to by Rosenblum as:

...a painting that for twentieth century spectators has become one of the most famous modern symbols of a visionary, quasi-mystical translation of the data of the empirical world.<sup>55</sup>

Indeed, in this picture we are presented with a vision of the world in natural tumult; the sky, which seems to be its central subject, hurls itself across the canvas like turbulent water. The painting is obviously not intended to realistically represent a sky at night, but has been adopted by the artist in order to radically express his feelings. The objective distance which one might feel when looking at a work by Friedrich or Blechen, is in Van Gogh's image collapsed, so that the painted landscape relates closely to the artists sensations and feelings. In this closure of distance, I suggest that one might identify Plotinus' dictum of 'looking inwards to the soul'.

A similar expression of the immensity of nature can be seen in Mondrian's early images of woods and seascapes. His 1908 painting, *Woods near Oele* (Fig.7), for instance, depicts a large golden sun shimmering through a forest of tall vertical lines that suggest an underlying universal pattern or mystery. The image captures a moment of intense energy. The sun - is it setting or rising?- seems to merge with the tops of the trees as it basks the land in its unifying glow. It is an image which shows Mondrian's stirring unease with the

outward forms of nature. Nothing is painted in too defined a manner; instead everything seems to be melting. We are perhaps presented with an interesting comparison in Friedrich's 1821 painting entitled *Evening* (Fig.8), in which we see two small figures in the middle distance gazing out to a forest through which the yellow, orange glow of dusk shimmers. Compositionally, the two paintings share patterns: the centre of both paintings is occupied by strong horizontal bands of colour; in both paintings the viewer is situated just outside a wood; and in both images the trees act as forces of vertical movement upwards. And yet, whilst Friedrich paints the scene realistically, showing details such as the different coloured grasses in the foreground, Mondrian's image is loose and fluid. In many senses, Friedrich portrays a scene of quiet contemplation, whilst Mondrian shows us an image of energised movement; the former suggests a degree of *hope* in the revelatory potential of landscape whilst the latter displays a sense of *agitation* with the natural world that perhaps reflects Mondrian's growing psychological distance from the 'seen' world.

Mondrian's seascapes fulfil a similar function. *Dune IV* of 1909-10 continues a Friedrichian tradition of evoking the transcendental through barren and empty spaces, as Rosenblum asserts, but in Mondrian's image the naturalness of the scene is slipping away. One gazes out into a panorama that stretches far off into the distance, into a vision of nature that has been *reduced* to its simplest forms, and which seems to have lost its organic colour. Instead Mondrian paints the scene in tones of pink, white, yellow and blue, alluding most probably to the theosophical colour theories of his friend Rudolf Steiner. The critic W. Steenhoff comments on this visionary quality in Mondrian's images.

Mondrian's perception is highly sensitivistic, a perplexed observation of the staring eye, which tries to measure the secrets of living organisms in the flat appearance of colour....Perception exceeds beyond its normal boundaries.<sup>56</sup>

Steenhoff identifies Mondrian's Neoplatonic basis; his art 'tries to measure' nature in order to go beyond it, perhaps also bringing to mind Cezanne's notion of 'the heroism of the real' and his desire to paint apples as if they were monumental expressions of the vibrancy of nature. For Mondrian, the dunes represent a unity beneath the seeming complexity of nature, both in symbolic terms and, pictorially, as a flat, unified area of colour without disturbance. We may trace two contradictory aspects in Mondrian's thinking: one concerned with a drive towards purity and cleanliness, and another revealing his sense of unease at the 'chaos' he saw in matter. One could thus suggest that underlying

Mondrian's artistic project was a deeply felt *fear* of the world which he tried to address by altering the way he 'saw' it. Do the straight lines of his mature paintings 'hold' back a void, like a barrier? Do they provide a final structure onto which Mondrian could cling and *feel safe*, like the motif of the cross in an earlier religious art?

In contrast to a vision of nature as vast and panoramic, artists such as Franz Marc and Paul Klee sought to express the transcendental through intense and detailed studies of the natural world, a method which is once again foreshadowed in the small nature studies of artists such as Friedrich or Carus. Marc often utilised animals as symbols of harmony and innocence, reflecting a Jungian concern for them as 'symbols for transcendence', in order to 'animalise art' as he put it. He was familiar with Romantic philosophy and art, and is known to have admired the work of artists such as Friedrich, Runge and Blechen as well as to have quoted freely from Novalis. His animal images of horses or cows serve as symbols of a personal spiritual yearning that, like his friend and 'Blue Rider' partner Kandinsky, was directed towards revealing a new spiritual era. In a letter to his publisher Reinhard Piper, Marc outlines his artistic direction, which, in contrast to the more reductive, essentialist language of a figure such as Mondrian, confirms a sense of activity *in the world*.

I am trying to heighten my sensitivity to the organic rhythm of all things and trying to empathise pantheistically with the tremulous coursing of the blood in nature, the trees, the animals and the air...<sup>57</sup>

In a painting such as *Red Horse and Yellow Cow* from 1913, we are presented with animals peacefully standing amidst simple, trees. His style of work in this painting retains the watery patch of his brush mark on the paper surface. Marc achieves a naiveté in his paintings that reflect interests in primitive cultures, ideas of utopia or children's art, all of which serve as channels for his greater sense of spiritual revival in modern Europe.

Marc's fascination with personal vocabularies with which to express the transcendental is paralleled by the Swiss painter Paul Klee, who continued to express metaphysical themes through, among other things, simple and often detailed images of imaginary natural worlds and flowers. Klee's more abstract grid compositions should not be forgotten though, although they differ significantly from Mondrian's images in their obvious allusions to organic motifs. A painting such as *Eros* (1923) in which we see two

large triangles intersecting and smaller arrows pointing upwards, may be read more in terms of ritualistic symbols rather than attempts to express a pure transcendental. In this sense Klee's images have obvious parallels in older forms of Celtic symbolism.

In a painting such as *Spiral Blossoms* of 1926 Klee focuses on the organic and evolving power of flowers. The flowers coil into themselves creating circular spiral shapes that allude to a sense of wholeness in the manner of a mandala, also recalling Runge's use of plants. Like ancient symbols, they are simple and suggestive of evolution in both an organic and spiritual sense. Significantly, and in contrast to painters such as Mondrian, artist's such as Marc and Klee may be said to have dwelled *within* the complexities and contradictions of nature. As Mark Cheetham also begins to suggest, their art was not one of reducing nature to an abstraction, but rather one which seems to respect its dynamic and changing nature. Cheetham talks about Klee's 'openness' thus:

His art is akin to what Richard Rorty has called 'therapeutic' philosophy in that it seeks to keep discourse going and resists the "'traditional', Platonic, epistemologically-centred philosophy" that searches "for a way in which one can avoid the need for conversation and deliberation and simply tick off the way things are."<sup>58</sup>

Such an observation seems important, for it suggests that not all painters working at this time were resolving the problems of transcendental expression in the same ways. Whilst we may see Kandinsky or Mondrian's artistic projects as primarily concerned with expressing the core or essence at the heart of natural forms through a process of *reduction*, or *de-materialisation*, painters such as Marc and Klee may be seen to have taken quite different routes. In Marc's animal paintings or Klee's simple flower forms, we see a more nature-inclusive and ambiguous approach to the issue of how to represent the transcendental; one which does not seek a closure in a realm of pure, untainted forms, but rather remains close to natural and material forms.

In the work of a later artist such as Joseph Beuys, who in many ways can be regarded as a successor to Marc and Klee, we may see a continuation of this sensibility through his simple drawings of deer and hare, or through his use of materials such as honey and felt with which to evoke natural processes. Rather than adopting a strictly Neoplatonic model these artists' works may be viewed as reflecting a Northern European shamanic tradition of the transcendental that seeks to evoke the sacred by respecting nature's *materiality* and

flux. If Mondrian sought refuge from facing the 'void', Marc and Klee actively engaged it by seeing nature's complexities. The cycle of life and death in nature is fully accepted by these artists, and epitomised by Beuys' use of dead animals, honey as a life-giving agent or his performance with a living coyote dog in a New York gallery. Although clearly owing a debt to earlier Romantic philosophers and artists and inspired by a sense of spiritual loss and regeneration, both Marc and Klee - and Beuys - can be regarded as investigating other approaches which are not explicitly reliant upon Neoplatonic ideas, but incorporate notions from forms of 'primitive' and folk art, children's art, and their own unique personal systems of symbolism and expression. If Mondrian was the meticulous scientist-prophet working in laboratory-like conditions, Beuys was the witch doctor applying potions and gathering materials from nature.

### *Religion.*

Religious themes and motifs continued to be used for the expression of the transcendental by many modern artists. This was, though, tempered by a general sense of decline in the established churches in Europe, and the emergence of alternative faiths such as the Theosophical Society. If there is one significant difference between Romantic and modern forms of religious depiction in art, one can suggest that for many modern artists the idea of religion itself was greatly broadened to include other forms of belief or occult practices that often intimately involved the personal witness of artists. One of the consequences of such a shift was also a *generalising* of religious images, so that specific religious traditions or details were suppressed in favour of general depictions of religious architecture, poses, rituals, or esoteric symbolisms.

Mondrian's 1910-11 painting, *Church at Domberg* (Fig.9), is a good example of this sense of generalisation regarding religion, depicting a church tower in a manner that suppresses its individual characteristics as a Christian church. Rather, its architecture is employed to emphasise a sense of symbolic ascension. The picture urges the viewer to follow the church tower upwards from the earthly realm of matter, and into a shimmering transcendental atmosphere above. Furthermore the image illustrates Mondrian's geometricising tendency; there are no curves or rounded edges, only rectangular shapes that point upwards. For Mondrian, truth lay in pure, geometric forms that grounded everything in a unifying spirit: hence the church is not painted *as a church* in any strict religious sense but rather used as a metaphor or symbol for another realm. In this respect his image is also

implicitly universalist, suppressing individual religious detail for what he regarded to be an underlying spiritual unity. The artist does not use realistic colours to depict the scene, but restricts his palette to theosophically significant pinks, blues and greens.

The depiction of explicit religious scenes may be seen in the work of the German expressionist painter Emil Nolde. In his 1911-12 painting entitled *Life of Christ* he employs a recognisable Christian theme for the purpose of interpreting the sacred. Nolde's image supports the view that some artists continued to use older representational and narrativised means of expressing spiritual ideas. His painting successfully depicts sacred themes in a manner that some of the more radical images perhaps fail to do, precisely by retaining traditional elements of Biblical narrative. The viewer can relate to a story, a deep cultural mythology, which in turn can evoke strong emotions. And yet, despite his use of traditional Christian imagery, Nolde's work does not paint the figure of Christ in an idealised, classical fashion, but rather as a suffering, emotional human being. In doing this, and perhaps implicitly identifying *himself* with Christ, Nolde's work may be considered typically modern.

Like Romantic artists before them, many modern artists continued to rely upon the symbolic aspects of images to allude to transcendental ideas in their work. Even though the canvas often became the site for free, improvised expression, artists continued to utilise the language of metaphor and symbol in order to explain their work in transcendental terms. Yet it was not only artists who adopted such stances regarding art and its purpose; art critics such as the American critic Sheldon Cheney encouraged an understanding of modern art which allied it closely with notions of mysticism.

In his 1924 publication, *A Primer of Modern Art*, Cheney contextualises a thesis concerning art and mysticism within a wider discourse concerning the expressive and autonomous nature of modern art. Like Kandinsky, Cheney refers to music as the purest art form, disassociated from the ordinary emotions of living, and concludes from this that modern art must also seek a similar level of autonomy which he calls 'expressive form'. An objective, representative art merely attempts to copy the beauty of nature and is thus incapable of evoking the deepest aesthetic emotions, which, for Cheney, the modern artist stirs up with his expressive and abstract images. His discourse borrows heavily from Neoplatonic thinking in its insistence that art can reveal profound truths behind the veil of material forms. In a passage that sounds strikingly similar to Plotinus he insists that:

Art strikes straight to some separate aesthetic being, something as close to the spirit of man as it is possible to penetrate. To me this seems a fundamental approach to the spirit, to disembodied spirituality, as those other two unexplainable highroads, love and religious experience.<sup>59</sup>

The unique characteristic of modern art was thus its capacity to stir the spirit like religious experience, and thereby offer a means of salvation. The significance of his ideas rests in the relation he identifies between an autonomous art and the spiritual; in other words he implies that the only true modern art is also necessarily an art of mystically inclined ideas and experiences. In the light of what Walter Benjamin referred to as the 'mechanical production' of art, Cheney's position is one that sought to make art a religious activity, related closely to forms of ritual. Art was made significant because it 'was like religion'. Cheney's calls for the re-unification of art and religious experience has continued in recent times in, for example, the polemical writings of Suzi Gablik.

*vii) Seeing Through Nature.*

By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century some painters began to jettison all references to the material world from their images. The abandonment of recognisable natural forms was equated with an increasing significance of spiritual truths. Ultimately even matter had to be transcended in order to create a pure, autonomous art of the spirit.

In 1911 the Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky published Concerning the Spiritual in Art. It can be considered as Kandinsky's artistic manifesto, his explicit theory regarding the place of art within the broader realms of spiritual science and philosophy. It is written with an intensity that echoes the writings of a missionising church. The book is essentially a treatise on the significance of the creative subject in the process of art. Its principle message is that the artist must turn inwards to the transcendental self in order to produce a true art. The book may be said to mark a crucial and important point in the development of abstract art in Europe, not only referring to Kandinsky's own work, but also theorising an emerging sense of artistic practice in which representation was secondary to the expression of pure, inner emotion. Furthermore, it is my contention that the underlying discourse behind such positions can be seen to have been the metaphysical and ontological postures of Neoplatonism. Mondrian had, by 1911, also arrived at similar conclusions to Kandinsky:

...we must see through nature. We must see deeper, see abstractly and above

all universally...Then we can see the external for what it really is: a mirror of truth.<sup>60</sup>

For Kandinsky it was the path of inner consciousness or spirit that led to a true art; an art of spiritual realities behind material forms. The question of what was to replace the missing object finally seemed to have an answer in the Neoplatonic notion of Two Worlds, and the possibility for one's soul to ascend upwards towards truth.

The possibility of a pure art for Kandinsky could only emerge from a state of internal necessity. In the Cologne lecture of 1914 he claimed that the originator of a work of art was the spirit, and in this respect the artist was both the source and the end of artistic activity. Indicating a Romantic sensibility regarding the notion of genius, this spirit had the capacity to see in a special way.

This experience of the 'hidden soul' in all things...is what I call the 'internal eye'. This eye penetrates the hard shell, the external 'form', and goes deep into the object and lets us feel with all our senses its internal 'pulse'.<sup>61</sup>

Kandinsky refers to a form of intuition or spiritual awareness that echoes Plotinus's idea of discovering an inner being. The 'internal eye' allows the artist to possess a special capacity of inner vision: a vision which rises from an essential and pure level of existence found in the soul. The soul was for Kandinsky the principle locus of metaphysical perception and enlightenment. Moreover it communicated with the absolute and was thus the central means by which the artist could express inner truths. Kandinsky explicitly states that the goal of the artist was to realise what he calls his 'soul's dream':

The creative artist comes into the world with his own soul's dream. The justification for his existence is the materialisation of that dream. His whole talent exists merely for this goal alone.<sup>62</sup>

The realisation of the 'soul's dream' is then the ideal aesthetic state and the ideal creative model from which a 'true' art may emerge. We may, moreover, identify in Kandinsky's idea of the 'soul's dream', the Platonic notion of recollection. According to Plato, before our souls entered the body they had a vision of beauty, and consequently when our experience excites this sensation we remember this beauty. Kandinsky's 'dream' also suggests elements of recollection and pre-life, which when stirred appropriately, may

induce a 'true vision of beauty'. For Kandinsky the artists purpose was to *recollect* this primal sense of truth, and materialise it, calling to mind the elevation of the unconscious by Surrealist and Abstract Expressionist artists.

Johannes Eichner has suggested that before 1911 Kandinsky pursued exercises in contemplation following Indian models<sup>63</sup>. The inference that Kandinsky had employed yogic or meditational techniques in order to induce mystical or synethetic states may seem acceptable in the light of his writings. Indeed, if one contemplates the practicalities of Kandinsky's theoretical writings it seems obvious that he must have used mystical techniques for the purposes of revealing the 'inner eye' and recollecting his 'soul's dream'. Concerning the Spiritual in Art contains passages of praise for the Theosophical Society, and Kandinsky recommends the writings of the German leader of the Theosophists, Rudolph Steiner. Steiner's book of 1904, Theosophie, emphasised the need to utilise material means to assist people in their understanding of the spiritual and his notion of the 'inner word' through which all things become spiritually powerful may to some degree have influenced Kandinsky's idea of 'inner necessity'. Within the orbit of Kandinsky's theory therefore, the artist was not merely an aesthetic agent, but also a practising mystic. Significantly though, Kandinsky's mysticism is intensely personal, arising out of his own unique blend of ideas and techniques; his isolation from traditional religious practices is of note, leading us to ask whether his theories about creative practice held relevance within the wider society. Comparisons with Blake might be useful.

Between the years 1908-12, one sees the gradual dematerialisation of recognisable forms in Kandinsky's art. It is likely that by 1909 he was employing many of the ideas he was to include in Concerning the Spiritual in Art of 1911. Indeed, around this time he began to divide his work into three categories: Impressions, Improvisations and Compositions. The Impressions were largely natural and representational, the Improvisations were spontaneous expressions of inner emotions and the Compositions were consciously developed works. A painting such as *Improvisation 8* of 1909, although virtually abstract, still retains elements of recognisable forms. The image has the additional title of *Tall Fellow with Sword* and depicts a figure in the foreground holding a large sword. There is a city beyond a curving yellow wall above the figure, prompting one to wonder whether it is guarding a holy city. The image relates to Kandinsky's earlier depictions of legends, court scenes and Biblical scenes, but in a manner in which the viewer is offered no easy recognisable forms.

The expressive gesture of inner subjective feelings is seen better in a work such as Kandinsky's 1911 painting, *Improvisation 20*. Although as in *Improvisation 8* he gave this image the subtitle of *Two Horses*, the sense of dematerialisation is more complete here. The motif of horses can hardly be seen, yet the image conveys a sense of speed that suggests their movement. Amorphous patches of colour compete for space on the canvas, interspersed with black lines that are both solid and fluid: one is perhaps reminded of cave paintings. Kandinsky teases the viewer by providing only a minimum of 'things' to hold on to: the experience of looking at the image necessitates a degree of 'searching' therefore, as one tries to unravel the lines and shapes. The material reality of these horses has been stripped away to reveal only a skeletal after-image. The neoplatonic dictum of 'looking beyond' was eventually translated by him into an art totally devoid of material associations. Like Mondrian's development, we see in Kandinsky's art a progression from recognisable scenes to images of supposedly 'pure' abstract composition. And yet, as Briony Fer significantly points out, these artists remained related to the body and to matter by the very nature of their craft, painting, which necessitated a viewer standing before a picture, 'taking the image in' with the whole body. Despite 'purifying' the content of their images, these artists could not deny the physical facts presented by a painting and the ways in which they co-opt the body. For these artists the gradual reduction of images also meant a greater degree of transcendental expression; in other words, *camouflage equalled greater clarity*.

Mircea Eliade refers to this thus:

...for more than a century, the West has not been creating a 'religious art' in the traditional sense of the term, that is to say, an art reflecting 'classic' religious conceptions. In other words, artists are no longer willing to worship 'idols'; they are no longer interested in traditional religious imagery and symbolism.

This is not to say that the 'sacred' has completely disappeared in modern art. But it has become unrecognisable; it is camouflaged in forms, purposes and meanings which are apparently 'profane'. The sacred is not obvious, as it was for example in the art of the Middle Ages. One does not recognise it immediately and easily, because it is no longer expressed in a conventional religious language.<sup>64</sup>

Eliade's observation first and foremost recognises the continuation of what he calls a 'sacred art' in the West; it is a continuation which has both looked back to earlier Romantic

traditions and philosophies but also transformed radically within the broad developments of culture and society at large. The European transcendental 'lineage' has been one of gradual disintegration and increased camouflage: from Friedrich's evocation of the transcendental through landscape alone, to Kandinsky's further reduced images of colourful shapes and lines, to more recent works which actively engage with the material world through used objects or photographs, we may sense that Plato's Ideal world has perhaps gradually situated itself away from a 'beyond' transcendental space, to an immanent 'here'. A concern for 'stripping away' nature in order to reveal its essence has perhaps been followed by a renewed respect for *matter* and its imperfections.

viii) *Zen Positions.*

At first reading the term *Zen art* or *Zen painting* may conjure up a wealth of images and notions. This is particularly the case in contemporary Western societies where the word has evolved its own unique, often quite distorted, conceptions about spirituality, aesthetics, mood or temperament. To talk about a *Zen art* therefore immediately taps into a huge and powerful reservoir of popular images and perceptions. This profusion and confusion about *Zen* and its various arts in the West makes the question of exploring its dynamics and contexts even more important in a study of Tobey, for his art has been related by many writers to it. Recognising the diverse meanings which the term *Zen* has acquired in the West, it is nevertheless important to realise that the term primarily refers to a branch of Buddhism which was transmitted from India into China around 520 by the monk Bodhidharma.

Initially referred to as *Ch'an* in China, based on the Sanskrit word for meditation *Dhyana*, the word '*Zen*' developed in Japan out of the Chinese word *Ch'an* and the Japanese word for meditation, *Zazen*. *Zen* refers, first and foremost therefore, to an essentially religious practice or training that emerges out of the wider Buddhist cosmology. In talking of a *Zen art*, one is thus immediately juxtaposing the notion of art with something which has its roots in religious practice and experience. A primary definition of *Zen art* may thus be the art which arises out of the practices and experiences of *Zen Buddhism*. Just as we may refer to a Christian art or a Muslim art as those arts which have their basis in a Christian or Muslim world-view, so we may say that a *Zen art* refers, in the first instance, to the arts which accompany the practices and experiences of *Zen Buddhism*.

At this juncture it may be necessary to say that in referring to *Zen* and *Zen art* one must also recognise the diverse geographical and theological aspects of *Zen Buddhism*; to talk about *Zen art* is primarily, to talk about the *Zen arts* of China, Korea and Japan. From a generalised historical perspective we may note that most earlier examples of *Zen art* are Chinese in origin whilst later examples from the thirteenth century onwards tend to be Japanese. Such a distinction is not to imply that *Zen art* disappeared from Chinese culture from the thirteenth century, or that all *Zen art* after 1200 was produced in Japan; rather it provides a useful historical watershed identifying the pinnacle or culmination of *Zen arts* in China and its continuation in Japan. In this chapter I will refer to both Chinese and Japanese *Zen arts*. As well as this geographical diversity, one must note the diversities within *Zen Buddhism* itself. To refer to *Zen* as if it represents one, unified school or doctrine does not

recognise the differences which exist within it. It is always difficult to maintain a balance between a recognition of this diversity and talking about Zen as 'Zen'. In Japan, for instance, there are two major schools of Zen - the Rinzai and Soto - and others which have emerged and disappeared through time. I therefore, wish to make the reader aware of this diversity, but also adopt the strategy of talking about Zen and Zen art, except where it is necessary to explicitly refer to a particular school or sect.

Although I have thus far referred to 'Zen art', it should also be noted that in Japanese and Oriental art history as a whole no specific term existed until recently that referred to a specifically Zen art. Terms such as *zenga*, which is adopted often today, can be said to have emerged only recently for the purposes of art criticism. The art historian Yasuichi Awakawa has pointed out that the term *gazen*, which uses the same two characters as in *zenga* but in reverse order, appears sporadically in various early sources. The term is composed of the Chinese characters *gu*, referring to painting, and *zen*, referring to Zen. Awakawa mentions two early texts which use the term in their titles as the only examples of the use of the term in the Zen context.<sup>65</sup>

The Chinese and Japanese art historian Joan Stanley-Baker says of Zen painting:

Although Zen teaching stressed the futility of extraneous intellectual and artistic activity, there was gradually built up a corpus of poems and ink paintings used by Zen masters to demonstrate various aspects of enlightenment.<sup>66</sup>

For Stanley-Baker at least, Zen art is the art which grows out of the unique religious experiences of Zen Buddhism. The Japanese art historian Takaaki Matsushita takes a similar view also relating Zen art, in this instance specifically Zen painting, with the activities of Zen monks. He says:

As familiar with Taoist and Confucian ideas as they were with Buddhist doctrines or Zen metaphysics, these monks were often accomplished calligraphers, poets, and painters who drew on the whole range of Chinese culture and the Indian Buddhist tradition, blending and transmuting both into a unique Zen vision of life....The Zen monks who brought ink paintings to Japan also brought knowledge of the painting techniques employed, of the spiritual and intellectual attitudes that informed them, and of the theoretical basis for their enjoyment.<sup>67</sup>

Although such definitions of Zen art are accurate and substantial, one is inevitably also led to inquire about the nature and forms of Zen art, and to the ways in which the dynamics of Zen have affected the art it produces or inspires. A more common approach to talking about Zen art has therefore often taken a more focused route, relating Zen art to specific aspects of Zen Buddhism such as its emphasis upon the notion of *Sunyata* or emptiness, meditation or immanence. This second kind of approach may be referred to as aesthetic-led definitions of Zen arts as opposed to the more historical positions of writers such as Stanley-Baker or Matsushita. Below I would like to look at two such aesthetic-led definitions of Zen art by the Japanese philosopher Shin'ichi Hisamatsu and the Dutch art historian Helen Westgeest.

ix) *Zen 'Characteristics'*.

In his important work Zen and the Fine Arts the Kyoto philosopher Shin'ichi Hisamatsu expounds what he calls the 'Seven Characteristics of Zen Aesthetics'. These represent the aesthetic characteristics of what Hisamatsu refers to as the 'cultural complex' of Zen in China and Japan and is intended as a guide to the qualities which may be found in the arts of Zen. Parallels with Otto's analysis of the Numinous as composed of identifiable elements may be noted. Hisamatsu cites, for example, the Chinese painter, Mu'chi's, *Persimmons* (Fig.10) and the dry stone garden of Ryoan-ji Temple in Kyoto, Japan, as works of art which possess all of the seven characteristics which he sees to be integral to all Zen art. The characteristics are: Asymmetry, Simplicity, Austere Sublimity or Lofty Dryness, Naturalness, Subtle Profundity or Profound Subtlety, Freedom from Attachment, and Tranquillity. I shall briefly introduce each characteristic below, using examples which Hisamatsu cites in his book.

Asymmetry is linked to the idea of irregularity and crookedness, characteristics which Hisamatsu cites in works such as Ch'an-yueh's *Arhats*. Hisamatsu says of these paintings:

From the Zen view, these Buddhist paintings negate the characteristics of ordinary Buddhist painting, namely perfection, grace, and holiness; nor do they aspire toward such ideals....Irregularity here is deformation, the negation of perfection and grace; 'non-holiness' is the negation of sanctity. Neither imperfect nor worldly in the ordinary sense, these paintings are imperfect and worldly in the sense of going beyond perfection and holiness.<sup>68</sup>

The meaning of asymmetry is here linked by Hisamatsu to Zen doctrines, and hence the asymmetry not only represents a physical irregularity, but also metaphysical or spiritual meanings which arise out of a process of negation.

Simplicity points to being sparse and non cluttered and Hisamatsu points to the non-use of colour in much Zen ink painting to illustrate this point. The qualities of the tea-room are also referred to as an example of this simplicity which again seems to arise out of a particular Zen notion of simplicity; as Hisamatsu says:

*If, as the negation of holiness results the freedom of non-holiness, then simplicity as the negation of clutter may be spoken of as being 'boundless' - there is nothing limiting, as in a cloudless sky.<sup>69</sup>*

Austere Sublimity or Lofty Dryness refers to being advanced in years and in life; in short being seasoned. Hisamatsu says that it means the disappearance of the sensuous, of flesh, and rather an exposure of the bone or the core. The notion of 'dryness' is also introduced here, and Hisamatsu points to the unique way that dryness is understood within Zen; dryness refers, not to an ending or cessation of something, but rather to the culmination of an art by a master. 'Becoming dry' therefore signifies the disappearance of childishness, unskillfulness and inexperience; all that remains is the core or pith. Hisamatsu uses the metaphor of an old pine tree, battered by years of storms and rain but still lofty and strong to illustrate this characteristic, pointing to the calligraphy of Huai-su as a good example of this quality.

The fourth characteristic is Naturalness and refers to being natural - not being artificial - but again interpreted through a Zen perspective. Hisamatsu clearly says that naturalness here does not mean instinct or some innate natural force. Rather the term refers to the result of a full and creative intent that is devoid of any strained effort, and may be likened to the state of *samadhi* or meditation. Naturalness here thus has a quite different meaning to that normally associated with it in the West. As Hisamatsu says, it is the result of an aware suspension of all thought.

Even such an everyday experience as laughter is forced and ceases to be natural if one does not thoroughly enter into it. This sort of Naturalness is not found either in natural objects or in children. True Naturalness is the 'no mind' or 'no intent' that emerges from the negation both of naive or accidental

Subtle Profundity or Deep Reserve is described as implication, rather than the naked exposure of the whole and implies a sense of reserve, and of detachment. Mu'chi's landscapes, such as his *Eight Views of Hsiao-hsiang* (Fig.11), are referred to by Hisamatsu who sees in them a high degree of implied and suggested images as opposed to a deliberately detailed and obvious landscape. Interestingly, he also points to the quality of darkness in some Zen art works, citing Liang K'ai's *Sakyamuni Descending the Mountain* (Fig.12) and the interior of tea-rooms as examples. Unlike Otto's reference to darkness as Numinous-evoking which contrasts darkness with light thereby establishing a dichotomy or differentiation between the two, Hisamatsu seems to take a different view. He rather insists that it is the darkness itself which holds qualities of profundity and reserve, and that this darkness may even be called a 'bright darkness', conducive to deep composure and calm. Thus we are told that in the tea-house all the materials are made to *transform* the darkness into something restful and calming; it is not through its contrast with light, that darkness achieves its potency, but through the transformative power of darkness itself.

Freedom from attachment means freedom from habit, convention, custom, rule or formula, and includes being unconstrained in thought and action. Hisamatsu talks about this in the following manner.

Most religions demand adherence of some kind. Ultimately, of course, this would be commitment to God for Christians and to Buddha for Buddhists. Such is the very ultimate to which they cannot but adhere. But in the true Zen life, not only is there no adherence to such a God or Buddha, there is even a denial of them. What Master Lin-chi calls an 'utterly detached' and 'non-dependant' man is completely free of attachment either to things actual or transcendent. For this reason such phrases as 'killing the Buddha, killing the patriarch' are regarded as expressions of the ultimate standpoint of Zen Buddhism. <sup>71</sup>

Hisamatsu points to Hakuin's painting, *Monkey*, as an example of this sense of non-attachment. Not only in subject matter but also in the execution of the image and its irregular body proportions, the image captures a sense of playfulness that may be said to emerge out of what Hisamatsu calls 'freedom from attachment'.

The seventh and final characteristic is Tranquillity, referring to quiet, calm, and being

inwardly oriented. A painting such as Mu'chi's *Persimmons* (Fig.10) is seen by Hisamatsu as evoking this sense of tranquillity which, once again, refers back to the fundamental Zen experience of *satori*.

This final point is perhaps the most important as regards Hisamatsu's seven characteristics, for what all seven characteristics both refer to and emanate from, according to Hisamatsu, is the Zen state or what he calls the Formless Self. Nagarjuna's philosophy of *sunyata* which I have referred to, forms the basis of the Formless Self. Hisamatsu says quite explicitly:

...the expression in form of the Self Without Form necessarily produced the aforementioned singular group of arts that necessarily possess these Seven Characteristics. It was because the Formless Self came to awaken in a certain period and area that such a group of arts were formed there. Accordingly, we can safely conclude that these expressions are the result of the activities of the Self Without Form and, further, that since the Self Without Form is the root source of the Seven Characteristics, it expressed them in these arts.<sup>72</sup>

From this statement we can conclude that Hisamatsu is claiming a direct correlation between the seven characteristics and the Zen state; in other words he is relating certain quite specific aesthetic qualities to a very particular Zen ontology. Such a position inevitably raises questions; can an art work with all of the seven characteristics only be executed by someone in the Zen state of the Formless Self? Why does the Zen state lead to these very particular seven qualities? Hisamatsu has clearly distinguished Zen art to be those arts which possess all of the seven characteristics mentioned above, and proceeded further by linking the seven characteristics to the Formless Self of Zen experience. Within Hisamatsu's thesis at least, Zen art is specific and ultimately defined by its own close contexts. The seven characteristics are in this sense, not general aesthetic styles but the manifestations of stringent Zen adherence. By implication, to successfully express the seven characteristics is also to adopt a correct state of mind referred to as the Formless Self.

Although Hisamatsu's characteristics provide a useful tool with which to examine and look at Zen art, it may also be too narrowly defined from a number of perspectives. Firstly, can one say with any certainty that all Zen experiences of *satori* are the same? Does it necessarily lead, through creative expression, to the same seven characteristics, particularly in light of the often radical and 'wild' nature of Zen painters? Secondly, Hisamatsu limits his study to early works of Zen art, primarily done between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries

and as such can we also use his methodology effectively in the modern age, for modern Zen arts? Perhaps a useful way of incorporating Hisamatsu's characteristics into an engagement with Zen art is simply to use them as guidelines or as sign-posts in charting the contours of Zen arts. A reliance on Hisamatsu alone would be tantamount to the reductionistic position of Lipsey; other positions must always be held in view.

The Dutch art historian Helen Westgeest follows a similar line to Hisamatsu, although interestingly her thesis emerges out of a comparative study of Zen art with the arts of Western painting in the nineteen fifties. By comparing some of the characteristics of Zen art as described by several Zen writers including D.T. Suzuki, with the work and ideas of some Western artists in the 1950s, Westgeest identifies five parallels or characteristics which she thought related to both Zen art and to the work of Western artists interested in Zen during the 1950s. Her five aspects are thus also characteristics which she thinks may be reflected in Zen arts. Westgeest identifies the following five aspects: Emptiness and Nothingness, Dynamism, Indefinite and Surrounding Space, Direct experience of here and now, and Non dualism and the Universal.

Westgeest identifies both the doctrinal and formal aspects of emptiness in Zen art, seeing the two as related. On the doctrinal or metaphysical level she points to Zen's insistence upon negation and its understanding of emptiness as not merely the absence of form or things, but as the negation of both form and non-form. As Westgeest says:

The great significance of emptiness and nothingness in Zen is reflected in the descriptions of *Mu* (meaning emptiness and nothingness) as 'pure experience, the very foundation of our being and thought' and 'always with us and in us, is our life itself'. Nothingness can also be found in the emphasis Zen places on 'detachment'.<sup>73</sup>

From this initial statement about the philosophical significance of emptiness in Zen, she suggests that the Zen arts are also infused with emptiness in a more formal way. Zen gardens or calligraphic images are, she contends, often composed of large areas of empty space or ground.

The notion of Dynamism is related to the Zen world view, which is seen as a dynamic and constantly changing whole. Westgeest uses the examples of arts such as *Kendo* and *sumi-e* as activities which embody this dynamic quality, a quality which stresses constant motion and uninterrupted flow. Like Hisamatsu's characteristic of Naturalness, Westgeest's dynamism must also be tempered.

It may not be a noncommittal spontaneity on the individual's behalf, but one which is only attained after a disciplined learning process, in which the unity of subject and object has to be attained. The ensuing spontaneity is then one of Nature itself.<sup>74</sup>

It is interesting that Westgeest here uses a Western philosophical language to describe what dynamism involves; she talks of the 'unity of subject and object', although one rarely encounters such language in the writings of Japanese Zen scholars.

The third aspect is *Indefinite and surrounding space* and refers to the Zen artists' perception of 'surrounding space'. Unlike the Western academic painter who sees space in terms of perspective, as something that recedes away from him, Westgeest points to the Zen idea of space as the space in which the artist is situated as opposed to facing. The Japanese word *Ma* is introduced, meaning both space and time and usually interpreted as interval. *Ma* may be understood both in terms of a temporal interval and in terms of a spatial in-between, and is often used to talk about ink-brush images or activities such as Noh dance. Although there is not an equivalent word in English one may say that it points to something like the word breathing-space.

Direct experience of here and now refers to Zen's emphasis upon a focused attention on the present moment, a result in part, of meditation practice which concentrates attention on the breathing process. *Zazen* practice is thus often also referred to as 'just sitting'. Westgeest refers to Suzuki's statements about the here and now, quoting an anecdote of a Masters answers to a pupils questions; a pupil asked a Master how he pursued truth. The Master replied, 'When I am hungry I eat; when tired I sleep.' The pupil responded by saying that everyone did that, to which the master replied, 'When they eat they do not eat, but are thinking of various other things, thereby allowing themselves to be disturbed; when they sleep they do not sleep, but dream of a thousand and one things. This is why they are not like myself.'

The fifth and final aspect is referred to by Westgeest as *Non dualism and the Universal*. This is problematic, I contend, for terms such as 'non dualism' and 'universal' tend to emerge out of specific Western philosophical notions. Westgeest says on this point:

Zen prefers non dualism, which is the opposite to the traditional Western way of thinking, based on 'discrimination'. This means that Western Man is primarily oriented towards establishing his own identity and that of other people and things, doing so by seeking differences. Zen advises a unification

of antithesis, by means of nondualistic thought. In that way, contact can come about with the 'universal', characterised by the fact that it is 'one', something and nothing at the same time.<sup>75</sup>

I would contend that Westgeest's identification of Zen with Non dualism and the Universal fails to adequately evoke the dynamic and subtle qualities of Zen thought. To talk about Zen in terms of the 'one' and relate this to notions of the 'universal' is to consider the meaning of such terms to be universal, and thus applicable in both a European philosophical, and Zen context. The significance of their differences demands a plurality of languages with which to talk about them. The Kyoto School philosopher Masao Abe takes a rather different and, I think more creative, route to the same question. He refuses to employ a rhetoric of 'one-ness', instead pushing the ground to its extreme limits. He thus says:

One of the well known utterances of Zen is this: 'When all things are reduced to the one, where is that one to be reduced?' Zen does not end with that one, which is beyond any particular and transcends any form of duality. Rather, Zen starts with the question: Where is that one to be reduced? It emphasises the necessity of abandoning even the one.<sup>76</sup>

Abe recognises that to talk about Zen is also to engage in a constant process of negation, of deconstructing even the language which one uses to utter any statements. Although Westgeest's five aspects highlight some significant points or contours around Zen and its expressions through art, they must be read and used with a degree of caution. To equate terms such as 'one' unproblematically with Zen is to impose specific philosophical and theological notions which may ultimately be inappropriate and misleading. It is also implicitly Orientalist in the Saidian mode, prescribing a term of considerable intellectual and cultural assumption upon Zen Buddhist thought and thus collapsing its potential as a site of differences.

We are faced therefore with an array of different ways of thinking about Zen and Zen art. Both Hisamatsu and Westgeest ultimately refer us to aesthetic and religious characteristics within Zen arts, using terms such as 'freedom from attachment', 'naturalness' and 'dynamism' to try to express the qualities of Zen art. Such approaches are useful, but must remain checked within a broader methodology.

*x) The Challenge of Zen Painting.*

In looking at the development of Zen art and painting in China and Japan one is struck by certain similarities with the rise of Romanticism in Europe during the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Although such a historical and cultural comparison must be approached with caution it can nevertheless reveal interesting aspects about both the nature of the art in question and about the wider issue of how art proliferates and changes through time. As I suggested in an earlier chapter, the Romantic period may be said to have witnessed the emergence of at least two fundamentally significant changes; firstly, a broadening of subject matter in painting, outwards from religious or court images to the embracing of contemporary political, historical and landscape images, and secondly, a radical shift in the attitudes and intentions of many artists towards a more personal, intense and emotional relationship with the idea of art itself.

When one begins to look at the history of Zen art, and painting in particular, one is confronted with similar shifts. In broad terms one sees Zen painters challenging older conventions regarding subject matter and formal composition, as well as attracting criticism with their often wild and personal styles. A brief survey might thus be useful.

In China the development of *Ch'an* or Zen painting was in many ways a challenge to established artistic forms and conventions. Traditional Buddhist religious painting with its ordered detail and orthodox subject matter was undoubtedly confronted with a new and bold kind of painting in *Ch'an* inspired works. It is, though, important to recognise that little is known about the lives and careers of many Chinese *Ch'an* painters, particularly of the early periods. Different reasons have been given for this lack of recognition in China of *Ch'an* painting, but the strong influence of the literati, and their critical view towards *Ch'an* painting may account for much of this attitude in China itself. Consequently, it is largely to Japanese and American collections that one must look in order to find many outstanding examples of Chinese *Ch'an* painting. Thus although many of the fundamental principles and aesthetic characteristics of Zen painting were initially developed in China from as early as the ninth century, it can be argued that Zen painting as we know it today is a unique blend of Chinese and Japanese influences. In many senses one can say that Zen painting flowered and matured fully in Japan, having absorbed many of the characteristics and sensibilities of the Japanese Heian period. Indeed it was in Japan that many *Ch'an* paintings were highly regarded and eagerly collected by nobles and monks, thereby also creating a financial and

aesthetic market for them. Immediately then, in looking at the historical development of Zen art, one is faced with a complex cultural and geographical interaction that nourished and preserved it.

Despite this situation, it was in China that the first *Ch'an* inspired works were executed. The art historian Hugo Munsterberg cites a tenth century painting by Shih K'o as possibly one of the earliest known examples of *Ch'an* painting, but as he himself says, it is probable that it is a thirteenth century copy. The only known painting to be executed by a *Ch'an* priest during the twelfth century, now in the Freer Gallery in Washington, is significantly similar to other religious scrolls of the time, depicting traditional subject matter in an academic style. Munsterberg concludes that a distinctive *Ch'an* school of painting did not develop in China until around the mid-thirteenth century or the Southern Sung dynasty, although other scholars such as James Cahill seem to suggest an earlier date. Indeed, if one looks at the known dates of many great works by painters such as Mu-ch'i, Liang K'ai or Yu Chien we see that they were all working from around the end of the twelfth century through to the late-thirteenth century. It is also from about the same period that Zen inspired works began to appear in Japan, partly brought over from China for discerning collectors and partly evolving independently in Japan itself.

What then was so new about *Ch'an* painting? Why was it so criticised within China by the academic painters? I would like to suggest that the answers to such questions were possibly quite similar, in formal terms, to those which we may offer for the clash between Classicism and Romanticism in Europe during the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Like then, one may identify radical changes in subject matter and style or attitude; it is only significant that such developments should happen some five to six hundred years before any equivalent development in Europe. Not only was *Ch'an* painting presenting new subject matter and styles, but crucially it also represented a radical religious view in Zen Buddhism. Zen did not concern itself chiefly with external ritual or liturgy, but rather challenged these institutions with its direct and practice-led outlook, based primarily upon meditation. Drawing heavily from Taoist sources, Zen could be said in many ways to be similar to the Romantics' preoccupation with nature, the occult and mysticism in general; in short, both challenged existing religious orthodoxies and linked this to artistic practice.

In terms of subject matter, *Ch'an* painters expanded the repertoire of what could be painted; they began painting new things, and in different ways. We may understand this further if we see that most painting until the advent of *Ch'an* images in the twelfth and

thirteenth centuries was primarily concerned with the depiction of traditional Buddhist subjects and scenes, done in a fine academic manner. What *Ch'an* painters achieved was, to borrow Gombrich's phrase, a 'break' with this orthodox tradition. Images of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Paradise scenes and mandalas were largely rejected and replaced with Arhats, or the disciples of Buddha, Zen patriarch's, the founder of *Ch'an* Buddhism, Bodhidharma, and explicitly non-religious scenes of landscapes, still lives and animals. If the Sakyamuni Buddha was depicted at all, he was usually not clad in robes upon a golden throne, but rather shown ragged and terrestrial, as one sees in Liang K'ai's painting, *Sakyamuni Descending the Mountain* (Fig.12). The image does not try and depict Buddha as exalted or heavenly, but rather shows him emerging from the mountains after his enlightenment experience, utterly attentive, humble, yet strong and focused. Underlying the image is a sense of wishing to depict religious figures as human beings - albeit extraordinary - and *active in this world* as opposed to confined to heavenly realms. This 'humanisation' of the Buddha figure also reflects Zen's primary tenet that human beings could realise Buddhahood in this life.

In Japan, pre-Zen painting may also be said to have revolved largely around formal images of Buddhas, mandalas and other such iconographies. With the spread of Buddhism in Japan during the Heian period (794-1185) by Saicho and Kukai, one sees both the continuation and proliferation of such religious iconographies. In images such as the *Womb Mandala* (Fig.13) from 859-880, and *Amidha on a Cloud* (Fig.14) from the early eleventh century, we see an emphasis on precision, geometric composition, a centralising of images and vivid colour. Jocho's famous Phoenix Hall and its artistic treasures, completed in 1053 and intended as a terrestrial representation of Amidha Buddha's Pure Land, also reveals a strong penchant for graphic and realistic representations of Buddhas and other heavenly bodies. Although one must consider such developments as arising out of particular religious and historical contexts - most notably the strong influence of the Tendai and Shingon sects during this period - it is interesting that one does not see anything resembling the sparseness of Zen paintings until the late twelfth century in Japan.

One can though, consider the secular arts of the Fujiwara period (late Heian) and in particular the emergence of *Kana* script calligraphy and its greater sense of fluidity and direct self expression, as expressing some parallels with Zen art. Although on a formal level one may see parallels between Zen painting and Fujiwara calligraphy, at a deeper level I would contend that they represent quite different attitudes and intentions. Whilst *Kana* calligraphy

emerged out of an intense interest in poetic and literary nuance and expression, Zen painting is reflective of an essentially religious practice. More than this, one may perhaps also characterise the two art forms in terms of gender.<sup>77</sup> *Kana* calligraphy was also referred to as *Onnade*, literally meaning 'feminine hand', and associated with the writing of women. Men were thought to be better able to engage with the boldness of Chinese scripts whilst women were only thought able to deal with the *Kana* script. Zen painting in both China and Japan, in contrast, may be said to have been closely allied with a more masculine centred outlook - in part a result of its close affiliations with the military ruling class during the early thirteenth century in Japan and the fact that most Zen practitioners were men. Thus, while *Onnade* script is often referred to as graceful, steady, open and highly refined, Zen painting takes on quite different characteristics such as ugliness, coarseness or imbalance. One can recognise this difference if we compare a fragment of *Onnade* calligraphy from the *Shikishi* album (Fig.15) of the late eleventh century, with a Chinese Zen calligraphy by Jiun (Fig.16). Jiun's character is strong, thickly brushed and unrefined in its finish, whilst the *Shikishi* piece is lighter, thinly brushed and fluid. The point I make is not that a gentler brush is somehow more 'feminine' or that a strong brush is more 'masculine'; but rather to highlight the ways in which Japanese and Chinese culture at the time perceived a 'feminine' or 'masculine' art. Interestingly, the later Japanese Zen calligrapher, Ryokan's (Fig.17) brush seems much closer in feeling to an *Onnade* style. A glance at his calligraphy reveals a remarkable lightness of touch and grace that seems, on the surface, quite different from traditional Chinese Zen pictures. At least in Japan, then, one can perhaps say that the *Onnade* style influenced Zen painters to a degree, pointing to Zen's complex and metamorphosing nature there.

It is both significant and interesting that *Onnade* calligraphy should precede Zen painting in Japan, in many ways anticipating and moulding many of the aesthetic characteristics of Zen art. In some senses therefore, one can say that the roots of Zen painting in Japan were already laid in the early twelfth century, and that Zen re-moulded this into a new religious and masculinised art form in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries to suit the turbulent mood of the times. Such a thesis is further supported if one considers the considerable intimacy between certain Zen sects, notably Eisai's Rinzai *shu* (sect), with the military *bafuku* or shogunate of Minamoto Yorimoto from the Kamakura (1185) period onwards. The elegance of the Heian court was radically replaced by a military power that emphasised discipline and strength, and which looked to Zen for spiritual and aesthetic

support in its outward simplicity and austerity. Although China undoubtedly remains the major influence upon Zen painting in Japan, the influences of *Onnade* style, and calligraphy in particular, should not be over-looked too readily.

*xi) Embedded in Nature.*

The other great shift in subject matter which *Ch'an* painters introduced was in the depiction of nature, and here again, we may discern similarities with many Romantic painters. Helmut Brinker suggests that the depiction of nature in *Zen* paintings represents a radical shift in the ways in which nature came to be seen by painters, not simply as a background or paradise garden but as significant in itself; as expressions of *sunyata*. On this point, the Romantics too may be said to have initiated a new artistic perception of the natural world that saw it not simply as decoration, but as the expression of their profound spiritual longings. Brinker says:

Classical Buddhist religious painting had been virtually dominated by the complex and stylised representation of figures; and while figures continue to provide the main content of *Zen* pictures, other major themes now appear: above all, nature. In general, nature plays a major role in *Zen* painting. Where figures are not shown standing or sitting in deep composure, free of all decorative adornment, before - or, better, in - empty space, they appear in intimate harmony with nature: never its masters, but knowingly and lovingly embedded in it.<sup>78</sup>

Much of this attitude towards the natural world may be said to have grown out of a Taoist vision of reality, rooted in an emphatic respect for nature and its ways. Indeed, one encounters numerous metaphors relating to nature and natural processes in both the writings of Taoists such as Chuang Tzu, and Zen; mountains, rivers, clouds, the moon, and the wind are all used to illustrate their views. A comment by the eighteenth century Japanese *Zen* painter Sengai might be cited here. It is said that he recited the following instruction to a large group of novices prior to a session of *zazen* in late summer.

Walk by day in the bamboo groves surrounding the temple. Stroll by night along the eastern cloisters or by the western lake, watching the moon. If you spend ninety days in this way you will automatically develop the true *Zen* spirit. The T'ang dynasty *Zen* monk Yun-men once berated his novices at his temple for doing nothing but eat without studying and demanded that they

return the money they were given for food. I, however, say no such thing, for the novice who has made himself one with nature, thereby perceiving the true Zen spirit, has truly devoted himself energetically to religious practice.”<sup>79</sup>

Sengai’s remarks are reflected in his many ink paintings which have a sense of fluidity and humour that are unrivalled among Zen painters in Japan. Herbert Read usefully refers to him as a ‘transcendental humorist’<sup>80</sup>. In paintings such as *Animal or Life Preservation Day* in which Sengai depicts two tortoises swimming down a rapidly flowing stream, or *Eggplant* which is accompanied by the words, ‘Look at the long, long faces of the eggplants grown in Hakata. (How long and glossy)’, we can sense a playfulness and humour that infuses nature. That Sengai refers to the monk who has ‘made himself one with nature’ as having ‘truly devoted himself to religious practice’ is another point of significance. Whereas for Friedrich, a religious significance is always implied in nature, in Sengai’s case the relationship is made overt and encouraged. Nature is thus both teacher and a religiously important space, akin to the temple or church. In looking at Sengai’s work therefore, one is confronted with images of religious figures and scenes as well as eggplants, crippled beggars, frogs, skulls and people playing board games.

The significance of this in relation to European traditions of depicting the transcendental should not be overlooked lightly. For artists such as Mondrian and Kandinsky nature and the corporeal ultimately needed to be jettisoned if a ‘pure’ abstract art was to emerge. And thus, as Briony Fer convincingly argues, the body, the feminine, nature, the colour green and the decorative were all thought *negatively*, as elements to be overcome in the striving towards the Ideal<sup>81</sup>. A central underlying theme of their attempts to express the transcendental is thus also a strong element of *denying* certain subjects and motifs. Much Zen painting in comparison, attempts no such ‘purification’, rather tending in both its subject matter and style of execution, to embrace nature and the corporeal. Sengai’s subject matter and his ‘naive’ style of painting echo an approach to the transcendental which thus remains mundane and ‘stained’. This attitude is further refined in the aesthetic tendencies of *wabi* in the context of Tea drinking, especially as espoused by Sen Rikyu during the sixteenth century in Japan. Leonard Koren variously identifies *wabi* as accommodating ‘crudity, corrosion, degradation, attrition, ambiguity, contradiction, darkness...’<sup>82</sup> and the term rests closely to Hisamatsu’s characteristics of Zen art. A desire for purity through line, edge, the abstract and surface is replaced by a desire for *purity through impurity*. In this sense, Zen images are at once both objects of religious

contemplation *and* decoration, religious instruction *and* humorous illustration.

Mu-chi's painting, *Persimmons* (Fig.10), from the late thirteenth century is a good example of *Ch'an* paintings radical evocation of nature. We see six persimmons of varying sizes placed, as if in a still life, on a surface which is not actually seen. The painter has painted each persimmon in slightly varying shades of black, the central one being the darkest and most prominent. One, smaller orb sits slightly lower than the others taking the eye round in a sweeping gesture as one looks at the image. The brush strokes are simple, and as a result, the entire composition breathes an air of lightness. This sense is compounded by the empty space that surrounds the objects, and which seems to bear the persimmons as if suspended in mid-air. The image expresses a quality which is similar to that of the short *haiku* verse form, avoiding an intricate rendition of the perceived objects, and rather showing them with a minimum of referential detail. In contrast to a still-life by Cezanne for example, we may identify a number of significant differences: Mu'chi uses only a black ink palette, he positions his persimmons slightly off-centre towards the bottom of the picture, the persimmons are not contextualised, and they are painted with speed and boldness. Rather than depicting the persimmons in a realistic way, Mu'chi's image is almost cartoon-like in its general impression of the persimmons. Hisamatsu contends that the painting possesses all seven characteristics which he attributes to Zen art; its *haiku*-like quality and slight clumsiness, may be said to express an emptiness/potential that does not function symbolically, pointing to a transcendental beyond, but merely presents itself with a maximum of simplicity and elegance. The enigmatic qualities of Friedrich or the monumentality of Cezanne's still-lives have been replaced by a subtle sense of the transcendental *felt in nature*. The painting might, though, be read as a metaphor for meditation; the persimmons 'sit', as if instructing the viewer to learn from them, and in this sense, the image may be seen to possess a metaphorical function.

Ri Shubun's painting, *Bamboo against the Moon* (Fig.18) from the early fifteenth century, provides another good example of how nature is expressed in Zen paintings, offering a good opportunity for a comparative analysis with Friedrich's use of the moon motif. Shubun, also known as Tensho and Ekkei, held the office of bursar in the Kyoto monastery of Shokoku-ji and is thought to have completed Zen training. In his painting we see a large moon, partially covered by the branches of a bamboo bush, somewhat reminiscent of Friedrich's use of mist or cloud. There is no strong sense of moonlight or a vast panoramic view with the moon centrally placed. The image perhaps points to an

underlying sense of spiritual unity through its starkness and mood, but this is expressed quite differently from Friedrich's moon paintings.

Friedrich's moon paintings are epic engagements with the magnitudes of nature. The moon almost always occupies a definitive function within his moon paintings. This is evident if we look at paintings such as *Mountainous River Landscape at Night* (1835), or his 1822 painting entitled *Moonrise on the Seashore*. Moreover it is usually invested with a potent symbolic and spiritual power that alludes to a transcendental order beyond the chaos of matter. He achieves this, in part, by painting the moon either veiled by cloud or fog, or emitting a luminous light. For Friedrich the moon and its light comprise a fundamental image which reveals the elemental and divine aspects of nature. The Friedrichian moon is thus highly symbolic, and imagined within a code that explicitly spiritualised nature.

In contrast, Shubun's sensitive use of space does not draw the eye inwards to a centre where meaning implicitly resides. His moon is not *precious* in a romantic sense, but is like the moon at which one points with the gesture of a child. The fourteenth century author of '*Tsurezuregusa*' or *Essays in Idleness* wrote about the admiration of a partial moon in this verse praising the crescent moon. It usefully asks a question which is revealing of a Zen sensibility.

Are we to admire cherry blossoms only when they are in full bloom, and the moon only when it is perfect?<sup>83</sup>

Shubun's moon achieves what Friedrich's image does, but in a manner that excludes a transcendental dimension. The panoramic vista of Friedrich's moonscapes have been replaced by a dioramic perspective in which the viewer stands *amidst* nature. A sense of awe and grandeur has been replaced by one of sensibility and immanence. Shubun's painting does not arise out of a metaphysic of duality which separates the world of matter from that of an anticipated spirit, but rather represents a Buddhist conception of 'no-difference' or 'relative-difference' in which nature and the moon are no more or no less significant than anything else.

Friedrich and Shubun share a love for night as the potential topos for spiritual transformation or awakening. And yet underlying their respective traditions are distinct philosophical and religious ideas that have moulded the way in which the moon is expressed in their arts. Whilst for Friedrich the moon represents a gateway towards the transcendental Other by functioning as its manifestation in nature, for Shubun the moon expresses a

*familiar* Other that remains forever close and which does not explode outwards with meanings, but rather remains potent and inert.

*xii) Spitting Ink.*

The other major challenge posed by *Ch'an* painting was in the style and attitude of *Ch'an* artists. A consequence of Zen Buddhist teachings and experience, *Ch'an* painters approached the process of making art in radically different ways to what had been done by traditional literati painters. Technical brilliance and the use of colour were largely rejected by *Ch'an* painters, who instead used unorthodox painting methods and techniques. Indeed, one often encounters descriptions of early Taoist or *Ch'an* painters 'spitting' ink onto paper from their mouths, painting on walls in the streets or using their feet as brushes. Georges Duthuit, for example, recounts how many Chinese Zen painters supposedly painted while intoxicated with alcohol.

About the year, 1215, a Zen priest, of whom we shall have more to say, called Mu'chi, came to Hangchow, where he rebuilt a ruined monastery. By rapid swirls of ink he attempted, with undeniable success, to capture the moments of exaltation and set down the fleeting visions which he obtained from the frenzy of wine, the stupor of tea, or the vacancy of inanition. Wang Hsia, who lived in the early ninth century, would perform when he was drunk real *tours de force*, going so far as to plunge his head into a bucket of ink and then flop it over a piece of silk on which there appeared, as if by magic, lakes, trees, enchanted mountains.<sup>84</sup>

The element of myth-making in such statements should be borne in mind, although some painters undoubtedly practised in such ways. Duthuit interestingly mentions the poet Rimbaud, as a European example of a similar artistic sentiment which one may extend further to include painters such as Henri Michaux who executed several series of mescaline-induced drawings. Unfortunately in the case of these early Chinese artists there is little visual or written evidence remaining, although a painting such as Ying Yu-Chien's *Village in the Mist* from the Sung period with its abbreviated and apparently random ink marks, suggest some of the 'wild' approaches apparently taken by some Zen artists. An underlying implication of such intoxicated painting activity is, moreover, concerned with a sense of unhindered expression rather than with intricate and perceptually 'realistic' images, and in this respect, it can be seen to share much with aspects of Zen thought.

Likeness was rarely the goal of Zen painting. Rather the brush expressed the attitudes and intentions of the artist. Cahill has interestingly pointed out that until the second half of the eleventh century Chinese painting theory was largely concerned with how the artist should express the likeness of scenes and objects so that the viewer could feel as if he or she was actually looking at the real scene or object. By the late eleventh century, he suggests, some scholars began to become aware of the inadequacy of this theory to explain the peculiar expressive power of certain unorthodox painting styles such as that of Ch'an painters, and that as a result, new theories were called for. Thus parallel to the growth of Ch'an painting in China was also a renewal of aesthetic theories; painting as likeness was broadened by some literati scholars such as Su Shih (1036-1101), to incorporate the idea of painting as the expression of the artists feelings and emotions, which in turn, was the expression of Ch'an experiences.

Indeed, one may talk of Zen art and its unorthodox style as being an inevitable expression of its understanding of emptiness; after all, Zen stresses an ultimate freedom which arises out of a realisation of true emptiness. It is thus not surprising that Zen painters should have challenged orthodoxies and developed new, radical styles. Traditional Buddhist paintings and murals which had always been executed in bright colours and intended for public display were not the favoured means of expression for Zen painters. Images such as the earlier *Amidha on a Cloud* (Fig.14) from the eleventh century, portray the Buddha figure in a rather grand, iconographic way. It is painted with geometric precision, is evenly balanced and arranged in a traditional manner with the Buddha sitting cross legged, facing the viewer directly. Mu-chi's portrait of the Taoist sage, *Lao-tzu*, (Fig.19) is a good example of the Zen leaning towards rough, un-smoothed images in contrast to the formal symmetry encountered in the *Amidha* image. Here we see a few brush strokes emanating out from a central point forming *Lao-tzu's* robes, and his facial expression is not one of serene meditation, but one of activity. In contrast to an idealised depiction of Buddhist figures, Zen painters imagined them as human beings in this world of suffering, and therefore also as companions on the path towards *satori*. Hisamatsu's characteristics of asymmetry and austere sublimity or lofty dryness are also called to mind.

Zen painting's propensity for spontaneous and rough styles may be seen to reflect Zen teachings; the artist does not concern himself with detailed intricacies, but rather with a fluid and immediate expression of things. The medium of ink and brush was, moreover, suited to

such an approach, as Munsterberg writes:

What counted was not hours of laboriously worked out detail, but brief periods of highly concentrated activity. The medium itself encouraged this approach, for in ink painting, especially in the *p'o mo* or spilled ink type, nothing could be changed once the brush strokes had been put down. Such a method required both skilled technique and clarity of vision, for there could be no uncertainty, no hesitation, no redoing if the work was to have the inspired quality expressive of Zen.<sup>85</sup>

Munsterberg links the Zen approach to painting with a particular end result, largely echoing Hisamatsu's identification of the seven characteristics with the Formless Self. The attitude of the artist is thus transmitted through his work to the viewer and his spontaneous burst of creation remains somehow captured in the painting. A direct link is established between the signifier and what is signified; the two are *crucially* related. There is perhaps some similarity here with the ideas behind Expressionism in Europe, which also stressed the link between the creative expression of the artist and the resulting work of art. And yet the difference in Zen painting can be said to rest in the expressive intention or consciousness of the artist. The Zen painter is not merely expressing himself, his ego-centric self, but rather trying to express an essentially religious or mystical self which is formless. Hisamatsu refers to this thus:

In the case of Zen painting, then, it is not, as is often the case with other types of painting, that a consciousness not free from form (the ordinary self) paints a concrete object; nor is it that the ordinary self-with-form tries objectively to depict what is without form; nor is it that the self-without-form objectively paints what is formless. Rather, it is always the Formless Self that is, on each and every occasion, the creative subject expressing itself.<sup>86</sup>

The unique characteristic of Zen painting thus derives from this expression of the Formless Self. Its fundamental attitude and intention is directed towards and outwards from this experience. In this way, expression is also related intimately to spiritual practice, for the two are profoundly inter-woven. Furthermore, the context of Zen provides the viewer with a comprehensive metaphysical and aesthetic framework with which to appreciate these paintings. The viewer is therefore crucially involved as an agent with specific assumptions and intentions as to the nature of what he sees. Not only does the artist aspire to paint through the Formless Form, but the viewer also validates this by seeing the image in a

specific manner.

This is often encouraged by the inclusion of calligraphic inscriptions alongside the painted image, called *san*. In some cases this is written by the artist and in others, by different persons. Sengai's paintings, for instance, usually include textual elements which support and add further meaning to the image. In Katagiri Sekishu's *Sekishu Sambyakkajo* ('Three Hundred Rules for the Tea Ceremony') he writes that the picture should be viewed first and then the *san* read. In other words, the writing derives from the painting, giving it added religious and aesthetic weight. The viewer is thus not only offered a visual image to contemplate, but also a corresponding verse of religious significance which contextualises it.

Zen artists may be said to have represented a radical challenge to traditional Buddhist painters in terms of their entire approach to expression. For the Zen artist, painting was not simply about representing or imagining scenes and objects, but was also concerned with profound religious states of experience that often expressed itself in ways far outside orthodox ways of painting. Zen painters were often ridiculed and criticised by literati artists for their intense forms of expression and in this sense one may note a comparison with certain Mannerist painters of the Renaissance such as Tintoretto or El Greco and their criticism by writers such as Vasari, who considered their work unrefined and unfinished. Munsterberg cites the case of the Chinese painter Mu-ch'i, who was derided by the artistic establishment.

The academic critics seem to have had little appreciation for the boldness and originality of his style, for they refer to him rather slightly. In one passage it is said that he 'played with ink in a rough and vulgar manner and did not follow the rules of the ancients.' In another: 'He expressed his ideas quite simply without ornamental elaboration. His way of painting was coarse and ugly, not in accordance with the ancient rules, not for refined enjoyment.'<sup>87</sup>

It is interesting that Mu-ch'i is compared to the 'ancients', who obviously represented the ideal for the Chinese academic painters of the time. The criticisms levelled against him are perhaps also peculiarly revealing in that we are told how Mu-ch'i painted. Phrases such as 'played with ink' and 'coarse and ugly' certainly seem to fit within a Zen approach to painting as outlined by scholars such as Hisamatsu. The statement is also important in that it suggests the reception of Zen paintings rests primarily upon its contexts. To claim that Mu'chi's images contain some universal Zen 'essence' is undermined by the fact that some critics saw them negatively in terms of differing aesthetic criteria. That Zen painting came to

be held in great regard later is indicative of changing circumstances which enabled them to be seen in different ways. As Gombrich has argued persuasively elsewhere, the reception of images is crucially related to *how we see them*. The problematics of considering Zen painting is precisely the un-contextualised identification of elements such as its intention and style with supposedly 'universal' characteristics of painting which artists can appropriate and claim to be 'authentic'. A methodology must be adopted which closely considers Zen painting's own contexts, philosophies and circumstances without collapsing them in favour of a universalist rhetoric of cultural diversity.

At a formal level then, one may highlight certain similarities between the rise of Zen painting and that of Romanticism in Europe. In both instances, we see a new and unorthodox art-form challenging the traditions of an established Academy. In both instances, we see the introduction of new subject matter such as nature, and in both instances we see new attitudes emerging amongst artists. Yet underlying these similarities are also profound differences that have their roots primarily in the metaphysical and religious differences between a European Romanticism emerging out of Neoplatonic thought, and Zen painting with its understandings and experiences of Taoist and Buddhist *sunya*. There is an implicit *desire for cleansing* the picture space in European Romantic models, a desire for revealing the transcendental by processes of gradual *veiling*. In the Zen model, there is a sense of fateful *acceptance* that the transcendental is never too far away, undifferentiated from the worn and the everyday. In this divergence lies the possibility for many different histories.

### Part 3. The Case of Mark Tobey.

#### *i) Situating Tobey.*

Mark Tobey was born in the small Wisconsin town of Centerville on December 11th, 1890. At the age of three his family moved to Tennessee, only to return to Wisconsin a year later. They lived for the next decade in Trempealeau, a town of six hundred people near the banks of the Mississippi. In many senses one could say that Tobey's childhood in Trempealeau was typically American, indeed quintessentially so. After all, this was midmost America, and the dusty environment of that icon of American freedom, Tom Sawyer, written in 1876. And yet one could also say that his experiences in the vast wilderness of Wisconsin might have been curiously romantic in the vein of American Transcendentalists such as Emerson. Such thoughts are supported by John Russell, writing about Trempealeau at the turn of the century in a 1971 catalogue introduction.

The Banks of the Mississippi offer, still today, a spectacle as impressive as anything on the Congo or the Amazon. For the European visitor it has, above all, an uncontaminated quality; looking at the mountains (some bald, some thickly wooded) which make up the panorama upstream and downstream, we think of a Switzerland unflawed by a century of tourism and a Rhineland whose castles have no Wagnerian overtones.....Tobey grew up as a barefoot boy who swam, fished, skated and collected wild flowers.<sup>88</sup>

Russell certainly imagines Tobey's childhood as a romantic one, unhurried and distant from the pressures of the cities. And yet, after a short stay in Hammond, Indiana, Tobey and his family moved to Chicago in 1909 where he took up a variety of small jobs which ultimately led him to work as a fashion illustrator in New York for 'McCall's'. Working mainly between Seattle, England and Basel and holding over one hundred one-person exhibitions worldwide, Tobey died aged eighty-five on April 24 1976.

In beginning to investigate Tobey it is necessary to situate him within the broader history of American Abstract Expressionism. This is for three primary reasons: firstly that Tobey was an American painter, secondly that his mature style developed during the period of Abstract Expressionism - from the late 1930s to the late 1950s, and thirdly that his work is largely abstract in the manner of many of the Abstract Expressionists. Any comprehensive

survey of Tobey's work must therefore acknowledge his status in relation to this 'movement', for it both forms the orthodox history within which his work may be contextualised as well as reveal potential points of rupture against that history.

*ii) Abstract Expressionism.*

Tobey's relations with the American Abstract Expressionists may be seen to be one of fluctuation; he hovers on its margins. He is mentioned by some and ignored by others and thus manages to occupy a unique and interesting position in relation to the 'bigger' names of Pollock, de Kooning or Rothko. How is Tobey considered within the broad Abstract Expressionist canon? Why do some writers include him whilst others omit him? By seeing Tobey as an Abstract Expressionist do we also alter the way in which we can approach his art? These and other questions may help in further contextualising Tobey, as well as highlighting potential differences and similarities with other American painters of the period.

Recent years have seen a number of more challenging and critical studies of the Abstract Expressionist period, exploring amongst other things, its political and economic implications during the Cold War<sup>19</sup>, or with black and Asian American artists<sup>20</sup>. Contrary to much of the writing surrounding Abstract Expressionism, these recent studies have begun to reveal some of the 'hidden' discourses and agendas that underlay the movement, thereby also situating it within wider cultural and historical contexts. One of the consequences of such strategies has been to supplement theories which identify Abstract Expressionism with a form of universal and 'pure' art, with ideas that recognise its specific social and political contexts. The importance of such writings in revealing Abstract Expressionism's 'margins' and 'others', and its forms of rhetoric is, I think, unquestionable. In terms of exploring Tobey's ambivalent relations with Abstract Expressionism, it therefore seems useful to employ such critical strategies.

Ann Eden Gibson in her recent book, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*<sup>21</sup> strongly argues that the supposed canon of Abstract Expressionism with its 'essential eight' - Adolph Gottlieb, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still - excluded many other Abstract Expressionistic painters of the period, Black, Asian, homosexual and women, because it generated its own specific agendas and discourses about what could be considered Abstract Expressionist, and who could be admitted into its hallowed domain. Her thesis is compelling, and I think further supports the contention that Abstract Expressionism generated its own myths. Although recognising that it defined an important moment in American art, Gibson also

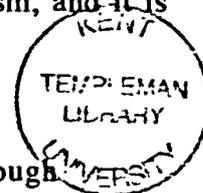
Although recognising that it defined an important moment in American art, Gibson also points to its exclusive tendencies.

A rebellious movement, it aimed not only to revolutionise representation by superseding America's regionalism, realism, and recognisably national styles like French Cubism, but in doing so also opposed America's isolationism, imperialism, and ethnocentrism. In its redefinition of styles and themes, however, Abstract Expressionism also neatly invalidated the products of those who were not among America's most powerful persons: white heterosexual males.<sup>22</sup>

Gibson thus points to the movements exclusivist tendencies, implicitly marginalising artists who did not 'fit' into its self proclaimed mould. She goes on to identify some of the dimensions which shaped the exclusivist borders of Abstract Expressionism, and it is interesting to consider Tobey's work as one reads her points.

The Abstract Expressionist rhetoric of presence was defined through resistance to language, methods designed to convey that the art they made corresponded to the thoroughness of their convictions, redemption of the decorative through monumentalization, the employment of feminine sexuality as transgressive, and the polyphony of multiple meanings. Formalism, connoisseurship, and existentialism shaped these practices, defining the structure of works and ways of thinking about them. Yet, at the same time, the success of these strategies and themes in affirming values that supported an aesthetic elite of white heterosexual males distorted the potential of those same strategies and themes to empower work that affirmed other identities, other experiences, and other relations to power.<sup>23</sup>

Tobey can be seen to rest somewhere in between Gibson's definitions of Abstract Expressionism and her critique of them; for example, as I will attempt to show, much of Tobey's work has been received as resistant to language, but his work also opposes monumentalization. Furthermore, although Formalism and connoisseurship played important roles for Tobey, I would contend that existentialism and its more Freudian implications were of little interest to Tobey who favoured what can be described as more 'transpersonal' tendencies. This is supported if we consider Tobey's place among the so called 'mystic four' of the Northwest School, and its seeming distance from the popularity of psychoanalytic 'models' in regions such as New York or Los Angeles. Writing in 1982 as the curator of the Seattle Art Museum, Bruce Guenther identifies this distance in the



following way.

Constituting what came to be known popularly as the 'mystic four' of the Northwest School, these artists (Tobey, Graves, Callahan and Anderson) were part of a larger community that came together regularly in one another's studios and over dinner to philosophise and to discuss events of the day and their respective work....Discussions of Eastern and Western attitudes concerning nature, artistic process, religion and mysticism were also important aspects of these meetings.<sup>24</sup>

If one considers in addition to such observations, the prominence of movements such as the Beat poets and the strong nature-based tendencies of much abstraction during the 1950s and 60s in cities such as San Francisco, perhaps one can partially situate Tobey within a unique West-Coast painting tradition that defined itself *against* their East-Coast colleagues. If we add to this the considerable significance of early American Buddhist missions - primarily of the Zen persuasion at least during the late 50s and 60s - and their important role in disseminating Eastern ideas about spirituality and aesthetics, one is faced with a veritable 'stew' of diverse and alternative views on the West coast in particular. The predominance of these 'proto-New Age' tendencies on the Western seaboard may be seen to have offered alternatives to the more 'academic', continental ideas predominant on the East coast epitomised most strongly by the importance of existentialist philosophies. In saying this, though, one should also note that Buddhist ideas were present in New York - for instance in the form of the First Zen Institute - and that painters such as Rothko and Newman consistently utilised a rhetoric which borrowed heavily from what may be termed a 'quasi-New Age' language, stressing notions of spiritual awakening or healing through their art.

The significance of Tobey's homosexuality and his long relationship with Pehr Hallsten from 1939 to Pehr's death in 1965 must also be considered in the light of Gibson's comments, and perhaps situates his experiences somewhat away from the 'white heterosexual males' which Gibson identifies with Abstract Expressionism. Tobey scholarship seems to avoid this issue on the whole, although it is referred to in passing by various more recent writers. No doubt many people would regard his sexuality as being largely irrelevant to his picture-making - after all, Tobey's artistic project, they may argue, was concerned with the 'universal' - and yet could one not relate Tobey's relative marginalisation within the Abstract Expressionist canon to its implicit negativity towards homosexuality and more specifically to art practices which did not 'fit' a typically male,

aggressive and monumental ethos? If, as Gibson argues, Abstract Expressionism was as much a movement about implicitly setting up an exclusivist territory that marginalised those who didn't 'fit' as much as it was about 'art', then a consideration of Tobey's relationships with it become somewhat more complex and interesting. As Gibson says:

By taking a broader cultural perspective, one can begin to see that what divided those who were considered to be 'Abstract Expressionist' from those who were not, was not so much 'quality' - how good their art was in some absolute sense - as how well it measured up to standards established by certain interests peculiar to only some of those present during the 1940s in New York.<sup>29</sup>

Gibson goes on to highlight specific aspects which moulded this exclusivity and standard, among them the largeness of canvases, large brushstrokes, an indifference to politics and an affinity for universalism, all of which one could relate to Tobey and compare. For instance, Tobey's work is conspicuously small in comparison to most Abstract Expressionist works and his brushstrokes are modest when compared with the sweeping gestures of de Kooning or Pollock. Pollock's work from the early and mid-forties already suggest his penchant for large canvases; *Guardians of the Secret* (1943) measures 123 x 192 cm and a later work such as *Cathedral* (1947) measures 180 x 89 cm. De Kooning, Rothko and Newman's paintings are usually well over 200 cms square. In comparison, Tobey's paintings are small; *Legend* (1943) measures a mere 50.8 x 17.1 cm, *Crystallisation* (1944) is 45.7 x 33 cm and even one of his largest works *Edge of August* (1953) measures 121.9 x 71.1 cm. On the question of canvas size alone therefore, Tobey may well differ considerably from the 'core' Abstract Expressionist canon.

As regards brushwork, again Tobey may be seen to represent a difference with the established canon, opting not for large expressive gestures but for intense and small flecks of paint that cover the entire picture surface. From a visual perspective then, a Tobey painting presents something that is significantly different from much Abstract Expressionist work. The physical qualities of a Tobey seem no match for the monumentality of a Rothko or a de Kooning, and his fibre-like brushwork known as 'white writing', does not echo the large gestural splashes and strokes of Pollock or Gottlieb, although it is interesting to note the similarities with, for instance, many of Pollock's paper based drawings which are delicate and often employ Tobey-like 'writings'. More than this, as Gibson notes, underlying these latter characteristics are signals of authority and power. If the physical

gestures of Pollock and de Kooning reflected the vigour of the frontier cowboy, then Tobey's 'white writing' reflected the meticulous labour of the monastic scribe (Fig.48).

The conventions of Abstract Expressionist painting - large brushstrokes, for instance, whose appearance indicates that they were laid on the canvas rapidly - have come to stand for spontaneity and even masculine force. The canvases' large sizes have come to embody Abstract Expressionism's control of its environment. They are signs of its authority. Where does this leave the modest size and precision of Alice Trumbull Mason's works and the gentle, practised linearity of Norman Lewis? Rather than understanding the brushstroke in its fullest historical complexity, which would include parallels with weaving and African American music, we limit it by seeing only what it has come to stand for: the myth of Abstract Expressionism's creative vigour, originality and force.<sup>66</sup>

One could equally ask where does this leave the small, intricate paintings of Mark Tobey? Indeed, one could also include to weaving and African American music, Oriental forms of calligraphy. Although Eastern calligraphy with its apparent sense of spontaneity, profundity and expression, has often been identified as a source for some Abstract Expressionist painters, I would contend that it has largely been in a limited and often misrepresented way. Jeffrey Wechsler expounds on this and attempts to re-establish a sense of difference between Oriental calligraphies and Abstract Expressionism, recovering calligraphy from its stereotypical appropriations.

The fact that Western-style gestural abstraction and Eastern-style calligraphic abstraction both used black pigment on a white ground somehow muscled aside any perception of the differences between them. The most basic difference is that artists with an Eastern cultural heritage usually had exhaustive training in the methods of calligraphy, as well as knowledge of the Taoist aesthetic philosophy behind it. The use of the brush in Eastern art, no matter how gestural or spontaneous looking its product, is highly controlled through experience. The deliberately brusque, aggressive strokes of the New York School had no history of, or use for, that expertise.<sup>67</sup>

By allying Kline or Pollock with Eastern calligraphy, as some writers have done, is also to appropriate calligraphy within Abstract Expressionism - in other words it becomes associated with exactly the kinds of discourses which Gibson highlights. The potentially empowering and radical dimensions of calligraphy are thus subsumed within the wider

Abstract Expressionist discourse, and its various rhetorics of 'presence', 'transcendence' or the artist as hero. In this respect Tobey's pictorial style opposes much of the grand gestures of Abstract Expressionism, relying instead on 'other' models such as those suggested by Gibson. In Tobey's work therefore, the identification of powerful brush marks with physical strength, political freedom and authority is questioned, and different voices exposed.

Although regarding the size of the canvas or application of brushstroke, Tobey may represent significant differences to the major figures of Abstract Expressionism, he shared with them a strong desire for universalism and a belief that the artist could be a communicator of 'spiritual' messages. Inspired, in part by his Baha'i faith, Tobey's art was one which strove to speak across national borders and express universal truths. In this, he shares much with painters such as Rothko or Newman who also understood painting to have a revelatory potential. It may be worth quoting from Newman's well known statement, 'The Sublime is Now', published in 1948.

We are creating images whose reality is self evident and which are devoid of the props and crutches that evoke associations with outmoded images, both sublime and beautiful. We are freeing ourselves from the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth, or what have you, that have been the devices of Western European painting....The image we produce is the self evident one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history.<sup>36</sup>

Newman's rhetoric is grand and to utter that 'the image we produce is the self evident one of revelation...' equates the artist with the priest in many respects. For Tobey the universal was also essentially related to the spiritual, as we can read in this passage from his essay, 'Japanese Traditions and American Art'.

That abstract art has in many ways become an Academy appears certain. But somewhere in this and in what we saw before, there were a few paintings that radiated the spirit and it is in these we seek, no matter what garment is worn.<sup>37</sup>

And yet underlying these claims to universalism must also be seen to have been very specific issues of power, race, gender and class. As Gibson points out, the Abstract Expressionist's sense of universalism was also one that could speak to everyone precisely because it represented a white, heterosexual and male agenda. African American or

homosexual artists such as Romare Bearden, even if they wished to be universal, could not be because the dominant society did not read their work in that way. She writes:

This claim (to universalism), to which sympathetic contemporary viewers readily responded and which subsequent historians have made specific, was not seen as the movement's implicit story about itself, that is, as literary, but simply as a wondrous fact.<sup>100</sup>

Tobey could both claim his art to be 'universal' and be seen in these terms precisely because he represented what Gibson calls 'America's most powerful persons'. Furthermore, Tobey was an artist who had explored 'other' belief systems and immersed himself in different cultural systems; like a 'roaming of the wilderness', such eclecticism served to *confirm* his universalism. Crucially, it was by *gathering* the knowledge and experiences of others that Tobey could proclaim a universal outlook which, like Leibniz' *philosophia perennis*, synthesised diverse threads of thought into a unifying commonality. His Oriental interests may therefore also be considered in the light of recent studies into 'Primitivism' in the sense that Tobey remained ultimately the point of *absorption* and *discrimination*. The Orient is referred to, but never achieves an independent status as the site of original, self-aware art. Rather, it is co-opted into Tobey's wider Euro-American practice as an interesting 'influence'. And yet, paradoxically it is also Tobey's association with these 'others' that marginalises him within Abstract Expressionism's 'official' history. In this respect, his relations with the Orient are at once empowering and fracturing, confirming his status as a 'universalist American artist' but also marginalising him within the dominant discourse.

In general terms Tobey is conspicuously absent from most literature on the Abstract Expressionists. Although he is often listed in indexes and mentioned in relation to other painters - most notably Pollock - the majority of writers do not give him much attention. Interestingly though, Tobey features prominently in William Seitz's book, Abstract Expressionist Painting in America, originally submitted as his Princeton thesis in 1955 but not published until 1983.

Seitz's enquiry, perhaps understandably, gives the most consideration to formal and procedural elements in the vein of Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, citing in particular de Kooning, Gorky, Hofmann, Motherwell, Rothko and Tobey. Significantly, he omits Newman and Pollock, rather including Gorky, Hofmann and Tobey, all of whom are considered by Gibson to be outside the so called 'essential eight'. This selection is

interesting, partly because it presents a reading of Abstract Expressionism which is quite different to subsequent attempts; Seitz's history seems perhaps less overtly 'American' and it is interesting to note that the title of his thesis is *Abstract Expressionism in America* as opposed to *American Abstract Expressionism*. Certainly compared to Greenberg's fervent calls for *Abstract Expressionism as American*, Seitz's thesis acknowledges non-American influences. The inclusion of Gorky, Hofmann and Tobey all point to an attempt by Seitz to situate Abstract Expressionism within a wider Modernist history, recognising its European and non-Occidental sources. In many senses, his thesis could be said to reflect a 'first generation' of Abstract Expressionist painters, slightly older than the 'essential eight'. As regards Tobey, Seitz considers him as an artist who bridges America with Europe and the Orient, at once drawing on European Modernism and developing it with Oriental influences.

Tobey is the first painter who has fully realised the median geographical position that the American continent occupies between Europe and the Far East, and the mediating role that the United States could play in a synthesis of what is best in both cultures. No other painter symbolises the influence that Oriental art and philosophy have had on American artists.<sup>101</sup>

Seitz's comments on Tobey, and in particular his identification of him as a painter who synthesised West and East, could also be seen to have been precisely the reasons why other writers such as Greenberg and Rosenberg did not see Tobey as a significant Abstract Expressionist. Did they rather see Tobey's 'Eastern-ness' as somehow *lessening* the American-ness of Abstract Expressionism? Indeed, was it Tobey's very 'universalism', his perception as a 'trans-American' artist who drew heavily on non-American sources, which also marginalised him? One may well ask then, why Pollock's interests in native American arts or Rothko's interests in myth were seen to be somehow 'acceptable', whereas Tobey's interests in Oriental art and mysticism were deemed less significant. Once again I think that some of the answers to such questions can emerge from the points highlighted by Gibson, concerning the power, race or gender discourses surrounding Abstract Expressionism. In some senses, Tobey's Oriental interests and his Baha'i mysticism 'relegated' him within the Abstract Expressionist canon because they did not 'fit' established and accepted patterns of 'American-ness', 'originality' or 'a-politicism'. On the other hand though, Oriental influences in the form of calligraphy or Zen Buddhism in particular, has often been recognised as a part of the Abstract Expressionist genre, prompting one to question the ways in which the movement's critics and artists appropriated 'other' non-American sources and

integrated them into a hegemonic Abstract Expressionist discourse. Certainly, a Greenbergian reading of the movement strongly emphasised its independence from European Modernism and in a similar vein one could conclude that it also isolated itself from Oriental sources. Moreover it is perhaps fair to suggest that Native American sources were deemed 'acceptable' because of its 'links' with the *American* landscape, which artists such as Pollock sought to 'integrate' into their work. In other words, Pollock's practice was in some way identified at an unconscious level with the rituals of Native Americans and thus with the roots of America itself. Tobey's Baha'i links, in contrast, with its Islamic context offered no such mythic relations.

Although Tobey appears prominently in Seitz's 1955 thesis, this seems to be the exception. Irving Sandler's influential 1970 work, The Triumph of American Painting, concentrates on eleven artists, excluding Tobey. He is only referred to in lists of artists who exhibited in group shows and in the chapter on Pollock, where Tobey's 'white writing' and Pollock's 'drip painting' techniques are compared. Although Tobey is omitted, Gorky and Hofmann both warrant full chapters.

One reason for Tobey's omission may be that Sandler's thesis strongly suggests an art historical lineage for Abstract Expressionism as arising out of a certain European Surrealist tradition, with its various stresses on automatic techniques and dreams. This is borne out if one looks at Sandler's contents; chapter two is entitled 'The Imagination of Disaster' and is accompanied by a number of paintings by Dali, Matta and Masson, chapter four is entitled 'The Myth Makers' and focuses on the early reevaluations of Surrealism by painters such as Rothko and Gottlieb, and the chapter on William Baziotes almost seems to be intended as the bridge or moment between these early neo-Surrealist tendencies and the 'new' Abstract Expressionism. From such grounds, Sandler goes on to identify two 'wings' of the movement, the 'Gesture Painters' and the 'Colour Field Painters'. Tobey's omission from Sandler's history may, in part be connected to his own distance from Surrealist tendencies. Throughout the thirties and early forties, Tobey's paintings do not borrow from a Surrealist language - either in terms of creating images from dreams and myths, or of using automatic techniques - but rather explore different areas. Tobey's paintings from the 1920s for instance, may be more usefully compared to Georgia O'Keeffe's desert landscapes or Edward Hopper's precise urban settings. Paintings such as *The Gathering* (1943) (Fig.32) or *Extensions from Baghdad* (1944) (Fig.33) are strikingly different from Pollock's or Rothko's images from the same period, certainly in terms of their modes of expression as well as in the fact that many of Tobey's images retained figurative and representative

well as in the fact that many of Tobey's images retained figurative and representative elements. Pollock's 1942 painting entitled, *Male and Female*, or Hofmann's 1944 *Idolatress I*, are both rather heavy, passionate and primitivistic in style. Their emphasis is on large, gestural brushwork, totemic shapes and the importance of mythical and ritualistic ideas, as borne out in their titles. Even when Tobey paints abstract images in his 'white writing' style, they differ significantly from the biomorphic shapes and elemental signs evident in the work of painters such as Baziotes or Gorky. Sandler's omission of Tobey may thus be related to his seeming difference from other artists of the period, and in particular to his apparent lack of Surrealist influences. As I will argue later, one may rather situate Tobey alongside European painters such as Mondrian rather than with the Surrealists.

Tobey's marginalisation within the Abstract Expressionists has also been evident in exhibitions of post-war American art. Although he was included in exhibitions such as *Abstract Expressionism, Other Dimensions*, during 1989 and 1990 which toured within North America and included many normally excluded artists such as Lee Krasner, Alfonso Ossorio and Forrest Bess, Tobey's lack of presence in many other major exhibitions purportedly charting American twentieth century art is noteworthy. A good example is the 1993 exhibition entitled, *American Art in the 20th Century. Painting and Sculpture 1913-1993*, held in Berlin and London and setting itself up as a European survey of American art in the twentieth century. It may be worth quoting from Roger de Grey's foreword to the extensive catalogue.

'American Art in the 20th Century' differs from previous surveys in two significant ways. First, it has not been selected by experts from the country in question, but rather is presented from a European point of view. Secondly, this exhibition highlights arts created between 1945 and 1970, while its predecessors were weighted towards the first decades of the century. It can be said with little fear of contradiction that, during those twenty five years, American art was the driving force behind many, if not most, developments in art throughout the world.<sup>102</sup>

In the light of de Grey's comments it is curious that Tobey should be absent from the exhibition for at least two reasons. Firstly, as a European-curated project it is odd that Tobey was left out if one considers his considerable acclaim by many European critics during the fifties and sixties as well as the fact that he chose to settle in Switzerland in 1960. Secondly, as an exhibition highlighting American arts from 1945 to 1970, the years when Tobey's art

became internationally known, it is odd that he was omitted. This is further compounded if we consider that Tobey was the first American artist since Whistler to win the first prize in painting at the XXIX Venice Biennale (Fig.51).

And yet, in the light of my argument, one may suggest that Tobey was not included in the survey precisely because he did not 'fit' the perceived canon of American art, as say, artists like Pollock, Rothko and de Kooning did. Tobey's absence tells us much about the hierarchies and value structures that have dominated post-war American art history, and which seems to be supported by the Royal Academy exhibition. Indeed, by his very omission, can one say that Tobey and other artists challenge a particular reading or interpretation of Modern art in America? One significant question seems therefore to revolve around his perception (or not) as an *American* artist and how this has served to place him within an overall art-historical narrative.

To what extent Tobey's sense of 'American-ness', and perhaps more importantly, how his perception by others as an 'American' painter changed, is an interesting point, certainly in relation to his ambivalent relations with the Abstract Expressionists. After all, as critics such as Greenberg and Rosenberg seemed to suggest, one of the primary notions behind Abstract Expressionism was its very 'American-ness', and hence also its autonomy from European Modernism. That the movement also claimed to represent a 'universal' art is significant for, as writers such as Eva Cockcroft suggest, in the climate of the Cold War during the late 1940s and early 50s the idea of the 'universal' was implicitly identified with 'America', as the bastion of free expression and truth. If we accept that Abstract Expressionism claimed for itself - through its supporters - this 'American-ness', then I think that Tobey comes to represent something 'diluted' or perhaps even 'contaminated' with a range of specifically non-American influences.

This is supported if we consider Tobey's aforementioned award at the Biennale of Venice in 1958, and its reporting in the American art press. New York's two leading art magazines seemed to have found Tobey's achievement of little interest; Arts mentioned it only in its news column whilst Art News ignored it completely. In comparison The New York Times and Life published feature articles. The lack of interest by arts publications seems rather strange, but perhaps can be better understood if one sees Tobey to have been perceived as somehow 'less American' than Pollock or de Kooning. One may speculate that had a painter such as Rothko or Still won the prize, the American magazines would have been somewhat more excited.

A similar situation may be identified following Tobey's large retrospective exhibition

at the Louvre in which some 286 works were shown, in 1961. Whilst Tobey was critically acclaimed in Europe, Art News devoted a mere paragraph to the show in its Paris exhibitions roundup two months after it had closed, and Arts printed a weak review of the smaller version of the exhibition which travelled to London. Once again, this lack of critical interest in America at a time when he was being received seriously in Europe, seems strange. The German critic Werner Schmalenbach, writing in a 1989 catalogue, writes about Tobey's relationship with America thus.

America herself has never declared herself for Tobey as frankly as for the succeeding generations of artists from Pollock to Lichtenstein and Frank Stella. The introverted character of Mark Tobey did not quite fit into the panorama of the highly extroverted 'American challenge'.<sup>103</sup>

Indeed, as Schmalenbach suggests, Tobey's relative marginalisation in America may largely have to do with the times he lived in and its favouring of the overtly 'American'. I would not wish to claim a certain 'American' style, but merely point to the shifting perceptions held at the time and now, regarding what 'American' can mean.

Another significant factor here concerns Tobey's strong affinities for the past, which he often alluded to in interviews and writings, and its seeming contradiction to the Abstract Expressionist position that the new art had to emerge without recourse to what had gone before. A 1951 article in The Art Digest devotes some space to discussing Tobey's affinities for the past and for past artists.

He spoke of Turner, for him even greater than the French Impressionists because Turner 'dissolved everything into light'; of Guardi, who 'painted men in boats like water spiders'; and of the 'ones who paint solidly', like Cezanne, who turn out a canvas that is 'all calligraphic' so that 'everything moves, every stroke is alive'....His life having spanned two centuries, Tobey has a strong feeling for the past.<sup>104</sup>

From the same year, we read in an article written by Tobey for The Magazine of Art similar sentiments.

To rediscover the past is to move forward. There is no surcease when we constantly destroy what we have built. The future is carved with the implements we created before it was upon us. The past offers the art student different roads, all converging towards his present.<sup>105</sup>

different roads, all converging towards his present.<sup>105</sup>

This sense of the past as somehow intimately related to the present and anticipating the future forms a central theme in Tobey's thinking. Moreover, it may also have contributed to his weak critical reception in America at a time when critics such as Greenberg were championing America and Americans as the bearers of a radically new Modern art. His essay, 'The Decline of Cubism', published in the The Partisan Review in 1948 confidently asserts the decline of artists such as Picasso and Braque and the resulting migration of Western art to America; the sense of Greenberg's article is that modern art has abandoned Paris for the energy and talents of America. Tobey's keen concerns for history may be seen to have somehow lessened the 'American-ness' and 'newness' of his work in the eyes of many critics.

### iii) *Art Informel*.

One of the results of Tobey's distance from the Abstract Expressionists and its sense of 'American-ness' has been a tendency to associate his work with European strands of expressionist painting in the form of *art informel* or *tachisme*, both of which surfaced at roughly the same time as Abstract Expressionism in America. Tobey was included by Michel Tapié in his 1957 exhibition entitled, *Un art autre*, shown in Barcelona and Madrid, and numerous European critics including Jean Cassou and Pierre Restany wrote about Tobey's work. That Tobey was associated with the *informel* painters is perhaps not surprising if one considers his strong historical affections for Europe as well as his perceived difference from the New York School. In addition, Tobey's 'white writing' style can be seen to have had resonances in the scribbled calligraphies of Wols, Vieira da Silva or Henri Michaux; in contrast to the highly gestural and large-scale works of the Abstract Expressionists, the work of many European abstractionists remained modest, intricate and perhaps more lyrical in tone.

And yet one must also remain careful not to simply identify Tobey with *informel* artists, many of whom pursued interests in surrealist automatism, child art and unfettered expression. Although one can identify formal similarities between his work and some European abstractionists of the forties and fifties, it is also necessary to locate their differences, which were often significant. *Art Informel's* tendencies, under Tapié, were towards giving direct expression to subconscious fantasy and irrationality in contrast to the

hard-edged abstractions derived from Cubism and De Stijl; Tobey was not primarily interested in expressing unfettered or irrational feelings in his work, but may be better situated alongside the rigorous abstractions of painters such as Mondrian. Although his abstract works look highly gestural, they were not so much informed by a desire for total freedom of expression, but more by a highly sensitive and subtle intelligence which remained crucially *controlled*. His 'white writing' thus remains 'tight', rarely becoming uncontrolled and wild. In a work such as *New York* (1944) (Fig.34), one is confronted with a seething mass of lines, interlocking and over-lapping, but which never loses control in the way that, say, the brush of painters such as Appel or Dubuffet does. The only instance in Tobey's work where one encounters overtly expressionistic and 'exploded' marks of paint is in his 1957 *sumi* ink paintings, to which I shall turn in the following sections.

Tobey's standard 'white writing' style also differs from many Occidental appropriations of Oriental calligraphy, with their bold, sweeping gestures. In this sense Tobey's work is unlike that of many *Informel* artists, who allied themselves strongly with the Japanese Gutai movement following Tapie's visit to Japan in 1957. Many Gutai artists such as Shiraga Kazuo or Motonaga Sadamasa had employed heavy, gestural brush strokes to paint highly expressionistic and 'raw' images which Tapie - problematically - thought related strongly with the work of the European *Informel* artists. Indeed, Tapie's 'appropriation' of the Gutai and his insistence on understanding them through the lenses of *Art Informel*, eventually led to a major exhibition entitled, 'The International Art of a New Era: *Informel* and Gutai', held at the Osaka International Festival in 1958. The exhibition showed the work of the Gutai artists as well as pieces by Pollock, Motherwell, Kline, Georges Mathieu and Appel; its tendency was to show a highly gestural and expressionistic abstraction that opposed the rigidity of Cubist or constructivist inspired abstractions. Although Tapie respected Tobey's work, it is my contention that he remained somewhat peripheral to the *Informel* movement, even though at a formal level, there were remarkable similarities between Tobey and some of the *Informel* labelled artists. Tobey's closest allies are perhaps Michaux and Masson, both of whom developed interests in Oriental calligraphic traditions.

Although Tobey's association with Abstract Expressionism is unsure on many levels, he shares their conviction that abstract art is also an art of revelation. His relationship with the 'movement' is thus significant in terms of a shared concern for the ultimate purpose of painting, what Newman referred to as penetrating 'world mysteries'.

*iv) The Baha'i.*

Tobey converted to the Baha'i World Faith in 1918. This event was prompted by Tobey's meeting with the portrait painter and Baha'i follower, Juliet Thompson, who introduced Tobey to its literature and teachings in New York. Following this meeting, Tobey was invited to attend a Baha'i summer camp in Maine, which he did, and which seems to have resulted in his conversion. Many of Tobey's earlier paintings are explorations of Baha'i themes, at least as he interpreted them; *Conflict of the Satanic and Celestial Egos* from 1918 and *Extensions from Baghdad* of 1944 (Fig.33) being two good examples. That the two works were painted over twenty five years apart is a good indication of Tobey's life-long attachment to Baha'i. For Arthur Lyon Dahl - a Baha'i himself - Tobey's work represents that of the religious searcher; indeed for him, the Baha'i faith provided Tobey with the spiritual bedrock from which to paint.

It is generally agreed that Mark Tobey was a unique figure in contemporary art, standing aloof from yet often pioneering trends and directions of twentieth century painting. The distinctive character of his work is obviously due not only to his innate talent and sensitivity, but also to his experience of the Baha'i Faith, which provided him with a philosophical basis and approach totally different from that of his contemporaries. Indeed, even his move towards abstraction came from a different motivation, the search for an artistic language capable of expressing the spiritual and intangible.<sup>106</sup>

Dahl may be speaking from a biased perspective, nevertheless his contention is that Tobey's Baha'i Faith played a crucial role in informing and forming Tobey's 'spiritual art'. In Dahl's opinion Tobey's abstraction gave form to Baha'i teachings.

William Seitz offers another useful view of Tobey's Baha'i faith, crucially identifying three themes which arise out of his involvement.

The premises of Baha'i doctrine which support and permeate his thinking can be reduced to three interrelated concepts: unity, 'progressive revelation', and humanity.<sup>107</sup>

Seitz's contention is a significant one, identifying what Tobey found so appealing in the Baha'i faith. Certainly, the three concepts he identifies play central roles in his wider world-view, as well as echoing the sentiments of Abstract Expressionists such as Newman and Rothko. It would be useful to briefly explore their origins in Baha'i teachings.

At the time of Tobey's conversion to the faith in 1918, the Baha'i had made significant inroads into the West, largely through the tolerant and quietist leadership of Baha' Allah (1817-92) who, whilst in exile in Turkey, had incorporated European ideas into his teachings and repudiated a militant attitude with a Sufi influenced legalism and tolerance. From Baha' Allah's leadership onwards the movement may be said to have 'modernised', a trend which was continued after Baha' Allah's death by Abd al-Baha (1844-1921) and Shoghi Effendi (1897-1957). Denis MacEoin, referring to the writings of Abd al-Baha, writes that:

...his writings in Acre incorporated notions such as collective security, world government, the use of an international auxiliary language and script, universal compulsory education and so on. Abd al-Baha seems to have been particularly interested in these and related matters, as is obvious from his early work, and in his later talks and letters addressed himself increasingly to topics of interest to Western converts.<sup>108</sup>

The attraction of the Baha'i to Tobey in 1918, the year that also marked the end of the First World War, perhaps becomes a little clearer. Underlying the social and political messages of the progressive Baha'i was also a powerful call for unity under 'One God'. Shoghi Effendi writes that:

The Baha'i Faith upholds the unity of God, recognises the unity of His Prophets, and inculcates the principle of the oneness and wholeness of the entire human race. It proclaims the necessity and inevitability of the unification of mankind....<sup>109</sup>

The Baha'i insistence on 'oneness' forms a crucial discourse underlying Tobey's mature works from the mid-nineteen forties and informs much of the literature about his work.

Tobey referred to the notion in his short essay 'The One Spirit', a piece of writing that at times sounds like a sermon from a prophetic messenger. For Tobey, any movement towards unity on the political or social levels had also to be paralleled with a unity of spirit which underlay all things and ultimately brought them together.

For the inner and outer states are both aspects of the One Life - and in the great vision of the Oneness of the World of Humanity we must look to the One Power manifesting these multitudinous divisions of Its one rich *Unity* so that we *may be stirred* to the wonder and majesty of Itself, and in this power of Cohesion we may get our first glimpse of the Unity and Universality of God....What expansion! What rivers of inspiration pour from the greatness of Baha'u'llah's Being as He attempts to acquaint us with this vision of Oneness, this sublimity of the One Great Power!<sup>10</sup>

Tobey's rhetoric is one that ultimately amalgamates all differences under a hegemonic unity that derives from a great divine 'Being'. It reveals a spiritual idealism that is characteristic of many Modernist artists such as Kandinsky, Malevich, Rothko and Newman, all of whom may be said to have constructed discourses around the notion of a spiritually progressive 'humanity'. What is significant about Tobey's statement in comparison to that of Kandinsky or Newman though, is its explicit religious tone, referring to 'God' and Baha'u'llah as the powers towards which he strove. At a time when artists tended to jettison overt references to religion and instead opt for generalised themes and motifs, Tobey's Baha'i conviction is unique. Indeed, this explicitness may be another reason for his relative marginalising within orthodox histories of Modern art in America.

Interestingly, the Baha'i message of Oneness is adopted by Tobey and redirected towards a *personal mystical experience*; he implies that by looking to the 'One Power' the individual may be 'stirred' until he 'gets his first glimpse of God'. Tobey thus interprets the 'Oneness' of Baha'i teaching as a call for his own mystical transformation. I would suggest that Tobey, and other non-Islamic followers perhaps received Baha'i teachings as primarily mystical discourses as opposed to in the form of the *shari'a*, or divinely inspired law which governs all aspects of Muslim society and culture. MacEoin interestingly points out that:

The majority of Baha'i today are converts from non-Islamic backgrounds and, as a result, there is widespread ignorance within the community of the extent to which the basic doctrines of the religion are Islamic (and, in particular, Shi'ite) in origin....The Baha'i *shari'a* is derived from two

primary sources: the sacred text and the legislation of the Universal House of Justice. In practice, only a small portion of Baha'i law is either known or acted on outside Islamic countries.<sup>111</sup>

My aim here is not to point out any 'misunderstanding' of Baha'i teaching by Tobey, but rather to show that his understanding of it elevated the significance of its mystical aspects over legal or social ones. As an American convert, Tobey adopted those aspects of Baha'i teaching which he regarded as 'universal'; it is thus unlikely that he followed the social or moral laws which would have been expected in Muslim societies.

The Baha'i religion and its universalist outlook provided Tobey with certain important elements; on one level, it obviously provided a personal religious faith with which he could identify and commune. In this regard, his numerous visits to Baha'i summer camps and conferences shows how important he regarded the company of other Baha'i followers. On another level, the religion may be said to have symbolised a positive and progressive world view which Tobey fully shared, and which also provided him with a viable alternative to his Christian background. Although rarely mentioned in literature about him, it is possible that Tobey's homosexuality might also have been more accepted and tolerated amongst his non-Islamic Baha'i peers. Perhaps most importantly for Tobey the Baha'i faith provided a cosmological and spiritual paradigm through which he could approach his art; in other words that it helped him develop his interests in religion, in religious experience and in the conviction that there was ultimately 'One World Spirit' underlying everything. Tobey's interest in Baha'i teachings also suggests his attraction to seemingly 'exotic' cultural ideas and traditions from an early period. The notion of questioning one's own cultural context and searching for others underlies his Baha'i conversion in 1918, establishing a model which was to recur again in his 'discovery' of the Far East in the mid-1930s. In this respect the Baha'i not only provided Tobey with religious teachings and a sense of community, but also a paradigm for his oppositional stance against his own cultural background and a parallel 'search' for alternatives in cultures different to his own.

Tobey was certainly deeply impressed by Baha'i teachings; he made his first pilgrimage to The International Baha'i World Center in Haifa in 1927, going again in 1966. While teaching at Dartington Hall, Devon, Tobey also impressed the English potter Bernard Leach with Baha'i teachings and this led to Leach's own conversion. Tobey also gave the Baha'i World Faith twelve small paintings to sell in 1963, raising \$40,000 for the religion. In these and many other ways, Tobey's allegiance to the Baha'i can be charted, and provides

a significant factor which has led to his reception as a painter of a 'private world of vision and spirit'.

v) *The Willard Gallery.*

Tobey's long association with the Willard Gallery in New York may be seen to have played a central role in forming Tobey's subsequent legacy, as well as situating him alongside other artists with shared interests in the spiritual and the mystical. The gallery thus presents an interesting and important junction for an exploration of Tobey's art; on the one hand it may be seen as the site where his paintings could reach the public and social sphere and thus become available for criticism and study, and on the other hand it can also be seen as the site where his reputation and mythologies were constructed via exhibitions, catalogue writings and associations. The gallery space thus represents both a site of *presentation* and of *construction*. Far from merely being a 'white cube' which is 'filled' with art works, it must be seen as a complex site of representation with significant consequences for Tobey's perception as an artist.

Although Tobey had exhibited in New York before 1944, it would be fair to say that it was only after his solo show at the Willard Gallery in April of 1944 that he received a far greater level of critical acclaim, most notably from the then emerging Clement Greenberg who wrote about Tobey's works in *The Nation*. Until the 1944 show, Tobey's work attracted lukewarm receptions, although it should be noted that following his 1929 exhibition at Romany Marie's, Lewis Mumford wrote in *The New Yorker* that he would not be surprised if Tobey's reputation would survive their generation. Yet it was not until his first Willard Gallery show in 1944 that Tobey prompted notable critics such as Greenberg and Sidney Janis - who wrote the catalogue foreword - to write about his work in an affirmative manner. Greenberg's comments are worth quoting, if only because they represent one of the few writings by the writer on Tobey, before his championing of the Abstract Expressionists and in particular, the work of Jackson Pollock. He said that Tobey had:

...already made one of the few original contributions to contemporary American painting. Tobey's great innovation is his 'white writing': the calligraphic, tightly meshed inter-lacing of white lines which builds up to a vertical, rectangular mass reaching almost to the edges of the frame; these cause the picture surface to vibrate in depth - or, better, toward the spectator. Yet this seems little out of which to compose an easel painting. The compensation lies in the intensity, subtlety, and directness with which Tobey registers and transmits emotion usually considered too tenuous to be made the matter of any other art than music.<sup>112</sup>

Greenberg's sentiments for Tobey in 1944 seem to have been positive, and indeed, he hails him as one of the few 'original' voices in contemporary American painting. Interestingly, only a few years after this article, Greenberg came to regard Tobey as less important, situating him on the margins of the then heralded Abstract Expressionist movement<sup>113</sup>. Instead, the younger and more charismatic Pollock was championed, and Greenberg claimed in the spring 1955 issue of the 'Partisan Review' that Pollock had arrived at his all-over pictures without having seen Tobey's work. Recent scholars such as Eliza Rathbone and Judith S. Kays have criticised Greenberg's unsupported statement, revealing how the uncritical repetition of opinions and unverified facts can be taken up as 'fact' within the wider discourse of the history of Abstract Expressionism. It does seem clear though, that both Pollock and Tobey were aware of each others' work from 1944 when they showed together in group shows at Putzel's 67 Gallery and the Mortimer Brandt Gallery; moreover I would contend that certain formal similarities can be seen in some of their works from this period.

The use of the square motif within the picture space was used by Tobey in paintings such as *The Way* of 1944 and by Pollock in paintings such as *Guardians of the Secret* from 1943, and the two painters used similar metaphoric devices in the titles of their works, Tobey's *November Grass Rhythms* from 1945 and Pollock's *Sounds in the Grass: Shimmering Substance* from 1946 being two good examples. It seems futile to try and establish any kind of priority between who was 'first' in respect to Tobey and Pollock; rather it seems enough merely to recognise that the two artists often shared similar pictorial motifs, devices and interests.

Following the 1944 exhibition, Tobey consistently showed at the Willard Gallery until his death in 1976. A mention of some of the other Willard Gallery artists may serve to

contextualise Tobey among a certain 'type' or tendency of artists; Richard Pousette-Dart, Ralph Rosenborg, Richard Lippold, John Ferren, Rudolph Ray, Andre Masson and Morris Graves all exhibited regularly there. It is also interesting to note that the Japanese abstract artists Hasegawa Saburo and Inokuma Gen'ichiro were also represented by Willard during the mid-1950s and that Betty Parsons Gallery also represented a number of Japanese abstractionists including Okada Kenzo and Shinoda Toko. Miriam Willard herself, had studied with Carl Jung and initially wanted to be a psychoanalyst, opting instead to open a gallery because of her lack of communicative skills<sup>114</sup>. Her interest in Jung is, I think important, not only regarding the kind of artists she chose to show, but also because Jungian tradition emphasised the importance of images and archetypes over Freud's more psychoanalytic concerns or to those of European existentialism, both of which were significant in New York during the immediate post-war years for many artists. Out of her Jungian 'roots' Willard may be seen to have embraced artists with leanings towards Eastern traditions, ideas of wholeness and archetypes, and a vague 'mystical' dimension. Alexandra Munroe supports such a contention, also identifying Martha Jackson as a prominent dealer together with Miriam Willard who supported a certain 'spiritual' tendency in artists of the time.

Along with Betty Parsons, the New York dealers Miriam Willard Johnson and Martha Jackson did most to foster an Eastern 'transcendentalism' in contemporary American art. The Willard Gallery, founded in 1940, showed the works of West Coast artists Mark Tobey and Morris Graves, while Martha Jackson showed Sam Francis, Adolph Gottlieb, Karel Appel, Lee Krasner, and Antoni Tapies.<sup>115</sup>

Willard's statements also provide an important and revealing aspect of the direction of her taste and agenda. As we can read in the following remarks, like Tobey and Graves, her concerns are with the Universal and the Whole. Writing in *Direction* in 1944 she wrote that she tried to achieve:

...a kinship among men and the realisation of the oneness of mankind.<sup>116</sup>

Writing to Morris Graves she both acknowledges her own role as a seeker of the spiritual in art, and the influence of the East.

After 15 years of searching for spiritual content in painting and becoming known for it...I look more to the East for synthesis and Zen to study for our own expression of universal truths."<sup>17</sup>

Willard's close friendship with Tobey - seen in, for instance a photograph by Mary Randlett taken at Morris Graves' home in August 1949 (Fig.49) - should be seen to have extended beyond merely her role as his dealer in New York. Indeed, her support of Tobey was also intimately tied to her 'selling' of Tobey to prospective clients. The Willard Gallery's reputation and its specific agenda regarding Eastern ideas and the transcendental, must be regarded as important contributing factors to the way in which artists like Tobey came to be seen by many writers. By no means was it a one way communication either, as one can read in Tobey's numerous letters to Willard from the mid-1940s in which he often seems to mull over problems and issues which concerned him as a painter. In these senses, Willard was not only Tobey's dealer but also his public relations agent and mentor. Her mediating role between the private world of the artist and the public world of the art establishment gave her considerable power and influence in terms of how she could portray Tobey, contextualise his work, and introduce him to suitable and sympathetic buyers. All of this, I would contend, are significant factors that contributed to *constructing* Tobey's reputation and image as a transcendental painter.

vi) *Japan 1934.*

To travel is never to be merely an innocent passer-by; rather it involves the traveller in cultural, economic, social, and often political aspects of the country which he is visiting. The traveller comes to occupy different physical spaces, as well as new psychological or poetic ones through which he must relate himself and all that he is familiar with to the new place in which he finds himself. In numerous ways therefore, the traveller is also a creative agent who must constantly renegotiate himself in relation to his location. For an artist, such as Tobey, visiting a foreign country thus becomes not only an opportunity to see and paint differences, but also to re-explore the familiar.

Tobey's relationship with the 'Orient', and in particular with its aesthetic traditions of Zen and calligraphy, must be understood in the light of his first and only trip to the Far East in 1934 with his friend Bernard Leach. Although in many respects this trip may be regarded as a 'standard' artists' journey to a foreign land undertaken during the first part of this century - akin to a pilgrimage - on closer reading it also reveals interesting issues and critical positions. My strategy in this section will be primarily to trace Tobey's trip to Japan in 1934 through the primary sources of his letters and other secondary materials related to his visit, and attempt to construct a framework by which one may consider his experiences in the Far East. Moreover, I will attempt to contextualise Tobey's visit by looking at Japan's position in 1934, as well as critically examining the role of Zen Buddhism in the rise of Japanese nationalism at this time. I believe that by situating Tobey's 1934 trip within this wider orbit, the art historian is afforded the opportunity to discover new ways and means of looking at and understanding Tobey's work of this period, as well as re-examining the critical legacy of Tobey regarding Japan. One is engaged therefore in not only an *excavation* of new materials, but also a potential *realignment* of already excavated views and positions. By doing this, Tobey's relationship with Abstract Expressionism, and its broader romantic discourses, may also be further questioned.

It should be noted from the outset that although Tobey and Leach visited both China and Japan during the same journey, it will largely be to his Japan trip that I will refer in this section. This is for two main reasons; the first being that he spent a longer period of time in Japan, and secondly that he stayed for one month in a Zen Buddhist monastery near Kyoto, which has subsequently been regarded by scholars as a crucial moment in the maturation of

Tobey's art. As well as these reasons, Tobey's close links with Leach also meant that he had the opportunity to associate with significant Japanese artists such as Yanagi Soetsu and Hamada Shoji, both of whom were deeply involved at that time in the development of the Mingei crafts movement. It is also important to present a detailed analysis of his experiences in Japan in the wider context of the Tobey literature, which invariably tends to generalise his 1934 journey under a problematic 'umbrella' reference to 'the Orient'. It is only by a close and focused inquiry that a more useful picture of Tobey's time in 'the Orient' can be drawn.

The background to Tobey's 1934 trip to the Far East lies in Dartington Hall, Devon, where Tobey was an art teacher from 1930 to 1938. Dartington Hall in the nineteen thirties can perhaps best be described as a creative community of crafts-people, artists and intellectuals gathered together by Leonard and Dorothy Elmhirst. The initial idea for this community came from the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, who had talked with Leonard Elmhirst whilst he was working as an agricultural advisor at Tagore's university in Santiniketan, India. The flavour of the venture which the Elmhirsts embarked upon is best summed up in Tagore's own words, which were quoted by Leonard Elmhirst in a Dartington Hall newsletter.

We have no right to deprive growing children of direct access to nature and to all the beauty that nature lavishes upon us; the most beautiful place will not be too beautiful for your school. Why not look for a site in Devon? When you settle there you must open a craft-school of your own and be sure that weavers and potters always keep in touch with your artists. ....Try to attract some budding poets, some scapegraces whom no one else dares to acknowledge. Never mind how small the flame may be, provided they have enough of a gift to light the lamp."<sup>8</sup>

The project was to involve many artists, crafts-people and thinkers including the Orientalist Arthur Waley, Tagore himself, and the dancer Martha Graham. Tobey was the resident American artist at Dartington from 1930 and taught drawing classes there. Leach quotes from a paper Tobey presented at his first drawing class in 1930.

...I want you to feel that in this class you are, through making an effort to express your ideas on paper, freeing yourself - opening up greater powers for living the life of the artist within us all - that can see and know greater subtleties of colour and of form and wider experiences in other dimensions, than you have ever known before. To me all phenomena we observe should

result in the heightening of consciousness, day by day."<sup>9</sup>

Tobey's language is, at this early stage, already marked by strong metaphysical and spiritual leanings, perhaps a result of his Baha'i convictions. The statement implies that the very act of observing is intrinsically linked to a 'heightening of consciousness'. Already at Dartington Hall, Tobey's language was one that considered art to be a means of revelation.

The ecumenical nature of Dartington Hall nurtured Tobey's views on the relationship between art and a universal spirituality that was not tied to any one tradition, creating what one could justifiably refer to as one of the first organised attempts at an inter-religious community in Britain. Whilst walking through its extensive gardens, it was interesting to come across an old stone carving of a standing Buddha figure, most probably a depiction of the Buddha Sakyamuni judging from its *mudra* (hand positions) and plain garments. Standing before it, one could not help but imagine Tobey also gazing at it from time to time as he wandered around the gardens. It was from such a spiritually accommodating environment then, that Tobey set out for the Far East.

It was while Tobey was teaching at Dartington Hall that Dorothy Elmhirst asked him whether he and Leach would like to visit the Far East together. Leach in fact writes that towards the end of 1933 he had received an invitation from Yanagi Soetsu - the founder of the Mingei (Folk Crafts) Movement in Japan - to revisit Japan in the spring of 1934, and that it was as a result of this initial invitation that Dorothy Elmhirst asked whether he would like to be joined by Tobey. Leach accepted, and the two men set sail in the spring of 1934.

From surviving correspondence written by Tobey prior to his departure for the Far East one is made aware of Tobey's interests in Japanese culture. In a letter simply dated '1934' written as he was leaving London, Tobey writes to the Elmhirsts about his forthcoming adventure, referring to Japan in terms of 'cherry blossoms', *Noh*, and Zen Buddhism. The implication is that Tobey had familiarised himself with Japan and its culture to some degree via books and other sources. It would be useful to quote a considerable portion of the letter as it provides a good overall view of his itinerary, as well as revealing some of Tobey's interests and intentions:

Leaving London via Paris and Rome to visit galleries for consideration of Western points of view in relation to Eastern material.....Five weeks on the boat, stopping Colombo, Singapore, Hong Kong en route to Shanghai. Here Bernard leaves me and goes to Japan, I remaining providing I can find my

Chinese painter friend who is at present living there. After two weeks I will meet Bernard in Tokyo. Trips to Nara and Kyoto for cherry blossom time. Later we hope to take a house together to study brushwork, which I also hope to take up in China at times available. As Bernard will be very busy with his potter friends I hope to remain in Tokyo until the close of the Noh drama season to investigate and study the spirit of Noh and rhythmic gestures....I am hoping to contact Zen Buddhism in relation to teaching because I realise that on the West Coast when I began teaching that I was unconsciously related to Zen spirit in getting at people psychologically rather than presenting an aesthetic formula.<sup>120</sup>

Tobey interestingly highlights three particular activities which he would like to undertake in the Far East: study 'brushwork', 'investigate Noh', and 'contact Zen Buddhism', all of which he refers to again in later letters from Japan. His reference to 'brushwork' and to 'rhythmic gestures' outlines two primary elements of the 'white writing' technique, although it is interesting that rhythm at this early stage is derived from *Noh*, a dramatic form which employs forms of suppressed rhythmic gesture that are highly abstract and stylised. His association with Teng Kuei, a Chinese student at the University of Washington, from 1923 had exposed Tobey to some of the basic techniques of Chinese brushwork and his experiences in New York during this period led to his deepening exposure to Oriental ideas, particularly through the writings of Arthur Wesley Dow and Ernest F. Fenellosa. More than anything, though, the letter tells us that Tobey had read about the Orient to a considerable degree before his departure for the Far East.

In many ways therefore the 1934 trip can be seen as a journey of *confirmation* for Tobey. Indeed this is borne out in a letter Tobey sent from the 'Tatsuta Maru', dated 'April 19, 1934'.

I feel happier as I near China and Shanghai - there seems so much of value ahead. I can only hope I am going to get at it.<sup>121</sup>

Reading these lines one feels that, for Tobey, the Far East represented a vital source of wisdom or energy that could be tapped. In psychological terms it perhaps represented aspects which Tobey thought he lacked; physically going there would thus compensate for these perceived deficiencies. As well as a pleasure trip, the journey was thus also one of learning and, crucially, of *seeking*.

A week or so earlier in a letter dated 'Easter Egg Sunday', Tobey had alluded to his interests once again by referring to a book he had read:

Have read a very good book on Buddhism and only hope I'll have some experiences related to those in the little book you gave me, which always delights.<sup>122</sup>

Again, Tobey's sense of expectation is apparent, setting the overall bearing of his trip. Far from being an 'innocent' traveller, Tobey was well read and prepared.

There is little documented history about Tobey's time in China except for some small anecdotes he writes in letters from Shanghai. A particularly telling piece recalls his experiences living in the house of his old painter friend, Teng Kuei. The writing expresses Tobey's first real sense of being in an utterly different culture to his own:

Three days and three nights in a Chinese household. I feel I know more about China than if I had stayed in hotels in all the principal cities.....It is a strange rather mad house....three of us sleep in one room in which we also eat. Teng and me dress in front of every one else and the female servants don't seem to care. Relatives come and go and sometimes the sleeping arrangements get rather complicated.<sup>123</sup>

One can point to Tobey's stay in Shanghai then, as his first *encounter* with the Orient as a *real, felt* place. He had admittedly travelled through Persia and South East Asia by sea, but the experience would most certainly have been largely Western in style and tone. Only in Shanghai was Tobey finally immersed in another cultural setting, and it was, going by the above quote, perhaps rather difficult or at least amusing for him.

He produced several ink wash sketches of Hong Kong and Shanghai, which mostly allude to street scenes. In *China* of 1934 (Fig.36), we see a doorway above which hangs a large paper lantern inscribed with Tobey's early attempts at mimicking Chinese calligraphy. The style of these water based sketches expresses a sense of speed and urgency which, on one level suggest the artists hurried sketching outdoors, but on another level can be contrasted with the more geometric city images painted by fellow Americans such as Charles Sheeler or Georgia O'Keefe. Their Precisionist renderings of New York and other machine age images from the same period offer a stark contrast to Tobey's softer and more expressionistic sketches of 1934. Indeed, we can compare Tobey's 1934 sketches with his own 'version' of a Precisionist style such as his 1930 painting entitled *Interior* (Fig.37), which echoes in its straight lines and perspective, Georgia O'Keefe's images from the mid-nineteen twenties. In his 1934 sketches there is a resistance to the rigid Modernist renderings

of the Precisionists; rather Tobey was searching for an original style which leant heavily on *brushstroke* as the primary means of expression. In Tobey's images the city is a flurry of activity, almost a blur, whilst for Sheeler or O'Keefe it was imagined in terms of its material modernity. Tobey's city scenes are in this sense primarily evocations of *human activity* on the city-scape rather than of its structures, and thus painted loosely and with maximum expressive emotion.

Although Tobey and Leach arrived in Shanghai together, Leach set sail alone for Japan after a few weeks. Leach mentions that he sailed on first to meet his Japanese friends and 'prepare a programme for him (Tobey)', a statement which suggests that Leach may have introduced Tobey to the Zen monastery in which he eventually stayed when he arrived in Japan. This would most probably have been through the connections of Leach's many Japanese potter friends. Tobey followed on after Leach and arrived in Japan sometime during late May or early June of 1934<sup>24</sup>. A postcard sent to Leonard Elmhirst dated '9.6.34' gives us a good description of Tobey's early impressions of Japan:

Japan is a beautiful place after China. Man and nature seemed to have reached an equilibrium in Nara where I spent all of today. Mountains there are beautiful and farmlands beautifully farmed. My delight here seems to be most architectural and crafts. Bernard is 100 miles south of Tokyo potting. I don't know when I'll see him. A big *Noh* celebration and dance on Sunday. I really am stunned by the craftsmanship here. Hope you are happy and interested.<sup>125</sup>

After his experiences in China, Japan seems to have provided Tobey with a sense of nature and naturalness that affected him deeply. He seems to have been particularly impressed by the quality of rural crafts, perhaps its detail and humbleness a reaction to the loudness and chaos of Shanghai from where he had just come. Indeed, Tobey's close friendship with Leach exposed him to the context of craft as an aesthetic and cultural form in Japan, affecting the way he saw its culture. We know from his letters that Tobey went to Mashiko, for the opening of the kilns there, where he saw Leach and Hamada Shoji potting. He notes that it was a 'very successful firing', with 'only about 5% loss', suggesting that he had remained there watching the entire process. Whilst Tobey remained South in Kyoto during late May and June, Leach stayed at the home of Yanagi Soetsu, founder of the Mingei movement in Tokyo.<sup>126</sup>

Tobey's initial and rather romantic impressions are, though, quite different in tone to his letters written from Tokyo which reveal a rather more critical eye. Tokyo seems to have impressed Tobey as a jumbled mix of Western tastes and 'traditional' Japanese life; a clash of the modern and the traditional. Interestingly, and perhaps rather tellingly, Tobey hints in the letters that he prefers the 'old' Japan behind the modern. For instance, he writes in characteristic note style:

....modern girls breezing down the streets in their high heels - printed Western dresses fluttering - their small white circular caps just covering their left ear. Symbols of a modern emancipation but again must I like the wooden facades of the buildings where left behind, they return to the patriarchal arena of their private life.<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps Tobey had not expected to see such a degree of Westernisation in Japan. There is a slightly melancholic tone in his writing, a hope that modernisation would not consume everything, much like a nineteenth century Romantic yearning for the Middle Ages. As we read in the following excerpt, Tobey clearly felt that the 'old' Japan had much to offer and challenge the modernising West:

...many huge department stores full of hideous bad modern decoration, grand mosaic walls struck through with slably sun rays where ornamental copper and glass chandeliers cling, sticking out in stuck out clipped clumping clusters as though desperate to achieve an effect. But on a counter, delicate bamboo objects still speak of superior skill - black and red lacquer not to be denied....<sup>18</sup>

One begins to sense reading his letters that Tobey's Japan, his ideal, was not the rapidly modernising place he encountered in Tokyo but rather an older, more traditional and arguably romanticised Japan which was fast disappearing. A drawing entitled *Japanese Figures* from 1934 for instance, (Fig. 35) shows two traditional-clad figures. Once again he mentions a craft object made in bamboo as an example of what he thought represented a 'truer' Japan. In contrast to the manufactured ornaments made from glass and metal, Tobey points to the delicate, handmade object in natural material. For Tobey, as for the Romantics and the Arts and Crafts Movement in Europe before him, craft represented a final stand against an encroaching and impersonal modernity.

It is interesting to compare Tobey's ideal of Japan with those of the Mingei movement which Leach was deeply involved in, for they also advocated an essentially romantic view of

Japan as enduringly rural and craft-centred. For both Tobey and the Mingei Group, modernisation could only be successful if it took account of Japan's indigenous spiritual and craft traditions. What Tobey wanted to find in Japan was not to be found in the modern urban clatter of Tokyo, but in the craft-led traditions of the countryside, and this position allied him with the ideas of Mingei. Again it is significant to identify his distance from the Precisionists in America, and their celebratory respect for the Modern in the guise of modern buildings and machines.

Interestingly, his suspicion for the Modern does not seem to have deterred him from painting cities such as New York throughout his career. As a foreigner in Japan Tobey felt that he could defend *its* indigenous traditions, whilst adopting a modern outlook in the West. The underlying discourse here is classically Orientalist, in the sense that non-Western cultures could remain 'traditional', preserving their crafts and religions, whilst the West develops industrially - albeit as a 'bad' influence. Tobey's 'Japan' was clearly an older, historical one, and not the rapidly modernising place he encountered in Tokyo. A brief look through newspapers from 1934 reveal that the Japanese government was indeed aware of this 'traditional' perception. In one article about the efforts of the Bureau of Tourism written just prior to Tobey's arrival in Japan, we read:

The Bureau has hitherto made a number of pictures with a view to introducing Japan to foreigners and inducing them to make trips to Japan and the Orient. Most of those pictures however, showed native customs and characteristics of Japanese cities and villages with special emphasis on the beauty of scenery. In view of the fact that such pictures would give foreigners the impression that Japan is still backward in progress, and using this as a means to attract foreign tourists, the Bureau of Tourist Industry has decided to produce the kind of films which would show that Japan is just as progressive and civilised as any of the modern countries of Europe or America.<sup>129</sup>

Tobey's apparent longing for a Japan of traditional folk living and crafts was thus actively being challenged by the Japanese government during this period, who wished instead to show Japan's sense of modernity and equal standing alongside Western nations as it gradually asserted its political and military power in Asia. What is particularly interesting about the above example is the recognition that the West would perceive Japan to be 'backward in progress' as a result of pictures which portrayed Japan's native customs and scenery. Rather than adopting a passive, accepting stance towards this Western gaze, the Bureau of Tourist Industry at least, wished to change this relationship by emphasising

different perceptions and images. The Japan that Tobey imagined was not that which was officially promoted.

Tobey's descriptions of Tokyo are interesting for another reason, providing us with what can be described as a literary form of 'white writing'. His letters are often difficult to read due to the speed with which he wrote them (see Appendix 1), but they give us strong, poetic descriptions of Tokyo life with all of its chaos and tempo:

A mixed up town with mixed up clothes....remnants of Samurai walking down man and master hurrying through lanes - hill printed and banner flung strung with black and red clustered characters or spilling their meaning through rapid grass hiragana characters blood without bones. Radios squawking or guzzling gaggle....Sitting at night on the tatami grass matting the sliding doors open to the small gardens faced by a stone lantern. Beyond the high fence the 'getaz' clatter under the arching bough of the pomegranate tree.....light vermilion flames in the fading light of day.<sup>130</sup>

Often making little sense, these rapidly written sketches can almost be seen as preparatory mental sketches for later 'white writing' images. Their highly tense structure, without any firm grammatical form or order disperse a freedom which is often paralleled in his later paintings. And yet, in the following lines from the same letter he slows considerably, turning his attention to the immediate environment:

The simple straight lines of the room and absence of cumbersome furniture are quieting and the silence which penetrates the room and garden is the same. The quietude of your area set amidst trees - and softly writhing bamboo.<sup>131</sup>

The contrast between these two tones, focusing on the bustling world outside and the contemplative interior, further elaborates on Tobey's contrasting of Modernity with 'tradition'. The city is described largely in terms of its 'noise', whilst the environment of his room is marked by its 'silence', both literally in terms of a lack of noise but also metaphorically in its sparseness. One is offered a useful parallel in Rudyard Kipling's observations of the Kiyomizu Potteries in Kyoto, in which, like Tobey, he contrasts an image of Japan as 'idyll' with a corrupt and advancing Europe.

Somewhere in dirty England men dream of craftsmen working under conditions which shall help and not stifle the half-formed thought. Would they have their dreams realised, let them see how they make pottery in Japan, each man sitting on a snowy mat with loveliness of line and colour within

arms length of him, while with downcast eyes he - splashes in the conventional diaper of a Satsuma vase as fast as he can!<sup>132</sup>

Tobey's letters from Kyoto in July, prior to his departure for the Zen monastery also provide an interesting account of his experiences and thoughts. Most of his time there seems to have been spent practising and watching archery, touring temples and attending *Noh* performances - which he continued to do until his death. Archery appealed greatly to Tobey, who considered it to represent an art form very close in spirit to Zen Buddhism. After observing archers and spear fighters training at the Hall of Martial Virtues Tobey writes:

I believe there is an underlying philosophy and science in this aspect of Zen for the archery and spear dancing is found in Zen. If I could get a hold of this side of life I might begin to realise that side of art and teaching I have always wanted and not have to depend entirely on intuition....I feel us in the West need concentration and a bodily form onto which to maintain the precious tension of our own energy.<sup>133</sup>

Tobey refers to archery as the thing he most wanted to find in Japan, a physical practice that could help him develop concentration and energy and provide him with a basis for 'intuition'. It is significant that Tobey's experiences of archery appear some twenty years before Eugen Herrigel's classic account of archery was published in its English translation in 1953 as Zen in the Art of Archery, a book which was widely read by artists interested in Zen, including Tobey. The German edition appeared in 1948, some nineteen years after Herrigel left Japan after his stay there between 1924-29. The intense restraint of this activity and its austere forms led him to contemplate taking it up. Writing to Dorothy Elmirst he ponders:

If I can get something from this I'll take up archery or fencing for a while.....sitting in the larger mat covered room watching the archers shoot through the sunlit mist at a target under a roofed wall 100 yards away. The style impressed me!<sup>134</sup>

Tobey also writes in some detail of his encounters with *Noh* in Kyoto. This too, like archery, inspired him. In particular he was attracted to its sense of movement and dance:

Sunday I saw three performances of *Noh*. In one called the 'Heron' the 77 year old founder of *Noh* here danced the part of the Heron....Practically no action and yet plenty of it. The Heron hardly moved and yet showed the

'emperor how to fly to heaven'.<sup>135</sup>

In these small observations Tobey slowly reveals important thoughts, which accumulate to affect his later work. Through these cultural encounters with various forms of traditional Japanese art, it is as though he were excavating those elements that he wanted to find. In this sense, they served to *confirm* an image of Japan that was radically different to his own culture and thus also present appropriate conditions from which he could renew his art.

vii) *'White Writing' as Oriental.*

The majority of writers choose to see Tobey's 1934 journey as an aesthetic and philosophical pilgrimage which was to contribute strongly to his later development of the 'white writing' technique. Indeed, if one browses through the literature, the linking of his 1934 trip with the development of 'white writing' becomes strongly evident.

In a 1951 issue of The Art Digest Tobey's assimilation of Oriental calligraphy and his visit to Japan and China in 1934 are cited as the "impetus to his so called style of 'white writing'". In a similar vein Paul Cummings writes about Tobey's 1934 trip thus:

In 1934 he (Tobey) and Bernard Leach visited Aden, Colombo, Hong Kong, and Shanghai, after which Tobey set out alone for Japan. This trip significantly affected his thinking and his art, especially the instruction he received in calligraphy at a Zen monastery outside Kyoto. In England, in 1935, he painted the first of his 'white writing' pictures, which synthesised graphic insights while travelling.<sup>136</sup>

Arthur Dahl is even more explicit in relating Tobey's Oriental experiences to 'white writing', almost implying in his commentary that Tobey somehow 'received' the 'white writing' technique in a semi-mystical manner. Referring to his Oriental trip he writes:

This experience seemed to crystallise all the ideas and impressions he had been accumulating over the years. His previous work had been in a variety of styles and media, but was not disciplined and cohesive, tending towards what Muriel Draper called 'intellectualised philosophy in paint'. But one evening in 1935, after he had returned to Dartington Hall, he began to improvise a little picture very different from his others, a mesh of whitish lines on a brown background criss-crossing in a jumble of movement, somewhat like the flight of his imaginary fly. With sudden intuition he realised that he had been using the Chinese calligraphic impulse with a vision of the energy of the city, but

that the result was occidental and was, in fact, New York. He called the painting *Broadway Norm*.<sup>137</sup>

Kosme de Baranano, writing in an exhibition catalogue, refers to Tobey's friend Teng Kuei who first exposed him to Oriental calligraphy and writes:

...in 1934, he visited that calligrapher in Shanghai and afterwards spent one month in a monastery in Kyoto where he was initiated into the mastery of the brush. There he discovered the magic of the line that is never closed, of the philosophy that can transport a line. This experience provided him with a conception of the world and a style of life that he maintained from that moment on.<sup>138</sup>

From these statements, a certain pattern emerges that links Tobey's 1934 trip to the development of his 'white writing' technique. The 'Orient' becomes the birth-place or origin of this new technique, a distant land on the 'periphery' of European modernism to which Tobey journeyed. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the 'Orient' is referred to in terms of its inspirational effects; in other words its relation to Tobey revolves largely around what Tobey *gained from going there*. The formula is thus one of cause and effect; Tobey visited the 'Orient' and as a result of this he 'founded' 'white writing'. This may be referred to as a discourse of 'influence' from one culture to another, assuming an unproblematic link between the 'Orient' as the site of 'discovery' and its 'transplanting' into Tobey's work. It is a pattern of looking at Tobey's 1934 trip which, I would contend, remains the standard 'version' that most writers have adopted. And yet, by seeing his 1934 trip as primarily an aesthetic pilgrimage, what do these writers ignore? What other issues can one identify in his 1934 trip? Apart from providing Tobey with a source for his artistic development, what can one say about his Oriental sojourn?

There are at least two important aspects which can be considered and which have largely been ignored by Tobey scholars; one is a more detailed attempt to explore where he actually stayed in Japan, which Zen monastery he lived in and what he did there. If, as many writers suggest, Tobey's experiences at the monastery was crucial to the evolution of his work, a more thorough analysis of it is necessary. The other aspect is a broader analysis of the historical and political contexts within Japan at the time of his visit. I would contend that by exploring these *detailed* aspects in greater depth, one may also begin to reveal some of the reasons why Tobey has been considered a particularly religious or transcendental artist related to the 'Orient'.

viii) *The Zen Monastery.*

The issue of Tobey's stay in a Zen monastery is an issue which has attracted little serious research. In relation to its perceived significance for the development of Tobey's mature artistic style it seems surprising that no substantial research has been done into his time in the Zen monastery.<sup>139</sup> Perhaps this can partially be explained by Japan's geographical distance from the major centres of Tobey research in Europe and America, as well as by the fact that much archival material relating to his 1934 trip - such as Tobey's travel notes - have been lost<sup>140</sup>.

Eliza Rathbone's detailed catalogue essay in Mark Tobey, City Paintings, from 1984<sup>141</sup> provides a good example of the lack of thorough research thus far into Tobey's Zen monastic experiences. Rathbone includes in her notes a vague reference to the identity of the monastery, which she obtained from reading Tobey's travel notes. It would be useful to quote her footnote here, for it provides one of the few references to the name of the monastery I have come across in the English language literature:

In Tobey's notes (the only place where the place or location of the monastery is recorded) it looks to be called *Emperfuji*, but the word is difficult to decipher with any certainty.<sup>142</sup>

Research at the National Register for Buddhist Temples in Japan confirmed that there was no temple by the name of *Emperfuji* in Japan. David Clarke's contention that Tobey stayed at a monastery called *Enryaku-ji* may also be considered mistaken in the light of my findings.

The name *Empuku-ji* though, surfaced from two sources, one being a letter written by Tobey from Kyoto (see Appendix 1), currently in the Dartington Hall archives, and the other being a catalogue introduction from an exhibition entitled 'Pacific Northwest Artists and Japan' held at The National Museum of Osaka, Japan in 1982.<sup>143</sup> Furthermore, inquiries in Japan confirmed that *Empuku-ji* was a Zen sect temple located on the periphery of Kyoto in Yawata. Both of these pieces of information match Tobey's own notes, which clearly states that he stayed in a Zen monastery near Kyoto. On the important question of where Tobey

stayed therefore, a surprising lack of rigour is reflected in published materials and catalogues.

We can infer that the Tobey letter was written on July 11th, the day before his departure for the monastery. The letter is the second of a two part letter detailing Tobey's various experiences in Kyoto, and offers the only written evidence by Tobey which directly links him to *Empuku-ji*, that I have come across. He writes:

Tomorrow I leave for *Empukuji* monastery to live alone in a special cottage....Here I bring my own food - cook and clean my room. The abbot says I can concentrate my mind while working....The monks rise at 3.00 am and retire at 9.30.....I shall hate the lonely nights with 1,000,000 bugs, mosquitoes etc. But I'm anxious to try. If I can get something from this I'll take up archery or fencing for a while....<sup>144</sup>

We can infer that Tobey must have visited the monastery prior to writing the above letter for he refers to the abbot and seems familiar with the basic routines of the monks. Although his nervousness is apparent, he clearly wanted to try living in a monastic environment.

I visited *Empuku-ji* during the spring of 1998 to see whether any archival materials relating to Tobey's stay there existed. Unfortunately the monastery do not keep an organised archive of their visitors, but I was able to learn about its recent history talking with the monks there. Tobey refers to staying in a 'cottage' in the monastery's grounds, and my inquiries into its existence confirmed its existence, although it is now destroyed, having been deserted since the late 1930s. A number of historical facts provided further information about why Tobey may have chosen to stay at *Empuku-ji*, the most significant being that one of the abbots of *Empuku-ji*, Kozuki Tesshu, had in November of 1932 built a *Gaijin Zendo*, or Foreigners' Zendo, in its grounds (see Appendix 2). A Zendo is a building in which one practices zazen meditation. Although this *Gaijin Zendo* was only used for a short period of time and is now destroyed, its presence at *Empuku-ji* further supports the archival material that Tobey stayed there. The building of such a centre for non-Japanese practitioners seems particularly unusual considering the rise of nationalism in Japan during this period, although it is perhaps more easily understood if one considers Kozuki Tesshu's considerable international activities as a Zen priest, travelling to various Asian countries, and his academic affiliations with the *Rin zaishu-Daigaku* (Rinzai Sect University), of which he was appointed president in 1923<sup>145</sup>.

In a 1934 article written in *The Japan Times* about Zen and *Empuku-ji*, Helen M.

Hayes provides a rare contemporary account of the monastery's affiliations with foreigners. Considering that Tobey most probably entered *Empuku-ji* on July 12th, Hayes' account, which appeared in *The Japan Times* on July 15th is particularly important.

One thing Zenji Kozuki (Abbott) has realised is that a great many Westerners are attracted to Buddhism and that Japan climatically, politically, and geographically is the logical centre for making Buddhist learning available to the West. Zen, he feels, is particularly suited to the Western mentality with its ceaseless urge toward activity and desire to dominate. Though he is not a propagandist, he has, with the aid of many of his supporters, set himself to provide quarters suitable for foreigners, where they may study Zen under favourable conditions. He does not expect or desire to make monks or nuns of those who come to him as students; but if they wish to learn what he has to give in the Zen manner, he is eager to give, hoping only that they may be happier for it. There is a Zen life for the Japanese, if they wish it; foreigners, he feels, should have equal opportunities.<sup>146</sup>

Hayes' favourable comments about *Empuku-ji* and Abbott Kozuki provides further evidence why Tobey chose to study there. Indeed, one may speculate that Tobey stayed at the monastery at the same time as Hayes, and that he read her account of it. It is significant to mention that Hayes' article was the only one about Zen to appear in *The Japan Times* during the months of May, June and July of 1934.

*Empuku-ji* monastery is situated among low hills and is surrounded by lush green forests, supporting Tobey's own notes which suggest a wooded, rural area. Rathbone quotes from Tobey's now lost travel notes the following description of his time in the monastery:

Japanese vision which takes into account such (small) forms of life - gives them the dignity of a kakemono.....it is this awareness to nature and everything she manifests which seems to characterise the Japanese spirit. An awareness of the smallest detail of her vastness as though the whole were contained therein and that from a leaf, an insect, a universe appeared.<sup>147</sup>

One finds further documented correlations in Tobey's 1958 essay in the *College Art Journal*, entitled 'Japanese Traditions and Japanese Art', in which he refers to a *sumi-ink* dragon painted on a ceiling of a Kyoto temple:

When I saw a great dragon painted in free brush style on a ceiling in a temple

in Kyoto I thought of the same rhythmical power of Michelangelo - the rendering of the form was different - the swirling clouds accompanying his majestic flight in the heavenly sphere were different but the same power of spirit pervaded both.<sup>148</sup>

Interestingly, on the ceiling of a smaller sub temple at *Empuku-ji* there is a *sumi*-ink painted dragon picture (see Appendix 2) that we may infer was the one that Tobey refers to. In addition, *Empuku-ji*'s sister monastery *Myoshin-ji* in Western Kyoto is also famous for its painted ceiling depicting a great dragon. Kozuki Tesshu had, before moving to *Empuku-ji*, been the Abbot there and thus it is highly likely that Tobey may have travelled there on the advice of Kozuki to see it. Whether this was the same image which Tobey refers to, though, cannot be confirmed.

The monastery is still an active centre of Zen practice with about forty monks living there, including a young German monk who kindly showed me around during my visit. In a biographical account of the Zen monk Nakahara Nantembo (1839-1923) who entered *Empuku-ji* for training in 1857, one finds a reference to the monastery as being particularly strict. Matthew Welch writes:

Well known for its strictness, *Empuku-ji* seemed a cold and friendless place, even for the determined young monk. 'When I entered the *sôdo*', Nantembo later recalled, 'I stole a glance to the side and saw white eyes and hateful-looking faces - even now it makes me shudder.'<sup>149</sup>

It was also exciting to discover that the monastery has always been closely related to the Tea Ceremony (*Chado*), and that many of the abbots and monks practised and still practice *sumi*-ink painting, flower arranging and other aesthetic activities. Consequently, the monastery is full of pictures and calligraphies, including many *ensô*, or *sumi* images of round circles, which Tobey writes about in his recollections of staying at the monastery:

When I resided at the Zen monastery I was given a *sumi*-ink painting of a large free brush circle to meditate upon. What was it? Day after day I would look at it.<sup>150</sup>

From the various quotes I have offered above and from actually visiting the monastery, one begins to sense how Tobey might have spent his time there. In his most explicit writing about Zen, published in the College Art Journal in the Fall of 1958, Tobey

tells us a number of things he did at the monastery. He tells us that he tried zazen meditation:

I have attempted meditation in a Zen monastery and have talked with a few abbots but still I have never experienced Satori or Enlightenment and I doubt if any other American has.<sup>151</sup>

He also writes about looking at a sumi-ink painting of an *ensô*, or round circle, an experience that encouraged Tobey to ask profound questions about himself and the universe. Out of these various experiences Tobey seems to have drawn certain conclusions, or at least come to certain points of view as regards the role of 'spirit' in the creative process. For example, he offers his views on the nature of Japanese art:

When I was in Japan in the early 1930s it seemed to me that in Japanese art (not including the westernised variety) there were two strong characteristics: concentration and consecration. That all of nature did not have to be shown as in a stuffed bird, hence there was more life for the imagination.<sup>152</sup>

In these observations Tobey draws from his time at the monastery, highlighting two characteristics which could apply equally well to the Tea Ceremony or sweeping leaves from the garden. It is interesting that he deems it necessary to mention that the kind of Japanese art he refers to is not of the 'westernised variety', suggesting that he was familiar with *Yôga* or Western-style Japanese painting of the time. By doing so, Tobey distances himself from what he clearly sees as a 'copied' form of Japanese art and by implication claims that his experiences are somehow more 'authentic'. And yet underlying Tobey's understanding is also a passionate universalist spiritual conviction that matured as a result of his experiences at the Zen monastery. He writes revealingly that:

A few decades ago we went to the galleries to see herons in the marshes, winter scenes at twilight, apples on a table. Nowadays we go to see lines, squares and great squashes of paint. Much that passes as abstract art whether in Asia or the US and Europe is not necessarily related to Simplicity, Directness, and Profundity. Perhaps if we omit the last word, the other two tally. That abstract art has in many ways become an Academy appears certain. But somewhere in this and in what we saw before, there were a few paintings that radiated the spirit and it is these we seek, no matter what garment is worn.<sup>153</sup>

Tobey clearly believed that there was something more that painting could achieve; he refers

to it as 'spirit' and as 'profundity'. Significantly he does not reject non-abstract art as somehow less spiritual, or claim that abstract art is more 'pure' than arts of representation, but accepts the possibility that within all kinds of art there is the potential for paintings to express 'something more'.

The significant difference between Tobey's elucidation and Zen thought though, is what Gombrich calls the 'cultural complex' of Zen painting which gives it *specific contexts* for generating meaning. Tobey's reference to 'spirit' rather emerges from a universalist discourse that collapses the *differences* between the cultural complex of Zen and that of Western abstraction. His reference to a culturally singular 'spirit' does not accommodate the potential differences which the term may hold in different contexts; to simplistically apply a Zen 'spirit' in very different contexts is thus problematic. Tobey's formulation may be identified in much writing about the inter-action between Western abstraction and Zen during the 1950s, also unproblematically considering Zen as a term of universal 'spiritual' appeal. Underlying such discourses is a questionable Orientalism which implicitly assumes the 'West' to represent the site from which meaning ultimately emanates, relegating Zen to a status of 'other' from which useful terms can be appropriated and assimilated. A tension may thus be identified between what Tobey 'found' in Japan as regards Zen 'spirit' and its *interpretation* and *reception* in his own cultural setting.

*ix) Japanese Contexts in 1934.*

As part of a broader hermeneutical approach which understands that images and artists exist within complex social, political and economic networks, it is necessary to consider Tobey's 1934 trip not simply as an innocent pilgrimage, but also as a journey embedded in specific historical contexts which were unfolding at that time around him. Tobey's obvious interest in Zen Buddhism and other traditional art forms can be reevaluated in different ways if one recognises the appropriation of such traditions by nationalists and militarists in Japan during the 1930s. This is not to ally Tobey with particular political interests, but rather to respect the 'immediate' histories around him at this time. A simplistic reductionistic model of 'Oriental influence' may thus be challenged, situating Tobey within a broader context.

The period of the nineteen thirties in Japan can be considered as a time of developing nationalistic thought that was eventually to lead to total war in 1941. It would be fair to say that during these years the domestic political situation reflected a growing conflict between, on the one hand party political government and, on the other, rule by militaristic factions who advocated a return to traditional Japanese values such as reverence for the Emperor and agrarian living. The reasons for the rise of such militaristic-nationalist sentiments are complex, echoing both international and national developments, although one may perhaps identify three particularly strong elements.

The first was increasing pressure on Japan by the Western powers and China following the First World War. At the peace talks in Versailles some of the Western powers certainly had intentions to restrict any further Japanese advances, and such intentions were mirrored in The Four Power Consortium and the Washington Disarmament Conference. The Chinese were also determined to resist any further Japanese advances, and anti-Japanese feelings grew sharply in China.

The second factor was a growing domestic climate of social and economic discontent in Japan. With the end of the First World War, demand for military goods declined, sharply affecting the price of steel and putting thousands of industrial workers out of work. As Western merchants re-entered the Chinese market, they also pushed many Japanese businesses out, leading to falling trade. With the added effects of a worldwide depression and weak economic leadership, many smaller businesses collapsed and rural regions suffered, as rice prices soared and growth was retarded.

The third, and perhaps most significant element, was the rise of nationalist societies, often secret and prepared to use violence to achieve their ends. Richard Storry writes that by

1936 there were nearly 750 such associations in Japan, although only a handful would have had any substantial power or influence. Groups such as *Yuzonsha* nurtured nationalist messiahs such as Kita Ikki and Okawa Shumei, whose writings came to be regarded with almost religious awe by younger military nationalists. Okawa, one of *Yuzonsha*'s founders in 1920 recalled later:

Those were the days when countless organisations, large and small, were established, some being radical organisations with democratic or anarchist principles, others advocating socialist or communist principles. At the same time we believed the true reformation to be that carried out from a genuinely Japanese standpoint. Therefore we considered ourselves the pine trees and chrysanthemums of Japan and decided on the name *Yuzonsha*.<sup>154</sup>

It is significant that despite the broad ranging ideologies Okawa cites as underlying these organisations, he refers to 'a genuinely Japanese standpoint' from which they also wished to act. Just what constituted this 'genuine Japanese standpoint', and how did these societies incorporate them into their practices? Clyde and Beers' description of the *Yuzonsha* provides a good general template of many of the themes which many nationalistic societies of the time embraced:

Theirs was a program of so called reform to be under the Emperor's guidance and under the protection of the military power. They proposed to launch their utopia with a temporary suspension of the Constitution, dissolution of the Diet, and a declaration of martial law. The new administration to be set up, essentially military, was to promote expropriation of private property in excess of given limits, redistribution of land, and policies of expansion abroad.....Their appeals often rested on the theory of Japanese racial supremacy and on denunciations of city capitalists and Westernisation.<sup>155</sup>

The growth of nationalistic societies such as the *Yuzonsha* after 1918 may also be broadly categorised into two different strands: on the one hand were those who opposed all ideas and programs which favoured any revision of Japan's traditional social and political order, whilst on the other were groups that were less reactionary and who supported a program of national 'reconstruction'. It was inevitably this second 'reconstructive' strand that was the more effective in gaining popular support, boosted by the publication of important books such as Kita Ikki's *Nihon Kaizo Hoan Taiko* (An Outline Plan for the Reconstruction of the Japanese State) which advocated opposition to perceived subversive activities and a reform plan which was thought to make better sense for Japan. Significantly

Kita's programme favoured a coup d'état by an enlightened few that would seize power and install the Emperor as the supreme power in Japan. As well as various measures to curb what Kita considered to be the 'evil system' of capitalism, he also developed ideas on expansionism which he thought would alleviate Japan's growing population pressures and result in greater economic wealth. Significantly he gave considerable attention to the military as an essential element in his reform plans, citing that it was servicemen who, by fighting for the nation, would logically have a greater sense of loyalty to the nation. The anti-Modernist stance of such groups during this period reflects what may be termed an 'amplified' version of the romantic agenda espoused by Tobey and the *Mingei* group. Undoubtedly, an underlying feature of many nationalist groups rhetoric was a utopian romanticism that wished to see Japan assert its historical Imperial Shintoist role in Asia.

By 1927, when Japan's economic depression worsened, the popularity and strength of such 'reform' groups increased greatly, particularly attracting a younger generation of military officers who organised themselves for action rather than for propaganda. Secret societies such as the *Sakura Kai* (Cherry Blossom Society), organised in 1930 by army officers, were prepared to resort to the use of force to initiate the reconstruction of the Japanese state. It was this Society which played a crucial role in plotting the Manchurian Incident of September 1931, which allowed the Japanese Kwantung Army to seize control of the Manchurian provinces of China. Although the action was opposed by civilian officials and the Emperor, the decisive and successful actions of the army in China buried any critical voices amidst a wave of popular support. Brown writes in the following way of the effects of the Manchurian incident:

Although the young officers did not succeed in establishing the kind of regime they had envisaged, the Army itself was placed in a much stronger political position, and government thereafter tended to adopt an even more uncompromising attitude in the management of foreign affairs. <sup>156</sup>

One of the most significant outcomes of the 1931 incident can perhaps be said to have been the declining significance of party political government and the resultant rise of the military as a real source of political power. Parallel to this development was thus also an increasingly expansionist foreign policy which saw a greater Japan as a reality worth fighting for. On the domestic front too, there were growing signs of tension. In 1932, Inouye Junnosuke, former Finance Minister and Dan Takuma, Managing Director of Mitsui were murdered, and on May 15th the Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi was shot dead by ultranationalists angered

at the Prime Minister's weak response to the situation in Manchuria. In June of 1932, the new American ambassador in Japan, Joseph Grew, wrote in his diary the following, capturing a mood of growing uncertainty:

...one thing is certain and that is that the military are distinctly running the Government and that no step can be taken without their approval.<sup>157</sup>

By February of 1933 Japan notified The League of Nations of its intention to withdraw, defying international opinion. The notification document is interesting in so far as Japan identifies her actions in China as essentially peace preserving actions and thus in accordance with the spirit of the League; although clearly from the League's point of view Japan's actions constituted an aggression. Having thus extracted itself from the international arena, the political history of Japan can be seen to have further supported the rise of military-fascism. By the time of Tobey's visit to Japan in 1934, one can assert with considerable confidence that the political situation in Japan reflected one of heightened nationalism and an increasingly aggressive foreign policy. It was, in short, the prelude to total war. Indeed, we read in an essay published in 1934 by John E. Orchard the following:

Japan today stands isolated, condemned by world opinion, withdrawn from the League of Nations, feared as a menace to the peace of the world. Military operations are being conducted on the mainland of Asia, and relations with Russia are strained. A trade war with Great Britain is in progress. At home there is much talk of conflict with the United States.<sup>158</sup>

Indeed, in the May 29th supplement of the Japan Times celebrating German-Japanese relations, which appeared after Tobey's arrival in Japan, we may further discern signs of Japan's moves towards this direction. Under the headline, 'Germany and Japan Linked in Friendship' are the flags of Germany, Japan and a Nazi swastika. Below this arrangement we see two national representations of landscape; Japan is depicted by Mount Fuji and cherry blossoms whilst Germany is pictured with an old Bavarian castle amidst thick forests. On another page we see images of young Japanese schoolchildren mountain hiking, an image that is contrasted with pictures of German children of the Hitler Youth.

Encouraged by a particular international situation, a weakening domestic economic situation and the growth of numerous nationalistic societies, Japan faced a particularly difficult time during the 1930s. In many senses we may see this general movement as a reaction away from the enthusiastic Westernisation policies carried out since the Meiji Restoration. In response to this, one may also contend that Japan underwent a moment of

looking back to the past in order to find appropriate bases from which to reconstruct itself. Hence, we see many of the nationalistic societies growing during this period calling for reverence for the Emperor, for ancient Shinto, for the land and for 'traditional' forms of thought such as *Bushido*, or the Way of the Samurai. Japanese nationalism of this period thus opposed Western Modernity precisely by adopting a conservative discourse of 'a traditional past'. The artistic avant-garde was pushed aside or outlawed in favour of 'easier' art forms which could be assimilated into their wider nationalistic objectives.

Within this complex orbit, Tobey's visit to Japan becomes more complex. If one recognises the way that many nationalistic groups sought to appropriate forms of so called 'traditional' Japanese thought such as Zen and its constituent practices such as *Bushido* into their discourses, Tobey's experiences of Zen in 1934 cannot be regarded in simple, aesthetic terms. This is not to ally Tobey with a nationalistic position, but rather to situate his Japanese experiences within a broader context. An unproblematic acceptance of Tobey's Zen interests is insufficient, collapsing the complex issues of the period into a simplistic and romantic discourse about 'influence' or 'spiritual pilgrimage'. It is necessary to acknowledge the wider nationalistic discourses of the period which, in their often romantic calls for a 'traditional' Japanese identity, paralleled the position of Tobey and his colleagues in the Mingei circle.

*x) Zen and Nationalism.*

Just as recent European scholarship has begun to explore the complex relationships between philosophers such as Heidegger and the Nazi era, so too in Japan scholars have recently begun to look into the controversial relationships between Zen Buddhism and Japanese nationalism before and during the Second World War. Although material in Japanese has been consistently produced, up until recently there has been relatively little written in English; a major contribution in this respect was *Rude Awakenings. Zen, the Kyoto School, and the Question of Nationalism*, edited by James Heisig and John Maraldo and published in 1995 after a conference in the preceding year. Although focusing predominantly on the Kyoto School of Zen philosophy and in particular the writings of Nishida Kitaro, the book also explores some of the complex issues surrounding Japan in the nineteen thirties and Zen. What attitudes did Zen have towards the Pacific War? How did Zen priests act during the war? How were Zen ideas appropriated by nationalists? These and other questions are posed, and answers offered.

In many respects the book challenges Western images of Zen, as a-political, pure and

In many respects the book challenges Western images of Zen, as a-political, pure and aesthetic, rather situating it within the political and social realities of the nineteen thirties and forties and questioning its political stances. Taking this approach though, one must remain aware of one's own critical stance in relation to Zen, for my intention is certainly not to prove that Zen was or was not nationalistic during the period in question. Rather, by adopting a critical position it becomes possible to recognise the fluid nature of Zen as a historical discourse. Robert Sharf provides a useful perspective:

It should now be evident that the issue is not whether Zen is 'inherently nationalistic', since the particular notions of 'Zen' and 'nationalism' invoked here are both very much contemporary constructs. Zen, like any other school of Buddhism, has had a long history of allying itself with state interests, resisting the state only when its own material interests were at stake. Moreover, Zen has had to reinvent itself repeatedly in the face of shifting political, social and economic circumstances.<sup>19</sup>

The purpose of the present analysis is thus not to try and identify any 'inherent' nationalism within Zen Buddhism, but merely to recognise that Zen, like any institution which exists within a social environment, changes over time. That Tobey was engaging with it during this particularly ambivalent period makes such an analysis all the more important.

If one browses through the pages of Buddhist journals such as *Zengaku-kenkyu*, *Daijozen*, and *Daihorin*, produced before and during the Pacific war it becomes apparent that elements within Zen Buddhism actively supported a nationalistic or militaristic cause. The Buddhist philosopher and historian, Ichikawa Hakugen has referred to this as 'Imperial Way Zen'. We find a good example of this in the writings of Iida Toin, who was a prominent Soto Zen figure and founder of the *Shorinkutsu-dojo* in 1931. Writing in 1934, the year Tobey visited Japan, Iida expounds an essentialist and expansionist rhetoric that explicitly links Zen practice to state policy:

If the state were to perish, what would protect the Buddha-Dharma? If the Buddha-Dharma were to perish, upon what would the state be established?..There is no Buddha-Dharma apart from loyalty...In all corners of the world there is no place where the Imperial Favour does not operate. The voices of pines and bamboo echo "Long May it Live!" (*banzai*). The Imperial wind and the Buddha's sun are nondual....We should be cognizant of how much power Zen gave to the Way of the Warrior. It is truly a cause for rejoicing that the Zen sect has recently become popular among military men. No matter how much we do *zazen*, if it is not of service in the present

events, then it would be better not to do it.<sup>160</sup>

Iida's position is one in which Buddhism and the state occupy a singular position, the state being essentially the will of the Imperial system. He proceeds to identify Zen in particular as the spiritual under-current for this theocratic system, citing its contribution to the Way of the Warrior (*Bushido*). Furthermore he insists that *zazen* must be carried out with service to the nation in mind; he thus intrinsically intertwines religious and political praxis. Bearing in mind his reference to *bushido*, it seems possible that he intended to suggest a relationship between *zazen* experience and fighting experience, a contention which is supported by writings about *bushido*, particularly during the Kamakura period when the Samurai classes involved themselves in rigorous Zen practice.

The Abbott of Buttsu-ji temple and head of the Rinzai sect around the end of the war, Yamazaki Ekishu, explicitly relates Zen experience with the Emperor saying:

In Great Zen Samadhi we become united with the emperor. In each of our actions we live, moment to moment, with the greatest respect (for the emperor). When we personify (this spirit) in our daily lives, we become masters of every situation in accordance with our sacrificial duty. This is living Zen.<sup>161</sup>

In Ekishu's logic, the Emperor becomes the spiritual root of Zen experience, nourishing daily life. Interestingly, he refers to 'our sacrificial duty', possibly suggesting that the ultimate action one could make was to surrender one's life for the Emperor. Like Iida's thinking, Ekishu seems to suggest a direct relation between Zen experience and that of the Emperor, and hence also with the state. To experience Zen through meditation thus also becomes a path to experience the true goals of the Japanese state. That Tobey was also engaged in Zen meditation during this turbulent period in Japan must therefore be seen from not only a 'pure' religious perspective, but also from one which recognises the rhetoric of priests such as Iida and Ekishu. To put it another way, the very same meditational practice that Tobey was engaged in was used by some Zen priests for the purposes of encouraging nationalist and militarist sentiments.

Ichikawa Hakugen asserts that one of the main reasons Zen could support militaristic-nationalistic sentiments during this time was because of its philosophical, institutional and historical dimensions. In particular, he identifies Zen's Chinese Taoist roots and its respect for leaving things be. Christopher Ives sums up Ichikawa's critique thus:

In his reading, 'Zen' emerged at a tumultuous time in Chinese history and, like philosophical Taoism, directed itself towards finding security in the midst of social unrest. As expressed by such Taoist notions as 'Because it does not contend, it is never at fault' and the 'usefulness of the useless', a prominent religious orientation in East Asia has been to give up resistance to, and then accept and accord with, the actuality around oneself.<sup>142</sup>

It is certainly correct to see much Zen practice as an attempt to relinquish, or at least accept, one's ego-centred self and 'become one' with any situation. Hence one often comes across references to rivers, fish or water, as metaphors for a liberated Self which can freely accommodate any situation. Ichikawa strongly questions this philosophical position, asking:

Is it the situation in which one is placed or participates? Is it a matter of attaining freedom in the sense of becoming master of one's situation by changing in accordance with it? Are we to take the personal initiative to act above and beyond what we are commanded to do, as in 'unquestioning compliance with the emperor's directives', rather than resisting or grudgingly obeying 'supreme commands in the holy war'? In other words, is becoming master of one's situation a matter of living as a faithful and pliant organisation man who through self discipline admonishes himself against civil disobedience?<sup>143</sup>

Ichikawa's questions are crucial in discussing Zen's relationships with nationalism, and may be seen in many ways as touching upon areas of taboo. Whilst recognising Zen's truly liberating potential, Ichikawa also reveals how it can often be interpreted as a kind of ethical 'black hole' in which nothing essentially matters, for 'one is master of one's situation'. During the build up to the Pacific War therefore, Ichikawa argues that Zen's existential orientation made it possible for it to fully support an imperial-military outlook. Whilst there were many Zen Buddhists who opposed the war, such as Ichikawa, it is also significant that some Zen practitioners did not take any critical ethical stance and chose instead to 'flow' with the circumstances of the time. Whilst one can appreciate Zen's respect for harmony and non-resistance, as Ichikawa points out, how were such perspectives viewed at a time of social and political unrest? Clearly, for many Zen Buddhists during the nineteen thirties, their training led them in the direction of tacit support for the states's actions. Tobey's absorption of Zen in Japan in 1934 was undoubtedly not that of Ekishu and his implicit alliance of Zen with nationalist discourse, but in the absence of more detailed archives relating to Tobey's Zen experiences, one must remain cautious of simplistic,

romantic readings.

There are identifiable parallels here with Tobey's mystical interest in Baha'i in that one may see Tobey's experience of Zen as being primarily informed by its *mystical and aesthetic* aspects rather than by theological, critical, or social aspects. In this respect, Ichikawa's critical position against Zen during the 1930s can be seen to have been absent in Tobey's reception of it. Rather, as his letters suggest, Tobey's primary interests lay in the individual practice of meditation and aesthetic pursuits such as archery and painting.

*xi) The Search for an 'Authentic' Japan.*

Tobey's *encounter* with Japan also played the role of exposing to him the ambivalent and dispersed nature of its culture, making it difficult for him to grasp any kind of primordial unity or purity within it. His romantic images were simultaneously questioned by the pace of life and developments around him. This is perhaps best illustrated in his writings about Tokyo and its modernisation, which are referred to in terms of what they *do not* represent and through the idea of *lack* or *insufficiency*. Tokyo represented his own, industrialised and corrupt Western experience, the very thing which he was trying to distance himself from. Daniel Miller sees such a position as a classic primitivist strategy, writing:

There is a variety of strategies by which art may determine the genres through which it finds expression. The most important divide is between attempts to characterise the fragmented nature of modernity itself, and the attempt to represent other worlds as models for totality.<sup>164</sup>

To use Miller's thesis, Tokyo perhaps represented 'the fragmented nature of modernity', or at least a city which was rapidly going that way. Rather, what Tobey expected and looked for was a more traditional, formal Japan, a Japan which in many ways can be said to have been a European invention or fantasy and which thus represented a notion of innocent cohesion. Nowhere in his letters, for instance, does he mention meeting or trying to meet with Japanese avant garde artists of the time; rather his primary concerns tend to be with traditional arts such as *Noh* and archery. As John Clark points out, Japanese art during the first three decades of the twentieth century was far from provincial or 'backward'.

Whether or not artists had been to Europe, the Japanese art world was highly exposed to international art information, the inward flow of art catalogues, and to the increasing exhibition of original works brought from Europe.<sup>165</sup>

Artists including Togo Seiji, Yamaguchi Takeo, Hasegawa Saburo and Sakata Kazuo returned to Japan from periods of study in France between 1928 and 1933, developing styles of surrealism, abstraction and futurism. Tobey's leanings towards *Mingei* and other 'traditional' arts during a period of rising political tension between left-wing cultural groups and an increasingly rightist police suggests his sense of distance from the current affairs of the time. Moreover these 'traditional' art forms provided 'safe', apparently apolitical and thus universal appeal; they crucially represented a historical Japan of unchanging aesthetic values which an artist like Tobey could desire. Thus paradoxically, during the very period when Tobey was immersing himself in *Zen*, calligraphy and *Noh*, the progressive activities of the cultural left were being dissolved by the authorities<sup>166</sup>; a search for 'eternal' values was being shadowed by drastic changes in the political and cultural landscape of Japan.

A major reason why Tobey gravitated towards more traditional arts and activities while he was in Japan, can be explained by the fact that he travelled with Bernard Leach, who had close relations with the then emerging *Mingei* movement. The *Mingei* movement aimed to herald the simple, spiritual crafts of rural Japan and Korea, collecting ceramics, textiles and other utensils in order to illustrate their belief in a profound, Buddhist-influenced aesthetic of beauty. Tobey writes in some of his letters of his friendships with various figures in the *Leach/Mingei* circle, as well as with its leader, Yanagi Soetsu who seems to have greatly impressed him:

The little man who is mothering and fathering me is a radiant person whose presence one feels is as a blessing. He is timeless as a teacher and is planning what I should see. An old hand at meditation and has given me many ideas about *Zen*. He looked after Bernard the same way 20 years ago...

Mr. Yanagi, Leach's friend and centre of their movement here is a man of very fine balanced faculties - a deep investigator into art and has as fine a tact as I ever met.<sup>167</sup>

The Japan that Tobey sought was then, in many ways, perfectly *provided* by the circle of people he met and befriended in Japan. It was a vision of Japan that echoed an Oriental ideal constructed in Europe during the late nineteenth century by popular writers and scholars. It thus remained largely unknown except for its portrayal. Moreover, in many of Yanagi's writings one reads of the necessity of craft arts as an antidote to increasing modernisation, a position which closely reflects Tobey's views. *Mingei* thus espoused a

universal Japanese aesthetic of beauty which rested upon a discourse that assumed unproblematic 'links' between different cultures and artistic traditions that could be 'identified' and referred to. Indeed if one studies Yanagi Soetsu's writings it becomes apparent that he was interested in revealing a universalism that encompassed both Western and Oriental ideas. Yuko Kikuchi writes that:

Yanagi vigorously studied Western philosophy. He absorbed anti-rational ideas such as those of Henri Bergson and William James, in which he found values antithetical to Western progressiveness and positivism. His extensive research into mysticism, first into Occidental Christian mysticism and then into Oriental mysticism and philosophy included Sufism, Zen Buddhism, Taoism and Hinduism....His study culminated in *William Blake*, probably the first of its kind in Japan, published in 1914.<sup>148</sup>

Kikuchi's thesis interestingly argues that *Mingei* theory was developed within a complex mechanism of what she refers to as 'Oriental Orientalism'; in short, European views on the Orient influenced Japan's own views as to how to define its own art, and this was in turn projected back to the West, reinforcing Orientalist discourses there. In contrast to the Saidian Orientalism model, Kikuchi argues for a more complex mechanism of exchange that importantly recognises Japan's ability to 'counter' European projections; Japan is not merely a passive source of images, but also an *active agent of projection*, and thus afforded a status comparable to that of Europe. Yanagi and the *Mingei* movement, Kikuchi argues, can be seen as a prime example of this complex mechanism of hybridisation and I would argue that Tobey, by virtue of his close associations with this circle, was also affected by its discourses. Within Kikuchi's logic, we may in part, regard Tobey's relationship with Japan as mirroring European notions of universalism and aesthetics. In other words the 'traditional' Japan that he encountered via the *Mingei* circle, can be considered as subtly motivated by European writings and ideas. The notion of 'Oriental Orientalism' and its echoes in the activities of the *Mingei* movement must direct us to at least briefly mentioning the central role played by Ernest Fenellosa in reviving traditional 'arts' during the late nineteenth century in Japan for his 'Japan' was one which formed a popular and enduring European image.

Initially travelling to Japan in 1887 to take up the post of Philosophy Lecturer at Tokyo University, Fenellosa's missionary-like role in reviving the 'old arts' of Japan can be seen as one important genesis of the 'Oriental Orientalism' thesis. His influence as the teacher to a

new generation of political and intellectual leaders in Japan was instrumental in enabling him to influence the direction of art in that country at a time when things Western and Modern were in vogue. Fenellosa set out to resurrect the traditional arts of Japan, spurred on by seeing authentic works by painters such as Sesshu in The Kuroda Collection. Aided by two students, Nagao Ariga and Kakuzo Okakura, who helped him with translation and interpreting, Fenellosa began a comprehensive study of Chinese and Japanese history and art, compiling charts and gaining access to various important sources through his University and government connections. In the summers of 1880 and 1881 he travelled to Nara and Kyoto visiting temples and castles in order to examine old relics and paintings, and by 1882 he had become convinced that the Japanese artistic tradition included works by master painters who 'could match any artists in the world'. On May 14th in a speech at the Ryuchikai, a club for the cultured élite, Fenellosa outlined the basis of his revivalist plans:

Japanese art is really far superior to modern cheap Western art that describes any object at hand mechanically, forgetting the most important point, expression of Idea. Despite such superiority, the Japanese, despite their classical paintings and with adoration for Western civilisation, admire its artistically worthless modern paintings and imitate them for nothing. What a sad sight it is! The Japanese should return to their nature and its old racial traditions, and then take, if there are any, the good points of Western painting.<sup>109</sup>

Fenellosa urged the Japanese to return to their own traditions, although he only referred to 'their nature and racial traditions', a somewhat vague and simplistic comment. In many respects his sentiments are echoed in Tobey's writings from Tokyo; there is a similar sense of *urging* in both writers that ultimately stems from their *position* in relation to Japan. It is precisely because both figures represent an Occidental 'centre' in terms of art and art theory in a 'peripheral' Japan, that they are able to espouse such views. Fenellosa's statement is offered as a solution and thus he confidently asserts that 'Japanese art is far superior' to Western modern art. His logic, like Tobey's, leads him to conclude that the way out of this 'impasse' is to look back to 'older traditions' and revive them in the face of Western modernisation.

Fenellosa's heralding of Japanese art can be said to have had at least two significant impacts: firstly, he introduced the notion of 'high' art, referring primarily to Buddhist art and paintings, thereby supplementing more popular art forms such as prints and craft. One reason for this might have been his proximity to aristocratic collections with their sizeable

elements of Buddhist arts and painting amongst other items, but it also revealed his Western cultural background and its tradition of distinguishing between the so called 'fine' and applied arts. In a letter from 1884, Fenellosa writes of his recent 'finds' in Japan, like an archaeologist unearthing lost treasures:

We have been through all the principle temples in Yamashiro and Yamato armed with government letters and orders, have ransacked stores, and brought to light pieces of statue from the lowest stratum of debris in the top stories of pagodas 1300 years old. We may say in brief that we have made the first accurate list of the great art treasures kept in the central temples of Japan.....and more than all, I have recovered the history of Japanese art from the 6th to 9th centuries A.D.<sup>70</sup>

The second area of Fenellosa's influence was his considerable contribution to the radical institutionalisation of the arts in Japan through, for instance, the establishment of various Western structures. These included the founding of an art club to foster art appreciation, artists' groups and exhibitions, prizes, an art journal called *The Golden Age*, and the development of an art market in which works could be bought and sold. Perhaps most important of all his contributions in this field was the creation of the National School of Fine Arts in Tokyo in 1886-7, in which traditional painting skills were taught alongside Western techniques. Indeed, in the art educational sphere, Fenellosa had, in 1884, been an important member of the committee which had recommended that elementary schools replace pen and pencil art classes with brush and ink. On the basis of their report, schools policy was changed.

In at least these two areas, Fenellosa can be seen to have been a decisive influence. His championing of traditional arts, extensive research trips and sense of missionary zeal were important factors in reviving a certain *sense* of Japanese art among many Japanese during the late nineteenth century. Arguably, his influence could be said to have been largely restricted to a cultured élite, well versed in Western modes; and yet it would be fair to say that his influence also had a considerable impact on the revival of a sense of Japanese nationalism in the arts. Yanagi's Mingei movement owes much to Fenellosa's heralding of a unique *Japanese* artistic and spiritual tradition, as well as to his belief in the possibilities for a synthesis between the art of East and West. Through these notions, he can be said to have contributed towards setting the agenda for later Orientalist discourses which we see echoed in Yanagi and Tobey. 'Japanese art' as a distinct and unique tradition was thus 'discovered'

and valued as 'art' in European terms, enabling artists such as Tobey to look at Zen painting or rural pottery in the same way that he could look upon Renaissance painting and other 'fine arts'. An important consequence of this was a *de-contextualising* of many Japanese forms of art from their specific religious or social contexts and their appropriation within a universalist discourse of 'art' in terms of Occidental notions of humanism and aesthetics. As we read in many of Tobey's letters, his perception of Zen painting equated it unproblematically with European painting traditions, thereby effectively 'cutting' Zen painting from its own religious and cultural references.

The Mingei group's notion of Japan, like Fenellosa's, was ultimately one that looked back upon itself in the face of rapid westernisation, but which also incorporated elements of Western thinking; it anticipated an essentially rural, mystical and culturally powerful Japan and a Japan that, I would argue, comfortably fitted Tobey's own expectations and perceptions. What it owed to Fenellosa was a *historical* view of Japanese art that considered it in terms of an Occidental tradition of art history as *progression*; distinct 'movements' could thus be identified and a division established between 'high', 'fine', 'low' and 'applied' arts. 'Fine art' was moreover primarily aesthetic in orientation, expressing universal values, whilst 'lesser' forms of art were merely functional or utilitarian. Although *Mingei* theory proposed an aesthetic theory around craft traditions and functional objects, it also ultimately considered those very 'ordinary' objects as beautiful aesthetic art works which were displayed as expressions of a 'timeless Buddhist beauty'. An underlying assumption of *Mingei* theory is thus an *aesthetic* consciousness of connoisseurship and *expertise* which in many respects divorced *Mingei* theory from the very rural contexts it wished to espouse.

The 'influence' of Japan on Tobey's work cannot simply be seen in terms of a simple movement from East to West or from Zen Buddhism to 'white writing'. Rather, by contextualising his journey and considering the problematic discourses around the notion of an 'authentic' Japanese art, it becomes possible to examine this 'influence' as a fractured and ambivalent exchange. In Homi Bhabha's language, we might point to a 'Third Space' through which Tobey 'found' a Japan which could not represent unity or cohesion. Indeed, Bhabha's theoretical formulation of the notion of cultural *difference* as opposed to cultural *diversity* lends an important dimension to the broader question of cultural interaction or interpretation.

Bhabha writes of the inherently doubtful nature of *enunciating* culture, of talking about it. The enunciating subject - the 'I' - and the subject of enunciation always represents a disjuncture or fissure. Thus any act of interpretation is never simply an act of 'pure' communication between the 'I' and the 'You' because of the unsure process of language and symbolisation. This echoes Derrida's notion of *différance*, as the formation which permits the articulation of speech and writing without allowing for any origin or *logos*. For Derrida the structure of language, of enunciation, can never be completely negated and thus 'pure' communication is impossible; as he says, 'There is nothing outside of the text'.

From this radical premise Bhabha suggests a theory of cultural *difference* which mobilises the notion of the 'Third Space' of enunciation that makes the structure of meaning and reference an *ambivalent* process, undermining the idea of representation as mirror-like or 'pure'. For Bhabha, culture can never be represented as whole or fixed, for the very act of enunciation represents processes of instability. It is rather what he refers to as the 'in between' spaces of translation and representation that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. The search for 'authenticity' is therefore hopeless from the outset, rather reflecting political discourses of domination.

The intervention of the Third Space of enunciation...quite properly challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenising, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People...It is only when we understand that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation, that we begin to understand why hierarchical claims to the inherent originality of 'purity' of cultures are untenable, even before we resort to empirical historical instances that demonstrate their hybridity.<sup>171</sup>

The attempts by the *Mingei* movement and Fenellosa to represent a historically 'pure' Japan that retained a unique aesthetic heritage would thus be strongly questioned by Bhabha. Underlying their insistence for 'purity' are the inescapable facts of *difference* which constantly destabilise the very act of enunciating. The search for an 'authentic' aesthetic Japan, in Bhabha's view, is rather a reflection of political and cultural power; a strategy of assimilating 'Japanese art' into a hegemonic Occidental art historical perspective. 'Local' contexts and the 'in-between' spaces which Bhabha refers to are thus drowned by a *will for certainties*.

Bhabha's notion of the 'Third Space' introduces a significant dimension that urges us to see Tobey's *enunciation* of Japan as necessarily ambivalent and tense. Although he obviously sought an 'authentic' experience of Japan rooted in a 'traditional' past, we are also confronted with fragments of his uncertainties in the form of his critical observations of the 'corrupting' influence of Modernity in Tokyo. In these lines Tobey confronts one 'actual' context in Japan and it is a context he clearly does not support. His solution in the face of such 'actualities' was to turn to what he regarded as 'authenticity' in cultural forms such as *Noh* and *Zen* painting. What is more, these 'authentic' forms were assimilated into his Occidental aesthetic context and heralded as 'Oriental' expressions of 'truth'. The transcendental was thus 'found' in Japan.

#### Part 4. Reading Tobey.

##### i) Tobey's 'Zen' Works: 1956-7.

We are confronted with a good comparative exercise between Tobey's creative model and those of Zen artists, in a series of drawings he executed between 1956/7, whilst he was residing in Seattle. During his career, this seems to have been the one time he intensely used *sumi* ink, and also made overtly 'Oriental' looking drawings, although we can infer from letters written to Marian Willard that Tobey had experimented with *sumi* on a number of occasions following his experiences in Japan and China. Writing in January of 1956, for instance, Tobey speaks about his experiments with *sumi*.

Well, I start a New Year today after a Japanese binge lasting 'till 2A.M. with *sumi* brush activities. I made my first finger nail painting; wouldn't brag about it but no doubt my understanding of what they (the cultured ones) look for. They are not wrong when they speak of their philosophy of the quiet lake (inner) and let nature take the brush.<sup>172</sup>

Tobey is characteristically modest in distancing his works from those of 'the cultured ones', presumably painters in China and Japan, and he speaks of letting 'nature take the brush'. The reference to a 'finger nail painting' suggests a sense of experimentation which echoes some of the 'wild' painting techniques of early Zen painters in China. Moreover Tobey's extensive experiments with *sumi* ink during this period reflect a broader artistic climate in the United States which looked to the 'East' and its painting techniques for inspiration.

In particular it can be said that the formal styles of *sumi* ink style painting and calligraphy of the Far East had considerable echoes in the abstract works being painted by artists in Europe and America. As early as 1948 the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art had organised a show of contemporary Chinese painting, and in 1954 the Museum of Modern Art organised the influential 'New Japanese Abstract Calligraphy' exhibition, bringing Oriental calligraphic styles right to the heart of the so called 'New York School' of painting. Artists as diverse as Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell, Franz Kline, Georges Mathieu, Jean Degottex, Pierre Alechinsky, Hans Hartung, Julius Bissier, Andre Masson, Henri Michaux, and Adolph Gottlieb were engaged in developing styles of abstraction that seemed to borrow much from the monochrome, fluid styles of Zen calligraphers. There is a sense in which one can talk of an 'international' style of abstract art during the 1950s,

encompassing artists in Europe, America and Japan under the respective 'schools' or styles of *Art Informel* or *tachisme*, Abstract Expressionism, and 'Gutai'. Manfred Schneckenburger identifies these post 1945 styles as 'calligraphic', identifying their shared sense of Oriental 'writing' as a central preoccupation and guiding metaphor.

Since World War II and entirely since 1950 these early links with Far-Eastern ink painting and calligraphy have merged into one. On the geometrical construction of the thirties and the 'mythical' ideograms of the forties has followed a scriptural tendency on a broad basis ranging from Pollock's dynamic, virtual bursting of the bounds of space to the oversensitised self contemplation of Wols. Catchwords: abstraction lyrique, action-painting, abstract expressionism, *tachisme*, *informel*.<sup>173</sup>

Supplementing such directions in painting one must also identify a growing number of Asian religious teachers travelling Westwards - to America in particular - and attracting growing numbers of new students. Of particular importance was the Zen scholar, D.T. Suzuki, who arrived in the United States in 1950 to teach at Claremont Graduate School in Pasadena, and whose seminars were attended by figures such as John Cage and Erich Fromm, both of whom were to play significant roles in the wider dissemination of Buddhist thinking in America during the nineteen fifties. Other Buddhist teachers such as Nyogen Senzaki and Soen Nakagawa were also involved in establishing interest in Buddhism during the immediate post-war years in America, but it was undoubtedly D.T. Suzuki's English language publications and his tireless teaching across the United States that most encouraged the later 'Zen' boom in America during the mid and late-fifties. From around 1953 when Suzuki had begun to settle into his New York life, his profile as teacher and writer blossomed, resulting in interviews on television, profiles in the *New Yorker* and even being featured in *Vogue* magazine. The founder of the First Zen Institute in New York, Mrs. Sasaki, observed interestingly in 1959 that:

Zen has always been credited with influencing Far Eastern Art, but now the discovery has been made that it was existing all along in English literature. Ultra-modern painting, music, dance, and poetry are acclaimed as expressions of Zen. Zen is invoked to substantiate the validity of the latest theories in psychology, psychotherapy, philosophy, semantics, mysticism, free-thinking, and what-have-you. It is the magic password at smart cocktail parties and bohemian get-togethers alike.<sup>174</sup>

For many artists working during this time Zen Buddhism provided a philosophical and religious justification for their activities, elevating the significance of aspects such as chance and spontaneity and allying them with an implicit spiritual discourse. As the composer John Cage suggests, Zen ideas also provided artists with new creative models which radically challenged existing patterns.

I got involved in Oriental thought out of necessity. I was very disconcerted both personally and as an artist in the middle forties...I saw that all the composers were writing in different ways, that almost none of them, nor among the listeners, could understand what I was doing...so that anything like communication as a *raison d'être* for art was not possible. I determined to find other reasons...I found that the flavour of Zen Buddhism appealed to me more than any other.<sup>175</sup>

As Japan opened itself to international influences following the lifting of American occupation in 1950, artists could assimilate and copy from one another on a global scale in search of new means of expression. There is a sense in which one can refer to this fascination with Eastern mysticisms and art as a 'new *Japonisme*'. If a late-nineteenth century *Japonisme* was defined mostly by decorative and formal influences upon the visual *appearances* of European painting, then it would be fair to claim that a post-war *Japonisme* was largely defined by psychological and metaphysical influences which sought to make the artist an *active spiritual agent* akin to the Zen-priest painter. As writers such as Daniel Miller<sup>176</sup> contend regarding Primitivist discourses, in this development one can identify a shift from the appropriation of visual styles to psychological intentions; from the purely formal and decorative to the spiritually significant and self-transformative. To use materials such as *sumi* ink therefore was also to participate in a wider discourse of appropriation which equated ink with forms of Zen thinking and art. The reception of Franz Kline's large black gestural paintings in the mid 1950s and their implicit identification with Zen ideas and calligraphy is indicative of the widespread effect of such appropriations, even though the artist denied such connections in favour of his deep interests in *ukiyo-e* prints.

And yet, as J.J. Clarke identifies, it was not only rapidly changing socio-economic patterns in Asia which prompted such cultural and artistic exchanges, but also a rapidly changing social and cultural structure in the West.

During the post-war period, and especially during the era of cultural

efflorescence associated with the beat and hippie movements, there emerged in the West a desire for cultural liberation and spiritual fulfilment which was felt by many to be left unsatisfied by established traditions and creeds, and it is not surprising that Zen, with its aesthetic purism, its non-dogmatic spirituality, and its promise of instant enlightenment, has been assiduously cultivated in the West.<sup>177</sup>

Unlike the largely textual and scholarly transmission of ideas from the East during the nineteenth century, Clarke suggests that the twentieth century has seen a pivotal shift away from secondary source transmission via books, to primary forms of transmission via individual travel Eastwards. In other words one could say that a shift occurred from people *receiving* information gathered by a privileged few, to people becoming *active seekers*. The ease and economy of travel has thus resulted in many more individuals being able to experience Asian cultures in a way which was perhaps rather more difficult in 1934 when Tobey travelled to Japan under the patronage of the Elmhirst's.

That Tobey executed his series of *sumi* ink paintings during 1956/7 is therefore significant on a broader, cultural scale. It may also explain, in part, his sense of distance from other abstract artists of the time experimenting in similar mediums and ways. In a letter written in 1961, Tobey refers to his 1957 paintings in fairly negative terms, as if they were a distraction to his other canvas works.

As to the *sumi* paintings - you ask how I came to do them....Offhand, I don't know really how I began this period - it happened one day, a suggestion from a brown-black painting which I felt could be carried on in blacks. How long I had these *sumi* paintings in cold storage or had the delayed-unrealized desire to paint them I don't know. It was a kind of fever, like the earth in spring, or a hurricane. Of course I can give many reasons, that they were a natural growth from my experience with the brush and *sumi* ink in Japan and China, but why did I wait some twenty years before doing them? Perhaps painting that way I freed myself or thought I did. Perhaps I wanted to paint without too much thought. I don't think I was in the Void, that rather popular place today.<sup>178</sup>

Underlying Tobey's statement is an urge to remain different from other artists who were interested in Zen and ink painting; his reference to the 'Void, that rather popular place today' suggests a familiarity with the popularity of Buddhist ideas at the time from which he wishes to remain *distant*. Rather for Tobey, *sumi* painting is portrayed as a *natural* extension of his

artistic practice.

1956 was the year Tobey painted the *Above the Earth* series (Fig.38-39), which may be considered as a precursor to his 1957 *sumi* ink paintings. These near-abstract images successfully evoke for me a Japanese sense which surpasses any sense of 'Oriental-ness' in the paintings of artists such as Kline or Motherwell: indeed, I would contend that they express Hisamatsu's 'Seven Characteristics' of Zen art. It would be useful to try and identify what it is about these paintings which evoke this Zen sensibility.

Perhaps it is precisely Tobey's *lack of overt 'Oriental' brushstrokes* in these images which make them so successful. They rather rely on delicate touches of a very watery brush on certain parts of the paper, and on a refined colouring and sense of space that recalls elements of Sesshu's watery landscapes. Ink has been utilised sparingly to evoke a sense of depth or nearness - which is never fully resolved - and the strokes seem intensely concentrated, yet free and playful. The brown ochre background in all of this series function in a similar way to the large empty expanses of sky or sea in Sesshu's images, providing a cushion on which more delicate images are placed. Moreover, the partial orb which Tobey paints in this series may be related to the partial moon in the manner of much Zen painting. Like Shubun's image of the moon only partially visible through a bamboo thicket, Tobey also utilises the strategy of partial disclosure in order to evoke a greater sense of suspended mystery. And yet from the title of the series we may infer that we are witnessing the partial earth seen from afar. Tobey's composition in these paintings is not one of total exposure or monumental suggestion in the manner of Friedrich, but rather more delicate and small. Thus, for instance we see in *Above the Earth VI* (Fig.39) the abstract calligraphy not simply painted on a plain background thereby emphasising *itself*, but a band of black added down the right side of the image which functions as a device to lead one's eyes across the image as opposed to into its centre. This band of dark colour down the right side of the image is also seen in *Above the Earth V* (Fig.38) as well as in the earlier work *Edge of August* (1953).

A crucial aspect of these images is their transparency. Unlike earlier works which have a sense of heavy *presence* behind the 'writing', the *Above the Earth* series employs the wash of ink in order to create a background space which is light and shallow in comparison to earlier works. Tobey thus manages to create a picture space which is relatively 'near' the viewer as opposed to 'deep' and absorbing, and in doing this he also echoes the use of non-painted areas of paper by Zen painters. Like many Zen works, these images are almost like

'blotches' or 'stains' of ink. Underlying their appearance may thus be a desire for 'impurity' and the mundane that situates them at some distance from a European Romantic tradition and its formal emphasis upon 'purity'. Compared to Tobey's later works, the 1956 paintings express a restrained elegance that rests on a respect for *blemished surfaces* that calls to mind Bataille's fascination with dust and decrepitude. Indeed, Bataille considers drawing and painting as intrinsically violent acts which only proceed by what he refers to as 'successive destructions' of the purity of the clean paper and of each preceding state. The notion of decomposition is thus central to his theory of painting, elevating the significance of metaphors such as dust in understanding painted surfaces. Moreover for Bataille, decomposition is not only about *dissolution*, but also represents a *transition* or passage to states which correspond to the sacred. This idea is particularly interesting in the context of a Mahayana understanding of *sunyata* which does not differentiate between suffering and salvation; Bataille's formulation of decomposition as both negative and positive, might be usefully compared to the Zen engagement with impurity and the mundane as expressions of the sacred. Dust is therefore also a *potent revealer* of the transcendental.

The *Above the Earth* series also operates on a constant series of tensions, between on the one hand a Neoplatonic conception of striving towards an Ideal *purity* and, on the other hand, a visual language of *impurities* which leans strongly on Hisamatsu's Zen characteristics. In this contradictory *ambivalence*, the paintings show us an image of the transcendental that is never wholly one thing or another, but in a state of 'hanging'. Rather than present a transcendental void that absorbs the viewer in the manner of a Rothko painting, Tobey's images seem to represent *suspended* surfaces which are not abyssal. Comparisons with artists such as Wols or Tapiés are thus appropriate in the sense that they, like Tobey, also managed to evoke transparent surfaces which never allow the viewer to enter into a total sense of transcendental reverie. In contrast to his mesh-like paintings which derive from a process of manic *covering over* of a surface, in the *Above the Earth* series Tobey *dissolves* forms. Briony Fer's comments on Miro's painting is appropriate here:

It suggests not the clarification of form or enlightenment but the obscuring of vision through a cloud of powdery dust, pulverised and fragile.<sup>179</sup>

Tobey's images are precisely also transcendental because they escape the singular identification of enlightenment with *clarity* and afford *obstruction of vision* an equally

important function as a revealer of the transcendental. Unlike the Friedrichian fog which will *clear* to reveal a new vision, in Tobey's 1956 images no such hope exists: it is rather into the 'powdery' dust of his surfaces that we are *confronted* with the transcendental. In this sense, his images share much with those of Zen artists.

This is particularly evident in *Above the Earth VI* (Fig.39). Unlike Tobey's other paintings with their 'all-over' compositions, *Above the Earth VI* manages to express what his other images do with a minimum of lines, relationships and colour. This restraint of line has resulted in a series of works which retains the gestural significance of the 'writing', but also keeps it in context within its ground. Tobey's 'writing' is therefore amplified within a broader field of dulled broader strokes, rather than becoming mesh-like and dense like in his other paintings.

It is interesting to note that, unlike Pollock, Tobey's 'writing' reflects a delicate process of *scribing* and that because it is so, requires a greater degree of space in order for it to be seen as such. Pollock's most successful works, on the other hand, tend to be his dense, spidery all-over compositions precisely because they are created by 'flinging' paint onto the canvas randomly. Tobey's most transcendently successful works tend to be his more restrained, spacious paintings in which one is able to see and move around within the canvas. The different pressures of the brush, the way that the ink has been applied, and those surfaces which remain untouched by the ink can all be seen, charting the artists' moment of mark-making and denying absorption into it.

The 'writing' in *Above the Earth VI* - though linguistically meaningless - nevertheless possesses a metaphorical 'language' that seems to communicate by virtue of its obviously script-like mode. The composition of the painting, with a fading expanse of black at the top right corner, and the calligraphy descending from top to bottom across the left hand side of the paper, has no wastage to it: at the lower left hand corner we can make out a faint circular edge. The experience of looking at this painting and following the lines of each stroke is quite similar to looking at many Japanese Zen brush works. One is not afforded any finality or compositional balance as such, but rather a delicate and open sense of *uncertainty*. And in this uncertainty we are committed to confronting the 'actual moment' rather than imagining other worlds. In Derrida's terms we can say that the image does not seek to erase its language of painting but rather precisely *presents* this language as itself. Thus the viewer is not afforded any finality or point of stillness within the image; only a perpetual turning over or, in Bataille's phrase, 'successive destructions'. We can see in the

*Above the Earth* series then, a gestation of Tobey's interests in brushstroke and ink, which were to ultimately spill out the following year.

In 1957 several factors converged to accommodate Tobey's experiments with *sumi* ink: Tobey spent time with his long time friend Tamotsu Takizaki, the owner of an antique store in Seattle who was known as a gifted swordsman and also well versed in Zen philosophy<sup>100</sup>, he was also offered *sumi* ink and materials by his artist friends Paul Horiuchi and George Tsutakawa (Fig.50), and from late 1956 Tobey had been reading much about Zen on the advice of D.T. Suzuki. That he began to paint intensely in *sumi* during 1957 is therefore perhaps not surprising. Writing to Marian Willard in July 1957 he says:

I want an all black and white show. Dan's intuition as to something new on the horizon, when I sent the small ones, materialised and I think I now have the cumulation of the Eastern influences brought to a focus and quite exciting. If not, I shall stop showing. Takizaki here says no one in Japan has done what I can and have done. I know Kline exists and Pollock, but I have another note.<sup>101</sup>

From the above quotation it becomes clear that Tobey considered his ink works from this period to be successful attempts at assimilating the 'East'; indeed he is confident enough to assert that if they are not good enough, he will 'stop showing'. There is a sense in which Tobey felt his ink works to be somehow more original and 'Eastern', than works by artists such as Kline and Pollock, and this is confirmed by his reference to Takizaki. There is a discourse underlying Tobey's statement, that can be seen in two parts: firstly there is a process of *distancing* his work from other Western painters, and secondly a process of *merging* his work with the East. Tobey seems to be saying that his work is not 'American' in the vein of Pollock and Kline, but closer to Japanese sources. The implicit statement by Tobey here is that "I am really over there, in the East", perhaps adding to his peripheral reputation amongst the New York School. As an artist in America, Tobey identifies himself with the 'East' in order to claim an authenticity which he thought others lacked. It is Tobey who is the 'source', a voice who even surpasses those in Japan, and who was thus also implicitly *universal*.

Tobey's 1957 *sumi* paintings, in contrast to the *Above the Earth* series, are intensely expressionistic and action-led. They perhaps have much in common with the monochrome

splashes of the French painter Jean Degottex (Fig.23), who like Tobey, had become interested in Zen during the mid 1950s and had painted his first Zen inspired series called 'Hagakure' in 1957. Not only is it interesting that the two artists should have begun their respective Zen inspired paintings in the same year, but both artists also seemed to use a similar visual language and style that drew heavily on a perception of Zen calligraphy - albeit totally abstracted. Although Degottex's 1957 works seem more contained and modest than Tobey's fiery splashes, his later paintings from the late 1950s and early 60s utilise a much more fluid brushstroke that leaves ink splashes and half finished lines. Like Tobey's series from 1957, they seem to rely on a sense of speed in their execution as well as what can perhaps be called a sense of intense spontaneity or explosiveness. In this sense their works from this period can almost be regarded as *targets*: it is as if the artist aims with intense concentration on the blank paper and finally releases his energies into it, leaving what looks like an imprint or target after it has been shot at. Unlike the 'all-over' intensity in paintings by Jean Dubuffet or Henri Michaux, Degottex and Tobey's work from this period seem to filter or focus an intensity into extremely short moments. The results are paintings which stand out like relics, or as trophies from a battle.

Although Tobey's means are 'Oriental' - using *sumi* ink and brushes - their execution and outcome are not. The paintings look hurried and experimental, in contrast to Tobey's more delicate 1956 works. Indeed, there is a sense that in the *sumi* paintings Tobey is trying *not* to be careful and to get away from slow, meditative procedures. The most striking characteristics of these paintings are their splash-marks and forceful free use of the brush. *Sumi II* (Fig.41) presents what looks like the imprints of two or three tennis balls which have been hurled at the paper, leaving splashes and specks of ink across the paper. The Japanese Gutai artist Saburo Murakami had in 1954 'painted' a work entitled *Painting done by throwing a ball* (Fig.24), which shows exactly that, as if anticipating Tobey's painting of 1957. Likewise *Composition No.1* (Fig.40) is a painting whose violence is uncharacteristic of Tobey and closer in tone to the action paintings of Pollock or de Kooning. Indeed, in all of his *sumi* paintings from this period one sees no evidence of small, deliberate brush strokes, but rather the imprint of large brushes applied with considerable physical energy.

What Tobey's 1957 *sumi* paintings convey is primarily the sense of *experiment*. Seen in the broader context of his work, they can be regarded as playful investigations with materials and with approaches to painting. Their extreme sense of unhindered expression is something which one does not see in Tobey's gouache or tempera works. In light of

Tobey's meeting with his friend Takizaki prior to his starting the series, one can suggest that they also represent his attempt to practice aspects of Zen thinking, in particular the notion of 'letting nature take over'. The *contexts* within which Tobey executed these paintings therefore provides a basis from which to look at and think about them. The notion of a homage may be suitable here and is supported by the title of one painting, *Eastern Calligraphy* from 1959 (Fig.42), which shows one swift, curving stroke of the brush across the paper. Tobey's title makes his position clear: this is a conscious homage to the calligraphy of the East. Moreover, that Tobey gave his painting this title suggests a sense of determination and conviction on his part: he is saying, "this is Eastern calligraphy".

And yet, compared to his *Above the Earth* series, Tobey's *sumi* works from 1957 remain rather unsuccessful. They do not evoke a subtle or refined expression, but tend to be hurried and messy. This significant difference is perhaps best realised if we compare Tobey's ink works with those by artists such as Saburo Hasegawa, Matsumi Kanemitsu or Morita Shiryu (Fig.25), all working in America during the same period as Tobey, or even with the works of Julius Bissier. In their abstract calligraphic paintings in ink, one senses a considerable degree of delicacy and concentration *amidst* the expressive brushstrokes which, in turn, is echoed in the limited splash marks of each stroke and by their gradations. In contrast, Tobey's brushstrokes seem somewhat rushed and hence the ink is splashed randomly and the brush emptied of ink substance. There is not the sense of *suspension* which one encounters in the strokes of painters such as Mu'chi or Sengai, but rather a sense of *statement*. Although evoking considerable physical action and presence, the images do not go beyond this; they do not evoke a sense of *risk*.

In respect to Hisamatsu's Seven Characteristics of Zen Art, I would point in particular to two areas of insufficiency: the lack of any sense of 'Austere Sublimity' or 'Lofty Dryness', which he describes as the 'disappearance of childishness, unskillfulness or inexperience' and a lack of 'Deep Reserve', characterised by 'implication rather than the naked exposure of the whole', and by a 'calm darkness'. We may look at the calligraphy by the Japanese artist Jiun (Fig.16) in the Edo period and compare it with Tobey's paintings: Jiun's characters, although executed swiftly and containing splash marks like Tobey's images, evokes both a greater sense of risk and calmness which are lacking in Tobey's 1957 works. The characters seem to rest in between a sense of total chaos or suspension and intense focus; it does not state itself to the viewer, but rather makes one look *actively*, re-tracing its strokes and pressures. In short I would tend to agree with Ahn and Shimizu that

in the 1957 paintings Tobey does not successfully express the 'Formless Self' to the same extent that he does in his 1956 works. As such, they are perhaps best viewed as experimental, sketch-like paintings.

If one broadens the analysis to encompass Tobey's other works in his 'white writing' style, I think that a different set of problems arises from the nature of the paintings themselves. In other words, rather than showing single instances of brushstroke, his 'white writing' paintings tend to emphasise the relations between multiple strokes done in a small manner. Tobey's style of painting is thus one of limited, small-scale strokes done all over the canvas in largely the same size and colour. The nature of his painting process therefore seems to emphasise the brushstrokes as a unified whole, to be contemplated as a completed work. In this crucial sense one could say that brushstroke does not play *as significant a role* as it does in his *sumi* paintings, which are made up of large singular, expressive strokes. Here we perhaps highlight a paradox in Tobey's 'white writing' works; that they tend to suppress individual brushstrokes, whilst being entirely composed of small delicate lines. In this sense, his paintings act rather like pages from a book or manuscript in that one engages with the whole page, which on closer inspection, is made up of tiny individual characters.

Within his considerable body of work though, I contend that certain paintings are more successful than others in expressing the Zen transcendental. As I have argued, his 1956 series represent one such high point, largely because they do not follow Tobey's 'normal' 'white writing' style. In the *Above the Earth* series, one encounters three aspects which direct Tobey's style: writing, brushstroke and movement. I shall explore each one in depth now.

### *Writing.*

Writing is perhaps the most common metaphor by which Tobey's work has been referred to; indeed, his characteristic abstract style is called 'white writing'. And yet, when we look at a painting by Tobey, any signs of a comprehensible writing are absent. His images do not incorporate language as such, but rather refers to it through its evocative use of the brushstroke and line. Unlike an artist such as Francis Picabia who incorporated written words into many of his paintings, Tobey's art is one that *alludes* to the *act* of writing. In this sense one may perhaps situate him alongside other artists such as Paul Klee and Henri Michaux, who utilise brushstroke and line in a manner that is akin to the act of

writing. What is particularly significant in Tobey's 'writing' though, is his expressed interest in, and assimilation of, Oriental calligraphy as a basis for his painting technique. This interest in calligraphic technique is also supported by an interest in a Zen 'model' of making paintings which incorporates aspects which I have pointed to such as the significance of *sunyata* and the 'Formless Self'. Tobey's experience with calligraphy during his stay in Japan is thus significant. But before looking at Tobey's work in relation to Oriental calligraphy, it would be useful to look at his paintings and explore the ways in which his work utilises 'writing' as a metaphor.

One may identify two significant aspects in Tobey's all-over 'writing' that, taken together, sustain his images. One can be described as Tobey's *method* of painting, and the other can be seen to be the way that he *composes* his images. 'Writing' suggests a range of things: a sense of small scale, of deliberateness, a slowness, and a scholarly attitude. Indeed, we may see Tobey as a scribe or mediaeval monk, entrusted with the task of preserving spiritual texts. A painting by Tobey presents us with a *tablet* of written signs that reveals the processes of what may be termed 'wrist-gesturing'. Tobey's inventory of lines, squiggles, dots or circles indicate the actions of his hand and wrist, expressing a sense of time and labour that only arises from *hand-writing*, and in this respect his process is significantly different to that of Pollock who may be termed a 'whole-arm' or 'body' gesture painter. The comparison with the scribe is here once again relevant, aligning Tobey with the practice of drawing more than painting. If Pollock famously *performed a dance* while painting, Tobey's technique is that of the watchmaker. Indeed, it is interesting to compare photographs of both artists working: Pollock in his characteristic T-shirt and denim, standing over the canvas with a cigarette in hand. Tobey is the epitome of the nineteenth century studio painter, dressed in shirt and jacket and absorbed in the act of painting (Fig.48).

The second aspect is the way in which Tobey composes his pictures out of this writing method. His images present us most directly with a dense mesh of lines and shapes that overlap and fill the picture space. The nature of Tobey's method means that his images follow certain predictable patterns of composition: most commonly, they are made up of multiple lines and strokes against a dark background. The metaphor of a ground upon which the artist 'writes' is thus suitable, suggesting an act of 'writing' *over* something. There is therefore a *beyond* or a *behind* in Tobey's paintings that may be considered to represent a metaphysical ground, a 'pure' space that always remains in the background of his paintings.

Invariably this ground is rarely an unpainted canvas or paper, but a prepared and coloured background that complements the colours of the 'writing'. We see this for instance in paintings such as *Crystallisation* of 1944 (Fig.43) where a dark brown ground supports a web of small white strokes, or in later paintings such as *Edge of August* (1953) in which varying shades of brown and black support a lighter coloured 'writing'. His 1956 *Edge of August* series is, in this respect, a diversion from this.

We may perhaps infer that Tobey's 'writing' acts rather like a barrier, hiding a 'clean' tablet underneath. The action of 'covering over' is thus also appropriate in discussing Tobey's specific kind of 'writing', filling space to a point of saturation rather than leaving large, unfilled gaps. In this sense his 'writing' is manic, unrestrained and multi-dimensional; it does not confine itself to only being 'read' two-dimensionally from left to right, or top to bottom, but from any number of vantage points and depths. In most of his paintings Tobey 'writes' to fill the void presented by an empty ground.

Although Tobey had studied calligraphy whilst in Japan and produced a number of good calligraphies - one of which can be seen at Dartington Hall - his painting works never refer to Chinese characters directly, instead often mimicking their style or flavour. Indeed, in some of his ink wash drawings of street scenes done in China (Fig.36) and Japan in 1934, Tobey vaguely copies Chinese characters on shop fronts, and in later paintings such as *Pacific Transition* (1943) we again see hazy allusions to Chinese characters amidst faces and intersecting lines. *Symbols over the West* (1957) also strongly alludes to Oriental characters by its use of *sumi* ink and title. It would be fair to say that Tobey never fully employed his acquaintance with Chinese characters in his work, rather choosing to *allude* to calligraphy through expressive brushstrokes and abstraction. The calligraphic aspects of his mature works are therefore not calligraphic in the Oriental sense of being *readable* characters, but more expressive and suggestive. His work may perhaps be thought of in terms of abstract calligraphy, or suggestive calligraphy, in that it never equates with language as such. In this sense Tobey may be seen to practice a fundamentally different *kind* of calligraphy to that of the Far East; his calligraphic writing is essentially abstract, whereas that of Far Eastern artists is crucially *derived* from their training in calligraphic forms. The Chinese scholar Tseng Yuho explains this important point thus:

While the lines used in painting may be freer than those of calligraphy, the

need for calligraphic forms to be readable creates an added challenge for artists to embody emotion and movement within certain practical, though flexible, boundaries. Since calligraphy itself is an accomplished form of abstraction, traditional Asian artists were able to reduce the marks and imagery of painting to relatively abbreviated, even minimalistic, forms without feeling the need to step into fully non-objective painting.<sup>182</sup>

In other words, calligraphy already provides Asian artists with a partially abstract form from which they could develop their own abstract styles without resorting to a totally non-objective or theoretical abstract art as epitomised by artists such as Mondrian or Malevich. The Japanese artist Morita Shiryu, working from the late 1940s, is a good example of a painter who derived an original abstract calligraphy from Chinese characters. Crucially for Morita it was only because he had a solid training in traditional forms of calligraphy (*sho*) that he felt able to loosen its forms to a point of near abstraction (Fig.25).

Without training in *shodo*, Tobey's abstract calligraphy is thus largely composed of single lines, turns and circular motifs without particular reference: it cannot thus be called calligraphic in any formal sense. Moreover it is precisely Tobey's *difference* from a tradition of *shodo* that afforded him the *choice* of appropriating Oriental calligraphic forms and making them abstract; indeed, for him this was the only way he could use calligraphy, unless he was prepared to learn under a master calligrapher for an extended period of time. Once again it can be said that Tobey's professed universalism enabled him to appropriate calligraphy as a *style* that could 'fit into' a wider universalist discourse. Toshimitsu Hatsumi suggests the problematic nature of such appropriations, reminding us of the broader context:

What matters first, in all fields of art, is to learn the 'primary form' and to attain complete command of it. This 'primary form' is the original, generalised prototype which has been laid down and defined as the basic form by several earlier masters. In this form there is no room for individualism. That is the firmly established principle of Japanese art. If a man attains full command of this primary form and then on the basis of it proceeds to develop a form of his own, he is a complete master.<sup>183</sup>

Only when one has learned how to *write*, is it thus possible to abstract or loosen the form; in such a context, random strokes and gestures executed for purely formal reasons are *fundamentally lacking* therefore.

Despite Tobey's abstract calligraphic style and his difference from an Oriental calligraphic tradition, we may consider his 'writing' from another important perspective. It is to see his 'writing' primarily as marks imbued with certain qualities of energy and volume which are highly valued in the Zen calligraphic tradition. I shall explore this aspect further in the following section, but it would be useful here to expound on Tobey's thoughts on the relationship between 'writing' and transcendental intention.

Tobey persistently stresses the importance of the cosmic and the transcendental over immediate, everyday issues, suggesting that for him line was a potent communicator of significant spiritual values and insights. The kind of 'writing' which Tobey sought was thus not of the strictly linguistic type, but more of what one might refer to as a felt or expressive type, akin in some respects to the religious function of druidic symbols or certain totems. 'Writing' enabled him to communicate his world-view in the most adequate way. In a 1957 letter to the Dahls, Tobey wrote.

To me an artist is one who portrays the spirit of man in whatever condition that spirit might be. We can't expect too much of them when the rest is so negligent of spiritual values such as today.<sup>184</sup>

One could suggest that Tobey's *attitude* as a painter leant heavily upon his experiences and insights he encountered whilst travelling in the Far East. In particular one could identify his interest in the Oriental notion of drawing a line with an attitude which encompassed both the aesthetic and the religious. The act of putting brush to paper was therefore crucial, for a good painting could only emerge out of successfully drawing lines *in the right manner and with the right attitude*. Like *Noh* dance, which Tobey admired, we may see his 'writing' as a form of intense *religious* performance which leant heavily upon ideas derived from Zen. In this sense Tobey's creative model is not that of the expressionistic, existential individual in the manner of Pollock, but rather the *Noh* actor or archer who devotes his whole life to perfecting a Way. It is worth pointing out that the Japanese word for calligraphy is *Shodo*, which combines the character for writing with that meaning 'road' or 'way'. 'Writing' thus comes to take on devotional qualities in Tobey's case, an activity like that of copying scriptures or painting religious images. We may sense this in another letter written by Tobey.

I am glad Alfred Barr likes the *Five Dancers*. This was painted in the spirit

of Zen - shouldn't say method; that is doing and idea are simultaneous - not just action. As the brush moves the surface the idea reveals itself. It is much more difficult than the observer might imagine.<sup>185</sup>

Tobey significantly refers to the 'spirit' of Zen rather than to its 'method', suggesting his interest in the devotional aspects of putting brush to paper. Clearly for him, a lack of written calligraphic skill was deemed unnecessary for the expression of a 'Zen spirit'. Tobey's strong universalist beliefs may once again be identified here, underlying a discourse which simplistically assumes the universality of a 'Zen spirit', whilst acknowledging the difficulties of 'writing' in an Oriental manner. And yet, as the following section points out, brushstroke within the Zen tradition arises out of specific religious and historical contexts that question such a reductionistic, universal view.

### *Brushstroke.*

A central question regarding Tobey's use of brushstroke and Zen traditions is whether he managed to paint from what Hisamatsu refers to as the 'Self Without Form' or the 'Formless Self'. In saying this Hisamatsu implicitly relates the experiential objective of Zen Buddhist practice - to be 'awakened' or to recognise '*satori*' - with artistic practice. We are thus faced with a subtle relationship between what one may refer to as mystical *experience* and aesthetic *practice*. I have already referred to Hisamatsu's ideas so I shall not go into detail here except to remind ourselves how he formulates the crucial link between the 'Self Without Form' and the Seven aesthetic Characteristics of Zen art.

The expression in form of the Self Without Form necessarily produced the aforementioned singular group of arts that necessarily possess these Seven Characteristics. It was because the Formless Self came to awaken in a certain period and area that such a group of arts were formed there. Accordingly we can safely conclude that these expressions are the result of the activities of the Self Without Form and, further, that since the Self Without Form is the root source of the Seven Characteristics, it expressed them in these arts (Zen arts).<sup>186</sup>

Hisamatsu's contention is that the Zen arts necessarily express its mystical experiential aspect of the 'Self Without Form', and that this is therefore an important measure by which

to look at and appreciate them.

Just as within Western academic painting, elements such as perspective, compositional balance or intellectual reasoning have traditionally been highlighted as ideals in order for a painting to be considered successful (at least since the Renaissance), so too in the Zen tradition have images been valued by certain criteria, perhaps the most significant of which is whether the image or object expresses adequately the 'Formless Self'. We read in Plato, one of the philosophical bases of Western European art, about painting's inability to represent Ideas in the same way that a carpenter makes a chair; the artist thus aspires towards a *mimetic* role of copying nature to the highest standard, something which we see continued through the history of European painting and in its methods of art teaching. The skills of drawing faithfully from life, perspective and composition thus *assume* important positions within the European art Academy.

In contrast, for Zen painters what matters are not primarily aesthetic or technical issues so much as the intimate relationship which exists between the artist and the work. In this sense, the Zen painter is not someone who represents fixed and eternal Ideas through paint, but rather someone who attempts to capture living, moving images which arise out of the experience of a 'Formless Self' or *sunyata*. There is thus a fundamentally different approach towards the *act* of painting itself, as well as towards *how* the artist paints. In Hisamatsu's thesis, the Zen painter paints as he does because that is how he *is*. Furthermore, ink is the most common painting material used by Zen artists precisely because it is what best meets the Zen demands for spontaneous individual expression and simplicity. A relation may thus be established between '*matiere*' and psychology, each complementing the other.

The most common way that this relationship has been characterised by both Japanese and foreign scholars has invariably been through an implicit religious language which assumes that the artist imbues the work with a Zen 'essence' or 'residue'. Paintings of esteemed Zen teachers, usually painted by pupils or other artists, are thus regarded as vessels which hold significant religious power, and indeed, this is supported by the specific type of Zen painting called *chinso* in which a teacher gives his portrait to an enlightened pupil as a token of their spiritual bond and as a protector-image. Such portraits usually take the form of showing a master priest sitting with his legs crossed on an ecclesiastical chair with arm rests. In the upper area of the picture is normally an inscription (*san*) by the master to his pupil, relating a personal encounter between the two. The role and expectations of the viewer further establishes the Zen image as religiously significant, precisely because the

'Formless Self' of the artist is also considered when evaluating a work and not merely its narrative or technical characteristics.

The nineteenth century Japanologist and ink painter Henry P. Bowie, offers what is perhaps a more aesthetically orientated perspective of Japanese painting, highlighting characteristics such as *Sei Do* which corresponds closely to Hisamatsu's characteristic of Naturalness. Although he does not refer specifically to Zen art, Bowie's observations provide an important statement regarding certain aspects which share much with what Hisamatsu identifies with Zen. Writing in 1911, after extensive studies in Japan under master ink brush painters he writes:

One of the most important principles in the art of Japanese painting - indeed, a fundamental and entirely distinctive characteristic - is that called living movement, *Sei Do*, or *Kokoro Mochi*, it being, so to say, the transfusion into the work of the felt nature of the thing to be painted by the artist.

Whatever the subject to be translated - whether river or tree, rock or mountain, bird or flower, fish or animal - the artist at the moment of painting it must feel its very nature, which by the magic of his art, he transfers into his work to remain forever, affecting all who see it with the same sensations he experienced when executing it. This is not an imaginary principle but a strictly enforced law of Japanese painting. The student is incessantly admonished to observe it.<sup>187</sup>

Bowie highlights a significant point of difference between Occidental and Far Eastern approaches to painting in the short phrase: 'the transfusion into the work of the felt nature of the thing to be painted by the artist'. In this utterance lies a significant aspect of Zen art as understood by Hisamatsu, as well as a major difference between the painting traditions of the West and the Far East. The phrase can be read in two distinct segments: the first is concerned with transmitting or transfusing something into an art work, whilst the second answers the question of this 'something' by saying that it is the felt nature of the thing to be painted by the artist. One is here not simply concerned with rendering something in paint or representing it mimetically. Rather the artist positions himself in relation to the thing he is to paint, transposing its *felt nature* through paint. This concern with 'felt nature' is significant, indicating that it is the artist's subjective experience that is painted and not a conception of a universal Ideal in the Platonic sense. Moreover it could be assumed that the 'felt nature' in Zen works is necessarily also related to the 'Formless Self', as this directs the Zen artists entire creative process. In a *material* sense painting is about applying colours or marks on a

surface, and yet one could suggest that in Japanese and Chinese Zen traditions this simple process is *made significant* by particular attitudes or dispositions which the artist brings to the act of painting.

The Ching painter Shen Tsung-Ch'ien asserts that a successful painting is only possible when the artist has adequately internalised what he wishes to paint to such a degree that the image itself 'holds' the essence of the thing painted.

The universe is made up of vital breaths and the painting is accomplished by means of brush-ink. The painting only attains excellence when the breaths emanating from the brush-ink so harmonise with those of the universe that they are one with them. A coherent path then appears through the apparent disorder of phenomena. Therefore it is important that the idea of all things be already completed in the heart of the artist, so that the execution of the picture can be animated by the vital current that dwells in the universe. The whole superior quality of the picture depends on this.<sup>188</sup>

Although Tsung-Ch'ien's language is rather difficult to conceptualise, the central point he makes is that for a painting to be successful the artist must harmonise himself with the universe and what he is to paint. Significantly this process of internalisation or visualisation is not only a conceptual, cerebral matter, but one which encompasses the 'heart' of the artist; a dialogue is thus established between the heart, mind and universe. By virtue of this, painting takes into account two aspects; the immediate, in the actions of the painter, and the infinite, in his relationship to the universe. Thus the artist does not work alone - he is not an existential being - but remains crucially related to what surrounds him. What the Zen painter expresses is a phenomenal world that is also intrinsically noumenal; all of the techniques and materials adopted by Zen artists ultimately serve this end. Therefore rarely do we see totally abstract forms expressed, but forms and images from the present and the everyday - the phenomenal world - which are themselves nothing other than the noumenal, when conceived by the 'Formless Self'. We are reminded of the radical Mahayana tenet that 'Form is Formlessness and Formlessness is Form'.

The extent to which one can say that Tobey's pictures expresses the 'Self Without Form' is therefore, a delicate and complex matter. Unlike Zen paintings, Tobey's work remains un-contextualised in terms of seeing them as expressions of the 'Formless Self'. In this respect one is offered some interesting conjectures by Asian American contemporary artists during a roundtable discussion that occurred parallel to the important exhibition 'Asian Traditions, Modern Expressions. Asian American Artists and Abstraction 1945-1970'. The

artist Don Ahn offers some interesting remarks on the idea of *ch'i* energy in Western and Eastern paintings, concluding that most non-Oriental artists ultimately fail to adequately express *ch'i* in their works. Tsung-Ch'ien's notion of 'vital breath' may be equated with *ch'i* here.

When I look at the Western painters, they have *ch'i*, but it is not refined....you see, in the West, when, say, Franz Kline is painting Abstract Expressionism, he is more concerned with the whole canvas. He puts one stroke here, one stroke here, like that. Wen Cheng-ming (a 16th Chinese artist) - when he paints he is aware of composition, but he is *more* aware of each stroke. He puts some kind of energy into it. There is a kind of strength. Kline's stroke has a strength, but I feel it does not really have that kind of *ch'i*. It is a different kind of *ch'i*, a little coarse.<sup>189</sup>

Ahn highlights significant differences in the respective degrees to which artists such as Kline and Cheng-ming emphasise awareness during the painting process. He thus concludes that their respective attitudes during the painting process crucially determines the quality of *ch'i* evident in their works. Underlying Ahn's statement is thus also an awareness of the different styles of painting education in the West and the Far East - one emphasising overall composition, the other each successive brushstroke. And thus for Ahn, tutored in the Chinese tradition, Kline's strokes are judged through his specifically Chinese code, and deemed a 'little coarse'. Ahn's conclusion reveals his different experience and contexts for looking at and comprehending pictures.

In the same discussion the Japanese artist Yoshiaki Shimizu refers directly to Tobey in relation to Far Eastern brushstrokes. He too, like Ahn, is an artist who has learnt to paint and see in certain ways and thus finds Tobey's stroke different to those of Japanese artists.

Tobey's use of the Japanese paintbrush, even the ink, is different. He is not writing a given character; his art is the dynamics of strokes. In other words, what I'm, saying is: the tools are similar, but there are different cultural roots of what these tools should be used for. I find there the different *expectation* between East and West.<sup>190</sup>

Shimizu emphasises the different expectations or *intentions* between Tobey and Japanese artists. For him, Tobey's use of Japanese brushes and ink are crucially different from that of Japanese artists because what he expects from these tools is quite different. For both

American Asian artists it is the different formulas and codes by which one paints that radically determines the dynamics of painting itself, and thus to equate Tobey's brushstroke unproblematically with Zen traditions is also to simplify Oriental understandings of brushstroke as a significant transmitter of religious feelings. Tobey's brushstroke may be read in terms of his interests in Zen, and yet it is equally necessary to maintain a critical attitude towards any simplistic or generalised comparison between the two.

*Movement.*

The depiction of movement has preoccupied painters since the earliest cave painters sketched wild buffalo and men in motion. A variety of visual techniques have been developed to evoke motion in two dimensions by artists, from human figures suspended in the midst of movement as one sees on Greek vases, to the highly charged expressions of the Italian Futurists. As I suggested earlier, it can be seen to have been with the radical nineteenth century revolutions in painting which Gombrich characterises as 'The Break in Tradition' that artists in Europe at least, began to express motion not simply through illustrating it - by drawing horses galloping across a field for instance - but by employing the expressive possibilities of the brush and paint to *record* the artists own subjective feelings of movement and rhythm on the canvas. Gombrich identifies a gradual shift from realistic renderings of movement, highlighting detail, to more impressionistic and emotional pictures. In Art and Illusion he points to this by directing our attention to the central relationship between our recognition of images and the projections and visual anticipations we bring to the process of looking.

It appears that if you show an observer the images of a pointing hand or arrow, he will tend to shift its location somehow in the direction of the movement. Without this tendency of ours to see potential movement in the form of anticipation, artists would never have been able to create the suggestion of speed in stationary images. This is the reason why the impression of movement, and thereby of life, is so much more easily obtained with a few energetic strokes than through elaboration of detail.<sup>191</sup>

As the image loosened and became less tied to accuracy, artists in Europe were able to express movement through the *medium* of paint itself as opposed to the represented *message* of a painting. Gombrich usefully offers the comparison of two paintings depicting horse racing, Manet's 1875 work *At the Races*, an impressionistic and blurry image of

thundering horses, and Frith's 1858 work *Derby Day*, which shows a copiously detailed image of horses, spectators and buildings. In Manet's painting one is confronted with not merely a historical account of a day at the races, but the speed and spectacle of horses racing in a cloud of dust achieved through his use of dabbed and loose brush work. In the late-nineteenth century the brush and brushstroke thus became significant as *transmitters* of the artists' feelings and emotions in a way that it had not done so up until then.

Whilst I would argue that such developments in painting have been relatively recent in European traditions, this is not the case in the painting traditions of China and Japan, where the expressive possibilities of the brush and brushstroke have been positively utilised in order to express movement and rhythm. Certain Chinese and Japanese pictures from at least the ninth century can be seen to have approached the problem of how to paint motion by evoking it through the brushstroke and its rapid transmission of ink onto paper.

My starting-point in talking about movement in Tobey's work will be a quote I have already referred to in which Tobey explicitly states his debt to the Orient for having provided him with what he calls 'rhythmic power'. It would be useful to provide the quote again here:

The only thing that I could have assimilated would have been the rhythmic power. It would be only that, I would say, that I took from Japan because it is the only thing that, as an American, I could take. I'll make no claim to finding anything else. But I did very much give my attention to this rhythmic power and its generation.<sup>192</sup>

That Tobey stressed rhythm as an important element in his painting at such a mature stage of his career indicates its significance to him. He does not elaborate on what he means by it, simply indicating that he regarded his work to have been crucially related to rhythm and its generation. The extent to which this aspect of his work was 'Oriental' is therefore interesting, setting up a field of inquiry. And yet, recognising the potential Oriental aspects in Tobey's interpretation of rhythm, I think that one could also approach this factor through his links with Western traditions such as Cubism, which provide equally compelling bases for understanding motion in his paintings.

Unlike Mondrian, who developed a geometric and formal approach to line relationships, Tobey's major works maintain loose brushstrokes in a variety of overlapping lines. His supposedly first 'white writing' painting, *Broadway Norm* of 1935 (Fig.44), painted while he was at Dartington Hall, provides us with a good example of how Tobey manages to create a feeling of movement through tight, overlapping lines which thread in

and out of each other. The image, painted in the central area of the paper, looks rather like a ball of string trying to unravel itself; we do not see any definite start or end to the lines, but a writhing mess. On one level it evokes movement by *alluding* to a scene such as a ball of string, which one imagines and projects onto the lines. On another level, it is the painting's very compositional structures that evoke motion, in a similar manner to that which Gombrich suggests. The white lines scribbled densely prompt us to *anticipate* movement, for after all, a view such as this could hardly be immobile! The painting works on two important levels therefore, one suggestive of real scenes, the other suggestive of what is about to occur or what has been occurring.

If we consider Cubism to have been an attempt to challenge the supremacy of illusionist painting by making contradictions apparent within the picture thereby forcing us to see the image as a man-made canvas object, Tobey's work fits its trajectory well. Many cubist images attempt to baffle the viewer by presenting contradictory clues which resist an easy reading. In Picasso's *Still Life* from 1918 for instance, the eye cannot rest easily on any one object. The chair, guitar and vase all seem to play visual tricks with us, moving into and then out of our view. Gombrich offers the following analysis, referring to Braque's and Picasso's works:

Try as we may to see the guitar or the jug suggested to us as a three dimensional object and thereby to transform it, we will always come across a contradiction somewhere which compels us to start afresh. It is a point of cubism, I believe, that we are constantly teased and tempted into doing this (finding consistency) but that each hypothesis we assume will be knocked out by a contradiction elsewhere, so that our interpretation can never come to rest and our 'imitative faculty' will be kept busy as long as we join the game.<sup>193</sup>

In a similar way Tobey's paintings rely on this contradictory strategy of depriving us of a consistent, stable visual image. And yet, instead of employing flat planes as does Braque or Picasso, Tobey employs line as the primary means by which to achieve a destabilisation of static form. The results are surprisingly similar to those achieved by the earlier Cubists, and also recall Mondrian's cubist-inspired paintings in which trees have been reduced to a series of lines which intersect. We are given further evidence of Tobey's Cubist leanings in a sketch he drew entitled *Personal discovery of Cubism*. It depicts an episode he recalls in which he sat in a small room working on a painting while watching a fly circling around him. Tobey imagined the lines of the fly's flight weaving a complex pattern that produced

form entirely from movement.

A painting such as *Crystallisation* (1944) (Fig.43) provides a good example of Tobey's ability to manipulate line in order to suggest movement. Like a Braque painting, the image does not allow one to rest easily on any one part of it. Seen from afar it looks simply like a mass of white lines, but on closer inspection, one is drawn to exploring its labyrinthine details. And yet I would contend that this is only possible if one concentrates on one part of the image at any one time, for trying to find any stable equilibrium in the lines as a whole, seems very difficult. Rather, the process is one of looking and following, of letting one's gaze be directed by the lines themselves. In this sense one is at the mercy of the painting. An important result of such active participation in looking at a Tobey painting is a sense that one has been mentally moving or *journeying* through the image. The element of movement is therefore active at a psychological as well as painterly level, providing one is prepared to engage with it in such a manner.

*Crystallisation* presents one with contradictions and interruptions: a surface which is literally so *scarred* and *scratched* that it becomes difficult to recognise any overall image or sense of totality. The intersecting lines generate feelings of movement through their tightness and compactness, perhaps suggestive of magnified images of cells or bacteria. The dynamics of perspective are once again relevant here, questioning the nearness or distance of the image we are confronted with and posing a contradiction; are we a thousand feet high looking down, or are we peering through a microscope at something intensely magnified? In Gombrich's terms, engaging a Tobey image also compels us to keep looking afresh, like the great cubist works of Picasso or Braque.

Let us now consider movement in Tobey's paintings through an Oriental mode, and in particular through the concept of 'movement space' as employed in reference to certain descriptions of Japanese architecture. The term is used by the architect Mitsuo Inoue in opposition to what he refers to as 'geometric space', and is used principally to highlight the uses of space within a given area. I think that such an architectural term can usefully be applied to the medium of painting, for, like the architect who fills physical space in three dimensions, the painter too confronts space and engages with it creatively.

Inoue identifies 'geometric architectural space' as forms of design which tend to base themselves on orthogonal or polar coordinates: spaces are thus organised along East-West or North-South axes, or around a central pole. As its name suggests, space develops along

geometric lines, and is organised and structured. A similar organisation of space may usefully be identified within certain recent paintings, perhaps exemplified by Mondrian's late grid pictures but also encompassing much early Cubist work. Principles of centrality and linear organisation are key elements within such paintings, assuming traditional Renaissance perspectival strategies in order to express depth and compositional balance. In this tradition the canvas represents an arena in which the painter measures and composes an image in accordance with principles of perspective, balance and composition. Uccello was said to have constructed wooden models of his paintings first, by which to measure and work out the composition's geometry and lines. Such organisation of space is thus precise and ordered; for the artist the process becomes one of calculation and balance, and for the viewer the experience is one of being firmly located in relation to the symmetry of the picture. Inoue illustrates 'geometric architectural space' by pointing to plans such as the Forbidden City in Peking with its grid-like arrangements and symmetrical lay-outs and the eighteenth-century German palace at Karlsruhe which emanates radially from a central point. In both instances, space has been arranged relative to an axis or pole.

In contrast, what Inoue refers to as 'movement space' offers a fundamental difference to 'geometric space', calling to mind terms such as 'irregularity' and 'indeterminacy'. He points to the Hommaru Palace compound in the present day Imperial Palace in Tokyo as an example of this type of architectural space organisation, based not on regular patterns, but on complex and irregular plans without any central axis or pole. Buildings and streets are thus not regulated, enabling one to locate oneself in relation to a total plan, but rather placed in irregular arrangements. It might be useful to quote Inoue on this aspect, for he reveals an important element that we can also utilise in looking at Tobey's paintings.

The spatial character of the site plan and building layout of Hommaru Palace should now be apparent. The irregularities represent a denial of an overall axis or framework and suggest the importance placed on the relative positions of buildings and rooms. Successive observation is the principle upon which this type of architectural space is based. Space is never revealed in its full extent all at once but is shown instead a bit at a time.<sup>194</sup>

Space becomes close and immediate in such a system, and one enters into a dialogue, walking through a building, not knowing what will be around the next corner as it were. An ability to imagine a totality based on geometric principles has been replaced by an attention to each successive moment.

We can infer a similar process of space creation in many of Tobey's paintings. The technique of 'white writing' is one which necessitates careful reading on the part of the viewer, denying an overall revelation. Its intricate and dense filling of space means that one is never fully aware of the whole picture. The absence of any axis or pole arrangements conversely focuses one's attention on the painting's detail, and its various different surface areas. To refer again to *Crystallisation*, seen from close up it becomes almost a blur, forcing the eye to rest only on one part at one time. Inoue's term 'successive observation' can usefully be applied to a Tobey painting, slowly revealing different spaces as opposed to presenting any total image. One's experience of looking at a Tobey painting is thus subtly *constricted by the image itself*, which acts to restrain the eye and prevent it from finding an overall plan or pattern. Movement is therefore not grand or monumental, but intricately controlled. Movement is not expressed physically in space as we see in a Pollock, but rather as something small and compressed. Following his brush marks, one is reminded of small whirlwinds or the flow of blood cells through veins; a sense of speed and motion in tiny spaces.

A significant result of investigating Tobey's Zen appropriations is how we may resituate him within an Occidental art history. How can we look at his 1956/7 works in the context of a broader tradition of painting out of which Tobey emerged? Tobey's relation to an earlier European lineage of artists who 'looked East' is an important question for at least two reasons: firstly it locates Tobey's Zen interests within a broader history of 'East-West' artistic transference, and secondly it questions orthodox accounts of that transference.

ii) *An Alternative-Japonisme Thesis.*

I contend that we may situate Tobey's Zen interests within what I will refer to as an 'Alternative-Japonisme' context. This is to expose the 'shadow-side' of orthodox accounts of *Japonisme* as primarily a transference of *visual* aspects, and re-examine *Japonisme* in terms of a transference of *transcendental ideas* and motifs.

To explore the 'Oriental' mystical tendencies of nineteenth century European painting is also in many ways to go against received convention and wisdom. In large part I would contend that this has been due to a vigorous enthusiasm on the part of most scholars to focus almost exclusively upon the notion of *Japonisme* and, in particular, the influence of decorative arts and *ukiyo-e* prints on the wider development of European art. In many senses this is perhaps unsurprising, incorporating some of the most famous names in the canon of Western painting including Monet, Renoir, Van Gogh, Manet and Whistler. The orthodox history, at least, places Japanese prints in its footnotes either through discussions about its 'formal influences' on painters such as Whistler, or in discussing its appropriation and collecting by painters such as Monet. The *Japonisme* thesis has also tended to claim a liberating role for Japanese art within the contexts of European art history. Klaus Berger, paraphrasing Edmond de Goncourt, claims:

The influence of Japanese art undermined all illusionistic representation and opened up entirely new prospects for the creation of a new visual reality, a modern style.<sup>195</sup>

Berger suggests that the influence of *Japonisme*, largely in the form of prints, contributed to nothing less than the formation of a modern style in Western art, implying that Japanese art acted as a kind of 'jolt' for European painting at a time when it had nearly exhausted itself through innovation and academism; in this reading then, Japanese prints came to the 'rescue' of the European painter by providing new aesthetic and visual strategies for painting.

Whatever the merits of Berger's claim, the point I wish to make here is that Japan, and its prints in particular, are seen by many scholars to be essential aspects of European art's journey into Modernism. Such views have also been encouraged and institutionalised to a large degree by specific exhibitions which have attempted to explore the influences of Japanese arts on European artists in the late nineteenth century. For instance, the 1972

Munich exhibition 'Weltkulturen und moderne Kunst' devoted almost half of its exhibits to the influence of Japan on the European arts via prints and decorative arts, largely ignoring the subject of Japanese philosophy or mysticisms.

This tendency to highlight the visual and stylistic aspects of Japanese art might be seen as a typically European strategy of appropriating the 'seen', whilst ensuring that its own psychological and philosophical spaces were not transgressed. The elevation of vision in European art and culture is referred to thus by Chris Jenks.

It has been forcefully argued by Jay that modernity's project was most effectively achieved through the privileging of 'sight' and that modern culture has, in turn, elected the visual to the dual status of being both the primary medium for communication and also the sole ingress to our accumulated symbolic treasury. The modern world is very much a 'seen' phenomenon.<sup>196</sup>

Jenks' contention is an important one, and one which also supports the view that scholars have tended to favour the Japanese print and its formal qualities over religious or philosophical issues. In this sense, the print and other decorative Japanese arts, perhaps provided many European painters with relatively simple and visually stimulating objects that could *easily* be appropriated into their own work. Thus the cultural or social contexts of *ukiyo-e* prints are invariably passed over in favour of their exotic, visual 'newness': the print is essentially incorporated in terms of *style* therefore.

It would be useful to ask what it was about *ukiyo-e* prints that so fascinated many artists during the late nineteenth century, and in this respect one may usefully turn to four aspects highlighted by John Steadman in his book, *The Myth of Asia*. The four qualities that Steadman highlights seems to strengthen the argument that it was decorative, formal and stylistic elements - rather than philosophical or religious ideas - that have normally been identified by scholars as crucial in the *Japonisme* discourse.

Steadman firstly notes the importance of two-dimensionality in Japanese prints and their non-perspectival approach to representing spaces and surfaces. The importance of this seems to lie in the fact that the Japanese print challenged traditional Western painting conventions of deep, illusionistic perspective, offering novelty; for the European artist the Japanese print was seen as a *liberation* from academic conventions. Secondly, Steadman points to the flat, plane-like qualities of colour in Japanese prints which European artists grasped as challenging the more subtle and shaded tones of colours in conventional Western

painting, although as he notes, many Japanese prints (in monochrome for instance) do employ effects of shading and variation of tone. Thirdly, he points to the line in Japanese prints and its emphasis on two dimensionality rather than on three dimensional, 'solid' form. And fourthly he points to the 'ordinary' and 'low' subject matter of many Japanese prints, depicting the so called 'floating world' (*ukiyo* meaning floating world) of downtown districts and its performers, street scenes and prostitutes.

It is clear that the primary emphasis is upon formal qualities - of colour, tone, subject matter or perspective - rather than on ideas or ways of thinking. This is further supported if one considers the fact that no major late nineteenth century European artist actually visited Japan - although we know that Toulouse-Lautrec and Van Gogh both harboured intense desires to do so. The aesthetic-led reading of Japanese 'influence' on European artists in the late nineteenth century, focusing primarily on the decorative and formal aspects of Japanese art, therefore offers a rather limited and reductionistic perspective; indeed, one may usefully speculate that such readings have largely followed a Formalist model in their favouring of what it is *in* a picture that makes it picturely. Issues of wider cultural or philosophical concerns have thus largely been passed over as peripheral or at least as something which emerged much later in the twentieth century.

Although, admittedly, such a differentiation between stylistic and what one may call 'psychological' influence is difficult to make, I would nevertheless point to the greater emphasis put upon the formal and decorative aspects of Japanese art by most writers on the subject. The consequence of this has been to marginalise a considerable and significant group of painters and paintings who were seriously engaged in exploring aspects of Japanese and Oriental religions and philosophy. Thus in the shadow of Monet, Whistler or Degas and their stylistic 'borrowings', can be identified a parallel 'borrowing' of philosophical and religious ideas.

Indeed, Berger further supports his more formal reading of *Japonisme* by rejecting the role of Oriental religious ideas such as Buddhism, in informing European Modernism;

The great vogue of *Japonisme* at the end of the nineteenth century reached only the fields of craft design, painting and the graphic arts. In literature it provided no more than a touch of local colour. There is, for instance, no sign of Buddhist influence...The philosophical encounter with the East took place only on the level of scholarship. It was not until a century later, with the Abstract Expressionism of Mark Tobey, Franz Kline, Julius Bissier and others, that structures inspired by Zen were to appear in Western painting.<sup>197</sup>

Although Berger does mention Emile Guimet's interest in the religions of the East, his overall argument seems to construct a division between a nineteenth century *Japonisme* centred largely around prints, and a later twentieth century Western encounter with the philosophies and religions of the East. For Berger at least, the 'philosophical encounter with the East' emerged much later, well into the twentieth century. Such a view is also echoed in the writings of Chisaburoh Yamada, General Editor of the 1976 publication Dialogue in Art: Japan and the West, which developed out of the 1968 exhibition, 'Mutual Influences between Japanese and Western Arts' held at the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo.

Nevertheless, whether in the field of painting or the decorative arts, what European artists learned from Japan before the early twentieth century seems to have been understood from the standpoint of a European tradition in which artists still had faith; in short, these artists seem not to have penetrated the unique spiritual background of Japanese art. This did not happen until after World War I, when some European intellectuals began to lose confidence in their own spiritual heritage....<sup>198</sup>

Yamada identifies Western artists interest in the religious and philosophical traditions of Japan as a post-World War I development, and then only initiated by scholars and critics. It is an approach that again favours the stylistic and formal influences of Japanese arts at the expense of philosophical or religious ideas. As Berger accurately observes:

What counted was not the culture of Japan, or even the objective history of Japanese art, but purely and simply those things that artists in Paris wanted to see and were capable of seeing.<sup>199</sup>

Yet, on the fringes of this 'official' history, it is possible to identify a 'counter-*Japonisme*' in the work of painters such as Odilon Redon, Paul Ranson and Paul Sérusier. These painters - mostly working at the end of the nineteenth century - represent a small but important strand of European artists concerned not so much with the decorative styles and forms of the *ukiyo-e* print (although they were all familiar with them), but rather with Oriental mystical ideas including Buddhism and Hinduism, within a wider Symbolist and theosophical universalist vision. In contrast to Berger's thesis one may identify certain artists outside the cosmopolitanism of Paris, who both complicate the orthodox *Japonisme*

discourse and represent tendencies which can be regarded as having greatly expanded the vocabulary of European Romanticism and its religious concerns. Before going on to look specifically at their paintings though, it would be useful to briefly outline the ideas of the French theosophical thinker Eduard Schuré who assimilated and introduced Oriental mystical ideas to many artists during the late nineteenth century.

*iii) Universalist Positions.*

Perhaps more than any other publication of the late nineteenth century which sought to present a unified vision of religions was Eduard Schuré's book of 1889 entitled Les Grands Initiés: Esquisse de l'histoire Secrète des Religions. The book is an attempt to unify different religious traditions from East and West by focusing on what Schuré refers to as the 'internal history' or the secret teachings and occult activities of the religions he chooses for study. Schuré consequently explores the lives and teachings of what he regards as eight prophets; Rama, Krishna, Hermes, Moses, Orpheus, Pythagorus, Plato and Jesus, and tries to equate them as visionaries of equal importance. His predominant theme may be identified as a uniquely late nineteenth century vision of mysticism, reflecting a conviction that within both the world and the human mind, there is an all powerful force or energy that defies rational scientific explanation. In this regard it is no surprise to read that Schuré's motto for Les Grands Initiés was 'the soul is the key to the universe'<sup>200</sup>. Schuré's discourse in Les Grands Initiés is one which sought a *closure* between different religious traditions by attempting to establish the notion of a mystical core which lay at the root of all world religions; his project was thus universalist in the sense that he believed in an essential singularity underlying differences. In an 1886 article Schuré had already begun to propound this universalist position. Writing in the Revue des deux mondes he wrote:

...the more one penetrates the hidden teachings of esoteric Brahmanism and Hinduism, the more one realises the close connections between Buddha and Christ.<sup>201</sup>

Schuré is adamant that one must penetrate the 'hidden' and 'esoteric' teachings of Brahmanism and Hinduism, which he boldly identifies with Buddha and Christ. Buddha is merged with the Hindu tradition and then with Christianity, in a remarkable manipulation of his identity that grandly sweeps aside all contextual or theological differences.

Les Grands Initiés in many ways embodied and encouraged a particular artistic climate

as well. Its significance for many artist's working around the turn of the century lay precisely in its formulation of such a universalist outlook that humanistically equated East with West or Christ with Buddha. The book was popular amongst many French artists of the time such as Paul Sérusier and Paul Ranson, both of whom can be said to have adopted its message of universal mystical truth as an important basis of their later paintings. Fred Leeman points out that Odilon Redon owned a signed copy of Schuré's book and that the two men were neighbours on the rue d'Assas in Paris from March 1890 to the fall of 1892. From Redon's notebooks, one may discern that the two men were respectful friends, probably sharing thoughts and ideas on a regular basis. Furthermore in 1892 Redon discussed the possibility of making a stage set for Schuré, although the commission eventually went to Sérusier.

Schuré's interest in the mystical aspects of religion were not isolated, but also reflected a renewed interest in mysticism by the established European churches. The ecclesiastical theologian Owen Chadwick identifies that:

In the last quarter of the century we find an interest in that which in a Catholic context is called *mysticism*. 202

Interestingly Schuré called for a deepening mysticism within the existing Catholic Church and his book is in many ways a call for introspection and further ecumenical dialogue. By comparing Eastern and Western prophets he both pointed to the inadequacies of his own contemporary church in Europe and invited foreign (and to many heathen) religions to stand together with Christianity. In this sense Schuré's book implied both a critique of European religions and a celebration of what the Christian churches could embrace from other culture's. His esoteric and simplistic juxtapositioning of 'East' and 'West' was a popular success, contributing to a growing awareness of the 'East' as a place of wisdom and spiritual power that matched Europe's own religious and occult traditions. Its role in propagating a perception of the Orient as mystically rich and exotic was considerable, naively presenting complex traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism in easily understandable ways alongside and as identical with European religious traditions.

The founding of the Theosophical Society in London in 1875 by Helena Blavatsky, and the establishment of a French branch in 1884 must also be seen to have greatly popularised occult and mystical teachings. Blavatsky's journey to Ceylon and India in 1875 and her subsequent conversion to Buddhism is often cited as a significant moment in the

dialogue between the West and Buddhism, although it should be noted that scholars such as René Guenon and Carl Jung have strongly criticised and often dismissed Theosophy's Eastern leanings as unscholarly, limited and even racist.<sup>203</sup> A growing interest in comparative religious studies, begun in the early decades of the nineteenth century by scholars such as Eugène Burnouf who oversaw the first translation of Buddhist texts in 1844 with the publication of his Introduction to the History of Indian Buddhism must also be seen as providing important new intellectual platforms which many artist's looked to for inspiration and support. Burnouf was followed by a host of other writers; The English scholar Spence Hardy published A Manual of Buddhism in 1853, in France Jules Barthémely Saint-Hilaire published his more critical La Bouddha et sa religion in 1858, whilst the Welsh orientalist T.W.Rhys Davids and his wife Caroline founded the Pali Text Society in 1881 to translate Buddhist texts. At Oxford Friedrich Max Müller, often called the greatest authority of his time in the fields of Indology and Buddhist scholarship, edited the important Sacred Books of the East series begun in 1874 which helped bring Eastern ideas in general to an ever increasing popular audience in the Europe. These and other developments in the fields of Oriental scholarship and Buddhist studies in particular, enabled Schuré to conclude Les Grands Initiés by calling for a 'reconciliation of Asia and Europe'. On the surface such sentiments are positive, and yet underlying them was also an increasing European colonial expansion Eastwards that in many instances legitimated the relocation of Buddhist or Hindu artifacts to European museums and collections. As Edward Said suggests, the appropriation of Oriental ideas and philosophies during this period was also implicitly tied to a European discourse of power. Schuré's universalist vision is, in this respect, a privileged vision in that it uncritically assumes Europe to be the centre of that universalism: Buddhism or Hinduism are ultimately satellites orbiting Europe to be assimilated into its humanist discourses.

*iv) European Buddha Images of the late 19th century.*

One of the visible consequences of the growth of scholarship and interest in Oriental religions and culture was the appearance of Buddha images in the work of some artists from the late nineteenth century onwards. Although we encounter instances of Buddha images in European painting from the early part of the century, the contexts and intentions surrounding their use by later artists such as Ranson and Redon is considerably different. Early academic publications on Buddhism were often illustrated with images of Buddhas and Buddhist temples, but on the whole such themes do not appear as subjects for larger scale, canvas

based works until around the 1890s. We may perhaps mention one interesting early example of a Buddha image within a larger individual work: in Sir Stanford Raffles' portrait of 1817 (Fig. 26) by G.F. Joseph we see a small seated Hindu or Buddhist deity on the mantelpiece behind the sitter, most probably one of the many Buddhist and Hindu figures Raffle's brought to Britain during this period. Importantly the Buddha functions primarily as an *ornament* to the main subject matter of the picture, contributing an ambience of mystery and exoticism to what is otherwise a rather standard nineteenth century portrait painting. In the work of Ranson and Redon during the late nineteenth century though, such peripheral functions are replaced by the inclusion of Buddha figures as *central subjects* within the overall pictorial composition.

Paul Ranson's *Christ and Buddha* emerged around 1890-92, and Odilon Redon painted numerous Buddha images between 1895 and 1906. For both of these artists the image of the Buddha was, I think, closely connected to their growing personal spiritual interests as well as to a more general concern with broadening the religious landscape of Europe. The Buddha image provided a new iconography that was unconnected to European traditions, but which could still be equated with images of Christ or the saints. In other words, the Buddha image represented a break with past traditions both in art historical and religious terms, thereby offering an ideal radical image that could both challenge past orthodoxies and point to a new utopian vision of universal religious harmony. The Buddha may thus be seen to have been one of many other similar images utilised by painters of this period for the purposes of breaking free of past conventions and exploring radical new subject matter's. Thus Ranson, for instance, painted many occult inspired images during this period and the titles he gave his images attest to his deep interest in this area; *Rama* (1890), *Support Sathan* (early 1890's), *Astrology* (early 1890's) and *The Sorceresses* (1891) amongst others. There is thus the sense that for artists such as Ranson, the Buddha image represented a *radical optimism* which at once challenged traditional religious and scientific orthodoxies and offered a universalist symbol of *mystical advancement*.

The appearance of Buddha images in the paintings of Ranson and Redon also represent expressions of their deepening interest in esoteric and mystical issues, and more particularly, of their wider interest in non-Western sources of religion. In the work of many Symbolist, Nabi and Fauve painters including Maurice Denis, Paul Sérusier, Paul Gauguin and Jan Toorop for instance, one often encounters references or allusions to occult and religious themes. In this, such artists represent early examples of the Romantic tendency

which was to be developed further by painters such as Kandinsky and Mondrian in the first decades of the twentieth century. For them, the transcendental could be visualised through other, non-Christian religious traditions that ultimately shared in a singular, mystical truth.

Ranson's *Christ and Buddha* of 1890-92 (Fig.31) is a strikingly vibrant image, full of symbolic allusions. We see a Buddha figure seated in meditation below Christ on the cross. A large face that resembles the face of a Buddha half occupies the top right hand corner. Five lotus leaves ascend from a murky underworld towards a symbolic light that is represented by Christ on the cross, perhaps suggesting the union of matter with spirit. The five lotus leaves may symbolise the theosophical association of the number five with ideas of human intelligence and health as well as corresponding with the pentagram. What is particularly interesting about this image is the portrayal of the Buddha figure in relation to a Christian imagery. Ranson's Buddha is primarily depicted as a spiritual being and thus related to Christ; in this respect it is unlike earlier paintings, affording them *the same status as mystics*.

And yet despite this perceived equation one may point to at least two interesting factors. Christ is painted in bright, light-coloured tones surrounded by praying ranks of angels. Like much Romantic painting, Ranson here seems to equate Christ with Light - perhaps the Light of the World? The Buddha, in contrast, is painted in a thick green tone, suggestive of nature and the earth. The symbolic significance of this use of colour is that Christ is closer to Light, the source of truth, whereas Buddha remains close to the terrestrial realm. Secondly, Ranson paints Christ ascending, and by implication we are witness to his transcendence upwards. Again in contrast, the Buddha is painted firmly seated on the ground, suggesting his human nature. Does this reflect Ranson's understanding of Buddhism as somehow more nature-oriented than Christianity? Although the two figures share the picture space, it is Christ who ultimately seems to occupy the spiritually 'higher' realm in terms of his spatial position and symbolic colouring. Furthermore, Christ and Buddha are not envisaged in the painting as specifically religious figures, but rather express what Schuré called the 'internal history', or mystical core, of all religions. Thus, both figures adopt meditative postures, but without resorting to traditional iconographic strategies. Further investigation reveals some interesting factors about how Ranson perceived Buddhism.

From the Buddha's attire one may deduce its Indian or South East Asian style. Buddhist images wear the robe in two principle ways; one in which both shoulders and arms are covered and another in which the right shoulder and arm are bared. Ranson's Buddha

does not correspond to either tradition, instead exposing the left arm and shoulder. Ranson correctly paints the Buddha with some of the Thirty Two Attributes that all Buddhist imagery contains. These attributes originated in ancient Indian tradition, which lists them as the signs of a Great Man, signs denoting a superhuman physical condition. The wisdom protuberance at the crown of the head (*ushnisha*) is clearly marked as are exceptionally long earlobes, but Ranson's Buddha lacks all other signs such as the three rings of flesh circling the neck or the light emitting curl of hair between the eyebrows (*urna*). Moreover, the figure does not sit in any traditional manner. The two most typical poses of Asian Buddhas are the standing and the sitting, although it is the full lotus sitting pose that is most commonly associated with Buddha images. In this pose the feet rest on the knees, soles facing up and, depending on which leg rests on the other, represent either the position of good fortune or the demon-subduing pose. Ranson's Buddha does not meditate in any traditional pose and its arms are positioned unlike most Asian Buddha images. The Buddha's simplified hands are not positioned in any mudra, or symbolic position, but merely rest on the thighs, and the legs are not arranged in any lotus or half lotus position. Furthermore, the Buddha's eyes are closed shut in a gesture of inner spiritual peace that indicates a spiritually transformed being.

We may deduce that Ranson's portrayal of the Buddha is from a Southern Theravadan tradition as I have suggested. Far from illustrating a universal Buddha image, I would contend that Ranson's image is tied to the discourse expounded in Burnouf's 1844 work, An Introduction to the History of Indian Buddhism. In this book, Burnouf establishes a clear distinction between the Northern and Southern Buddhist schools, emphasising the Southern Theravadan tradition as 'more ancient and pure'. As J.J. Clarke indicates, it was the Southern Theravadan tradition and its images of Buddha which largely dominated nineteenth century European thinking about Buddhism. Interestingly one rarely encounters images of Buddhas from Northern traditions - in the Tibetan or Zen styles for instance - until much later, although as we shall see, Redon's 1895 Buddha painting may be seen as an exception.

By the mid 1890s Odilon Redon's images evoked a heightened sense of spiritual awareness; a result, in part, of personal tragedies and in particular the death of his first son. Redon's earlier monochrome images of fantastic creatures and dream-like situations was increasingly replaced by calmer images of vibrant colour. Redon had painted Oriental images from the early 1890s, after his encounter with Eastern religions and imagery. Indeed, as Leeman points out, Redon had been introduced to Hindu poetry by Armand Clavaud as early

Leeman points out, Redon had been introduced to Hindu poetry by Armand Clavaud as early as the 1860s. His 1893 pastel entitled *Sita*, for example, shows the wife of Rama, whom Schuré had written about extensively in Les Grands Initiés. In Redon's lithograph from 1895 entitled *The Spirit came to me, I became a Buddha*, (Fig.29) we see Buddha as an expression of Redon's own spiritual transformation.

In this rather strange picture we see a gaunt looking Buddha figure with the eyes wide open standing under a blazing orb or sun. The figure is swathed in long robes and may be assumed to represent the figure of the Buddha emerging from ascetic practices before his enlightenment under the bodhi tree. His pale face and piercing staring eyes are perhaps reminiscent of an earlier Romantic portraiture; comparisons with Henry Fuseli's self portrait of 1780-90 or Samuel Palmer's 1826 self portrait may be fruitful. And yet, unlike their self portraits, Redon's image transposes his self onto the figure of a Buddha. He is showing us *his transformed self* after 'the spirit' had come to him and made him a Buddha. From the title Redon gave the painting and considering when it was painted I think that one can justly see it as a commentary on Redon's own spiritual experiences. The figure is not overtly Asian or Buddhist in appearance and it is only its title that informs us of Redon's intention and interest.

In both 1904 and 1905 Redon painted images of a young Buddha and significantly they seem calmer than his earlier Buddha images. One reason for this change in sensibility may have been the influence of Paul Carus' book, published in 1895 entitled The Gospel of Buddha, which Redon owned. Carus' reading of Buddhism led him to praise it wholeheartedly, going so far as to criticise the zealotry of missionaries whom he regarded as distorting and vilifying Buddhism. Instead Carus sought to bring Christianity and Buddhism closer together, primarily by aligning Buddhism with radical free thinking. He says on Buddhism:

I have not as yet met a Buddhist who would not look upon Christ with reverence as the Buddha of Western nations....for the sake of purifying our conception of religion, there is no better method than a study of comparative religion; and in comparative religion there is nothing more fruitful than a tracing of the analogies that obtain between Buddhism and Christianity.<sup>204</sup>

Carus' positive reading of Buddhism may have influenced Redon's post-1895 Buddha images to some degree, fitting his serene depictions of them.

The 1904 image is perhaps Redon's closest portrayal of a 'classical' Oriental Buddha

figure (Fig.28). We see a young Buddha in profile sitting in meditation under a tree, and surrounded by a whirlwind of imaginary flowers. The Buddha sits upright in the traditional lotus posture, his right hand resting on the thigh. What is interesting about this image is the profusion of flowers that float around the sitting figure, almost forming an aura around the body. In this image, like in Ranson's painting, the Buddha is portrayed communing with nature and natural processes: he represents positive ideas of growth and regeneration therefore. Like the 1905 painting, *Buddha*, Redon imagines a spiritually pregnant being intertwined and communicating with nature, yet unlike the 1895 lithograph which retains Redon's early sense of drama and tension, the 1904 Buddha image radiates a sense of beauty and calm. Indeed, one may speculate that the painting shows the Buddha in meditation under the Bodhi tree prior to his awakening, and in this sense can be seen as a historically or mythically based work. Redon's strategy of depicting the Buddha in this manner thus interestingly aligns an earlier Romantic tradition of transcendental *landscapes* with the representation of *religious figures*, and in doing so the painting also seeks to redefine Romantic portrayals of the transcendental. Significantly this figure is not from a Christian context, but a Buddha, and thus capable of freeing itself from a European tradition of religious painting.

Redon's 1905 painting, *Buddha* (Fig.30), is similar in many respects to Ranson's image. In this painting we see a standing Buddha figure, his eyes closed and the left arm raised slightly in the position of a mudra or religious sign. Redon's Buddha is not from a South East Asian tradition but rather resembles the Japanese 'stone Buddha' or *Jizo Bosatsu*. We can infer this by the figure's monk-like appearance; he is shaven headed, wears long robes that cover both shoulders and carries a stick normally associated with wandering priests. This particular Buddha is said to have attained Buddhahood but elected to remain on earth in the guise of a monk. Reverence for *Jizo* spread rapidly in Japan between the twelfth and early seventeenth centuries, and to this day his stone image may be glimpsed in small shrines along roads and crossings in Japan. Redon is thought to have associated the Buddha figure with ideas of creativity and rebirth, and in this painting, like the 1904 image, the standing Buddha seems to transform the nature he is in; it is as if he is making nature grow around him. Perhaps as a symbolic compositional gesture, the Buddha occupies one side of the painting whilst the other is occupied by a large tree which grows upwards towards the sky. And yet, like his earlier Buddha depictions, this figure emerges out of a specifically European context in that his robes are colourful and he wears shoes. Redon's

Buddha thus remains *generalised* and lacking in contextual details.

The combining of Eastern and Western elements is continued, and perhaps finds its culmination, in Redon's 1906 work again entitled *Buddha* (Fig.27). Unlike the 1905 *Buddha* which attempts to retain some semblance of the 'Oriental', the 1906 image makes no overt reference to the Asian origins of the Buddha. It is perhaps significant that by 1904 Redon had begun to seriously explore Eastern religions as alternatives to Catholicism. The fusing of Christian and Buddhist iconographies in these later Buddhist images may thus hint at Redon's own spiritual position; one which considered Christ and Buddha as essentially unified.

The 1906 Buddha significantly resembles Christ. The head is covered with a scarf under which we see long hair, and there seem to be traces of a beard on the face, suggesting a classical Zeus-type Christ image. That Redon originally called this painting *Sacred Heart* is interesting, for it seems to suggest an underlying Christian theme. One may conclude that it was Redon's strong attraction to a universal mystical experience - as expressed in Schuré's book - which enabled him to portray the Buddha as European and Christian. The power of the painting comes partly from its title, which seems completely paradoxical to the image we see, and yet which serves to allude to the nature of the figure. This sense of contradiction also adds to paintings power; on one level, is Redon simply playing with words? Or is he trying to force the viewer into recognising the innate universality of Christ and Buddha? It is a painting which may be compared to Samuel Palmer's self portrait of the artist merging with Christ, in the sense that Redon's painting also utilises the ambivalent *merging* of two identities into a unified whole. Like Novalis' references to fragments which also reflect the whole, Redon's image seeks to find unity in fusion. It is an image heavily underlined with the universalist discourse of Schuré, and one which radically *re-imagines* Christ in terms of Buddhism. In the context of a Romantic tradition which tended to 'camouflage' references to the Church, Redon boldly presents us with an image of Christ himself, but a Christ who is *denied* a Christian context.

Both Ranson and Redon's Buddha images may be seen as examples of a late-nineteenth century European art that concerned itself primarily with the evocation of intense, personal and seemingly universal experiences. What isolates them from other similar paintings of the period, is their use of Eastern religious figures in evoking ideas of the transcendental. Thus the Buddha image in many senses replaces images of the Christ in earlier religious paintings; it is recognised as an image of religious worth. And yet the way

that the Buddha image is represented in their paintings also reveal specific Orientalist discourses that suggest the centrality of Europe as the nucleus of aesthetic and philosophical judgment. In other words, Ranson and Redon's Buddha images are also reflections of the ways in which European artists *could* appropriate from the 'East': they expose the structures of knowledge assimilation and collection underlying European images of Buddhism and the Buddha.

Their Buddha images fulfil numerous functions simultaneously. In the first instance they may be seen to function as *critical postures* against existing Christian traditions. Their very appearance in paintings was an implicit challenge to a Christian tradition that had always been dominant. For Ranson or Redon to paint the Buddha next to Christ, sharing the same picture space, was radical precisely because the assumed authority of Christian imagery was challenged. In the second instance, one may detect a *prescriptive* theme. By painting Buddhas, Ranson and Redon were also offering a vision of what could be. At a time when traditional faith was under increasing pressure, the image of the Buddha offered an alternative expression of the sacred without having to resort to traditional Christian iconographies. It was in this sense therefore, a relatively safe image. In the third instance, Ranson and Redon's images take on distinctive qualities of their own. Their Buddha images are thus clearly not 'traditional' in a Buddhist sense, but rather complex *constructed* images about Buddhism informed by Western Oriental scholarship and the artist's own perceptions about the East. In this three-fold refraction, the Buddha image is at once *liberated* from its traditional Asian origins and *colonised* by Western perceptions. Thus, in Ranson's image for instance, we see the Buddha related to Christ, but also simultaneously objectified by Christ with whom the Buddha is equated. For both artists the Buddha symbolised a potent spiritual power equal to that of Christ, but significantly it is a Buddha that remains projected from a unique European viewpoint. In other words the Buddha is ultimately assimilated into a wider universalist discourse that emanates from Europe and thus that *judges* on terms constructed in Europe.

We may identify aspects of this in the fact that the Buddha was an image that had entered the popular culture of Europe only in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In this respect, the period when Ranson and Redon were painting Buddha images may be identified as one of 'gradual popularisation', in which Buddha pictures began to be recognised beyond a small circle of Orientalists and museum experts. Ranson and Redon's images are, in this

sense, also attempts at trying to understand and *visualise* Buddhism within a context of limited and growing understanding. Thus it is that both Ranson and Redon painted Buddhas largely in natural contexts, communing with nature and completely devoid of traditional religious contexts. In contrast to traditional images of Christ which situated him within specific narrative scenes, the Buddha could be situated within nature precisely because he remained *unfamiliar*. If for Friedrich, emblems such as the cross and the church could act as spiritual prompts within the landscape, for artists such as Ranson and Redon, the Buddha in nature represented a renewal of the notion of nature itself: it was the topos which non-European religious traditions could legitimately enter without overtly subverting the church, and still express the transcendental.

Ranson and Redon's Buddha paintings may thus be related to an earlier Romantic tradition of depicting images of melancholic escape. Like Friedrich's landscapes which generate feelings of longing in the viewer, Ranson and Redon's Buddha images also function as prompts for imagining a better world by claiming authority as *alternatives* to Christianity and European tradition. Such a contention is supported by the extensive trading links formed from the late eighteenth century between Europe and the Orient, the subsequent exchange of artifacts to many European collections and museums, and the development of a recognised field of Oriental scholarship, all of which provided the material and psychological contexts for the elevation of the 'Orient' as a site of mystery. J.J. Clarke refers to this tendency in the following way:

One of the most common explanations for the West's persistent enchantment with the East can be summed up in the word *romanticisation*. According to this view, the West's interest in the Orient has been guided for the most part by the desire to escape into some remote and fantastic 'other', and to find there a lofty yet illusory means of uplift, or the material for dreams of lost wisdom or golden ages.<sup>205</sup>

Buddhism in the nineteenth century - through scholarship and developing museum collections - may therefore be said to have provided a significant source of 'enchantment' for artists and intellectuals in Europe, developing considerable popular appeal through movements such as the Theosophical Society and publications such as Arnold's Light of Asia. It presented a religious tradition which provided a 'means of uplift' and 'wisdom' that could not be provided by Christian churches.

Clarke also points to the appeal of irrationalism which Europe perceived in the Orient,

in contrast to its apparent logic and rationality. In this sense, Oriental philosophies and religious thought provided a suitable platform of dissent for an emerging avant-garde trying to break free of the Academy. In many of Redon's Buddha paintings for example, one can recognise this 'irrational' aspect in the Buddha's portrayal as a being who is intimately linked with nature, ecstatic, and seemingly free from rational thought processes. This sense of distance from reason may be identified as another significant point of affinity between Redon and many earlier Romantics. The Oriental religious figures in their paintings are thus far from passive, decorative objects, but serve the significant *critical* function of presenting alternative religious models to traditional European images. In this sense, as I have already mentioned, they are also works which imagine the Orient in different ways to the 'orthodox' *Japonisme* model; their Buddha images assume critical and philosophical *meanings* as Oriental images.

Despite their sense of radicality, Ranson and Redon's images may be seen to remain closely allied to Neoplatonic metaphysics. Most significantly, their Buddhas are depicted with tightly closed eyes representing a Romantic notion of *communion* with higher powers and with a transcendental reality beyond the physical realm. Arising out of such a rendering is also a feeling of striving, or suffering, in order to achieve a state of spiritual purity, and one can sense this in, for example, Redon's 1905 *Buddha*. One may perhaps even speculate whether Ranson and Redon's Buddhas depict what R.C. Zaehner referred to as 'theistic mystical experiences', experiences of an identity with a divine power in which the mystic remains crucially separate. This contention is further supported if we recognise Redon's numerous other images of figures with closed eyes. *Closed Eyes* from 1904 or *In Heaven* from 1889, both portray androgynous figures with their eyes closed in what appear to be states of prayer or deep meditation.

In contrast, Oriental Buddha images are rarely seen with the eyes completely closed or in a state of inner tension. Rather the eyes are usually half open and half closed. Far from depicting a state of spiritual communion in a Neoplatonic sense, the Asian Buddha image represents Buddhist enlightenment or awakening, *the realisation of one's own sunyata*. Most Asian Buddha images thus express a sense of suspension and readiness; they sit or stand with a strong *confidence* that does not point to other realms, but rather inwards to a recognition of one's own looking. In the language of the Soto Zen sect, Buddha images merely show us how to 'sit'. Even one of the earliest representations of the Gautama Buddha, *Shaka Nyorai* at the Ango-in Temple in Japan, shows the Buddha with an

**expression of determined calm, the eyes never fully closed.**

v) *Affinities with Mondrian.*

The idea that Tobey is somehow an 'Oriental' artist remains strong within European and American writings. For instance, writing in 1982, the curator of the Seattle Art Museum Bruce Guenther relates the work of Tobey and other American Northwest artists to the Orient on account of their formal assimilation of Oriental materials and techniques.

The conscious use of techniques traditionally associated with Japanese art - sumi ink and other water based pigments, paper on scroll format and calligraphy - by many artists in the group [Northwest artists] further encouraged a rich synthesis of pan-cultural attitudes and reinforced the interpretation of the works as deriving more from Asian sources than from the Western Romantic tradition.<sup>266</sup>

Guenther significantly positions Tobey in between Asian art and Western Romanticism, initiating an important discussion that is rarely analysed in detail. It is between these two poles that the discourses around Tobey inevitably circulate, making any definitive locating of his work difficult, but also enabling his work to be read through different positions and contexts.

What many writers often overlook are Tobey's own statements about how he regarded himself in relation to his Oriental experiences. In this respect, one is confronted with a definitive documented assertion that must be taken seriously. He says stoutly in a 1961 interview:

I could never be anything but the Occidental I am.<sup>267</sup>

The quote may be amusingly illustrated with a photograph of Tobey and friends taken in Japan in 1934 in which we see Tobey in *yukata*, or traditional dressing gown, looking rather detached in the traditional Japanese surroundings (Fig.52). Although one should not draw Orientalist conclusions from this photograph, considering that it was most probably taken at an inn where *yukata* is common, the image might nevertheless prompt further questions: does it betray a full scale *embracing* of Japanese culture, or rather an aloof and parodic sense of 'otherness' on the part of Tobey? The notion of *homage*, with its sense of respectful distance in which the person paying homage never fully lets go of his or her own sense of place, is in this respect perhaps a useful way of seeing Tobey's 'Oriental' interests.

In another interview by a Japanese journalist recorded in Basel, Tobey again offers no strong affinities with the Orient: indeed, he rather seems to distance himself from it.

Q: The apparent Oriental tendencies in your work may be merely compliments to the East, but when we view some of your works, we can't avoid thinking of the impact of your encounter with Oriental art. Can we continue to think along these lines?

A: The only thing that I could have assimilated would have been the rhythmic power. It would be only that, I would say, that I took from Japan because it is the only thing that, as an American, I could take. I'll make no claim to finding anything else. <sup>208</sup>

It is my contention that such assertive statements by Tobey contribute towards a re-evaluation of Tobey's place within an Occidental art historical tradition emanating from Romanticism. Tobey's transcendental art may thus be usefully considered within the orbit of what Rosenblum calls the 'transcendental abstraction' of painters such as Mondrian, and his strategy of expressing the transcendental by reducing nature to a realm of non-objective forms. Indeed, Tobey may be seen to occupy an interesting position within a broad reading of Romanticism, further developing the efforts of late-nineteenth century artists such as Odilon Redon. And yet, unlike Redon, Tobey's signature works are mostly non-representational and highly metaphysical. In this regard the affinities between his works and those of Piet Mondrian are significant, not only providing interesting aesthetic and philosophical parallels, but also potentially situating Tobey alongside a more extensive lineage of Romantic artists. We may thus also read Tobey's art in terms of a Neoplatonic transcendental.

Mondrian is an artist who is rarely, if ever, associated with the work of Tobey. Perhaps this is unsurprising, given their vastly different mature styles - Mondrian's stark and geometric grids differ considerably from Tobey's delicately scribbled webs. Indeed, Mondrian has been championed as the pioneer of a style of painting that has tended to emphasise elements such as cleanliness, flatness and the geometric, and which has been carried through in the work of artists such as Ad Reinhardt or Bridget Riley. Such a view invariably concentrates almost exclusively on Mondrian's late works in the characteristic grid style, at the expense of his earlier and more transitional works, thereby also to a large degree severing his potential links with artists whose works do not *look* geometric. And yet despite the apparent stylistic differences between Mondrian and Tobey one can discern considerable areas of affinity between them. I would contend that there are perhaps two principal areas;

firstly that their concerns as painters were similar, and secondly that some of their stylistic strategies to achieve these concerns also overlapped. I would not wish to claim any kind of influential relationship between Tobey and Mondrian, but merely to try and highlight certain affinities between them that may help us to better situate and understand the work of Tobey as a Romantic transcendental artist.

We are presented with what is perhaps the only real documented evidence regarding Tobey's thoughts on Mondrian in an interview he gave to Seldon Rodman, and quoted by Wesley Wehr in the 1997 Madrid Tobey exhibition catalogue. It is a small comment that holds an important key for understanding Tobey's work in relation to Mondrian's, and which also directs analysis of his work into potentially new areas. I shall offer the quote in its full context here as it frames Tobey's thoughts on Mondrian in a crucial way.

I like best to see in nature what I want in my painting. I don't often enough. To do this, one must be in nature, aware and attentive. Then one must sleep - at least the conscious mind must sleep. Because if the resulting work is wholly conscious, it can't be true! When we can find the abstract *in* nature we find the deepest art. That is why the pictures growing out of tree forms in Mondrian's middle period are superior - for me, anyway - to his later geometric works.<sup>209</sup>

In this comment Tobey touches on at least three important aspects of his working process. Firstly, that he regards nature as providing him with a significant element in his painting, although as he says, he seldom finds it. Secondly, that to paint this element of nature successfully the artist must put his conscious mind to 'sleep', for not doing so results in the work 'not being true'. And thirdly, he states that to find the abstract in nature is to find the 'deepest art'. The statement may be read as Tobey's manifesto, concisely defining the significant elements of his art. In the first step he states his ideal subject matter; nature. In the second step, he states how best to paint this; by suspending his conscious mind. And finally in the third step he states his objective; to discover the 'abstract in nature'. That he goes on to mention Mondrian is also a sign of Tobey's admiration for the artist, suggesting that Tobey saw his own work as related to Mondrian's. And yet, Tobey is quite specific about which Mondrian works he admires, suggesting that he was familiar with Mondrian's development as an artist. I contend that from this seemingly marginal statement one can re-read Tobey's work in relation to Mondrian's and in particular with his transitional works from roughly

1909 to 1914.

Tobey's greatest point of affinity with Mondrian lies, though, not so much in a shared style, as in similar concerns regarding the *objective of painting*. These concerns were primarily philosophical, allying painting with metaphysics and religious thought. In both Mondrian and Tobey one can say that art led towards the revelation of 'higher' realms, of a spiritual domain beyond the everyday. It represented not merely an aesthetic exercise in composition or colour arrangements, but crucially also a *revelatory experience*, one in which the image could disclose a higher reality. Tobey, like Mondrian, was primarily driven by such metaphysical interests.

And yet, it would be rather too simplistic simply to parallel their interests in such a broad manner, for a closer reading of the two artists reveals that it was particularly regarding nature - and more generally the material world - and its relationship to abstraction that their thinking converges. This accommodates Tobey's own preference for Mondrian's 'middle period' works (which I would interpret as falling between 1909 and 1914) and their adoption of nature and other material elements as entry points into abstraction. Tobey's work as a whole can be seen in the light of Mondrian's transitional works, both in terms of their metaphysical frameworks as well as in certain formal similarities which are revealed in their paintings.

The notion of a higher reality behind the materiality of nature is Neoplatonic, and a notion that both Tobey and Mondrian espouse on a number of occasions and in various writings and statements. For both artists nature on the one hand *prevented* them from painting the immutable, whilst also *enabling* them to express it. In other words for Mondrian and Tobey, the role of nature and the material world can be seen as both problematic and enabling. It was problematic because it represented the external world, which was superficial and fleeting, but it was also enabling because it offered ways out of this impasse by providing the forms through which the immutable could be reached. In Mondrian's case, we see this most clearly in his paintings of trees, flowers, dune-scapes and church facades executed between 1909 and 1914, when he was experimenting with deconstructing natural forms. From around 1910-11 we begin to see the influence of Cubism in Mondrian's paintings, as curved lines are gradually replaced by straight horizontals and verticals. By the time of the *Pier and Ocean* series of 1914, Mondrian had effectively found a way of expressing the abstract in nature, reducing the entire picture surface to short lines pointing up or across the paper. Whereas for Mondrian the question of reducing nature into

abstraction had to be *fully resolved*, for Tobey it represented a far deeper investigation, and one which ultimately occupied his whole career as an artist. Whereas Mondrian ultimately sought to 'free' himself from nature by restricting his marks to straight lines and primary colours, Tobey continued to paint with the wrist, evoking naturalistic spaces by using an earthy coloured palette as well as often giving his paintings titles which revealed their source within nature. Mondrian's dislike of the curved line as 'feminine' is in Tobey fully investigated, and allied closely to an evocation of *natural processes* or movements.

Within Tobey's early development we see a similar struggle with the material world, although a much less rigid one, than in Mondrian. His early paintings from the mid-1930s often have a sense of struggling to break through the material world, whether in the form of nature or of the city. A painting such as *Broadway* (1936) (Fig.45) is a good example of Tobey's experiments in trying to abstract the cityscape. Its title clearly refers to New York, and the picture itself represents the tall buildings, traffic and bustling crowds of that city. The viewer stands above a wide street that winds its way away, into the far distance amidst the high buildings and lights. Shop facades, signs, figures and roof tops are recognisable, though they struggle to become visible against Tobey's complicated brush work. It can be usefully compared to Mondrian's *Woods near Oele* (1908) (Fig.7). Both images clearly represent a material scene, the city in Tobey's case and the wood in Mondrian's. Both images use this scene to explore the possibilities of abstraction through expressive and loose brush work that keeps the original scene in focus, yet equally pulls at it so that elements within it gradually become blurred or seem to melt away. In the final instance, both images attempt to express their subjects by a strategy of de-emphasising, of rubbing out, and of blurring. *Broadway* in this sense explores the radical possibilities of 'white writing' as a totally abstract form, using the form of the city as a starting point from which to reduce and expel the city. It is an image which rests on the *tension* created between recognising a visual city and feeling its energies through the blurring of that vision. To be accurate, Tobey continued to paint figures and other natural forms throughout his career; in numerous works from the post-*Broadway* period, such as *Threading Light* (1942), *Flow of the Night* (1943), *Pacific Transition* (1943), and *Gothic* (1943), we see twisting figures, people wearing hats, wine bottles, glasses and many other references to materiality included amidst what is often an otherwise abstract image of lines and planes intertwined.

*Gothic* (1943) (Fig.46) which depicts the great gothic facade of Chartres Cathedral in France, might suggest another point of affinity with Mondrian. Tobey's painting represents

a multitude of vertical lines rising upwards towards the heavens, holding within them small images of the Virgin Mary and other saintly figures. Although in quite different styles, Tobey's painting may usefully be compared with Mondrian's *Church at Domberg* (1910-11) (Fig.9); both manage to express a feeling of *ascension* through the motif of a religious building, even though the buildings do not look realistic in any formal manner. Mondrian's church is geometricised and highly simplified; there are no longer any references to the natural world surrounding it or to the details within the church itself. Tobey's cathedral too does not rely upon a realistic image from nature, but rather expresses a structure that seems to have been stripped bare or hollowed out. Underlying both artists' images is an urge to push nature back in order to reveal the immutable, the transcendental, beyond it. Their strategies in doing this was to emphasise the ascending structure of church architecture in a manner that rests upon a Neoplatonic conception of the transcendental as essentially divided.

1944 represents a significant year in the development of Tobey's art, a year of considerable transition in his style that is comparable to Mondrian's evolution into a harder, grid-like abstraction after 1914. In a similar development, many of Tobey's paintings become finer and more delicate after 1944, as his 'white writing' technique matured. It was the year of his first one-person exhibition at the Willard gallery in New York and the beginning of his national reputation as an artist. Clement Greenberg wrote about him in *The Nation*, saying that he had made 'one of the few original contributions to contemporary American painting'. 1944 was also the year when the term 'white writing' first appeared in a text about Tobey. Although, unlike Mondrian, one cannot easily identify defined stylistic phases in Tobey's career, 1944 must be considered as a moment of maturation for Tobey. Compared to many of his earlier, figurative and narrative works, after 1944 Tobey began to express a greater degree of unrestrained abstraction in works such as *Remote Field*, *Fata Morgana*, *New York*, *WorldEgg*, and the beautiful *City Radiance*.

In a work such as *New York* (Fig.34) one is confronted with what looks like a worn or carved slab of stone. Tightly contained by edges that frame the image within the canvas, the painting does not allude to anything recognisably material. From its title we may infer that Tobey wished to express the energy of New York city, and he achieved this, not by illustrating New York and its aspects as in earlier works, but by a totally abstracted web of white/grey brushstrokes. Looking at the painting one is struck by areas of light which seem to flicker and fade, and by a core of tension in the centre of the image that seems to bulge outwards. Tobey achieves this partly by containing the central image within a defined area of

the canvas, as well as by his delicate and dense brush work, which creates an infinite number of tense relationships within the image. Our eyes traverse the canvas, following one straight line only to be turned quickly by an intersecting curved line which in turn leads on to another straight line cutting the foreground. It is a deeply satisfying experience, bringing a sense of surrender that is mixed with a feeling of wanting to keep looking, to keep exploring this lunar-like surface.

It is a similar experience to looking at Mondrian's great *Composition 10 in Black and White: Pier and Ocean* (1915) (Fig.21). In Mondrian's drawing one is also confronted with an enclosed image in the shape of an oval, containing simple vertical and horizontal lines that occasionally intersect. Much more sparse than Tobey's painting, Mondrian's image achieves a level of tension and of satisfaction that is the result of its containment and linear relationships. Like Tobey's image, *Composition 10* does not illustrate what it intends, but rather suggests it through a process of reduction. Indeed, it is a work which looms over Tobey's entire oeuvre. Neither totally abstracted, nor fully referential, it is a work that supports Tobey's art both in terms of its style as well as its underlying metaphysical intention. Although Mondrian uses a more meagre technique, the results he achieves is comparable to any Tobey painting; its sense of tension, movement, rhythm, serenity, beauty and sheer scale is unprecedented. Bridget Riley refers to the painting thus:

...an immensity of sensation opens up: one feels oneself surrounded by the sparkling stillness and the rhythmic movement of some boundless continuum.<sup>210</sup>

Riley's comments could apply equally to many of Tobey's works. Tobey also effectively utilises the ways in which multiple lines can establish tensions within a picture space, as well as employing the tactic of framing the central image within the canvas. Unlike many works by Abstract Expressionists including Pollock or Barnett Newman whose images tend to extend to the very edges of the canvas, Tobey often *confines* his images, elevating their auratic presence and in a sense taking it out of the world. It is a tactic that Mondrian uses often in paintings up until 1916 or so.

But it is perhaps the two artists' use of line that ultimately relates them, and through the line that both manage to create *energies* within their pictures. Referring to Tobey, Kosme de Baranano offers the following assessment.

Tobey...sought a space that was immediate and active. A space in which the pigments and the colour tones - laid down in patches or transported in thin lines - interpenetrated, forming plastic energy.<sup>211</sup>

As Baranano suggests, Tobey achieves this 'plastic energy' by interpenetrating lines and tones. It is thus through expressing *relationships* that his paintings succeed in creating abstract spaces. Tobey's technique is, after all, one based upon relations between lines that he applies meticulously onto the picture surface; each brush stroke establishing a new set of relationships on the canvas. And yet, as I suggested earlier, Tobey's least intricate works sustain the greatest feelings of a Zen transcendental, precisely because they allow the viewer to see each lines *relationship to others*. Thus, whilst a painting such as *New York* (1944) (Fig.34) presents a dense, tightly packed 'slab-like' image of white lines, in a work such as *Above the Earth V* (1956) (Fig.38) Tobey paints in a more unobstructed manner enabling the viewer to follow each brushstroke in relation to others as well as to the overall composition. Like Mondrian's *Composition No. 10* (1915) (Fig.21), which also allows the viewer an unrestricted view of line relationships, heightening the sense of tension, a work such as *Above the Earth V* is better suited to evoking a sense of the Zen transcendental because of its less dense, and hence more accommodating, treatment of lines; it does not absorb the gaze but rather respects a distance between the viewer and the image.

The importance of relationships within the picture was a crucial element for Mondrian, whose statements on the subject often strongly echo in the works of Tobey. He refers to the expression of relationship in his Essay in Triologue Form of 1919. Asked whether relationships have only to be expressed through nature, Mondrian's 'character' answers:

On the contrary: the more the natural is abstracted, the more pronounced is the expression of relationship. The new painting demonstrated this and finally came to express *relationships* exclusively.<sup>212</sup>

He expounds on this further in a later passage, concluding that relationship is primordial.

...all things are *parts* of the whole: each part receives its visual value from the whole, and the whole from the parts. Everything is expressed through *relationship*. One colour exists only through *another*, dimension through *another* dimension, and position only through *another* position opposing it. That's why I call relationship primordial.<sup>213</sup>

One can discern in the above passages the early seeds of Mondrian's mature style, in which he reduced the entire picture to relationships between vertical and horizontal lines. They also point to Tobey's work and his own very different way of creating energised relationships through line. As Mondrian says, the more nature is abstracted, the more pure relationship is expressed; something that can very comfortably be applied to Tobey's paintings after 1944. In works such as *New York* or *Transit* one is indeed not given anything 'natural' or 'recognisable' to grasp. They are images which, I would argue, primarily express *primordial relationships* in the sense that Mondrian refers to.

The crucial idea of relationship leads, perhaps inevitably, to that of rhythm or movement in Tobey's paintings, for rhythm is one consequence of relationships, of two or

more elements interacting. One major reason for Tobey's work being allied to the notion of rhythm is, as I have already suggested, the parallels between his painterly technique and writing. Writing, especially using the brush, expresses a far greater sense of rhythm, mapping the hand and feelings of the scribe. Unlike other methods of brush use such as colouring or hatching, writing offers a deeper *degree* of rhythm expressed in each stroke, a result in part of the spontaneous nature of writing as well as its fleeting-ness. If we overlay writing with the idea of creating relationships, rhythm emerges as a central aspect in Tobey's work. This is confirmed in Matthias Barmann's comment:

The entire organisation of movement in Tobey's painting comes about through rhythm, it is supported by a variety of different rhythms that unpredictably overlay each other in a complex spatial resonance, interfering with each other as in African drum music; and as in that music, out of the vibrating swirl of such chaotic complexity, rhythmic relationships of a high order - intensifications, relaxations - which can spontaneously organise themselves.<sup>214</sup>

We can compare Barmann's description above with one that Mondrian provides in his 'Triologue' essay, particularly holding in mind what Barmann calls 'rhythmic relations of a higher order'.

...rhythm merges all particularity into unity. Plurality of particulars, however, forms a *naturalistic* rhythm that to some extent destroys the *capriciousness of things* - whereas plurality of the primordial relationship forms a more *inward* rhythm, which destroys its absoluteness. This difference points up the breach between the old plastic and the new: the task of naturalistic painting was to *emphasise* a work's rhythm, whereas the new art seeks so far as possible to *abolish natural rhythm*. In the New Plastic, rhythm, no matter how inward, is always present, and is even varied by the diversity of dimensions through which the primordial relationship, that of position, is expressed.<sup>215</sup>

Whilst many of Tobey's works may appear to express what Mondrian refers to as 'natural rhythm', and would therefore be considered as part of an 'old plastic', it seems that Tobey, like Mondrian, sought to 'abolish natural rhythm' by painting in a totally abstract manner. The 'primordial relationships' that Tobey creates through his 'white writing' produce a rather more subtle and ultimately subjective rhythm that arises in the viewer. A contrast

might be made between the sense of rhythm expressed in a painting by Pollock, which is most definitely coupled to his immediate physical actions, and the quieter, extended rhythm of Tobey which manifests itself slowly within the act of looking.

This interest in rhythm is pursued by both Tobey and Mondrian through the metaphor and emblem of the city, another element where the two painters share much in common. Within Tobey's practice the city remained an important symbol and subject, even though he rarely lived in one. From early sketch drawings such as *San Francisco Street* (1934-6) in which we see a brightly lit street scene bustling with people and buildings, to later paintings such as *Golden City* (1956) which presents no recognisable city vista but a dazzling impression of what look like city lights, Tobey used the city as a metaphor evoking movement, line and rhythm. His city-scape was not the numbed distant one of Hopper or O'Keefe, but closer in spirit to the melodramatic seascapes of Clarkson Stanfield (1793-1867) or J.M.W.Turner. Asked why he painted city scenes Tobey replied:

No doubt I did them because I am an American painter. I cannot be indifferent to the swarming crowds, multitudes, neon signs, movie theatres, to the noises that I hate of modern cities.<sup>216</sup>

One is reminded of his thoughts about Tokyo he wrote in some of his letters from Japan in 1934. And yet despite his largely negative feelings for the city, Tobey consistently painted its aspects throughout his career. The reference to Tobey's city paintings here though, are specific and revolve around his 1942 painting entitled *Broadway Boogie* (Fig.47), executed in the same year as Mondrian was working on his late masterpiece, *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (Fig.22). Apart from sharing very similar titles, the two works seen side by side succinctly illustrate the two artists' very different approaches to the same subject matter. That they chose to include in their titles both the words 'Broadway' and 'Boogie', suggests their similar interests in New York life at this time as well as elements which they strove for in their work. Tobey's painting is dense, full of white lines that jumble across the canvas, often depicting dancing figures or buildings. Mondrian's painting seems almost its opposite; it is ordered, restrained and technical. Despite these differences, both works also achieve surprisingly similar effects; flatness and depth are constants which come in and out of play as one looks at the images, as are movement and stasis. Both artists' mastery of the line and their relationships is evident. Kermit Swiler Champa's description of *Broadway Boogie Woogie* could equally apply to Tobey's city image:

*Broadway* is an extremely intricate painting. Its quality resides in the relative equilibrium or imbalance of its intricacy.<sup>217</sup>

It is this quality of frailty and trembling between states that gives their paintings a strong sense of New Plastic rhythm.

The points of affinity which I have tried to present between Tobey and Mondrian perhaps converge most significantly in their respective *attitudes* towards painting. Their use of features such as rhythm, ascension or line can ultimately be seen as outcomes of underlying philosophical concepts that I would refer to as Neoplatonic. In this respect, their works may be seen as the phenomenal representations of the Neoplatonic conception of Two Worlds.

It would be useful to return to the Tobey's statement from the Rodman interview I quoted at the beginning of this section, for not only does he refer to Mondrian, but Tobey's descriptions of his working process reveal close affinities with Mondrian's underlying concepts. Tobey's statement clarifies a crucial theoretical basis in his work that can also be identified in Mondrian's writings. It centres around the artist's *relationship with nature*, and more specifically, his conviction that the 'deepest art' is the result of seeing through nature to the abstract.

In particular, two elements recur: the objective of *looking past* or through nature, and of trying to *find* the abstract therein. For Mondrian these were objectives he aspired to during his transitional period, when he painted from nature (trees, churches, seascapes), trying to push his experience of it to its visual limits. In his 1919-20 essay, Natural Reality and Abstract Reality, Mondrian's 'character' urges us to:

...look past the natural, but we should in a sense look *through* it: we must look deeper, we must perceive *abstractly* and especially *universally*. Then we will perceive the natural as pure relationship. Then external reality will become for us what it actually is: the reflection of truth. For it is necessary for us to become free of *attachment* to the external: only then do we rise above the tragic and consciously contemplate repose, in *all* things.<sup>218</sup>

It is interesting that both Mondrian and Tobey use an exhortatory language to express their ideas; there is a sense that both artists are urging the reader to *see differently*. Their central ideas are surprisingly close, although Tobey talks of finding the abstract *in* nature whilst

Mondrian refers to looking *through* it. For both artists the abstract is to be discovered through a profound relationship with nature, and it is by *perceiving* differently, abstractly, that the deepest art is to be found. Although it might seem that there are crucial differences between Tobey's *in* and Mondrian's *through*, both artists retain the natural as the crucial point of reference. Mondrian importantly thus says that 'we will perceive the natural as pure relationship', and refers in other writings to 'stripping' as opposed to 'destroying' nature. For both artists it is in the moment of *witnessing* nature that the abstract is thus found. Whilst Tobey talks of putting the conscious mind to 'sleep', Mondrian refers to perceiving 'abstractly' and 'universally' as well as to detaching oneself from the external.

Mondrian's emphasis upon freeing ourselves from 'external reality' and on 'becoming free of attachment' are also themes which recur in Tobey. In the following statement Tobey almost mirrors Mondrian's concerns.

The earth has been round for some time now, but not in man's relations to man nor in the understanding of the arts of each as a 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 the true roundness lies.<sup>219</sup>

Tobey's underlying philosophical framework can, in this light, be regarded as Neoplatonic in that he divides reality into 'inner' and 'outer', giving primacy to the 'inner'. Like Mondrian during his transitional period, his art is concerned with revealing this 'inner' world through reference to the 'outer'. Tobey's images thus function on a significant *symbolic* level, as what Laski refers to as 'triggers'. Although writers often portray Mondrian as an artist who sought total escape *from* nature - as was perhaps illustrated by the title of a recent Mondrian exhibition at the Tate Gallery in London, 'Nature to Abstraction' - a closer reading of his writings reveals that he often refers to nature in a much more affirmative manner. Like Tobey, who sees nature as a basis or nucleus of his abstraction, Mondrian also speaks of nature in terms of its positive function, dispelling his received image as an anti-nature, or purely negative artist.

In the New Plastic, however, destruction at the same time implies *reconstruction: equivalence of the physical and the spiritual in one*. The natural is not destroyed, only stripped of its most external character.<sup>220</sup>

Tobey's paintings are congruent with the above statement. Indeed they often retain

their relationship to nature through their titles, which might suggest a season or a natural movement, or through their organic brush-stroke qualities. At the same time, one does not *recognise* nature in them as such; it has, as Mondrian suggests, been ‘stripped of its most external character’. What Tobey paints is therefore not negative, but rather intensely affirmative of nature. Like Mondrian’s *Pier and Ocean* drawings, the abstract is reached *through* nature, by piercing it decisively. The implication is that the painting acts as a barrier or veil dividing ‘this’ world from ‘that’, a visual deception that can reveal ‘truth’ beyond it.

The notion of a Fall from purity and a subsequent ascension or return to purity are central themes within Neoplatonism and also manifest themselves in the writings of Mondrian and Tobey. Mondrian expresses this in the following way:

Plastic vision also means being plastically *active*. In seeing plastically we automatically destroy the *natural and reconstruct the abstract appearance of things*. Seeing plastically, we in a sense perfect our ordinary vision, thus *converting the individual back to the universal*. Thus pure plastic vision unites us with the universal.<sup>221</sup>

The notion of unification or return is also present in Tobey’s writings, and in particular his more polemical writings for the Baha’i as well as his poems. In his essay, ‘The One Spirit’, he refers to ‘unlocking’ the mind and heart in order for unity to be regained.

It is (it seems to me) that our minds and hearts must be unlocked and through these doors, *the vista*, wherein the vision of unity lies, will disclose to us our true relationship one to another, and also not to be excluded, the mystery of our differences.<sup>222</sup>

For Tobey it was ultimately through painting that he could ‘return’ to a place of universal revelation. And yet, his profound interests in the ‘Orient’ and Zen thought question the universality of this revelation, by offering radical points of difference from European Romantic notions of the transcendental. Mondrian, and a wider Romantic tradition, remains for Tobey a constant presence, but a presence which is never allowed to fully settle.

The importance of Tobey lies precisely in this paradox between unity and fracture; it is difficult to place him in any one history in the light of his *details*.

Epilogue.

I do not conclude this thesis definitively, but suggest possible endings among many other endings. Indeed, the objective of this thesis has been to expose other possible histories and ways of thinking which challenge received orthodoxies. In this spirit, I contend that ideas of the transcendental remain relevant for the study of art precisely because the term represents a plural notion, of *possibilities*. Underlying this thesis is thus an assumption that all histories must remain mobile and fractured if many voices are to be heard and not consumed by homogeneous, 'official' stories. We may *imagine the transcendental in different ways and from different positions* therefore. To use Bataille's language, the relationship between art and ideas of the transcendental is not 'pure' or well defined, but rather characterised by 'contamination' and multiplicity; many possible meanings circulate beneath the surface.

Romanticism's lack of significance as a plausible creative strategy for many contemporary artists may thus also be addressed positively as *other positions* push themselves into view. The notion of a Western humanist culture in which *Man* occupies the centre of history as the privileged creator of meaning in the shadow of some immutable 'original' Being has been severely challenged in recent times. In this climate, simple Romantic formulations of the transcendental are fundamentally questionable; other ways must be investigated. A strategy of exposing other discourses is one way, as is a reformulation of the notion of imagination itself. Richard Kearney has called this a *poetics of the possible*, defined by a move beyond humanism understood as anthropocentrism and avoiding the easy refuge offered by a notion of an 'original Being' which can give 'pure' meaning, and the tendency to emphasise the significance of the autonomous subject as the sole source of meaning. Kearney instead calls for an imagination committed to a 'labyrinth of parody and play', always 'struggling to find other kinds of *poiesis*'. His is a hermenutical imagination of inherent *uncertainties* and constant *re-positionings*.

The importance of Zen ideas lies in its abilities to deconstruct an easy *dependence* on a distinctive history. In this sense it, and other positions, are the constant *shadows* following orthodox histories. Zen ideas of the transcendental moreover radically challenge Neoplatonic readings, upsetting the strategies of universalists or those who wish to claim that certain images are 'more' or 'less' transcendental than others. Though problematic from many perspectives, Tobey's interests in the artistic traditions of China and Japan during the early

twentieth century not only provide a rich visual history of *appropriation* but also implicitly exemplify a discourse of *fractured positions*. Tobey's Orientalism is thus also a radical example of how *different histories* can be *traced* around ideas of art and the transcendental. The lack of any definitive conclusion is also a result of not wishing to compress these different histories into any singular 'whole'. The differences between Neoplatonism and Zen, for instance, cannot be subsumed into an optimistic discourse of cultural diversity; rather, as Bhabha contends, it is from the spaces of cultural *difference* that understanding and respect may emerge.

Tobey's legacy is an ambivalent one. He remains relatively marginalised within the 'official' history of Abstract Expressionism or *art informel*, yet also creates spaces for different histories to be told. His journey to Japan in 1934 and his subsequent investigation of 'Oriental' forms of calligraphy in the mid 1950s present different possibilities for thinking about art making and ideas of the transcendental. His 'place' within an 'orthodox' European Romantic history of transcendental painting is therefore disturbed; his work may be seen in light of Mondrian and Neoplatonism or Zen painters.

In recent times, several artists have continued to investigate this ambivalent lineage between Europe and the 'Orient', and perhaps developed Tobey's quest. One is the American painter Brice Marden, who has produced calligraphic works from the mid 1980s derived from his study of Chinese script, gardens and poetry. His *Epitaph Paintings* from 1996-7 is one high-point of his investigations, emerging out of a two year 'dialogue' with ancient Chinese epitaph tablets of the 5th - 8th centuries. Another is the British artist Hamish Fulton who, along with others in the 1970s, sought to resituate creative practice beyond the studio space into nature. His work takes the form of solitary walks in remote parts of the world, during which he executes simple drawings, writes lines of words or take photographs. Both artists acknowledge aspects of Oriental culture in their work, but sensitively and within the wider contexts of their own traditions. For Marden it has principally been Chinese calligraphy; for Fulton it is the tradition of wandering poet-monks such as Basho and their *haiku* verse. And yet, their work is not so much an *appropriation* of these elements - it is rather *led* by them. Their work thus grows out of Tobey's early investigations, but also develops beyond it in many significant ways.

Brice Marden's *Epitaph painting 1* from 1996-7 (Fig.53), is a large canvas marked by a series of clearly visible lines in three colours. It might be usefully related to Tobey's

1935 *Broadway Norm*, but lacks Tobey's dense overlapping lines. Marden's image is looser and less obviously expressionistic. His lines are bold and solidly painted, like rivers seen from high above, and extended viewing suggests that the lines have been 'worked on' and arranged. Marden's apparent lack of overt gesture is thus a point of difference with Tobey's 'white writing' style. Another difference is Marden's use of Chinese calligraphic script as a starting basis for his paintings. The *Epitaph* paintings are Marden's responses to specific Chinese objects, and in this sense they offer an intimate and contextualised form of appropriation. The first stages of *Epitaph painting 1* are direct transcriptions of Chinese calligraphies from epitaph tablets; four large characters fill the canvas, and from this *readable* image, Marden progressively erases them. As the painting progresses, the characters are slowly dissolved and colour added, until only a removed or excavated remnant of the 'original' is left. Marden's 'calligraphy' is therefore inherently *impure*, the results of the artists' *erasure* of readable characters. Calligraphy literally lies underneath the finished work, functioning as a trace or faint dustiness which both sustains and decomposes the abstracted image. The painting does not express Tobey's sense of absorption or transcendental reverie, rather emphasising a 'calligraphic gesture' which is at the same time controlled and sensitive. Marden refers to his paintings as 'meditative objects', suggesting their affinities with ceramic pots or Chinese garden rock formations which he has written about enthusiastically.

Marden's Orientalism is radical in that it primarily represents and emphasises a *response* to Chinese art and its contexts without subsuming it within a broader Western modernist discourse. The results of his intensive dialogues with Chinese calligraphy or poetry thus always *remember* their origins; calligraphy remains literally *buried* within his pictures. Marden's exhibition at the Matthew Marks Gallery, New York in 1997 was in this respect bold and challenging. *Epitaph painting 1* and *2* hung low on one wall faced by several square limestone slabs from epitaph tablets from Chinese tombs inscribed with decoration and writing. Marden thus confronted and formally responded to his interests in Chinese art by sharing the gallery space with Chinese objects. One's position was necessarily made ambivalent by the dialogue between these two forms of work; Marden's images, seen alongside their initial sources, remained *permanently under pressure*.

Hamish Fulton walks. Unlike Marden's formal responses to Chinese objects, Fulton's art is one of attitudes and positions which often shadow those of Japanese Zen thought or the composition of *haiku* verse. Many writers locate Fulton's activity within a European

Romantic tradition of roaming the land in search of sublime experiences, in the lineage of poets such as Wordsworth. There are undoubtedly aspects of such traditions in his work, but a more accommodating reading might position him near the wanderings of Japanese Zen poet's such as Basho or the painter Sengai Gibon. Fulton's affinities to such figures lie principally in the *relationship* he constructs between himself and nature. This may be described as one of neutrality or non-intervention, characterised by an attitude of detachment that does not seek any kind of closure or transcendental reverie with nature. Nature is not imagined as a place of dreams or ideals nor of impurities, but experienced as a site of constant change within which small episodes of joy, melancholy or hope may arise. For Basho, these episodes translated into *haiku* verse, for Sengai they were hastily painted in ink on paper.

Underlying Fulton's works is also a tension between the 'work' one sees in the gallery space and knowing about his walking 'work' outside. One of the functions of his 'seen works' is therefore to *remember* the artists actions, but also to present simple elements of *information* regarding where he walked, when and what he saw. In *31+18=49=7x7 Two Road Walking Journeys* (1994/95) (Fig.54) Fulton writes, 'An 18 day road walking journey. From the river at Rhone at Valence, To the Atlantic Ocean. On the border of Spain and France. Spring 1995.' The words do not function poetically in a formal manner, but rather seem to present themselves *as that*. Moreover the words are printed on a long thin strip of vinyl which spans the floor of the gallery. Like the haiku, Fulton offers small traces of meaning which derive from his walking experiences and which do not adequately describe nor define it. There is a numbness about Fulton's work which is also constantly *renewed* so that every reading of his lines seems as concise and fresh as the last. Roland Barthes referred to the task of the haiku as 'the exemption of meaning within a perfectly readerly discourse', a language without moorings, and this is a reference we may usefully use to read Fulton's work. Nature is not used symbolically or poetically to evoke appropriate feelings, as in a Tobey painting, but restrained. His work thus rarely allows the viewer to *enjoy* nature, but rather offers traces of it, like small particles of dust which one discovers at the bottom of a rucksack or tent after returning from a period outdoors. In Fulton's work it is possible to confront a subtle yet profound homage to the art of Zen that is not based on particular formal aesthetic appropriations, but rather on an *attitude* or *commitment* which the work sustains. It is a commitment to questioning the questions and perpetually listening to other voices.

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- <sup>3</sup> Leonide Ouspensky, Theology of the Icon, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, NY. 1978. 227.
- <sup>4</sup> Takichi Irie and Shigeru Aoyama, Buddhist Images, trans. Thomas Elliot. Hoikusha Books, Osaka. 1984. 98.
- <sup>5</sup> William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience. (1902) Viking Penguin, London, 1982. 28.
- <sup>6</sup> James. 29.
- <sup>7</sup> James. 31.
- <sup>8</sup> Marghanita Laski, A Study of some Secular and Religious Experiences, Cresset Press, London, 1961, 42.
- <sup>9</sup> Laski, 44.
- <sup>10</sup> Steven Katz, 'Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism', in Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis, 1978. 50-1.
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- <sup>12</sup> 'Enneads', Book 1,6, in Philosophies of Art and Beauty, Hofstadter and Kuhns (eds.), University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1964.150.
- <sup>13</sup> in Bucke, Cosmic Consciousness University Books, New York, 1901. 102-3.
- <sup>14</sup> Enneads, Book 1,8,14, in Philosophies of Art and Beauty.
- <sup>15</sup> Abe, 122.
- <sup>16</sup> Abe, 123.
- <sup>17</sup> Abe, 124.
- <sup>18</sup> Abe, 126.
- <sup>19</sup> David Loy, 'The Deconstruction of Buddhism' in Derrida and Negative Theology, Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (eds.), State University of New York Press, New York, 1992, 238.
- <sup>20</sup> Abe, 127.
- <sup>21</sup> Marna Warner. The Inner Eye, (cat). The South Bank Centre, London, 1996. 9.
- <sup>22</sup> Gadamer interview in, States of Mind. Dialogues with contemporary thinkers on the European mind, Richard Kearney (ed.), Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1995. 276.
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- <sup>24</sup> Hannah Arendt, 'The Crisis of Culture', in Between Past and Future, Harmondsworth (ed.), Penguin, London, 1977, 220-1.
- <sup>25</sup> Rudolf Otto, 'The Idea of the Holy', (trans. John W. Harvey), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1923. 6.
- <sup>26</sup> In Otto, 66.
- <sup>27</sup> In Otto, 69.
- <sup>28</sup> Doug Adams' cited in, Art, Creativity and the Sacred, Diane Apostolos - Cappadona (ed.), Continuum, New York, 1984. 313.
- <sup>29</sup> Doug Adams' cited in 'Art, Creativity and the Sacred', 313.
- <sup>30</sup> Rosenblum. 218.
- <sup>31</sup> in Notebooks, vol. 1, ed. J. Spiller (trans. Heinz Norden), Lund Humphries, 1973, 23.
- <sup>32</sup> as above, 66.
- <sup>33</sup> Mark A. Cheetham, The Rhetoric of Purity. Essentialist Theory and the advent of Abstract painting, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, 141.
- <sup>34</sup> Notebooks, 269.
- <sup>35</sup> Roger Cardinal, German Romantics in Context, Studio Vista, London, 1975.
- <sup>36</sup> Arnold Hauser, The Social History of Art vol. III, Routledge, London, 1951, 143.
- <sup>37</sup> Hauser, 144.
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- <sup>42</sup> Hauser, 163-4
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- <sup>45</sup> C. Sorte, 'Osservazioni nella pittura' (Venice 1580), cited from P. Barocchi's edition, Trattati d'arte del Cinquecento, (Bari, 1960), I, 293-6, cited from Victor I. Stoichita, Visionary Experience in the Golden Age of Spanish Art, Reaktion Books, London, 1995, 84.
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- <sup>54</sup> Meyer Schapiro, Modern Art, 19th and 20th Centuries, Selected Papers, Chatto and Windus, London, 1978, 215.
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- <sup>56</sup> in Carel Blokcamp, 'Dutch Symbolism and Early Abstraction', in The Spiritual In Art, Abbeville Press, Los Angeles, 1986, 100.
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- <sup>59</sup> Sheldon Cheney, A Primer of Modern Art, Tudor Publishing, New York, 1924, 38.
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- <sup>74</sup> Westgeest, 20.
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- <sup>113</sup> for a more detailed analysis of Greenbergian criticism see Barbara M. Reise's essay, 'Greenberg and the Group: A Retrospective View', in Art in Modern Culture. An Anthology of Critical texts, (eds). F. Frascina and J. Harris, Phaidon Press, London, 1992, 252.
- <sup>114</sup> according to Charles Seliger in an interview on Mount Vernon on May 9th 1994.
- <sup>115</sup> Alexandra Munroe essay 'With the Suddenness of Creation: Trends of Abstract Painting in Japan and China, 1945-1970', in Asian Traditions Modern Expressions. Asian American Artists and Abstraction 1945-1970, Jeffrey Wechsler (ed.), Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York, 1997. 213.
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- <sup>117</sup> as above.
- <sup>118</sup> in Bernard Leach, *Beyond East and West. Memoirs, Portraits and Essays*, Faber and Faber Limited, London, 1978, 162.
- <sup>119</sup> in *Beyond East and West*, 166.
- <sup>120</sup> from 'Eastern Trip' letter, dated 1934, Dartington Hall Archives.
- <sup>121</sup> Letter dated 'April 19, 1934', Dartington Hall Archives.
- <sup>122</sup> Letter dated 'Easter Egg Sunday, April 1934', Dartington Hall Archives.
- <sup>123</sup> Letter dated 'April 25, 1934', Dartington Hall Archives.
- <sup>124</sup> In March 1934 the number of foreign visitors to Japan was 3,299 according to a customs report. This represented a 70% increase on the previous year. Source: The Japan Times, May 1st, 1934. The Japan Times Archive, Tokyo.
- <sup>125</sup> Letter dated '9.6.34', Dartington Hall Archives.
- <sup>126</sup> See: article, 'Bernard Leach and Japan', by T. Saisho in The Japan Times, May 14th 1934. The Japan Times Archive, Tokyo.
- <sup>127</sup> Letter, 'The Sanno Hotel, Tokyo, Friday', Dartington Hall Archives.
- <sup>128</sup> As above.
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- <sup>132</sup> Sir Hugh Cortazzi and George Webb (eds.), Kipling's Japan, Athlone, London, 1988, 102.
- <sup>133</sup> Tobey, letter dated 'The Kyoto Hotel, July 1934', Dartington Hall Archives.
- <sup>134</sup> Tobey, letter dated, 'Kyoto 1934. Two Days Later', Dartington Hall Archives.
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- <sup>137</sup> Arthur Dahl essay in Mark Tobey/Art and Belief, by Arthur Dahl and others. George Ronald, Oxford, 1984, 6.
- <sup>138</sup> Kosme de Baranano, 1994 Madrid catalogue essay.
- <sup>139</sup> Appendix Two in David Clarke's The Influence of Oriental Thought on Postwar American Painting and Sculpture contains the only detailed notes on Tobey's 1934 journey. Clarke contends that Tobey stayed at a monastery called *Enryaku ji*. Garland Publishing, New York, London, 1988.
- <sup>140</sup> Although the whereabouts of Tobey's travel notes are unknown, many of the letters he sent to the Elmhursts from Japan may be seen in the Tobey archive at Dartington Hall. These letters provide perhaps the only reliable documentary sources as to Tobey's 1934 trip to Japan, detailing his thoughts on the country, his experiences there and his general mood.
- <sup>141</sup> in the Preface of Pacific Northwest Artists and Japan (exhibition catalogue), Ogura Tadao. The National Museum of Osaka, Oct-Nov. 1982.
- <sup>142</sup> Letter, dated 'Kyoto, 1934. Two days later', Dartington Hall Archives.
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**Appendix 1. Transcripts of selected Tobey letters sent from Japan, 1934.**

From the Dartington Hall Archives, Devon, England.

Note: Words which were unreadable have been replaced by a '????' sign.

*'Postcard. 9.6.34. Nippon.'*

My dear Leonard,

Japan is a beautiful place after China. Man and nature seemed to have reached an equilibrium in Nara where I spent all of today, Mountains there beautiful farming-lands beautifully farmed.

My delight here seems to be most architectural and crafts. Bernard is 100 miles south of Tokyo potting. I don't know when I'll see him. A big Noh celebration and dance on Sunday. I really am stunned by the craftsmanship here. Hope you are happy and interested.

My best to you all,  
Mark.

*'The Kyoto Hotel. July 1934.'*

Dearest Dorothy and Leonard,

It is nearly 7.00 pm and I am in the fifth floor looking out at what would hardly call a city. Beyond a range of hills ranging in height bathed in a blue mist. Kyoto is 1,000,000 people with its architecture lost in time.

Today - ?? afternoon ??? I have spent in the Butoku-den or Hall of Martial Virtues, a school for fencing, Jujitsu and archery. This afternoon I was shown classes in spear exercises especially for women. I was greatly impressed not only by the movement but the great hall open on all sides, the concentration of the pupils and the fiery spirit of the two women instructors. Of course some of the blood curdling cries of the advances with lunging spears was a little too reminiscent of war and blood but I did greatly admire the spirit of teaching and learning the attitude and posture of the pupils who were waiting to start or who had just retired. I was asked to bow to the central place or shrine perhaps where the emperor had sat or will do so on certain occasions. Somehow it seemed right for I feel an underlying integrity in it all. Next I was taken to the archery, which I found thrilling - wonderful - 7 or 8 feet bow - such style and wonderful surroundings again. Monday I am being taken to the Zen monastery outside the city and expect to meet the abbot. I am thinking very hard about settling down here for some time. Its difficult as very little English is spoken - not one English title in the museum but then there aren't any Japanese titles in the Metropolitan or the Royal Academy.

I believe there is an underlying philosophy and science in this aspect of Zen for the archery and spear dancing is found in Zen. If I could get a hold of this side of life I might begin to realise that side of art and teaching I have always wanted and not have to depend entirely on intuition. I have been feeling the past year that I couldn't teach anymore but after

seeing what I have today I believe teaching could be interesting if one had a definite ground upon which to build. Anyway I feel us in the West need concentration and a bodily form onto which to maintain the precious tension of our own energy. The power for spear work and archery is placed in the lower abdomen and all walking forward and backward is done from here.'

Afterward I visited the Nightingale shrine of the Jodo sect - the head temple called Chion-In. 17th century architecture - beautifully decorated. They believe the opposite of Zen that one does not need strong exercises to gain salvation but that Buddha confers salvation even on the weak. 7 million adherents in Japan.

Well perhaps you know all this. Anyway I feel I am clearer to smoke?? as regards art and teaching than I was before and am anxious to see what will develop.

China was and is a thrilling experience but I know that I am glad to be in Japan with its cleanliness and ??? attitude. I feel a little that Japan is the lungs and China the breath which passes in and out. But it is dirty!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Its getting dark although the sky is luminous ??? the rays of hills - a low sheet punctuated by the long line of light stretches away and lost in trees and the white heath which lies on the back of the blue hills.

Do write me sometime to the above address - Perhaps I'll still be here if I can.

My best to you,

Love Mark.

July 9th '34.

*'Kyoto 1934. Two Days Later.'*

Sunday I saw three performances of Noh. In one called the Heron the 77 year old founder of Noh here danced the part of the Heron. Between the Noh were very human satirical plays and after each one the chorus performed in movement and voice. I sat on my legs on a flat cushion in a tiny box in the balcony. Below hundreds of fans waved in the audience. Practically no action and yet plenty of it. The Heron hardly moved and yet he 'showed the emperor how to fly to heaven.' The Hoo's and Haa's of the musicians accenting the chorus - the ??? flute and the sharp drum beats - the slow, slow moving of the formally costumed actors on the cypress floor - well - ah! and Ah! and what can I say -

It was and is an experience! The voices raised on the dust seated heath or tunes dried away in their throats like death water.

I can join the archery school for 2 yen and have four months instruction in archery for ¥4 and the ??? will loan me his bow!

Tomorrow I leave for the Empukuji monastery to live alone in a special cottage 2 block away??? Here I bring my own food - cook in and clean my room. The abbot says I can concentrate my mind while working.

The monks arise at 3 am. and retire at 9.30 The place is ?????????????? and I shall hate the lonely nights with 1,000,000 bugs, mosquitoes etc. But I'm anxious to try. If I can get

something from this I'll take up archery or fencing for a while. ?????????? sitting in the larger mat covered room watching the archers shoot through the sunlit mist at a target under a roofed wall 100 yards away. The style impressed me!

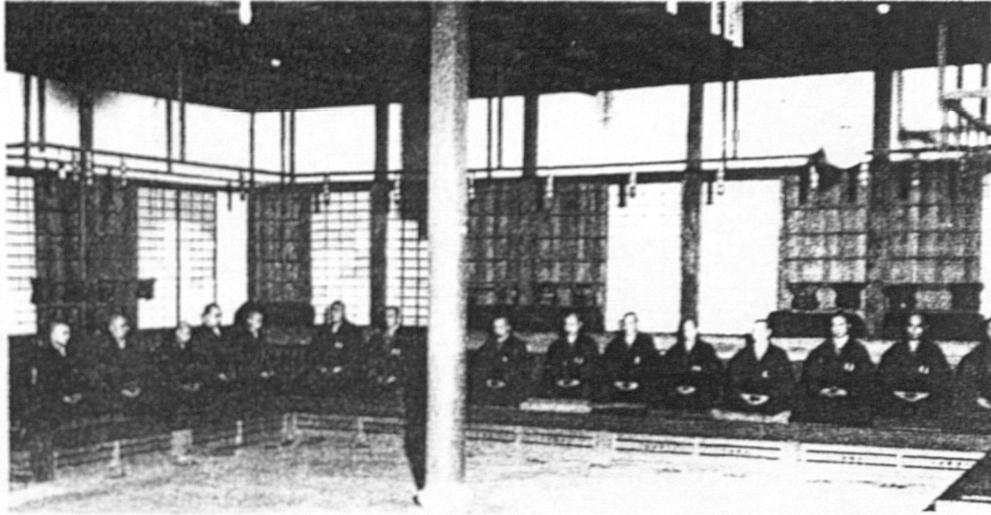
Others sitting around drinking tea and talking - only are the archers taking their positions - it seemed like a grand thing for the ?????? of Dartington only I wouldn't like baggy trousers!

Well more later almost all this difficult and subtle Zen.

Love, Mark.

**Appendix 2.** Photographs of *Empuku-ji* Monastery, Yawata-shi, Kyoto.

Sources: Roger McDonald and the *Shinkyō Zen shi to Empuku-ji*, a small privately published booklet about the monastery which I was given when I visited *Empuku-ji*.



*Empuku-ji* monks practising *zazen* in the main *Zendo* Hall. Date unknown.



The painted dragon ceiling in one of the smaller buildings of *Empuku-ji*, possibly the one referred to by Tobey in his letters. Date Unknown.



The author standing in front of the site of the *gaijin-zendo* where Tobey stayed in 1934.  
Photograph taken by a monk at *Empuku-ji*, 1997.

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Fig.48 Mark Tobey at work, Basel 1961. Photograph courtesy of Miani Johnson, Willard Gallery, New York.

Fig.49 Mark Tobey in Morris Graves' garden, Washington 1949. Photograph: Mary Randlett.

Fig.50 Mark Tobey with Paul Horiuchi and George Tsutakawa, date unknown. Source unknown.

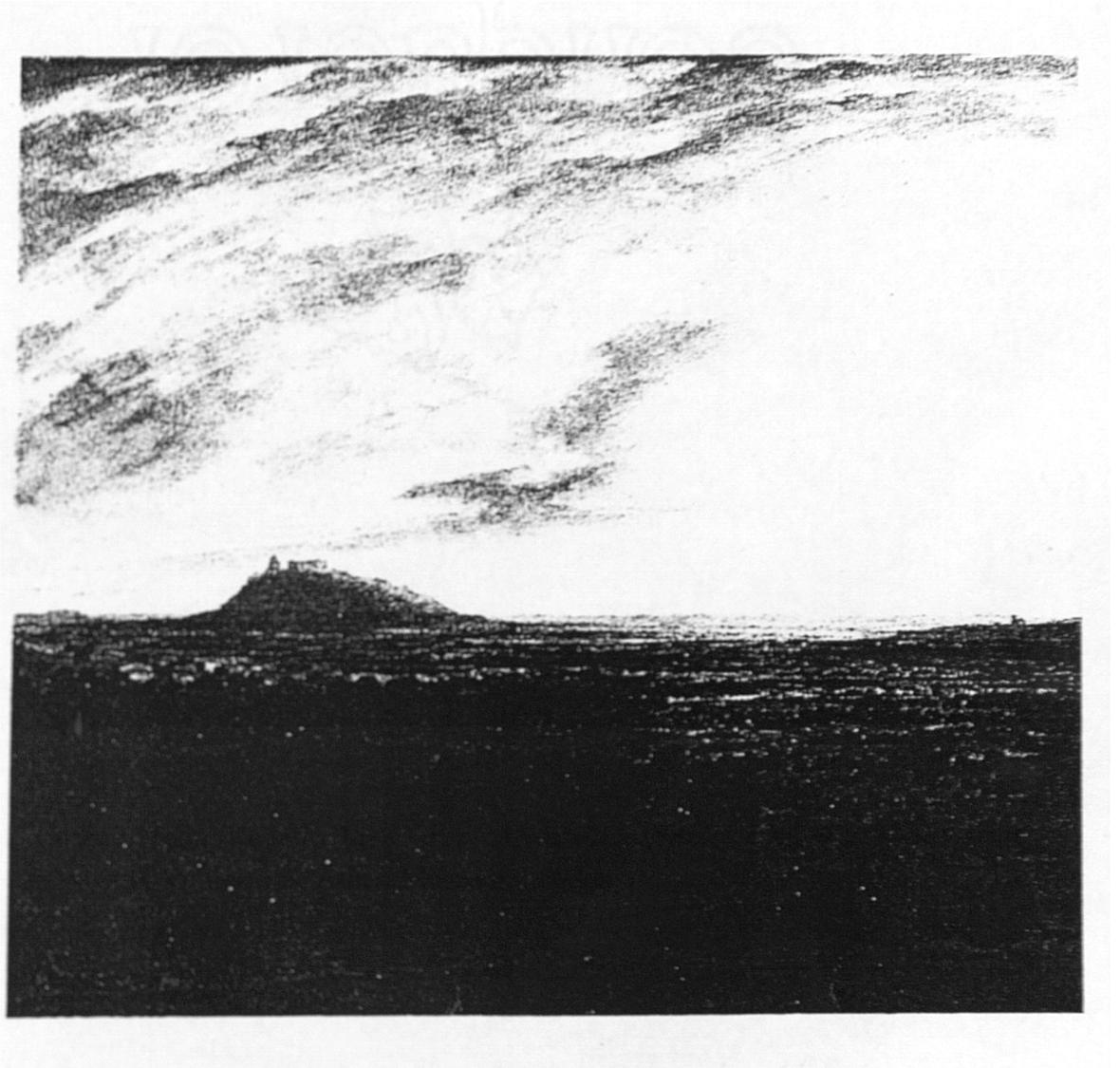
Fig.51 View of Mark Tobey exhibition at XXIX Venice Biennale 1958. Photograph courtesy of Archivio Storico Delle Arti Contemporanee.

Fig.52 Mark Tobey during his stay in Japan wearing *yukata* 1934. Source unknown.

Fig.53 Marden, Brice, *Epitaph Painting 1* 1996-97. Oil on Linen, (96.5x95). Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.

Fig. 54 Fulton, Hamish, *31+18=49=7x7 Two Walking Road Journeys*. Vinyl Text on floor, dimensions variable. Collection of the Artist.

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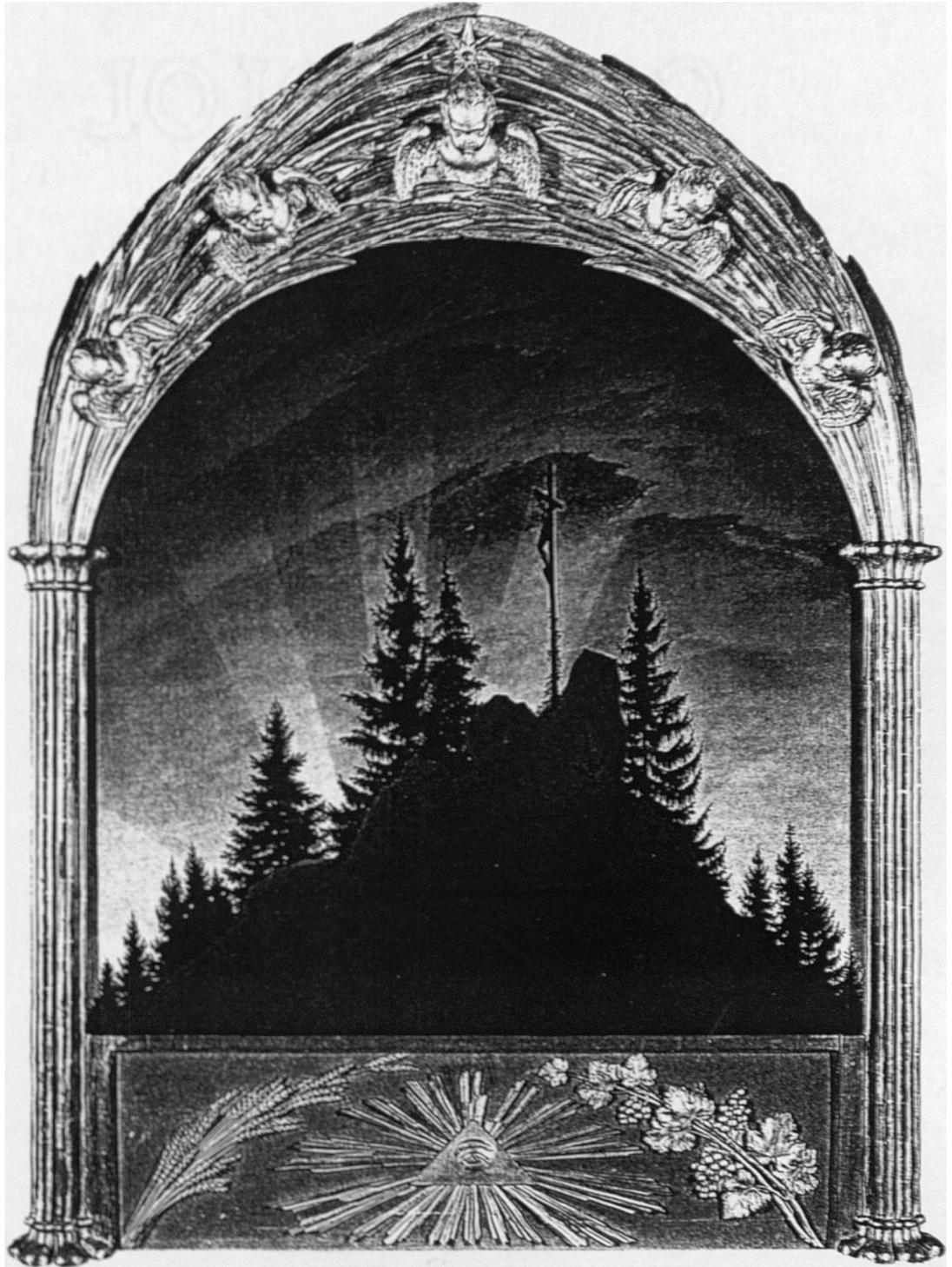
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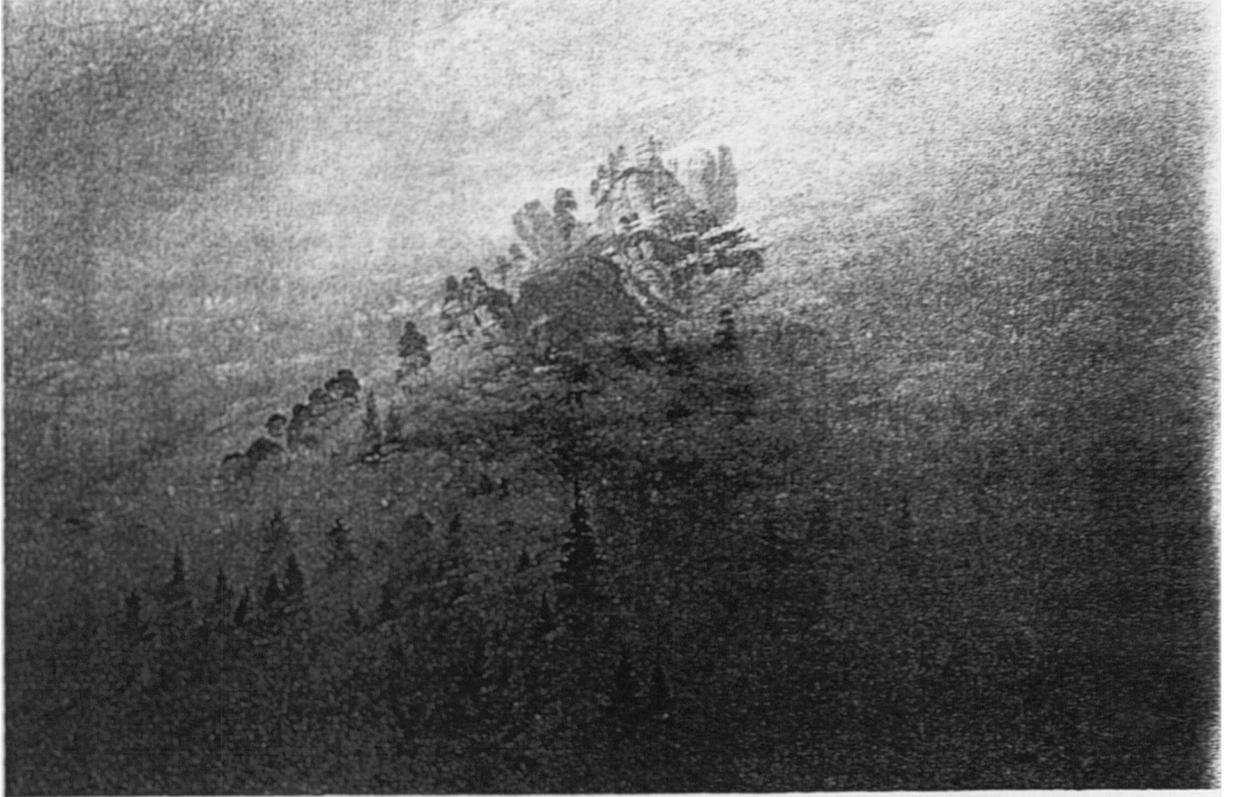
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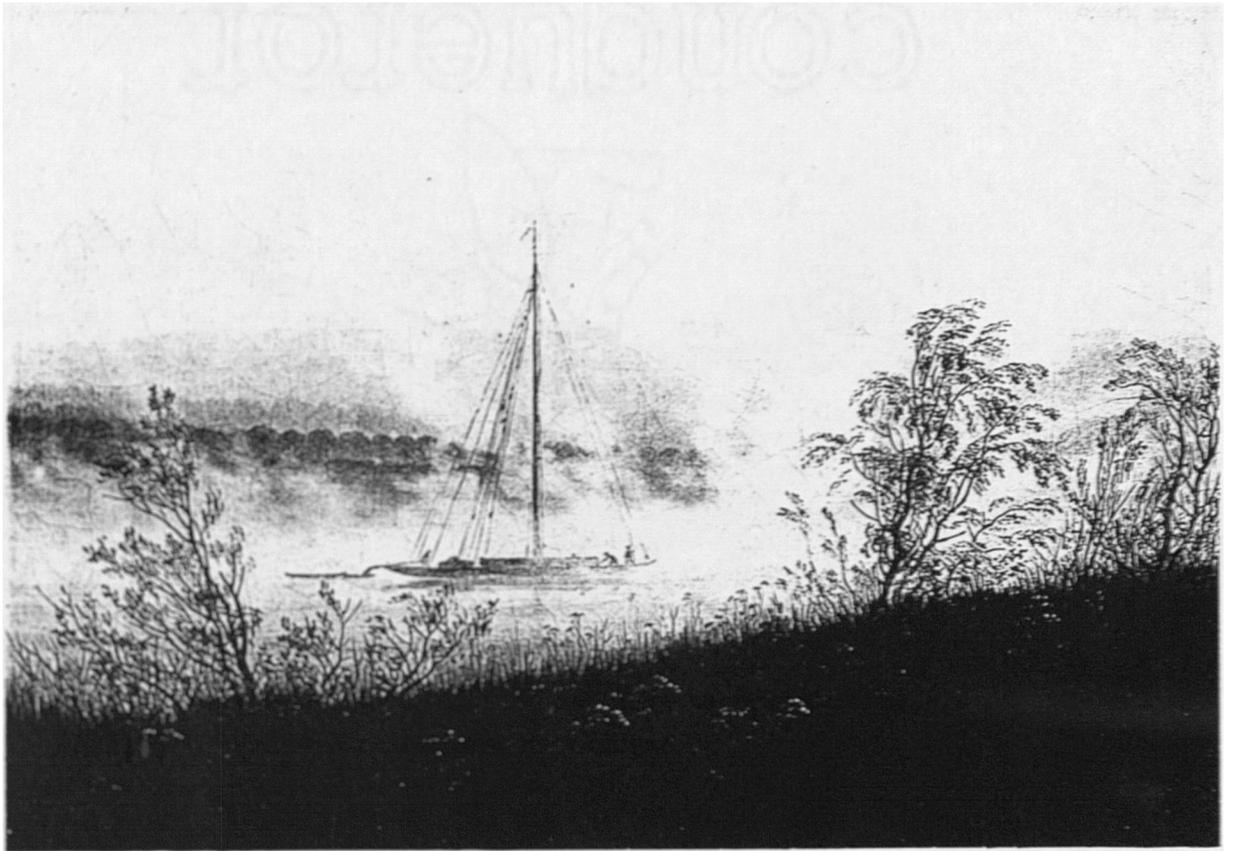
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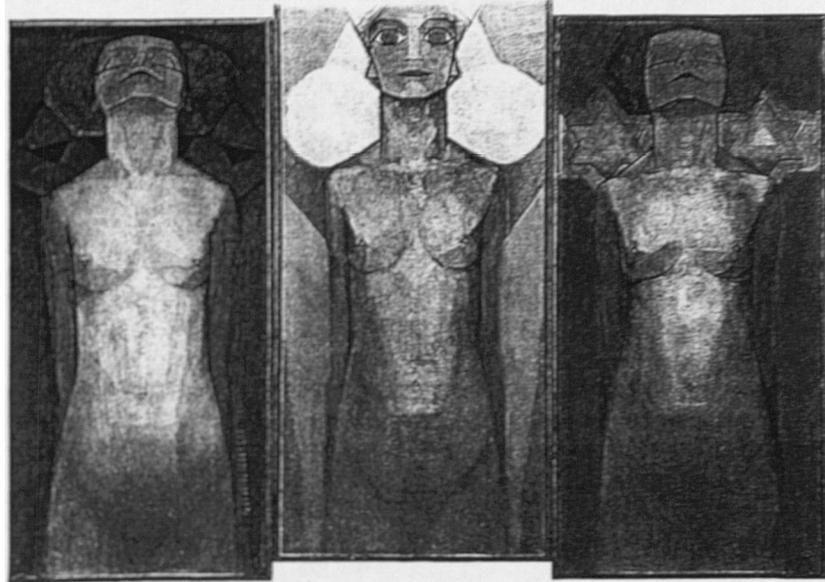
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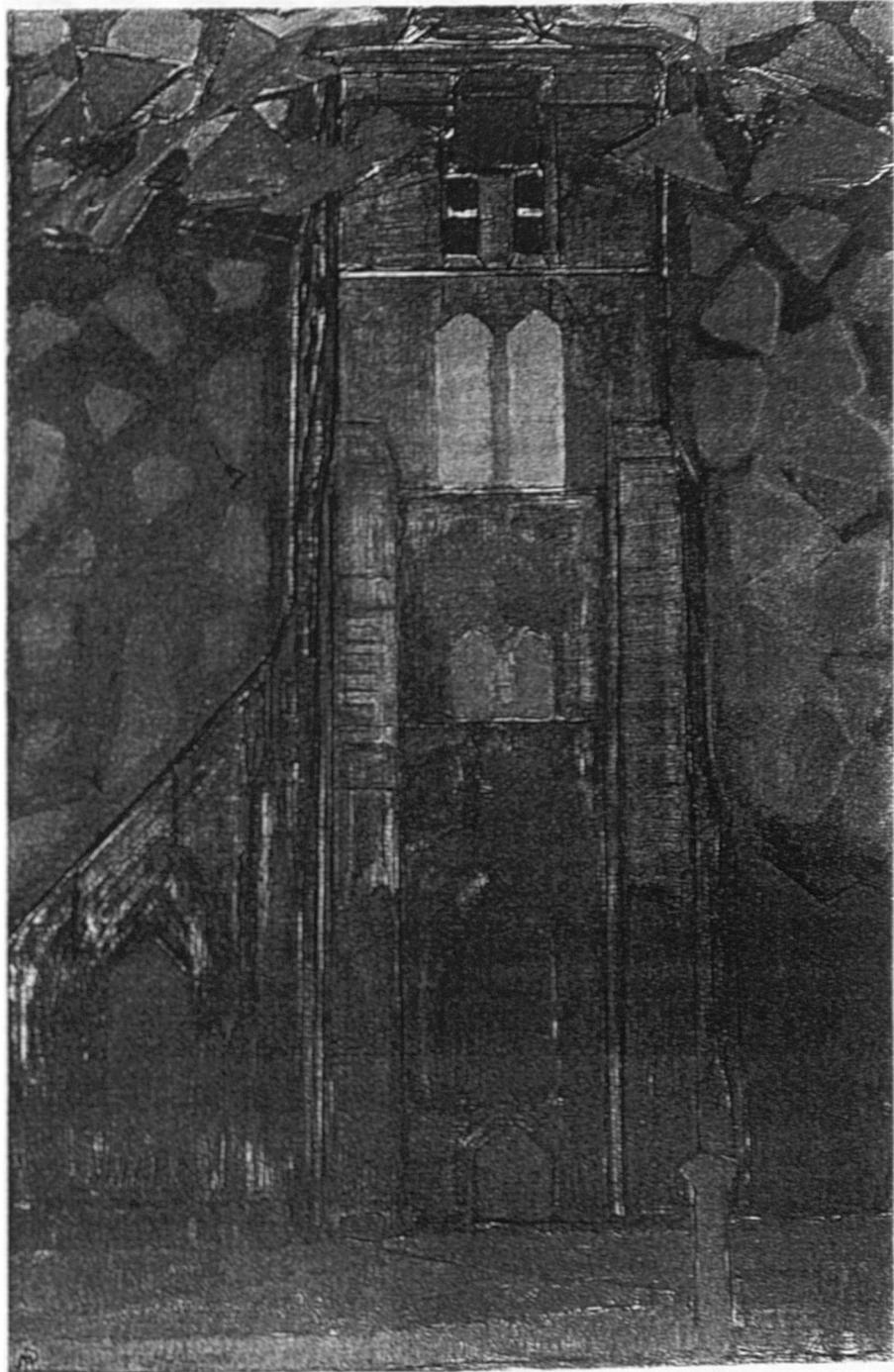
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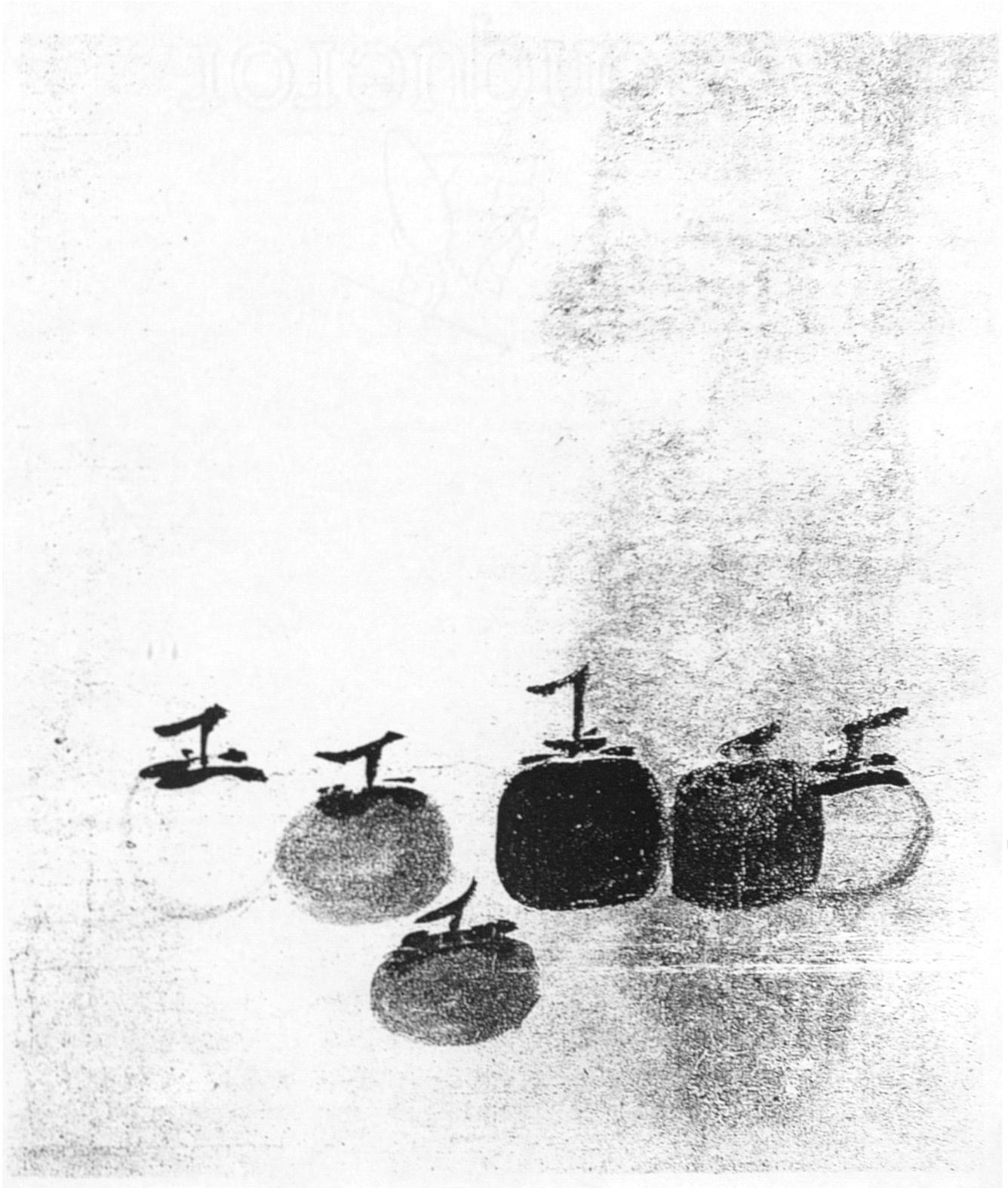
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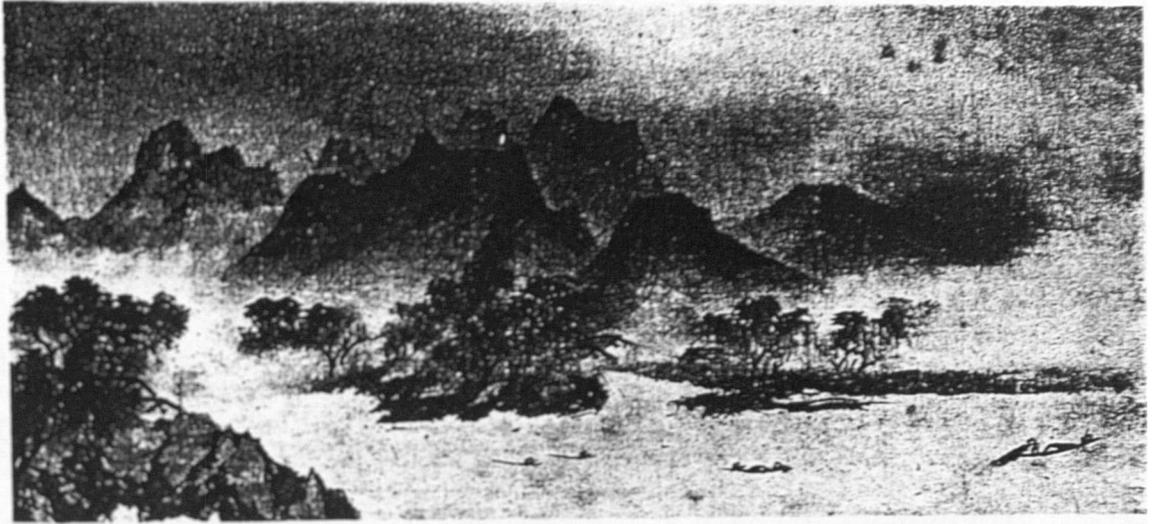
**Fig.9** Mondrian, Piet, *Church at Domberg* 1910-11. Oil on Canvas, (114x75). Haags Gemeentemuseum, The Hague.

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**Fig.10** Mu'chi, attributed to, *Persimmons* , late 13th century. Ink on paper, (35x33.6).  
Ryoko-in, Daitoku-ji, Kyoto.

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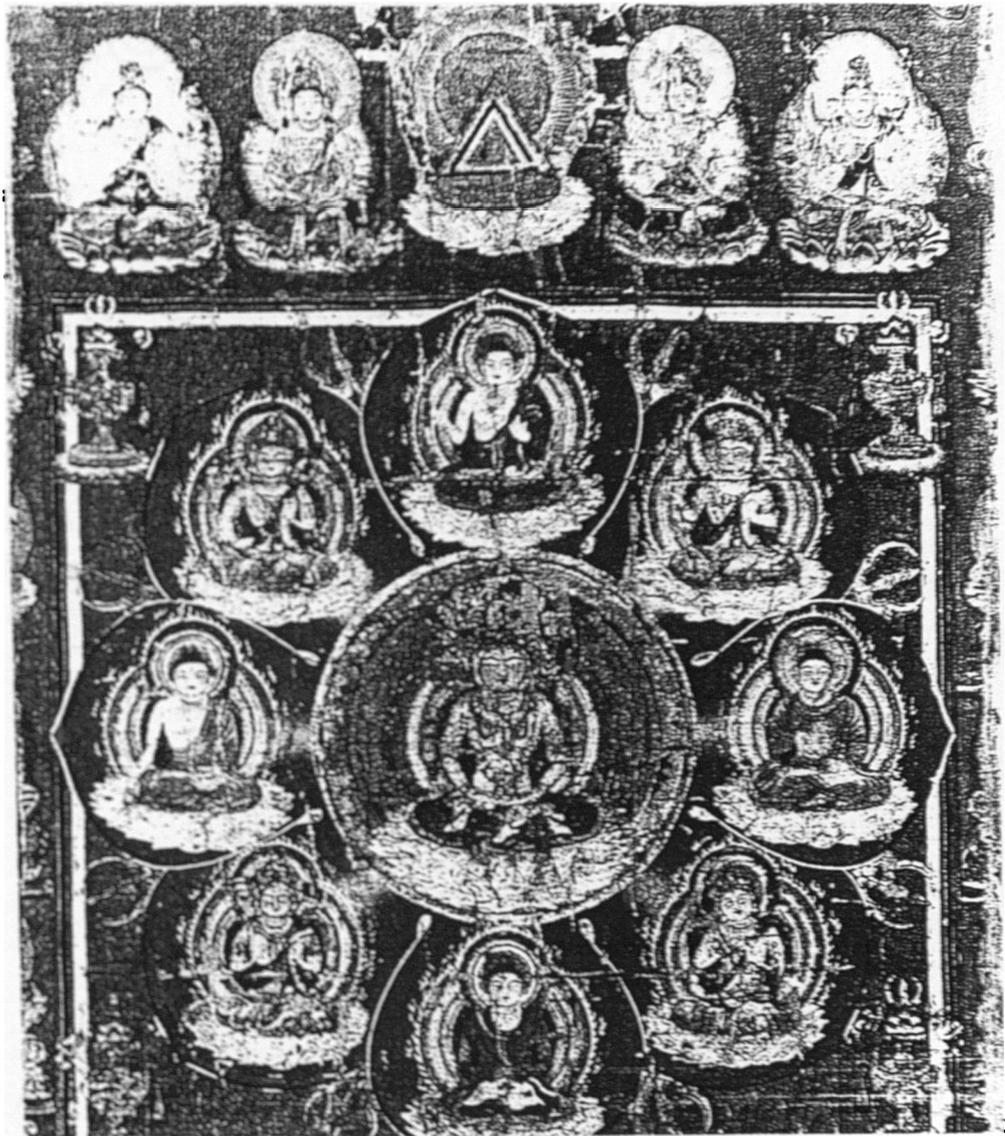
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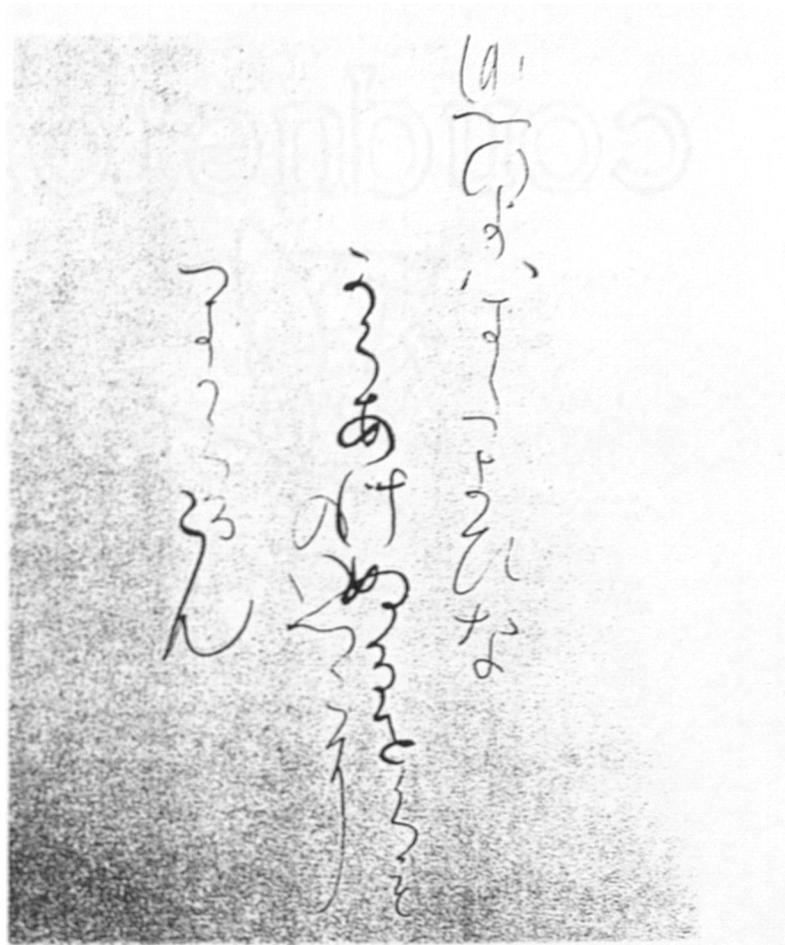
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**Fig.13** Womb Mandala (detail), Heian period (~~859-890~~). Ink and colour on silk,  
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**Fig.14** *Amidha on a cloud*, central panel of Amidha triptych, early 11th century. Colours on silk, (186.7x143.4). Hokkeji, Nara.

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**Fig.15** *Onnade* calligraphy of Kiyohara Fukayabu from one of the *Masu Shikishi* set of calligraphies ascribed to Fujiwara no Yukinari, late 11th century. Ink on paper, (13.8x11.8). Private Collection, Japan.

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**Fig.16** Jiun, religious aphoism, late 18th century. Ink on paper, (116x53.7). Private Collection, Japan.

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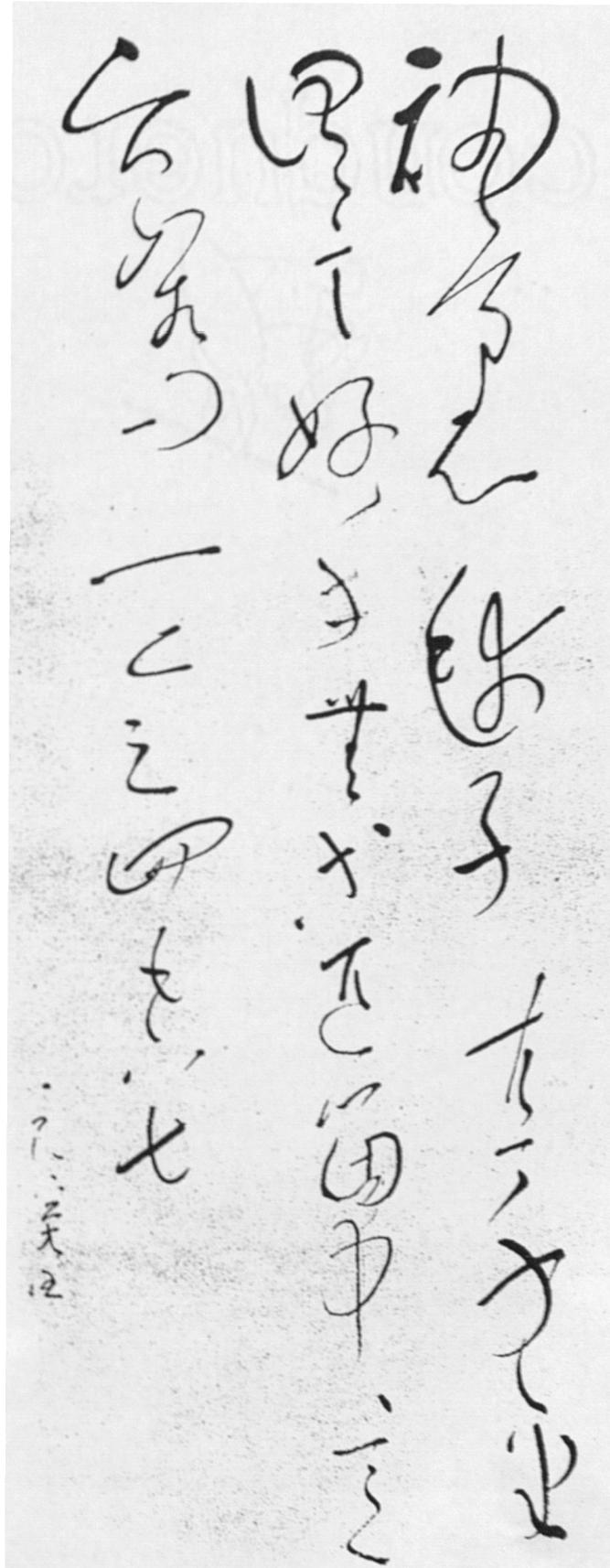
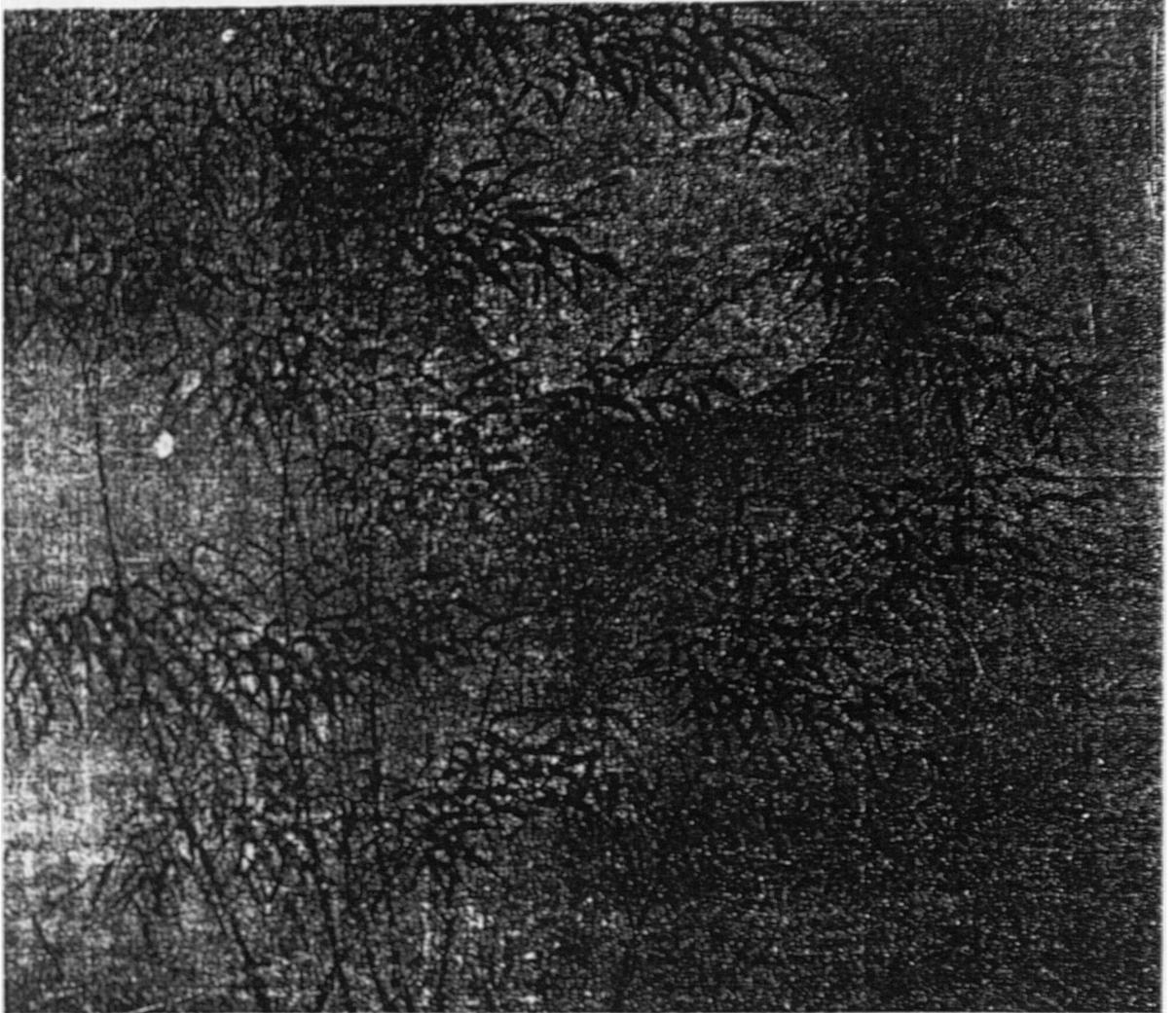


Fig.17 Ryokan, poem, early 19th century. Ink on paper, (dimensions unknown). Private Collection, Japan.

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**Fig.18** Ri Shubun, *Bamboo against the Moon*, early 15th century. Ink on paper, (dimensions unknown). Takekoshi Collection, Japan.

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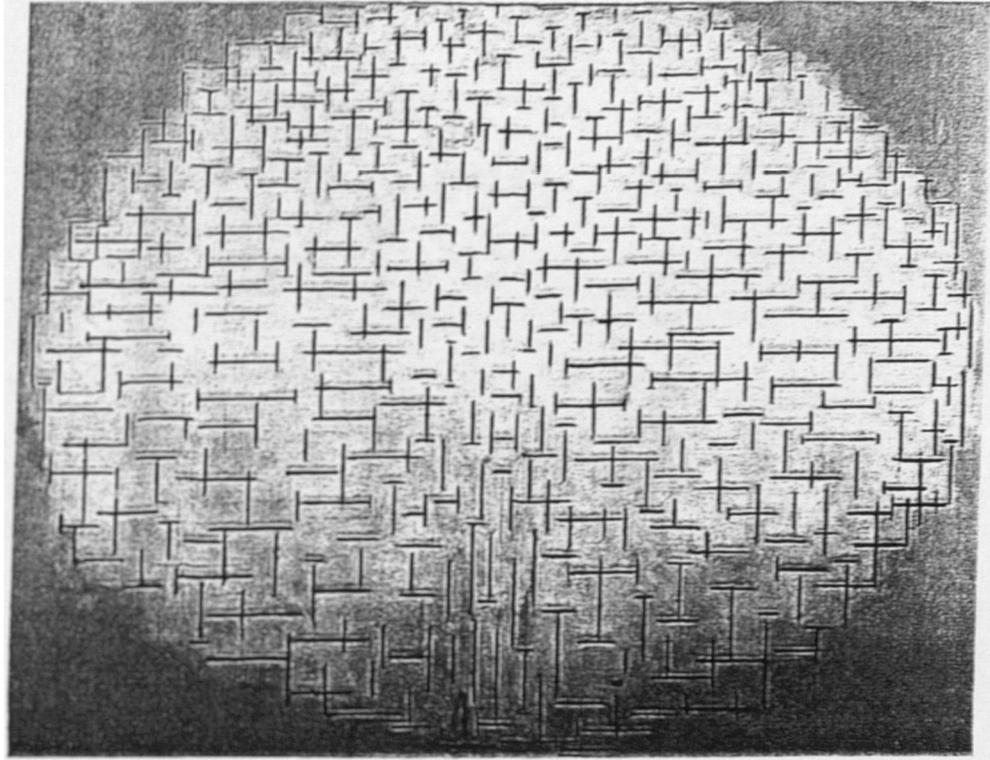
**Fig.19** Mu'chi, attributed to, *Lao Tzu*, Southern Sung Dynasty. Ink on paper, (89x33).  
Private Collection, Japan.

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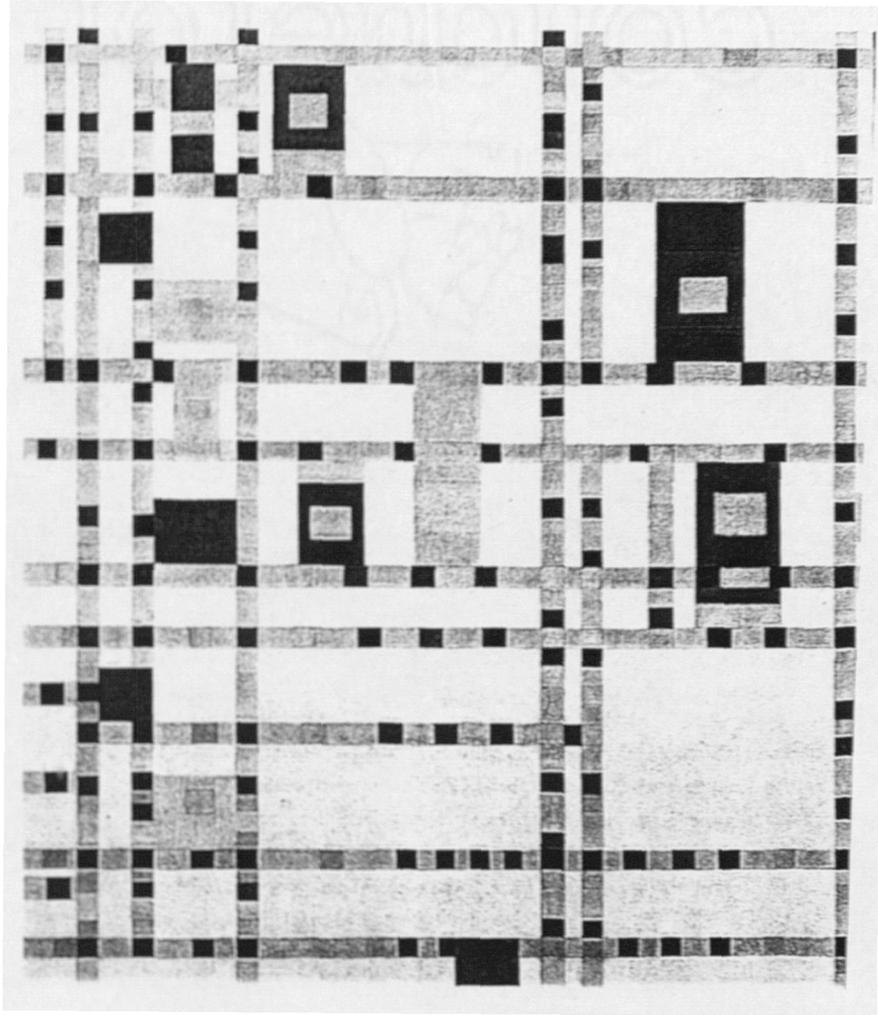
**Fig.20** Sesshu, *Landscape*, late 15th century. Ink on paper, (147.9x32.7). Tokyo National Museum.

**Illustrations. 21**



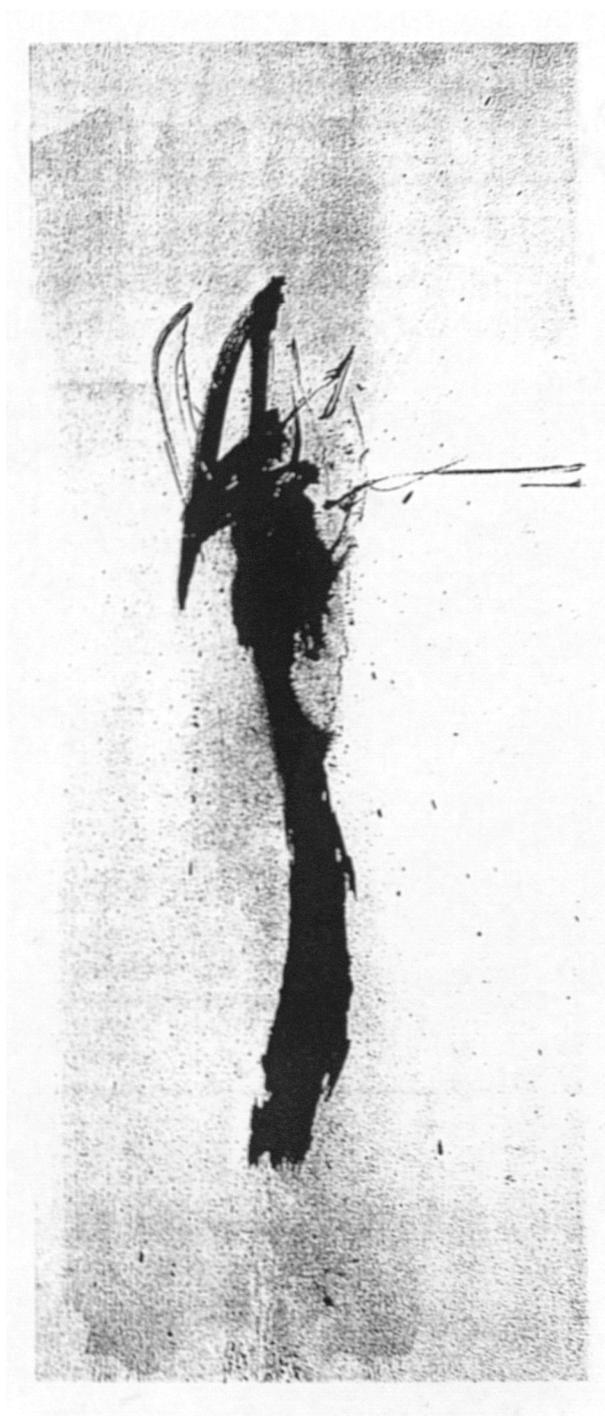
**Fig.21** Mondrian, Piet, *Composition 10 in Black and White: Pier and Ocean* 1915. Oil on canvas, (85x108), Kröller-Müller, ~~Museum~~, Otterloo.  
State Museum

Illustrations. 22



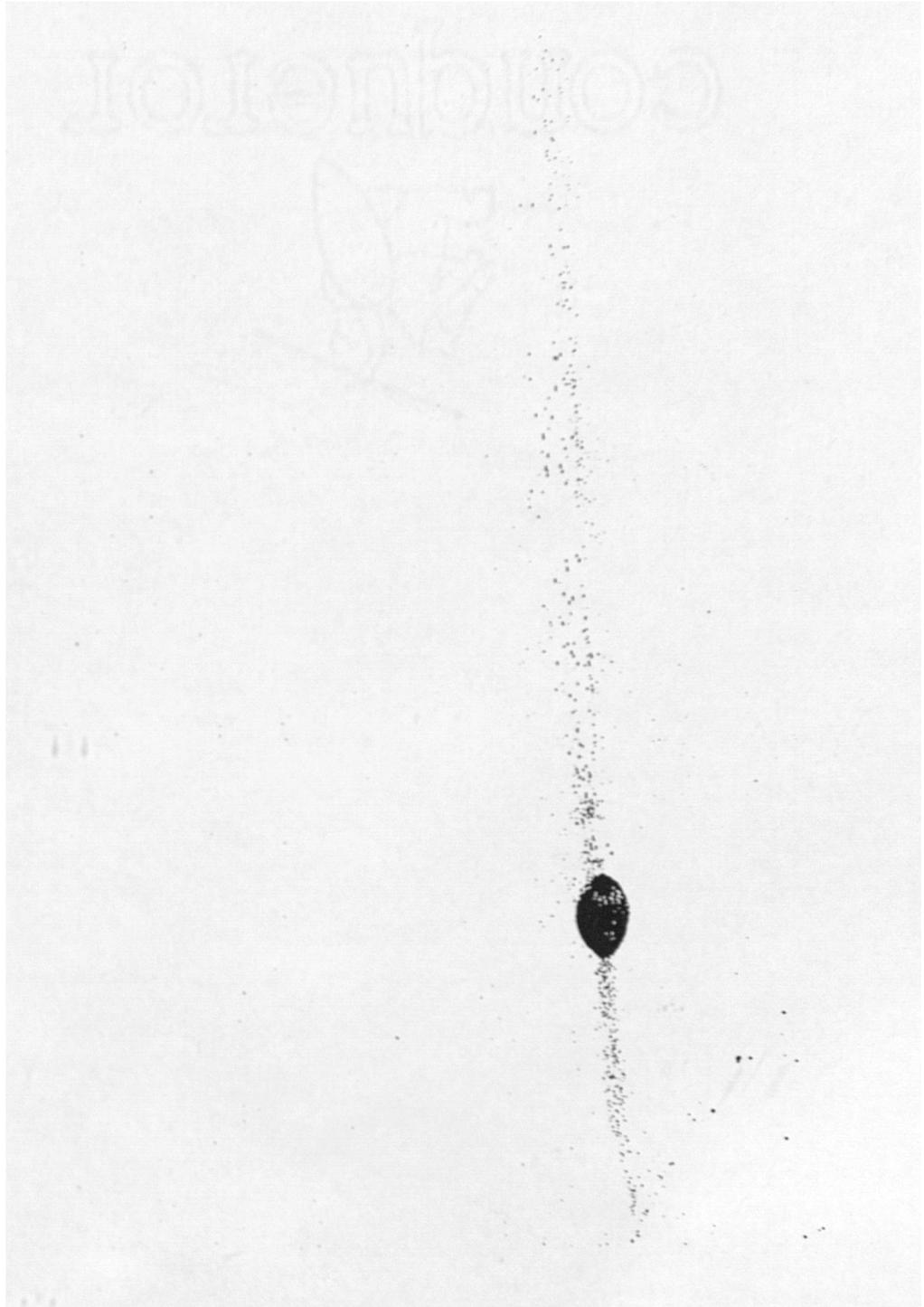
**Fig.22** Mondrian, Piet, *Broadway Boogie Woogie* 1942-3. Oil on canvas, (127x127).  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

**Illustrations. 23**



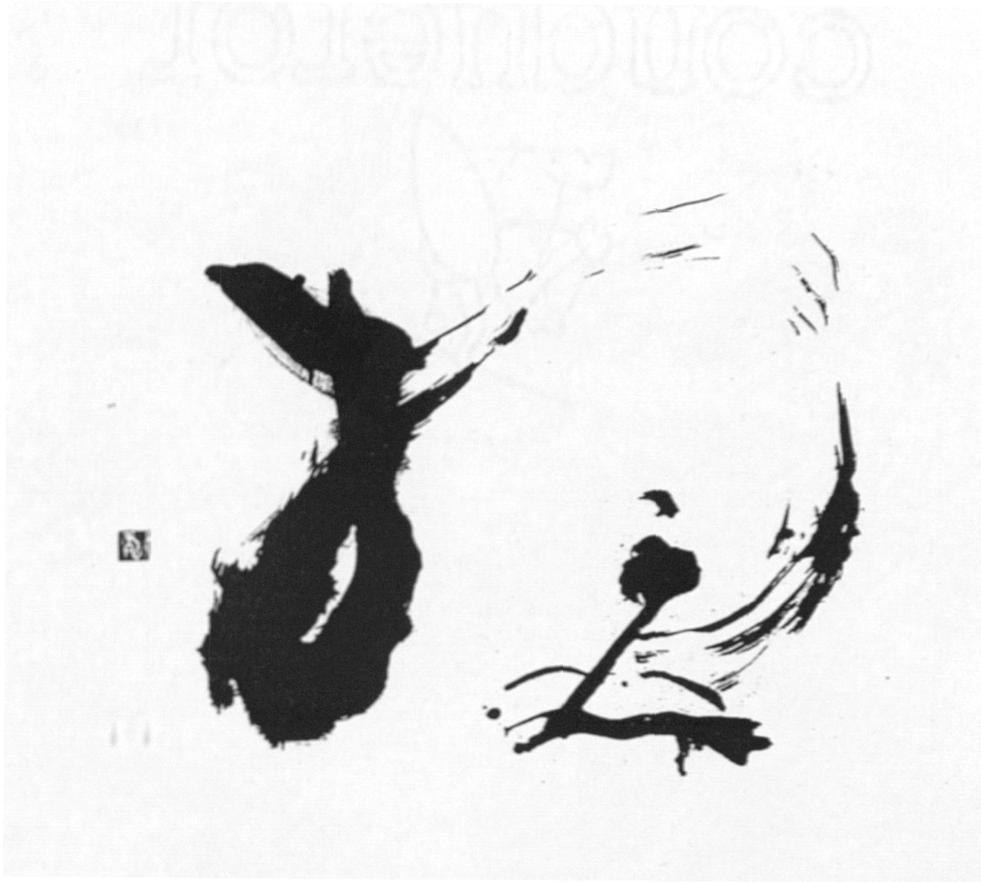
**Fig.23** Degotexx, Jean, *Vide de l'inaccessible (Emptiness of the Inaccessible)* 1959.  
Oil on canvas, (235x135). Musee d'Evreux, Evreux.

**Illustrations. 24**



**Fig.24** Murakami, Saburo, *Painted by Throwing a Ball* 1954. Ink on paper, (105.8x75.7). Ashiya City Museum of Art and History, Ashiya.

**Illustrations. 25**



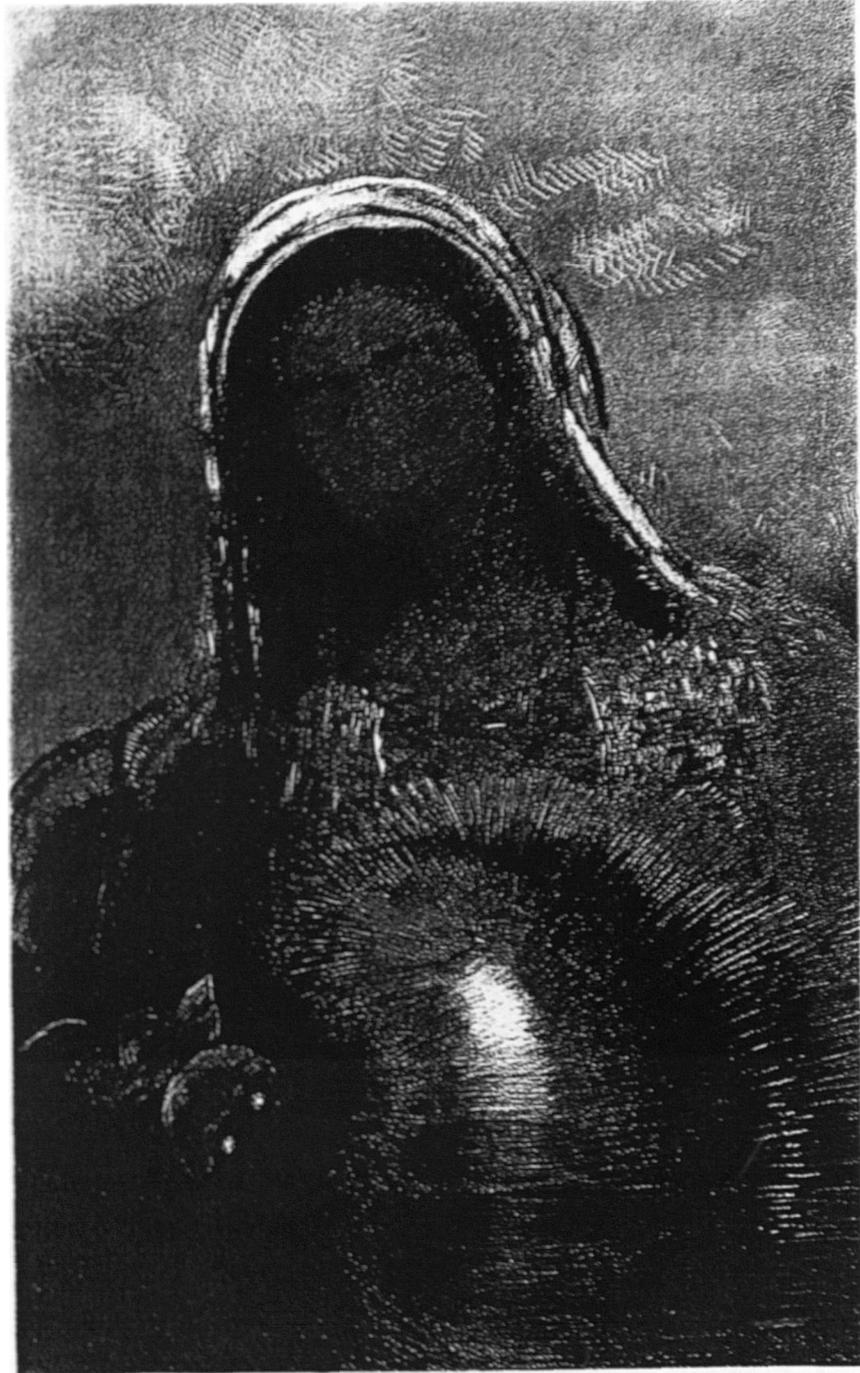
**Fig.25** Morita, Shiryu, *So (Musing thought)* date unknown. Ink on paper, (47x68.5).  
Private Collection, Caracas.

**Illustrations. 26**



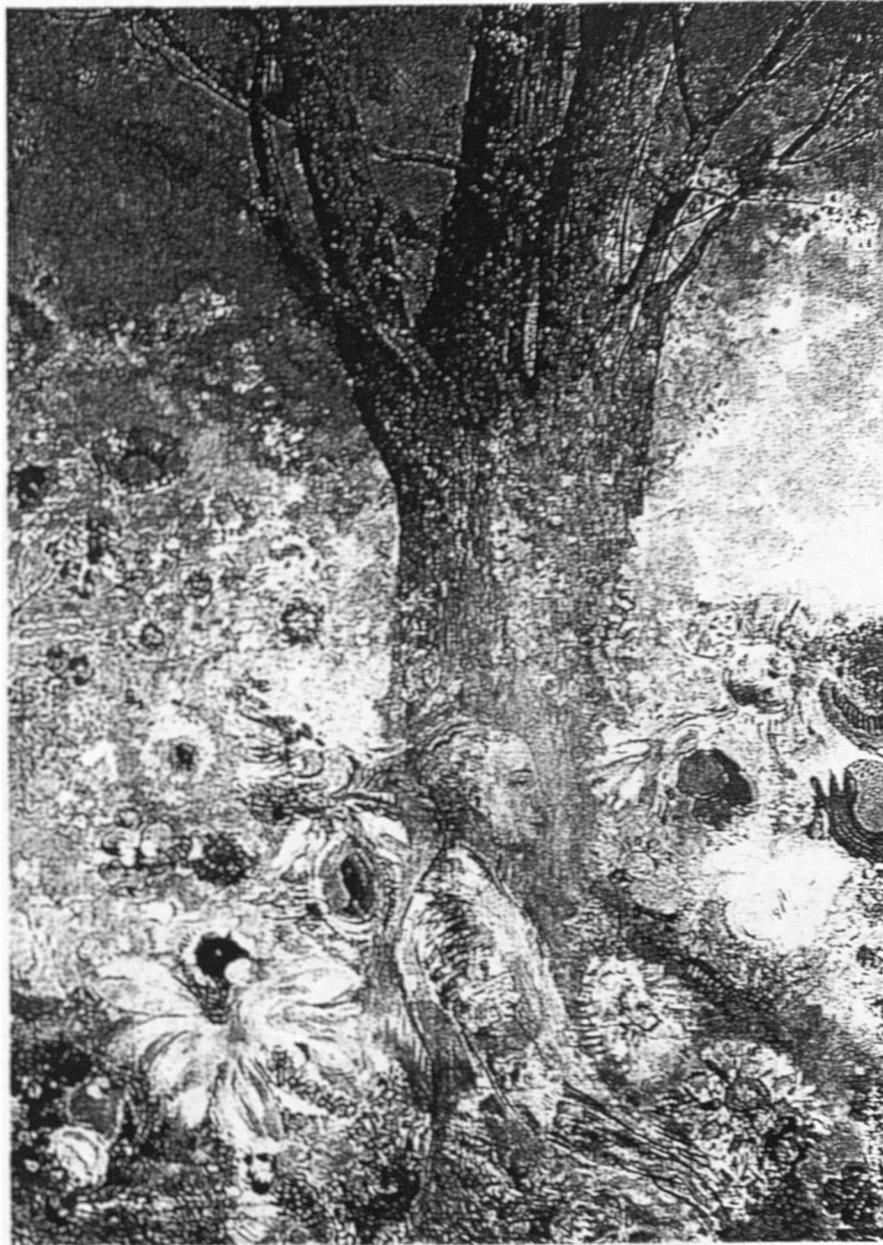
**Fig.26** Joseph, G.F. *Portrait of Sir Stamford Raffles* 1817. Oil on canvas, (110 x 34) (dimensions unknown). National Portrait Gallery, London.

Illustrations. 27



**Fig.27** Redon, Odilon, *Buddha* 1906. Pastel over traces of charcoal, (65x50). State Museum Kröller Müller, Otterloo.

**Illustrations. 28**



**Fig.28** Redon, Odilon, *Buddha in His Youth* c. 1904. Distemper on canvas, (161.5x122.5). Private Collection, The Netherlands.

**Illustrations. 29**



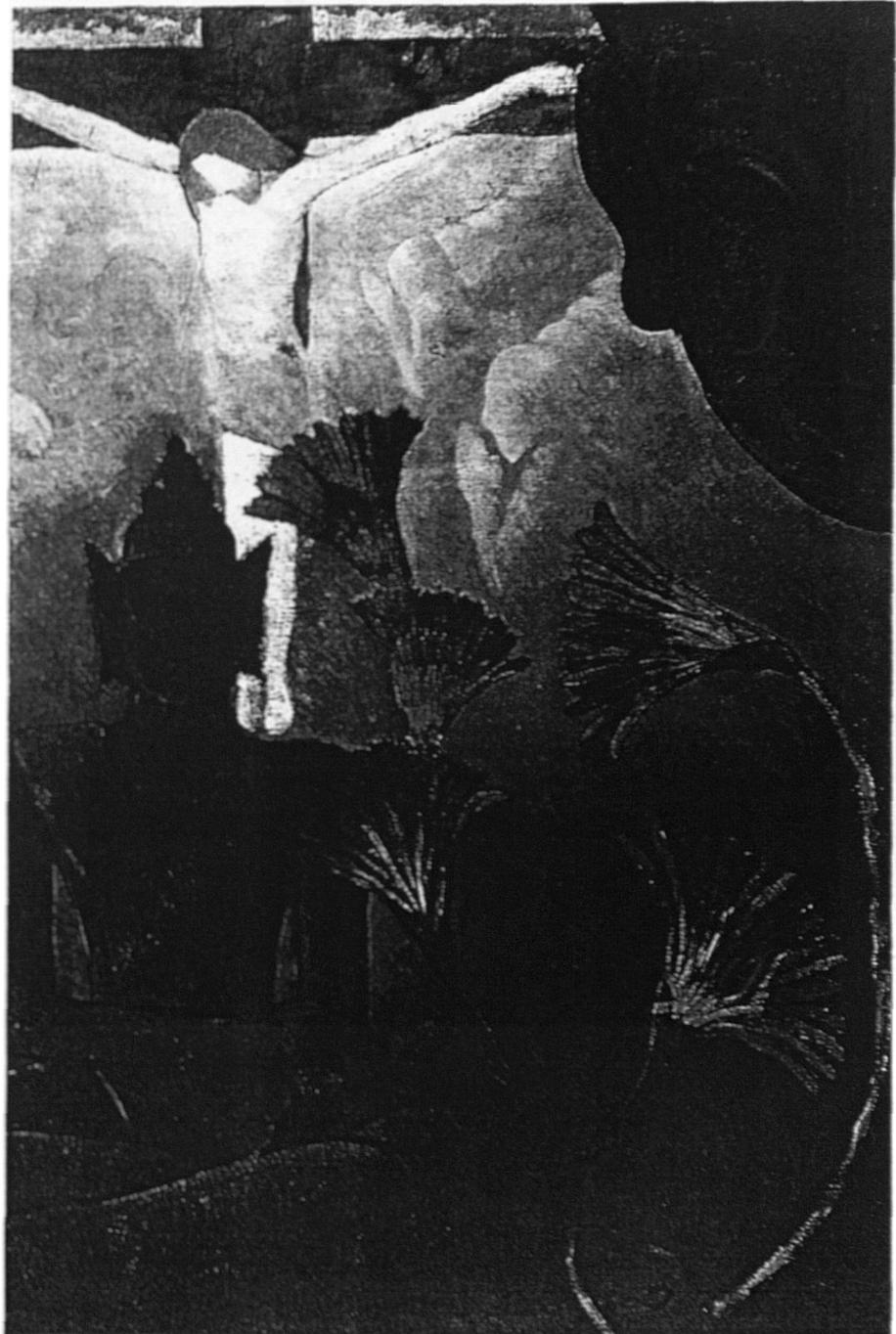
**Fig.29** Redon, Odilon, *The Spirit came to me, I became a Buddha* 1895. lithograph, (32x22). Location unknown.

**Illustrations. 30**



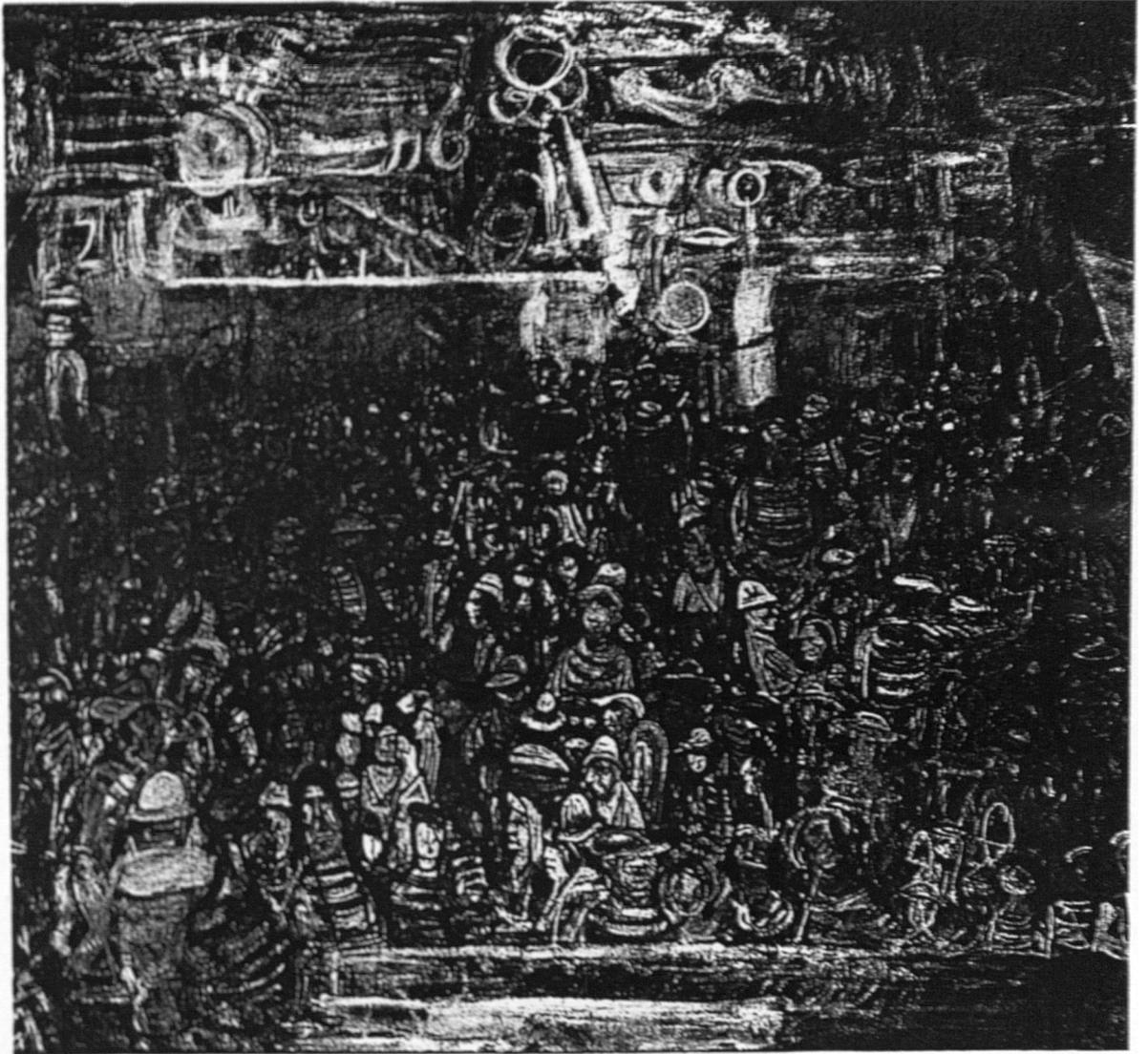
**Fig.30** Redon, Odilon, *Buddha* c. 1905. Pastel, (90x73). Louvre. Paris.

Illustrations. 31



**Fig.31** Ranson, Paul, *Christ and Buddha* 1890-92. Oil on canvas, (72.7x51.4). Private Collection, New York.

Illustrations. 32



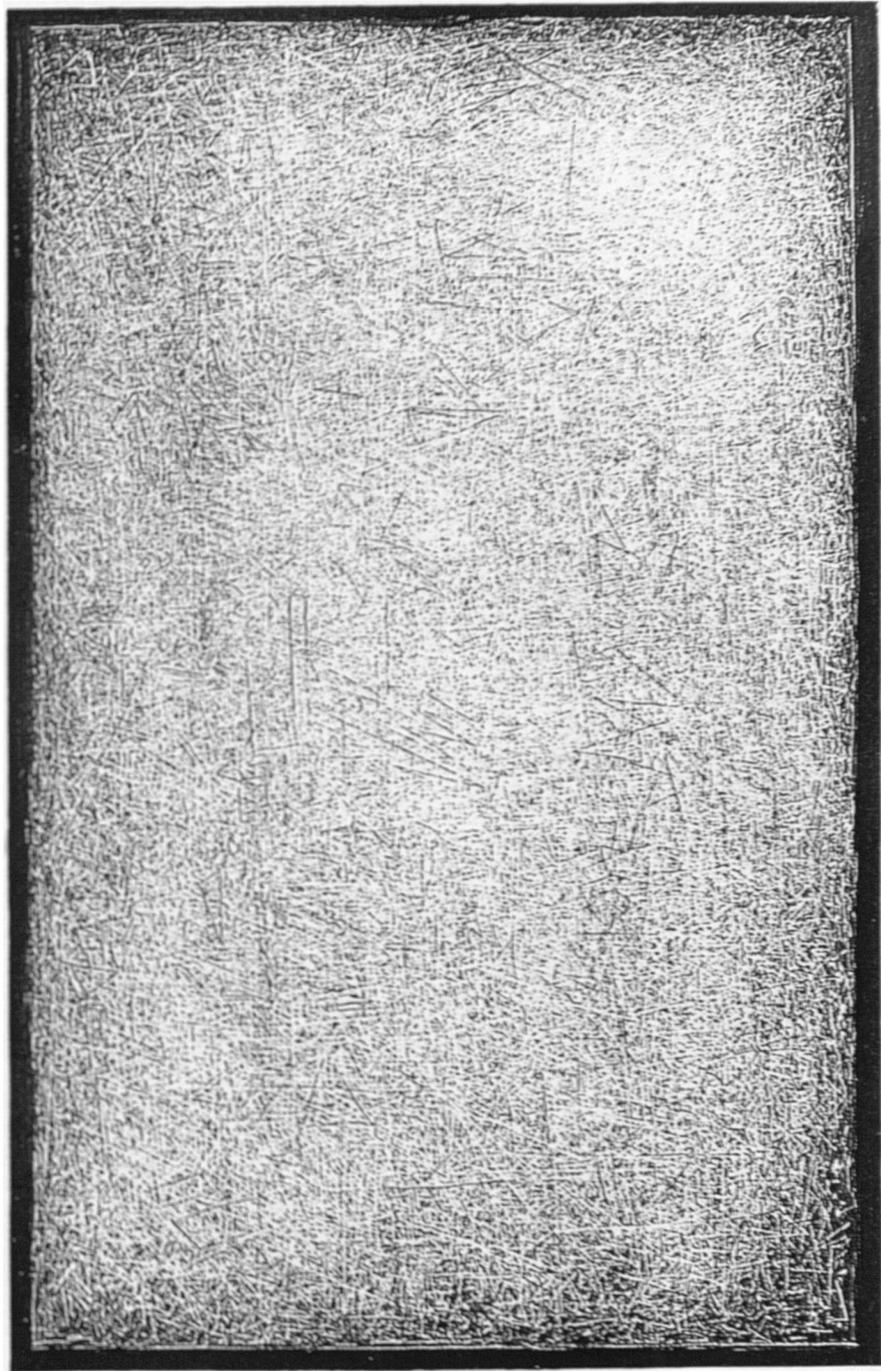
**Fig.32** Tobey, Mark, *The Gathering* (detail) 1942. Tempera on wood, (61.5x79). Galerie Beyeler, Basel.

**Illustrations. 33**



**Fig.33** Tobey, Mark, *Extensions from Baghdad* 1944. Tempera on paper, (28x76.2).  
Willard Gallery, New York.

**Illustrations. 34**



**Fig.34** Tobey, Mark, *New York* 1944. Tempera on cardboard, (84x53). National Gallery of Art, Washington.D.C.

**Illustrations. 35**



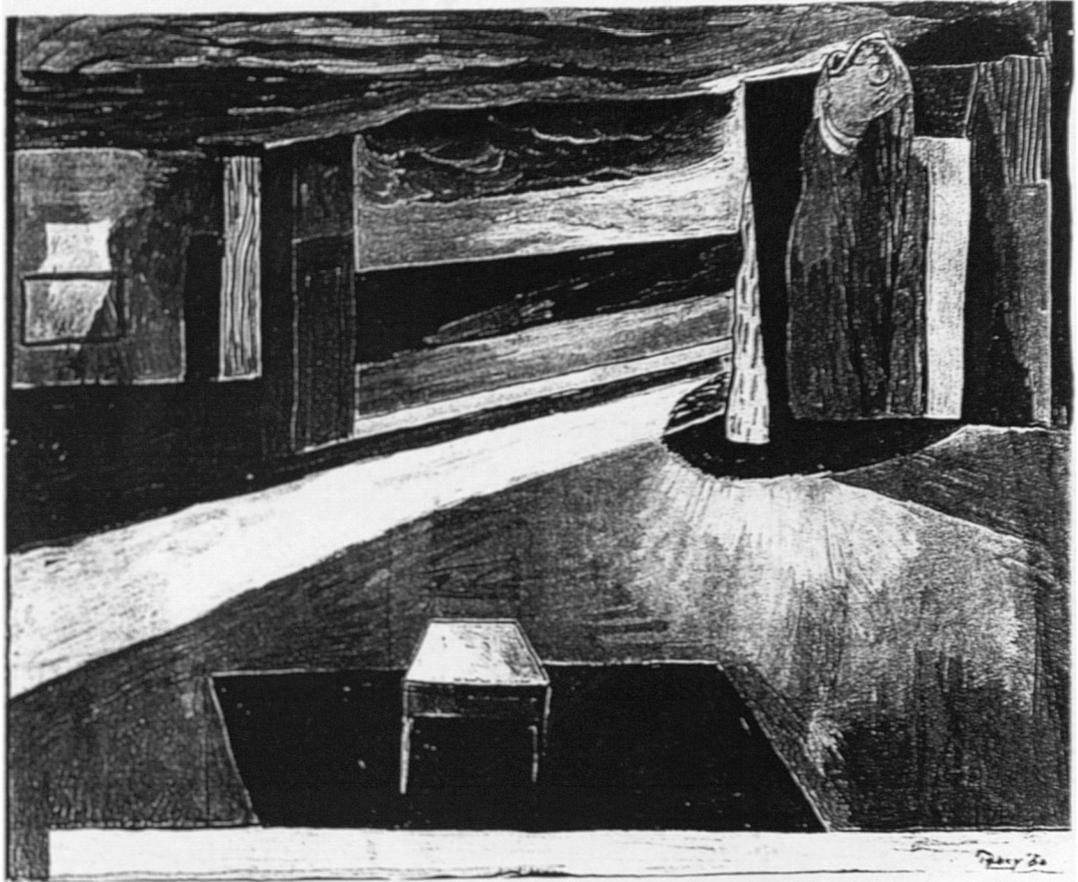
**Fig.35** Tobey, Mark, *Japanese Figures* 1934. Ink on paper, (37x29). Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington.

Illustrations. 36



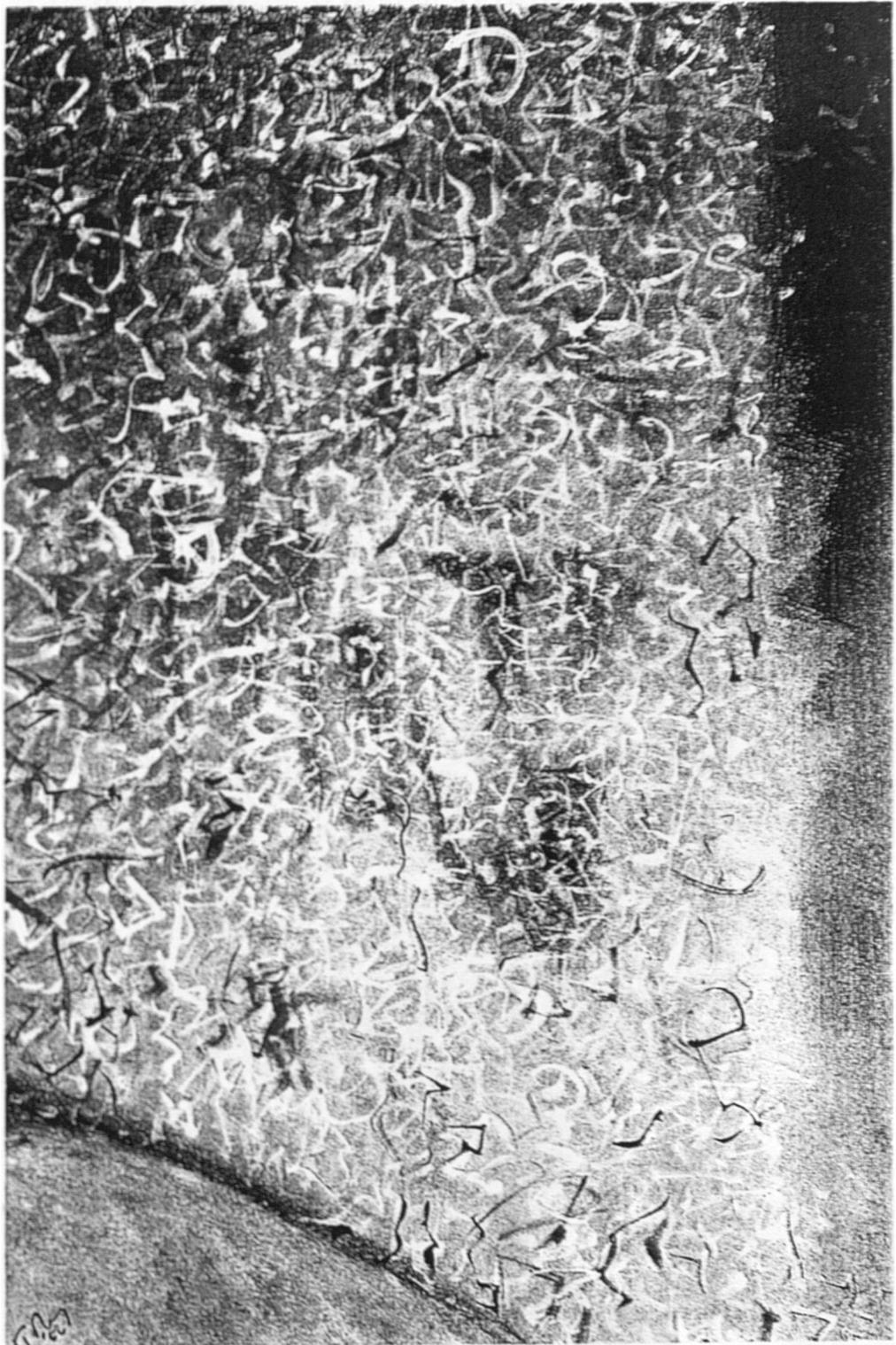
**Fig.36** Tobey, Mark, *China* 1934. Ink on paper, (38x29). Private Collection.

**Illustrations. 37**



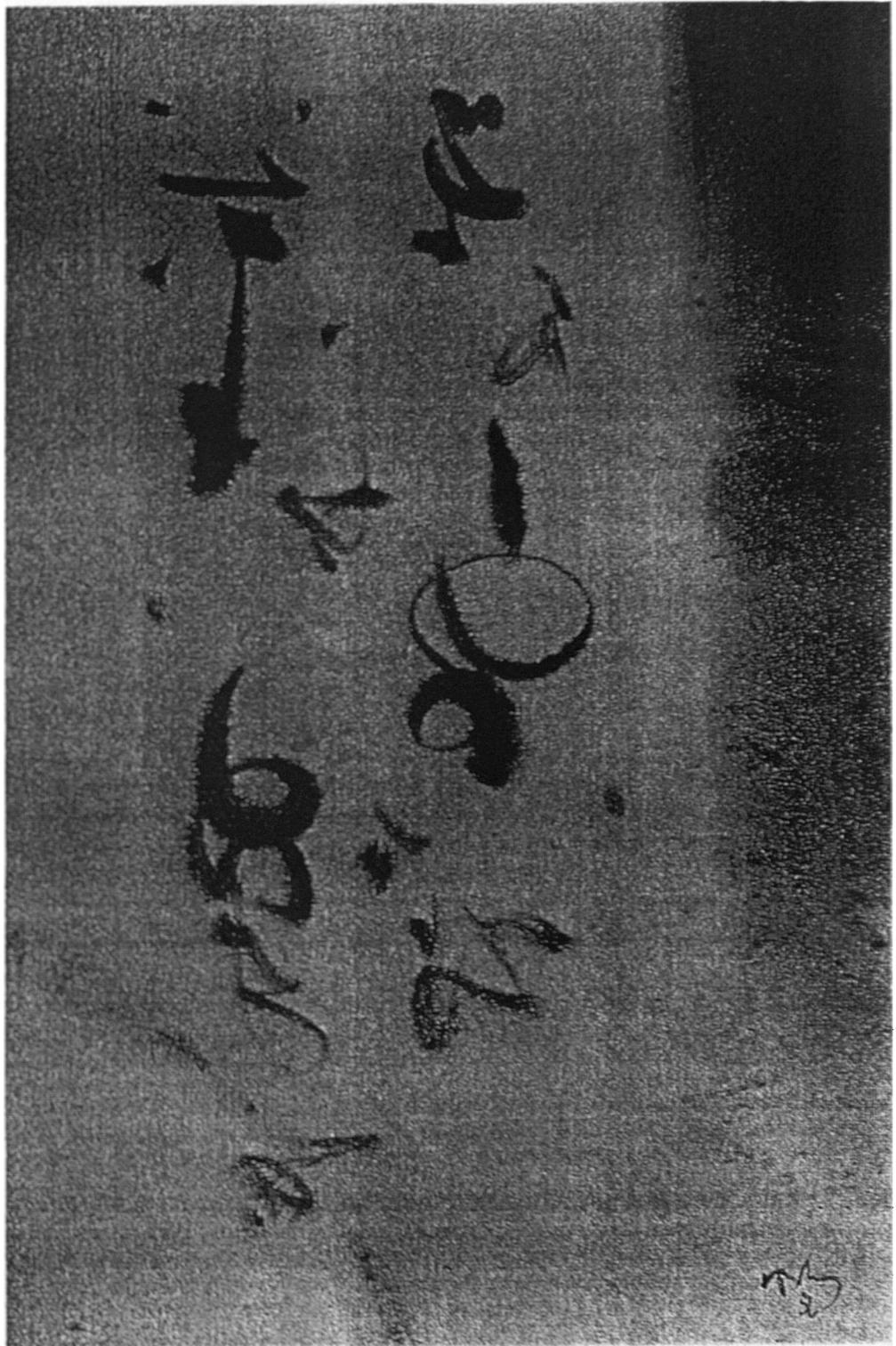
**Fig.37** Tobey, Mark, *Interior* 1930. Tempera on paper, (48x60). Private Collection.

**Illustrations. 38**



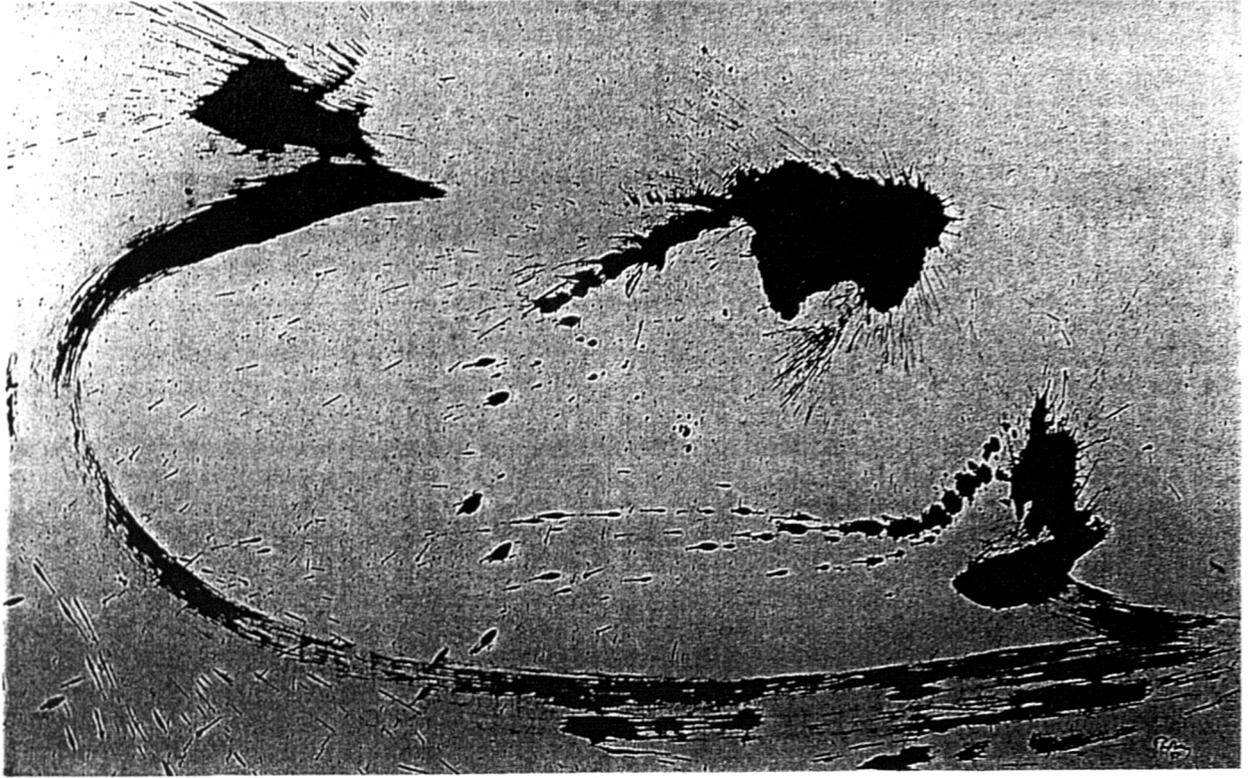
**Fig.38** Tobey, Mark, *Above the Earth V* 1956. Tempera on paper, (45.7x29.8).  
Collection Richrd Lippold, New York.

Illustrations. 39



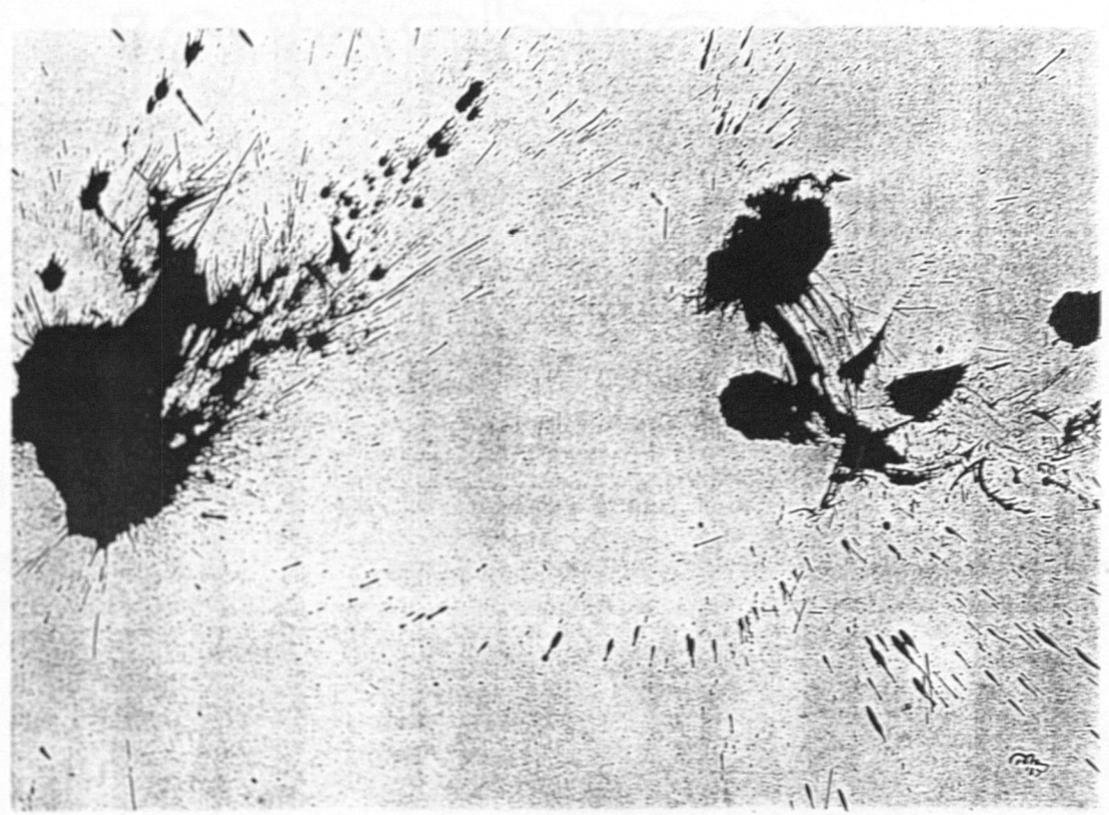
**Fig.39** Tobey, Mark, *Above the Earth VI* 1956. Tempera on paper, (45.7x30.5). Private Collection, New York.

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**Fig.40** Tobey, Mark, *Composition No.1* 1957. Sumi (ink) on paper, (61x96.5). Achim Moeller Fine Art, New York.

**Illustrations. 41**



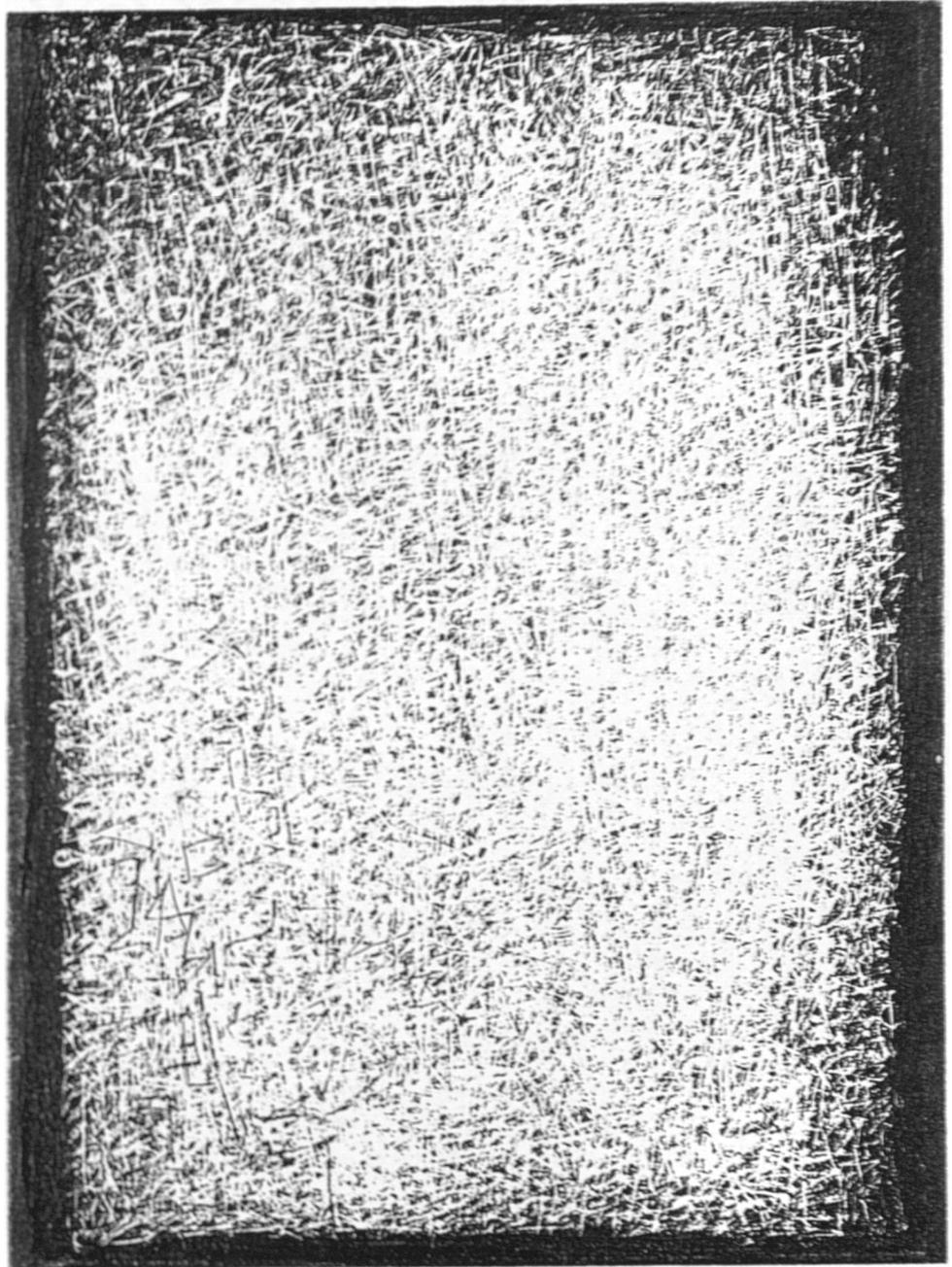
**Fig.41** Tobey, Mark, *Sumi II* 1957. Sumi (ink) on paper, (20.5x28.7). Private Collection, New York.

**Illustrations. 42**



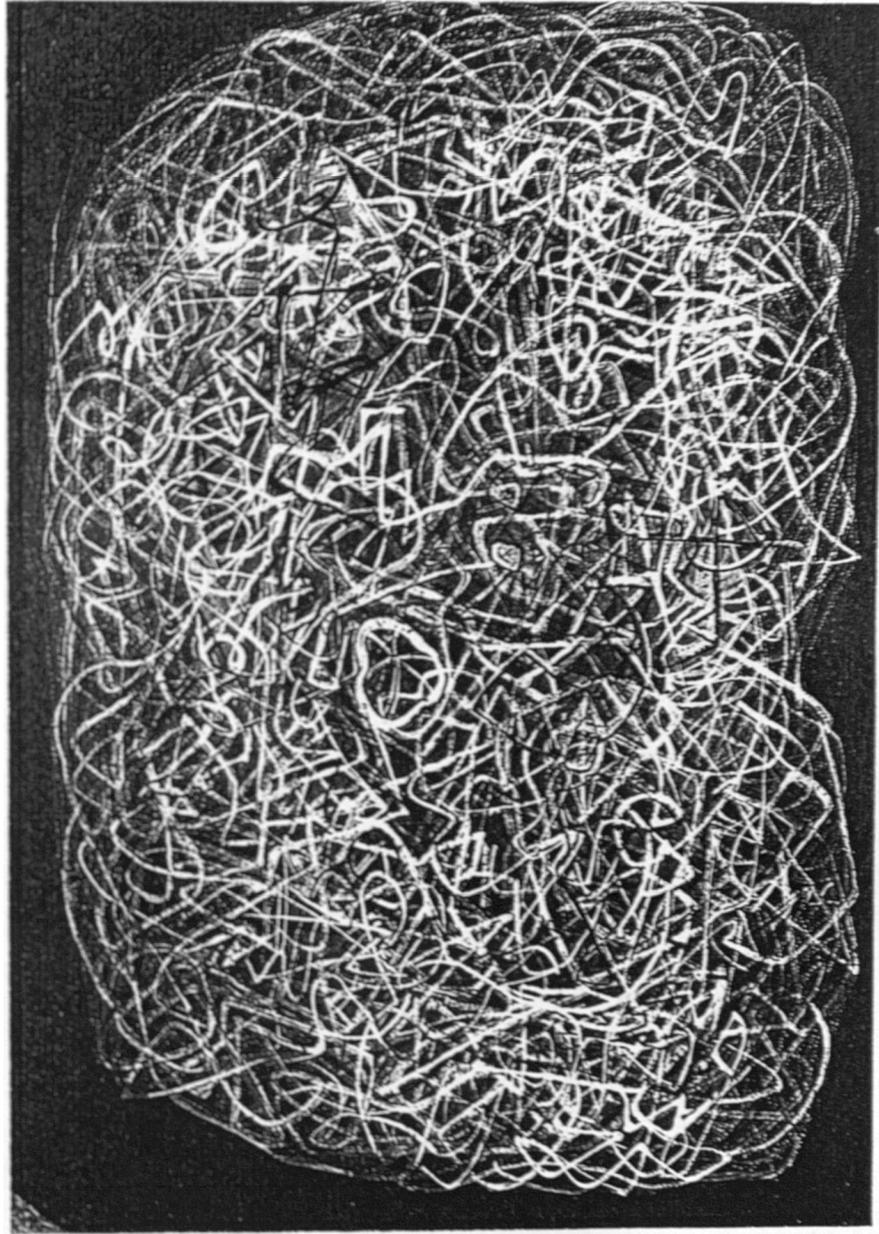
**Fig.42** Tobey, Mark, *Eastern Calligraphy* 1959. Ink on paper, (14.5x20). Private Collection.

**Illustrations. 43**



**Fig.43** Tobey, Mark, *Crystallisation* 1944. Tempera on paper, (45.7x33). Lillian Clark Collection, Dallas.

**Illustrations. 44**



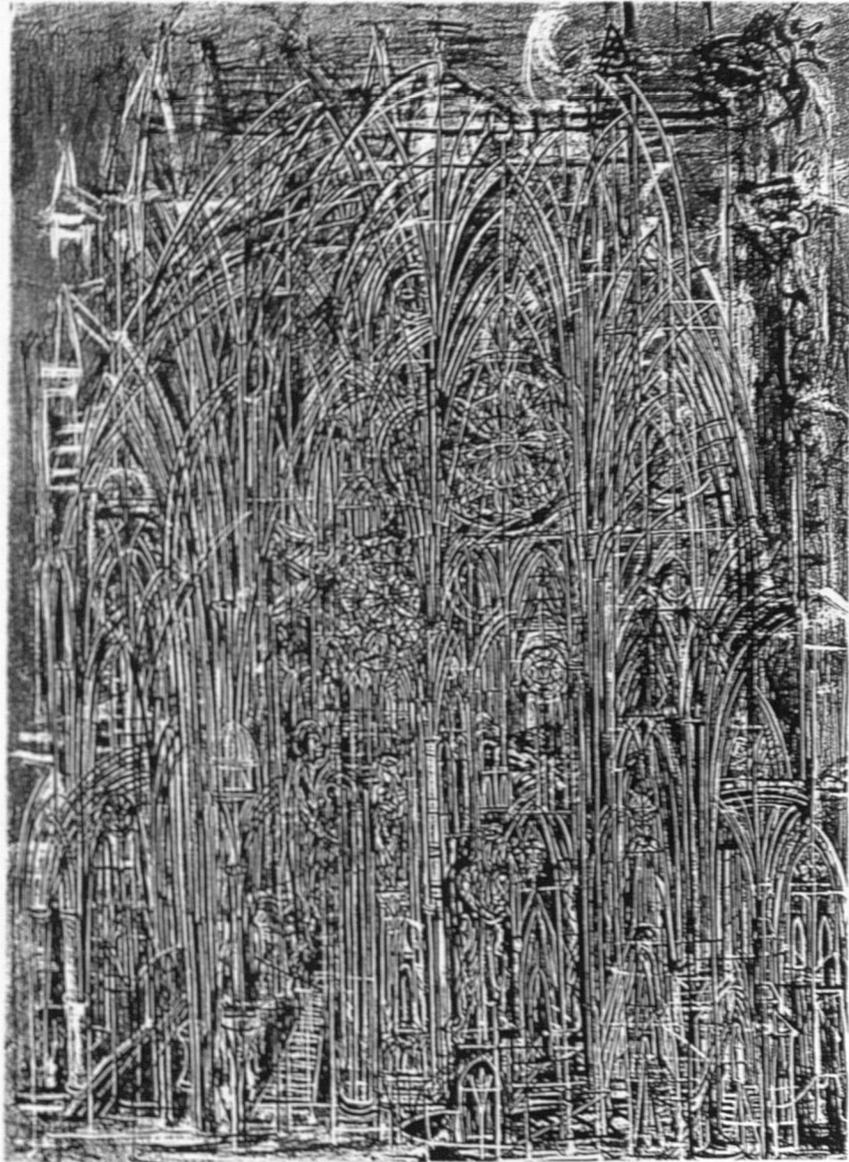
**Fig.44** Tobey, Mark. *Broadway Norm* 1935. Tempera, (33.7x23.9). Carol Ely Harper, Seattle.

Illustrations. 45



**Fig.45** Tobey, Mark, *Broadway* 1936. Tempera, (26x19.7). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

**Illustrations. 46**



**Fig.46** Tobey, Mark, *Gothic* 1943. Tempera. (70.5x54.6). Seattle Art Museum.

**Illustrations. 47**



**Fig.47** Tobey, Mark, *Broadway Boogie* 1942. Tempera, (31.4x24.7). Private Collection, Seattle.

**Illustrations. 48**



**Fig.48** Mark Tobey at work, Basel 1961. Photograph courtesy of Miani Johnson, Willard Gallery, New York.

**Illustrations. 49**



**Fig.49** Mark Tobey in Morris Graves' garden, Washington 1949. Photograph: Mary Randlett.

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**Fig.50** Mark Tobey with Paul Horiuchi and George Tsutakawa, date unknown. Source unknown.

**Illustrations. 51**



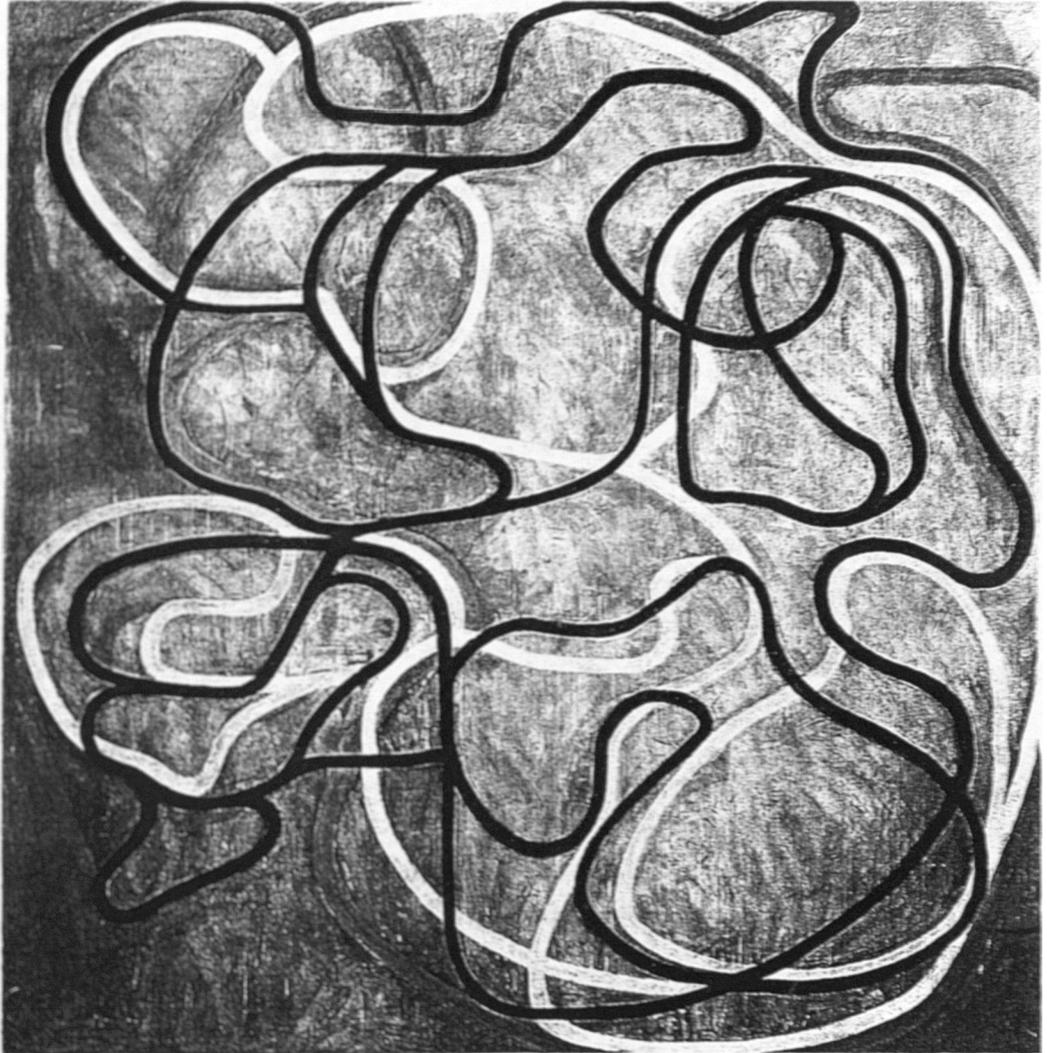
**Fig.51** View of Mark Tobey exhibition at XXIX Venice Biennale 1958. Photograph courtesy of Archivio Storico Delle Arti Contemporanee.

**Illustrations. 52**



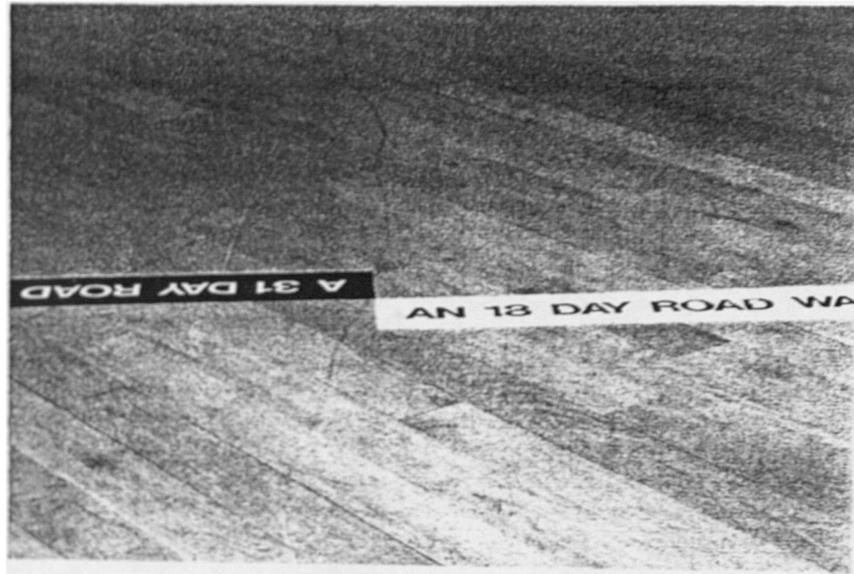
**Fig.52** Mark Tobey during his stay in Japan wearing *yukata* 1934. Source unknown.

**Illustrations. 53**



**Fig.53** Marden, Brice, *Epitaph Painting 1* 1996-97. Oil on Linen, (96.5x95). Mathew Marks Gallery, New York.

## Illustrations.54



**Fig.54** Fulton, Hamish,  $31+18=49=7 \times 7$  *Two Walking Road Journeys*. Vinyl text on floor, dimensions variable. Collection of the Artist.