Flowering Light: Kabbalistic Mysticism and the Art of Elliot R. Wolfson (Houston: Rice University Press)

As a modernist art historian, I spend most of my time with the dead. Typically, this entails engaging with the artistic works of key historical figures, their accompanying exhibition histories, and their relations to significant developments in contemporary intellectual and cultural history. Working with these established subjects means not only reconstructing an extensive base of primary visual and archival source materials, but negotiating a well-developed historiography, and with it, a corresponding set of accepted interpretive strategies. Thus in various ways, working with the dead means engaging with the collective voice of the discourse on the discourse.

This study represents something different; as such, the text marks a departure that is also an arrival.1 Because of the unique nature of the subject matter — the concordance of mystical and aesthetic expression in the scholarly, painted, and poetic works of a living author and artist, Elliot R. Wolfson — familiar templates of thought are not always readily available, or even aptly applicable. Instead, Wolfson’s artworks invite viewers to reconsider what it means to work with the living. Not only are his books and paintings the products of a living artist, but at the core of the corpus lies a set of ideas that sometimes seem to take on a life of their own.

In turn, this book is designed to reflect some of the complexities of its subject matter, in part through the convergence of art historical and religious studies methodologies with the domains of contemporary art criticism, poetry, and creative writing. In the crossing of these interpretive streams, what is said is also deeply informed by what remains unsaid. One particularly suggestive expression of such unsaying concerns the transgression of the edges that demarcate the familiar boundaries of academic discourses. In so doing, this text is presented partly as a work of conceptual art that resonates with the capacity of mystical envisioning to create imaginative worlds. This is one of the reasons why I wanted to write this book, and hopefully, why you will want to read it. In short, in this study I am not just writing about mystical art and literature; on a certain level, the text represents an attempt to produce mystical art and literature, through words and images that can potentially induce these states aesthetically and hermeneutically in their readers.

At the outset, I should note that it was my own long-standing engagement with abstract art that initially drew me to the mystical discourses of kabbalah. That is, when encountering abstracted modernist painting and sculpture, viewers often find themselves in the paradoxical position of contemplating substantial surfaces that have been envisioned and instantiated as insubstantial forms, even as these forms are manifested materially as concrete, sensuous presences. To cite Wolfson’s incisive formulation in his award-winning study, Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination, ‘In consonance with the teachings of mystic visionaries in various traditions, kabbalists assent to the view that the primary task of the imaginative faculty is to depict imaginally what is without image, to embody that which is not a body, to give form to the formless.’2 Applying these concepts to the visual arts, abstracted painting and sculpture can be seen as suggestively imposing a form on that which has no form, thereby allowing the invisible to become visible.3

When confronted with the complexity of Wolfson’s oeuvre, multiple pathways seem to emerge and diverge simultaneously, as intricate conceptual networks alternately reveal and conceal themselves in light of the paintings, poetry, and scholarship. In the encounter with these subtle and always demanding materials, the gift of the challenge is reflected in the challenge of the gift. Like a pearl that grows out of multiple demanding materials simultaneously, this study is situated in the conjoined fields of these overlapping paradoxic incubation serapis wrap this drape with gape plaited from poetic pearl verbally expunged from light plunged in darkness we see seeping through husks of froth burning truth truth cannot prove beyond doubt reasonable or not

Elliot R. Wolfson (b. 1956) is the Judge Abraham Lieberman Professor of Hebrew and Judaic Studies at New York University. While he is primarily known as a distinguished scholar of the Jewish mystical traditions of kabbalah, Wolfson is also an accomplished painter and poet. A recent volume of his poetry, Footdreams & Treetales: Ninety-Two Poems, was published by Fordham University Press in 2007; ‘incubation’ is exemplary of Wolfson’s style of poetry. With its lyrical conjunction of above and below, melting and burning, the poem reads like an allegory of occluded and revealed light. Wolfson’s language forms a convergent site of incubation and excavation, concealment
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and exposure, evoking the flickering depths of what lies within while also providing a skeletal framework for the quickening development of emergent presence. Explicitly invoking Serapis, an Egyptian underworld god who assists in processes of spiritual ascension, the verse begins with a nominal reference to the king of the deep. Yet the interwoven patterns of the deity’s name also bring to mind the realm of the seraph(h)s, the angels that surround and guard the throne of heaven while weaving a living veil of light, as they plait the luminous drapery that clothes the elemental world of form.

Resonating with these poetic and spiritual associations, Wolfson’s abstract painting Night Traces (2008, fig. 1) is a dark, evanescent canvas that can be viewed symbolically as an overwhelming veil that was woven in the interval before form takes form. In this tonally nuanced work, horizontal bands of black and white brushstrokes undulate across a visually spare surface, where they coalesce to form a monochromatic field of softly blended shades of grey that are heightened by contrasting accents of red and blue-violet. While the painting is wholly nonrepresentational, Night Traces could present an indeterminate view of night-time darkness as glimpse through the transparent surface of a plate glass window, or perhaps a dissolving vision of moonlight reflected on wet city pavement. Building on an undifferentiated base of ground and sky, material surfaces and ethereal atmospheres become interchangeable. The scene discloses nothing, even as it gestures beyond the shadows of doubted forms. In the crossing of these thematic currents, the painting’s pictorial field becomes an aesthetic incubator that cradles alternating possibilities of presence and absence as it incorporates its opposite into itself. Thus in both Night Traces and ‘incubation’, the oyster and the pearl have become interchangeable, as their identity and their difference are simultaneously revealed and concealed in the enfolded depths of their reciprocally encrusted surfaces. As is the case throughout Wolfson’s oeuvre, such mutually intertwined associations are strung together like a strand of iridescent beads. Woven from gaping openness and secret(ed) out into the world, the artworks can be approached as veils whose underlying subjects remain at once draped and exposed, revealing as much as they conceal, so that ‘in darkness/we see’.

As this suggests, one of the remarkable formal characteristics of Wolfson’s oil paintings lies in their ability to convey a fragile sense of transient light, a dynamic quality that resonates thematically with the mystical capacity to embody multiple temporal and spatial locations simultaneously. Indeed, Wolfson’s canvases appear less like stable pictorial surfaces than as shimmering fields of luminous colour on which forms continually crystallise, blossom, and dissolve, as shifting patterns light the paintings from within. Just as Wolfson’s works present these themes through a language of pictorial abstraction, they clothe their subjects in a range of sacred, angelic, erotic, and temporal associations. Coupled with ethereal titles such as Green Angel (2006, fig. 2), Fractured Androgyne (2006, fig. 3), and Inkblood (2006, fig. 4), Wolfson’s artworks invite their viewers to imagine the bodies of angels as painted incarnations of living light. In turn, works such as The Rose (2003, fig. 5) at once evoke and elude the forms of the flesh, in this instance through the radiant imagery of an inverted flower. Such dynamics are also evident in Wolfson’s poem ‘inside out’:

inside out
outside/ in
expanding
to point
diminishing
at crown
of light
lusting
no more
to see
but sight
blinded
inside/ out

Much like ‘inside out’, The Rose symbolically embodies a reversible state of being, like the petals of a rose that has turned back on itself, with forms emerging outward from within and inward from without, the centre of whose being remains at once sheltered and exposed in the embedded layers of its own unfolding. In various ways, Wolfson’s creative and scholarly corpus can be seen as such a complementary expression of ‘flowering light’. This evocative image is taken directly from Wolfson’s poem ‘embodied naked’:

embodied naked
through gate return
yet to be born,
flowering light
in silence beyond,
the meadow below,
under which dwells
empty sign,
laughter of lover,
lurking in touch,
approaching retreat,
fragment unbroken,
echo of word
never once spoken,
yearning to hold
what must be scattered,
naked in body,
fully attired

With their evanescent play of presences and absences, Wolfson’s paintings and poems do not emanate, either formally or philosophically, from a traditional humanist framework. Moreover, just as the images are neither conventionally representational nor iconographically driven, Wolfson’s artwork does not lean on the inherited templates of an art school background. Rather, his artistic training is largely autodidactic. Growing up in New York City, he was fortunate to be surrounded by some of the world’s great museums, which he began to visit on a regular basis during his high school years. He vividly recalls the many hours spent at the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. In these galleries, he
found himself especially drawn to the paintings of the French Impressionists, Van Gogh, Matisse, Chagall, and Klee. He also studied the mysterious illumination found in Edward Hopper’s scene paintings, and the dramatic chiaroscuro displayed throughout Rembrandt’s self-portraits and history paintings. As he notes of his early encounters with these artworks, ‘I connected with the medium well before I started painting.'

Wolfson also recalls that he experienced his first real impulse to paint while he was a graduate student at Brandeis University during the early 1980s, and that he sold books in order to buy painting materials. (Anyone who knows Wolfson personally will understand how strong the desire to paint must have been for him to have made such a sacrifice.) When asked about what originally motivated his painting, he responded, ‘I can’t explain the genealogy of the urge, except to try to translate what I was thinking and feeling into visual form.’ He initially produced a few canvases, let them go, and a couple of years later he painted a few additional works, which survive to this day. One such early canvas appears on the cover of *Footdreams & Treetales*. Nearly twenty years passed until, during the spring of 2003, a visitor asked him what was lying in storage bags in his office. He notes that, from that point onward, he felt encouraged to explore painting in a way that he had never done before.

As an author, a poet, and a visual artist, Wolfson attempts to articulate a vision through complementary media. He himself has identified an important similarity between his academic and his artistic work, as both provide ‘a recourse to another way of seeing’ and access to other states of consciousness. All turn on a similar dynamic of collapsing seemingly stable or discrete boundaries between time and space, presence and absence. Wolfson emphasises that the mysteriously decomposing and emergent forms that appear throughout his canvases emanate from affective states without premeditated intentionality. Instead, a feeling moves him to work on the canvas, ‘and in the absence of the feeling, the artwork wouldn’t happen’. His verse unfolds in a similar manner, as ‘a word will come to mind and germinate into a poem with very little effort’. In this way, ‘the decomposed presences become clothed or vested in the words’, just as the paintings represent a similar ‘attempt at crossing boundaries and bringing the formless into form through color’.

From floor to ceiling, Wolfson’s Manhattan study is filled with a dazzling collection of books. His library is at once an intimate and expansive space in which ancient and rare volumes are interspersed with classic texts and contemporary publications, while his own recent canvases perch on nearby easels. Indeed, the unique character of the space itself seems to engender creative associations. Thus when one envisions ancient texts, some of the images that come to mind are of precious books printed on fine laid and wove papers, and prior to this, illuminated manuscripts inscribed and painted on vellum. Vellum is ‘a fine kind of parchment’ from that point onward, he felt encouraged to explore painting in a way that he had never done before.

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In time
behind
their nakedness
etched in
stone
the name
we cannot
re/member
to forget
what it was
we remembered
to forget

Just as Wolfson’s various reflections on the veil appear in the contexts of a scholarly study of Habad and a collected volume of poetry, this ambivalent mystical imagery also sheds valuable light on the paintings. When asked about these thematic conjunctions, Wolfson affirmed to me that the passages from the Habad book are indeed ‘sufficient to confirm your sense of the importance of the trope of the veil and how it joins together this [scholarly] work (much of my work really) and the paintings’.13 Thus much as words create complementary aesthetic and hermeneutical structures in Wolfson’s writings, so too does colour serve as a veil in his paintings, as pigment appears as a material presence that grounds the ungroundable. Such modalities of formal enclosure are necessary to convey an intrinsic sense of their own largesse, or the insight that there is always more to find in the hiding of the hidden. When these concepts are translated into art historical terms, Wolfson’s abstract paintings can be seen as simultaneously encompassing and eliding the categorical frameworks that distinguish the very boundaries between abstraction and representation. With their intricate configurations of emerging and dissolving presences, the paintings can be viewed as conjunctive membranes or translucent screens that simultaneously demarcate and disseminate the material and the ethereal domains, bringing to earth mystical imagery that invokes the shifting veils of a living heaven (velum).

These observations on creative envisioning lead to a final reflection on time, timeliness, and contemporaneity. Wolfson characterises his own writing as being not the product of a medievalist, a modernist, or a postmodernist, but rather, as contributing to ‘the thinking that is happening now’.14 Thus it is perhaps especially appropriate that this project; and Michael Schmidt for his generous invitation to preview this book in PN Review.

I would like to thank David Ward of the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; and Jay Clarke of the Art Institute of Chicago for their kind interest and valuable commentary on this project; and Michael Schmidt for his generous invitation to preview this book in PN Review.

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Notes
1 From a different historical perspective, I also examine the relations between mysticism and modernist aesthetics in my book Carving Consciousness: Mysticism and the Modern Museum (forthcoming from the MIT Press, 2010).
3 Regarding these themes, see also Mark Godfrey, Abstraction and the Holocaust (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), for a discussion of Morris Louis’s engagement with Jewish mystical conceptions of sacred fire in his Charred Journal series and in the prismatic light of his abstractions.
4 Elliot R. Wolfson, in conversation with the author, 30 June 2008. The details concerning Wolfson’s artistic background stem from this interview.
5 Elliot R. Wolfson, in conversation with the author, 30 June 2008.
6 Elliot R. Wolfson, in conversation with the author, 30 June 2008.
10 On these themes, see also Chapter 5 of Wolfson’s Language, Eros, Being, particularly the section entitled ‘Unveiling the Veil/Unveiling the Unveiled’, on pp. 224–33 of this volume.
11 Wolfson shared these passages from his forthcoming text in an email of 24 June 2008.
12 Elliot R. Wolfson, in correspondence with the author, 24 June 2008.
13 Elliot R. Wolfson, in correspondence with the author, 24 June 2008.
14 Wolfson notes that this expression is a modification of the phrase used by his colleague, David Leahy, who describes his own philosophical methodology as part of the ‘thinking that is occurring now’. Elliot R. Wolfson, in correspondence with the author, 18 June 2008.
Fig. 1  Elliot R. Wolfson, *Night Traces*, 2008, oil on canvas. Copyright © 2009 Elliot R. Wolfson. All rights reserved.

Fig. 2  Elliot R. Wolfson, *Green Angel*, 2006, oil on canvas. Copyright © 2009 Elliot R. Wolfson. All rights reserved.

Fig. 3  Elliot R. Wolfson, *Fractured Androgyne*, 2006, oil on canvas. Copyright © 2009 Elliot R. Wolfson. All rights reserved.

Fig. 4  Elliot R. Wolfson, *Inkblood*, 2006, oil on canvas. Copyright © 2009 Elliot R. Wolfson. All rights reserved.

Fig. 5  Elliot R. Wolfson, *The Rose*, 2003, oil on canvas. Copyright © 2009 Elliot R. Wolfson. All rights reserved.