

Robert Sagerman

“Workings: Realized Objecthood in Painting and Jewish Mystical Practice”

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Thank you all for making it here today. My gratitude goes to Brian for allowing me to share some thoughts with you.

I'll be speaking today about two distinct fields of interest, one painting, the other the academic study of Jewish mysticism. It was painting that, around fifteen years ago, began to awaken my interest in the latter, as I chanced upon some discussion of Jewish mysticism that reminded me very much of the kind of metaphysical perspective with which I approached painting. Over time, I observed that Jewish mysticism presented me with an organized framework that could often illumine and inform my artistic project. It was this ulterior motive that spurred me toward a religious studies doctorate and which continues to lie behind those academic pursuits for which I can still make time.

It's wise to be leery about speaking about two fields of endeavor at once, which is what I will attempt to do today. The danger is of doing a disservice to both. The fields of art and mysticism each follow their own internal logic, and the demands of one cannot be circumvented by enlisting the help of the other. One risks diluting both. As well, there's an experiential dimension to both that is easily injured by too much wordiness.

I once had a conversation with someone who was incredibly enthusiastic about my work and wanted to hear my own view of my painting. When I explained my interdisciplinary pursuits at some length he thought for a moment and answered, “Well, I love your work anyway.” In that spirit, I insist that if my work is worth its weight it has to hold up without much explanation. But I find myself following in the habit of many medieval Jewish mystics, who cautioned again and again against the divulging of secrets, but who simply could not restrain themselves from dropping enough hints that their doctrines could be reconstructed by anyone willing to take the time to put the pieces together. The same importance of the subjects involved that makes secrecy seem so necessary also makes this secrecy a virtual impossibility.

An issue that today is often not taken very seriously, but which I can't help but believe still merits some measure of respect is the question of how one approaches material from antiquity that was supposed to be kept secret. Rabbinic literature of the second century made mention of several different types of secret doctrines. The most caution was applied to the so-called “Workings of the Chariot.” It was written that not even to a single student was any such doctrine to be imparted, unless he could understand on his own with the help of just general hints. In fact, it is to this doctrine that I will refer today, with a measure of respect and circumspection.

To begin with, an understanding of the Workings of the Chariot is rooted in a familiarity with the first chapter of the Book of Ezekiel, available in anyone's Bible. There, an account of the prophet Ezekiel's divine vision in the desert is presented in detail. Ezekiel's vision is without any parallel anywhere in Scripture or in any earlier surviving text. He saw a series of creatures, including *hayyot*, or "living beings," each possessing four faces of various types, *ofanim*, "wheels," each covered with eyes, accompanying the *hayyot* in a carefully described manner, all arranged around a central seated figure, himself possessed of unique traits and surrounded by a kind of atmosphere referred to as *hashmal*, a term whose meaning eludes clear understanding. Taken as a whole, this assemblage was understood as the divine chariot. Its central, enthroned divine figure was ascribed various identities, sometimes angelic, sometimes as God himself, in the literature that emerged in the succeeding centuries. Some of this literature can be understood as either commentary or as creative, often elaborate, embellishment on the original visionary text. And some of this literature appears to be prescriptive, presenting demanding techniques by which a mystic might achieve this vision for himself. Such texts often present apocryphal narrative accounts of the visions of the chariot experienced by celebrated sages.

I can't help but think that many of those who delved in practice into these Workings of the Chariot would in our day have been artists. In antiquity the mystical arena was one of the only ones that tapped actively and creatively into the subconscious. For these practitioners, imaginative activity was the route to a more essential reality, one in which a visionary encounter with God's divine throne, in particular, could be achieved. A visionary ascent through heavenly realms culminated, as the literary genre developed, in what was referred to as the "descent" to the chariot/throne. Likely this experience was called a *descent* because one delved deeply into one's own imaginative capacities.

In this endeavor there was to be found a rigid adherence to a strict practical framework, acting in concert with an element of spontaneity. This combination speaks to me in terms of artistic activity, where a certain rigor paves the way for a succession of discoveries. Practitioners of throne mysticism petitioned particular angels on their journey through successive heavenly palaces, each guarded by these same dangerous and warlike beings. It was obligatory that the mystic kept in mind all of the many precise formulae, one for each angel encountered along the way, that secured him safe passage to his destination, the divine throne-room. Arriving there was a revelatory moment, unscripted and unpredictable. Accounts show that various types of angelic beings might spontaneously be visualized upon the divine throne. Sometimes the identity of these beings would shift in mid-vision. Sometimes an entity referred to simply as God's "glory," or any number of other intangible beings, including God's very name itself, was encountered upon the throne. Sometimes the throne was unoccupied but was itself animated. Whatever the specific revelation, the discovery was always accompanied by a kind of euphoria, which took the literary form of ecstatic prayer.

Parallels here to the artistic creative process are in order. For myself, the end result of a painting is not clear, though the way by which to proceed is prescribed from the beginning. Ultimately this way of working gives way to an encounter with the artwork as an autonomous being, one that possesses a will, presence and identity all its own. This way of thinking about the evolved painting recalls the practice and doctrine of a Jewish mystic who was active centuries later than the throne mystics, but whose work was deeply indebted to them. I'm speaking of a kabbalist named Abraham Abulafia.

Abulafia would permute or combine Hebrew letters in his mystical practice. This modality was directly descended from the earlier throne mystic's retention in mystical practice of the complicated spelling of all of the angelic names that he bore in mind. For Abulafia, the end result of his letter permutations was the manifestation of a particular angelic being before him. In Abulafia's case it was always the same one. This angel would impart to him revelations regarding the hidden meanings of Scripture, expressed through equations drawn between the numerical values of different scriptural words and phrases. In this last stage of Abulafia's mystical experience one finds, then, that element of spontaneous revelation that was likewise present for the throne mystic. What's perhaps most striking about Abulafia's mystical encounter is that, when he saw his angelic mentor before him, Abulafia reported that he beheld his own mirror image, his own angelic self. So we find the notion here that, through engaging his imagination and his unconscious, Abulafia effected a link to another being, one who actually embodied his own distilled essence.

When I consider a painting of mine whose identity has coalesced, its essence is certainly an extension of my own self, yet it exists autonomously. I can't exactly say that the painting imparts to me secrets concerning Scripture. Although perhaps it does, after a fashion, in the way that kabbalists discussed such matters. Regardless of this separate issue, I can say that the completion of a realized painting stands as an encounter with an alternate presence, a projected self, or a facet of the self with which to become acquainted.

To return to the earlier throne mystics, what I'd like to turn attention to is a prevalent fixation, in particular, upon God's throne. It was almost never God himself who was encountered on the throne. In fact, as I mentioned earlier, the identity of the enthroned was ever-shifting, the throne itself being the constant. The multiplication of different possible occupants of the throne pointed directly to the unenvisionable nature of God himself. The latter could only be apprehended through his throne, or through a surrogate. God was conceived as too incorporeal and undelimitable to be confined to his throne. Everything else but God received ample description, but God himself was beyond all this. One text, for instance, discusses how God's appearance may only be inferred, somehow, from that of the envisioned entities:

Anyone who wants to learn this secret [of God's likeness] shall learn from the *hayyot* who are before him; [from] their gait, from their appearance, [from] their faces, [from] their wings. Their gait is like the appearance [of the lightning], their appearance is like the appearance of the rainbow in the cloud, their faces are like the appearance of the bride, their wings are like the radiance of the clouds of glory.¹

One finds that the sensual element in these texts is pushed quite far. The size of the heavenly host is amplified and their physical descriptions are rendered in elaborate detail, while the imposingness and beauty of the witnessed spectacle receives great attention. This pushing of the sensual element that comes with the awe of the encounter with the divine world, paradoxically, ultimately serves to express, by omission, the distance of God himself from the sensual sphere.

Sometimes such a throne text seems to be building toward a vision of God. But such a vision is then almost coyly exchanged, at the crucial moment of the encounter, for an angelic vision. One text, for instance, actually does describe the incredible beauty of God himself upon the throne of glory, but immediately after it reads, "He who looks at him will be immediately torn. He who views his beauty will immediately be poured out like a jug."²

If the paradoxical goal of such visionary practice was he who could not be envisioned, the vision of a sensually overwhelming divine surrogate, such as the throne itself, was nevertheless perceived to be a quintessential success. Sometimes, indeed, the devotionalism directed toward the throne itself bordered on heresy, redolent as it was of the Christian practice of rendering worship to a divine surrogate. These mystics were acutely aware of this danger, and they countered their accounts of visions of the throne with prescribed hymns to God alone at various points. Subsequently, by the twelfth century, some Jewish mystical circles in Europe propounded the doctrine that a descent to the throne could be achieved, for the adept who knew how, through assiduous, focused prayer directed with ardent intention toward God alone. Here the same paradox persisted: It was only God to whom prayer was to be directed; to proceed otherwise would be to fall into idolatry. But the goal was to achieve a visionary encounter with another being entirely, often the throne or its occupant.

This notion of the "idolatrous" error of focusing upon the sensually encountered being, as against the immaterial one, is striking to me. When I think about the sensual enticements of my own work, the extreme emphasis upon color and materiality, my analogy is to these envisioned entities, and as well to the one described by Abulafia. So, for instance, I might think about the *hashmal* vis à vis one of the more lurid pieces here, but the over-all structure of such a painting in fact alludes to a kind of underlying immateriality. There is, in an important way, literally

¹ *Hekhalot Zuyarti*, translated in Schäfer, *The Hidden and Manifest God*, p. 62.

² *Hekhalot Rabbati*, in Ibid., pp. 16-17.

nothing there. Along the same lines as the doctrine of the mystics we've been discussing, my ultimate subject matter inheres in what is not envisionable. It is the latter which is evoked for me by the absence of composition, by the field. The paintings are, in a sense, pictures of nothing. But, more to the point, they are not pictures. There really is nothing there beyond the sensual elements packed within the empty field. In a similar fashion, I notice time and again that the spaces between my applied marks, those places through which the eye can descend most deeply, approximate a kind of revelation. A secret can open up through those places. The secret is not simply the identity of the colors that are buried more deeply beneath the surface. It is, rather, that it is the immaterial, an absence, that coincides with and is the essence of revelation.

Those of you who've been able to track my practice over time may have noted that the sensually directed dimension of the work has been the element that I've most pushed over time. Essentially this tendency has widened the gap between the encountered work and that which is its underlying subject, ever present through its very absence, in almost the same way in which throne mystics amplified the sensual thrust of their experiences, which were nonetheless geared toward an immaterial destination. My tendency toward an amplified sensuality has seemed, further, to play into that element of secrecy or discretion that I discussed earlier. The more the viewer is absorbed in the sensual reality of a piece, the more occluded or hidden away is the piece's true identity. It is as if this identity is crusted over with material, the latter representing that which it hides only in terms of sensual metaphor, after the fashion of the multiplication of descriptions meted out by throne mystics for the angelic realm.

In recent months I've gravitated at times toward paintings with gradated color. While the gradualness of these gradations maintain the unity and sense of compositional uniformity that is so important to me, the presence of the contrasting poles at either end of the gradation allows for a color interaction that goes beyond the local ones that come from juxtaposed marks of different color. I'd begun to notice recently that this new element does something else visually. It is almost as if the optical gradation sits on top of all of the material, part of it but detached from it also, like a scrim or veil. Adding this additional sensual element, then, has served to suggest all the more the concealment of what lies beneath, in the same way that a veil conceals. Nevertheless, a veil reveals in the very process of concealing – a veil is suggestive, hinting at contours, providing glimpses, but denying viewership, at the same time, of the object of desire.

Interestingly, throne mystics focused frequently upon the visual apprehension of God's garment. Sometimes this element was all that could be envisioned upon the throne of glory. Sometimes the garment was inscribed all over with God's name, so that the garment is a kind of titillation, revealing much of God's essence while veiling him at the same time. In one text, while an accounting of the awesome beauty of the garment is presented, the text subsequently reads, "the eyes of no creature are able to observe it...The eyeballs of one who does observe are seized and

contorted, and his eyeballs flash and shoot forth torches of fire. And they scorch and burn him,”³ a less than desirable consequence of success in attaining to the throne.

In the context of this reciprocity and tension between immaterial ends and material means, the emphasis that I place in my own work upon process is central. One can see how the focus upon an activity, painting, would take for me priority over the residual object that results. In this way, the video that you find here goes more to the core of what my work is than does the physically encrusted final product. The video that you see documents the data generated from my work process for the large piece, including, for instance, the time spent on each color and the number of marks for each color. Particularly by the time of Abraham Abulafia, who we discussed earlier, Jewish mystics had begun to see numbers, and the Hebrew letters to which they correspond, as more closely approximating divine realism than anything to be found in the material world, and something of this outlook has rubbed off on me.

Here, however, the nature of what I refer to as “divine realism” is complex. In Abulafia’s aforementioned process of letter permutation, revelation came through a mathematical analysis of the letters and words of Scripture, but the divine reality that was encountered was essentially ever-shifting, based as it was upon the subjective inner proclivities of the one engaging in this hermeneutic, this act of textual decipherment. In a related manner, the numbers that are generated in my painting process are at times the product of, while at others the springboard to, a similar hermeneutical activity. My studio process consists, perhaps above all else, of my observing and tracking my own meaning-generating internal reflex. The manipulation of the numerical data that underlies each painting is a part of this hermeneutical fixation. It sometimes takes the form of a kind of “automatic writing” with which I have titled some pieces, and it has also served as the basis for the derivation of a stream of images, culled from the internet, that one can think of as the pictorial twin of the painting from which these images arise.

I do not place the greatest emphasis on my paintings as ‘works’ in the sense of finished pieces. The completed piece is a kind of consummated revelation. I’m trying to avoid clichés about the process or the journey being what the work is all about. But it is worth noting, again by an analogy, how equally focused throne mysticism texts are upon the means of accessing the realized experience - how to petition and adjure angels - as upon accounts of the realized experience, for which description is ultimately futile. The moment of revelation for them comes and is gone. However glorious, there is the sense that it is fleeting and that dwelling upon it cannot replicate it. The only way to recapture something of it is to engage once again in the descent. It’s for this reason that I make my work in such a way that it might unfold for the viewer, so that it will sustain repeated “descents,” while I move forward with my own parallel activity in other pieces. It’s for all this that I’ve referred to this show as “Workings” and not as

³ *Hekhalot Rabbati*, in *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

“works” in the sense of finished pieces. The locution of the “Workings of the Chariot” furnished an instructive model for me in this regard.

Certainly, notwithstanding all of the verbiage in which I’ve engaged here, discussing the nature of the secrecy that absorbs me does little to reveal it. In fact, it only pushes it further into concealment. The kind of secrecy that I’ve been discussing is revealed experientially, and wordiness is ultimately an obstruction. It’s that knowledge, in a sense, that is part and parcel of the secret itself. My apologies, then, if I’ve left us in an even worse position than the one in which we started.