

R.B. Kitaj and the State of "Jew-on-the-Brain"

By David N. Myers

R. B. Kitaj is afflicted with a peculiar malady. It is what his friend Philip Roth calls in *The Counterlife*, "Jew-on-the-brain." The main symptom of this malady is an obsessive concern with the Jewish question in all its forms (that can become, in a compensatory fashion worthy of Oliver Sacks's scrutiny, the source of creative inspiration). The targets of this obsession are varied, ranging from Heinrich Heine to Theodor Herzl, from Franz Kafka to Jacques Derrida, from Max Baer to Shawn Green. What unites these figures, and hence triggers the obsessive interest, is the condition of "Jewishness," created out of the vexing mix of Gentile tolerance and intolerance toward the Jew. One consequence is that the creative Jew dwells in a state of constant tension, in which he acquires perfect command of the reigning cultural vernacular and yet insists, as an act of cultural defiance, on bending the notes of that vernacular into a new language.

It is this tension that activates Kitaj's "Jew-on-the-brain." But it is also this tension that makes him the object of inquiry—both as an artist and as a thinker—by others with the same condition. For example, I am drawn to the explosive colors and thematic richness of his paintings, but equally so to his textualism. By this term, I do not mean his strict construction of a foundational text, but quite the opposite: his erudite and often wild, written glosses on his paintings. Of course, precisely that which so compels his many admirers has frequently maddened Kitaj's critics, who believe, as one London review claimed in 1994, that "no amount of exegesis will improve paintings that fail for pictorial reasons" (Aulich and Lunch 31).

It is here that Kitaj emerges as a new and very different kind of iconoclast—not in the sense of one who "destroys images and pictures set up as objects of veneration" (as the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term), but as one who destroys the idea of

the sacred autonomy of images and pictures. His textualist iconoclasm at once undermines a key verity of modern art and yet restores the primacy of the classical Jewish commentarial imperative. Kitaj was not always conscious of the Jewish pedigree of this imperative, but, as he relates in the *First Diasporist Manifesto*, he always felt himself to be "a Diasporist painter from the start" (31). The road toward his awakening as a Jewish/Diasporist painter began in the late 1950s, when he encountered Aby Warburg's writings on iconography, which revealed to him the links in earlier art among image, idea, and articulated thought. Meanwhile, Kitaj's self-awareness as a Jew was raised during the early 1960s, as he followed with avid interest the Eichmann trial via Hannah Arendt's dispatches from Jerusalem. By the 1970s, "as my Jewish obsession began to unfold," he relates, "the vast literature of Jewish commentary, exegesis, and Midrash encouraged me to write about some of my pictures in a new spirit" (*How to Reach* 72 15). Ever since, Kitaj's art has become more avowedly Jewish, exemplary of the kind of "Diasporist painting" that he now understands to be "unfolding commentary on its life-source, the contemplation of a transience, a *Midrash*," the products of which are "secular Responsa or reactions to one's transient restlessness, un-at-homeness, groundlessness" (*First Diasporist Manifesto* 29, 31). Enchanted by his discovery of the Tradition and its malleability, Kitaj the midrashist weaves his own brand of what he has called "strange Jewishness," as we will see below.

Estrangement is the currency of this Jewish realm, as we notice in his veneration of Kafka, his invention of the fictional Joe Singer in his paintings, and, of course, in the two Diasporist manifestos he has written (in 1989 and 2005). In the first manifesto, this estrangement surfaces when Kitaj admits that "the Diasporist lives and paints in two or more societies at once," not fully belonging to either (19). In the second, Kitaj reveals more layers of his estrangement: "My country is the American Diaspora of the Jews. One of my desires here is not to assimilate in symbiosis with the regular art blend but to listen to my strange Jews and IDEA appearing in my pictures beyond assimilation" (*How to Reach* 72 13).

Kitaj's sense of Diasporist alienation is not merely geographic. To be sure, his alienation from the London art scene—with which he did battle for decades—was real. And the somnolence of Westwood, where he currently resides, can be a bit disconcerting in its own way. But Kitaj's estrangement is at least as much cultural as territorial—and as much temporal as spatial. As an unabashed artist *and* textualist, as one who loves and is "littered with ideas" (according to a contemptuous critic), Kitaj might well have found more comfort in another era—an era before "the end of ideology," in which one felt unabashed about fusing art, literature, politics, and ideas together, even about writing manifestos (*The End of Ideology* 374). In that era, Kitaj might well have found other "strange Jews," caught in the throes of alienation from all forms of orthodoxy, with whom to converse about their shared concerns. Rather than sitting alone in his Westwood coffee house every morning, he might have encountered his favored intellectuals—Ahad Ha-am, Gershom Scholem, Walter Benjamin, maybe even Aby Warburg—

in the cafés of early twentieth-century Europe. They might have talked late into the night about pressing issues: new trends in philosophy, the allures of Kabbalah (especially its hermeneutics), the idea of "l'art pour l'art," the respective merits of various Jewish ideological strains.

In that setting, Kitaj would have to make no apologies for his textualism, the impulse to gloss his painted images with written words. His coffee house colleagues would immediately recognize this act as a decidedly modern, secular, iconoclastic, and Jewish invocation of the Tradition. Nor would they be taken aback by his willing embrace of the idea of Jewish Art, from which so many of his contemporaries have fled. On the contrary, they would be excited by his assertion that "I am Jewish Art in my soul's desire to paint radical pictures, on my own personal Diasporist terms at the limit-points of Jewish Modernism, where Kafka, Celan, Proust, Freud, Soutine, Philip Roth and a hundred other Jewish radicals have gone before me, but almost no painters" (*How to Reach* 72-8).

Kitaj's café comrades would know that he was not the first to wrap himself in the cloak of Jewish Art. They might have remembered Moritz Oppenheim (1800-1882), regarded as "the first Jewish painter" in modern Europe who evoked the warmth and openness of traditional Jewish family life (Cohen 167). They might also have known of a somewhat later figure, the Frenchman Alphonse Lévy (1843-1918), who gained renown for his depictions of the rural Jewish life of Alsace. They would surely have known of attempts by various European artists and cultural activists in the early twentieth century to advance the idea of a Jewish art as part of a broader Jewish national renaissance through journals such as *Ost und West* or the bilingual *Rimon/Milgroim*.

At first glance, the affinity between these earlier activists and Kitaj's "Jewish Art" would seem promising—a possible reunion of long-lost relatives. Who after all ever dares to speak today of a Jewish art? Who today is as obsessed with the Jewish Question? On closer inspection, though, the resemblance fades. Kitaj's own vision of a Jewish Art is too ironic for earlier twentieth-century adepts of the idea such as E. M. Lilien, Davis Trietsch, Hermann Struck, and Lesser Ury (Rosenfeld 95). Whereas they believed that Jewish art was an expression of the iron-clad "soul of the nation," Kitaj believes his distinctive variant—"Diasporist painting"—"is enacted under peculiar historical and personal freedoms, stresses, dislocations, rupture and momentum" (*First Diasporist Manifesto* 19).

That is all well and good; it is consistent with Kitaj's strong identification with Kafka for whom Jewishness was at once a burden, an ineluctable condition, and an opening to endless interpretive possibilities. And perhaps we could say at this point *dayenu*, "enough"; we've reached as much of an understanding of Kitaj's "strange Jewishness" as is possible. What confounds this conclusion—and what forces us to re-examine his estrangement—is that in Kitaj's new painting (2004), as its title indicates, "K Enters the Castle at Last." Why so? Has the modern(ist) Jew finally entered—and closed behind him—the gates of interpretation? Has fixed meaning been found? Indeed, has Kitaj the wizened skeptic become a baal *teshuvah*, a convert to belief?

There are conflicting responses to these questions. On one hand, Kitaj has mobilized his decades-long interest in Kabbalah to fashion a startling new theological stance: "DEVEKUT! This highest ideal of the mystical life, this Communion with God, seems within my reach—the reach of a Jewish Art no less!" (*How to Reach* 72 10). The agnostic seeker of the *First Diasporist Manifesto* has found his way, it seems, to faith, using the well-known means of the Kabbalist. But a breathtakingly iconoclastic faith it is! As he continues in the *Second Manifesto*: "I have come to believe fitfully in my Sandra [Kitaj's late wife and the subject of much of his recent work] as Shekhina—the female aspect of God according to Kabbala (via Scholem)."¹ This assertion is no accident, as Kitaj later affirms in a proposition that moves between the Hasidism of the Baal Shem Tov and the subversion of Sabbetai Zevi:² "The Name of God is SANDRA in my art. I am the Master of God's Name in my own painting" (*How to Reach* 72 10, 12).

Painting—and text—have thus become a bold new profession of faith in which his late wife Sandra becomes the Female Godhead, at a far remove from Orthodoxy but unmistakably Jewish in its bending of the notes of Tradition. This faith seems to be a novel stage of Kitaj's Jewish Art; possessed of a new claim to the divine, and yet idiosyncratic, indeed heretical, enough to satisfy the Diasporist's standard of creative alienation.

There are few adherents to this ideology, few who will pick up the cudgels of the first or second Diasporist manifesto. Once upon a time there were prominent ideologues of Diasporism—Zhitlowski, Dubnow, Medem, Peretz—who marshaled the attention of hundreds of thousands of Jews. Kitaj's Diasporism harks back to that time, when intense ideological debate prompted frequent attempts to answer the Jewish Question in an extraordinary intellectual culture. But there are few comrades, or even pointed rivals, to take up Kitaj's Diasporism. Rather, he fashions the idea of Jewish Art, and his surprising new faith, in the isolation of his studio.

What drives Kitaj? It is, to return to the point I made at the beginning of this essay, his incurable case of "Jew-on-the-brain." His obsession separates him from his friends, especially his fellow artists from the London period (e.g., Freud, Auerbach, Hockney), whose lives and work are hardly touched by the Jewish Question. It even separates him from his hero Kafka, at least in one regard. While Kafka was keenly interested in Jews and the Jewish condition (along with his friends in Prague), he rarely if ever uttered the word "Jew" in his work. By contrast, Kitaj names the Jew over and over again, demonstrating irreverence for the norms of polite company and an unwillingness to leave the Jewish Question to the anti-Semites.

And so R. B. Kitaj continues reading, writing, thinking, and painting "Jewishly" without cease. This deep engagement makes him more than a Diasporist; he is a curious kind of Rebbe, one who lacks a congregation, but heeds the ancient rabbinic imperative to turn the text over again and again—and in the process, audaciously reinvents Jewish Tradition. He invents it through his painting and glosses, but now with increasing frequency, in this last phase of his Diasporist existence, through list-making. This activity gestures toward a new, barely sacred canon, an iconoclastic

chain of Jewish creativity of which he is the latest link. Mindful of his own predilection for list-making and as homage to a dear friend, I conclude by suggesting that R. B. Kitaj—along with Daniel Boyarin, Alain Finkielkraut, Moshe Idel, Cynthia Ozick, Philip Roth, George Steiner, Tom Stoppard, Michael Walzer, and Leon Wieseltier—is one of the ten most interesting Jewish intellectuals alive today.

Notes

- ¹ Kitaj is referring to Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), the towering scholar of Kabbalah whose research transformed the subject from a source of disdain and shame to a central feature of Jewish intellectual history from antiquity to the modern age.
- ² The Baal Shem Tov (1698–1760) was the legendary founder of Hasidism, the powerful movement of religious revivalism that gained hundreds of thousands of adherents among Eastern European Jews in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Kitaj here plays off of the Hebrew term *baal shem tov*, which means “master of the good name.” At the same time, he hints at the remarkable and idiosyncratic claims of Sabbetai Zevi (1626–1676), the false messiah from Smyrna who drew heavily upon kabbalistic imagery to assert his own divine-like powers.

Works Cited

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