

## T. S. Eliot in the Art of R. B. Kitaj: Anatomy of an Influence

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R. B. Kitaj's keen interest in literature, which he connected with his Jewish heritage and its reverence for the written word, shows through as an essential characteristic of his art. As a young artist, Kitaj's cultural referents included Ezra Pound and, especially, T. S. Eliot. The external and imaginative structure of *The Waste Land* (1922) inspired the composition of Kitaj's *Tarot Variations* (1958), while Eliot's "Notes" to the poem were a model for Kitaj's "prefaces," short texts supplementing many of his paintings. *If Not, Not* (1975-1976) memorialises the Shoah, also drawing on *The Waste Land*—the definitive text as well as its drafts and critical reception. Like Eliot's poetry, Kitaj's art is highly allusive, in a way that conforms to Eliot's views on tradition and creativity. This is one of the reasons to stress the continuities with modernism in Kitaj's figurative art, which developed in the predominantly non-figurative context of postmodernism. In later years, Kitaj distanced himself from Eliot—prominently in *The Killer Critic* (1997)—rejecting the poet's early emphasis on impersonality and the anti-Semitism of his verse. Despite these differences, Eliot's influence on Kitaj was intense, long-lasting and productive.

Keywords: R. B. Kitaj; T. S. Eliot; modernism; influence; tradition

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## T. S. Eliot en el arte de R. B. Kitaj: anatomía de una influencia

El profundo interés de R. B. Kitaj por la literatura, que él mismo relacionó con la cultura judía y su reverencia por la palabra escrita, destaca como característica esencial de su estilo. En los inicios de su carrera, Ezra Pound y sobre todo T. S. Eliot figuraban entre los referentes culturales de Kitaj. La estructura externa e imaginativa de *La tierra baldía* (1922) inspiró la composición de su obra *Tarot Variations* (1958) y las "Notas" que Eliot adjuntó al poema constituyeron un

modelo para los “prefacios” de Kitaj, textos breves que complementan muchas de sus obras. *If Not, Not* (1975-1976) conmemora la Shoah, inspirándose también en *La tierra baldía*—tanto el texto definitivo como sus versiones anteriores y su recepción crítica. Como la poesía de Eliot, el arte de Kitaj es marcadamente alusivo, recordándonos en este aspecto a la visión eliotiana de la tradición y la creatividad. Esta es una de las circunstancias que nos permite argumentar la continuidad entre el modernismo y el arte figurativo de Kitaj, desarrollado en un contexto en el que dominaba un posmodernismo no figurativo. Hacia el final de su carrera, Kitaj se distanció de Eliot—claramente en *The Killer Critic* (1997)—rechazando el énfasis en la impersonalidad de su crítica temprana y el antisemitismo de algunos poemas. A pesar de estas diferencias, la influencia de Eliot sobre Kitaj fue intensa, duradera y productiva.

Palabras clave: R. B. Kitaj; T. S. Eliot; modernismo; influencia; tradición

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In 1994, the Tate Gallery hosted a retrospective of the American artist R. B. Kitaj (1932–2007). He had arrived in England in 1958 and during the following two decades became associated with other figurative artists based in London: Michael Andrews, Frank Auerbach, Francis Bacon, Lucien Freud and Leon Kossof—the School of London, a label that Kitaj was in fact the first to use in the catalogue of a collective exhibition titled *The Human Clay* (1976) (Wilson and Lack 2008, 193). The Tate retrospective seemed like the culmination of Kitaj's career, but it received scathing reviews that dismissed his work and attacked him personally. In one of these, Andrew Graham-Dixon sarcastically wondered whether Kitaj, accused of grandiloquence and vacuous name-dropping, could truly be “the T. S. Eliot of painting” (1994, n.p.).

Kitaj's early training at New York's Cooper Union introduced him to the main figures of modernism in art while, at the same time, he was becoming fascinated by modernist literature. In a letter addressed to the art critic Marco Livingstone, Kitaj explains, “I had discovered Pound and Eliot and Joyce and Kafka and an innate bibliomania was rekindled there as it would be, on and off, manic and depressive through my life, feeding and bloating the pictures I would do” (Livingstone 2010b, 13). From its earliest stages, literature was an essential part of Kitaj's art, an influence he would, in retrospect, attribute to his Jewishness and the Jewish reverence for the word (Kitaj 2010, 230–31). As an artist in the making, he looked up to Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot; as an American expatriate in Europe—first in Austria, then in Britain—he could also relate to the poets' transnational experiences. Indeed, because of the vitality and passion with which Kitaj pursued his career in a strange country, he has often been compared to Pound (Hyman 1977, 61). Interviewed by Andrew Lambirth in 1991 as a mature artist whose style had evolved through the years, Kitaj still recognised Pound's modernist motto as his own: “I aim to Make It New as that damned Pound proposed” (Lambirth 2004, 60).<sup>1</sup>

Although Kitaj admired Pound, Joyce, Kafka and many other writers, Eliot stands out as a constant point of reference. Despite an open rejection of Eliot's early emphasis on artistic impersonality and, more importantly, of his anti-Semitic verse, Kitaj saw in the poet a model artist who represented a facet of modernism that he could relate to and continue in his own work. The sections that follow explore the ambivalence of Kitaj's feelings for Eliot and the extent of his influence, which includes the visual imagery and poetic technique in *The Waste Land* (1922) as well as critical notions that he set forth, principally, in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919). Kitaj's views on Eliot's work and on art in general will be discussed, along with three paintings that exemplify the changing but lasting nature of Eliot's influence: *Tarot Variations*, *If Not, Not* and *The Killer-Critic Assassinated by His Widower, Even*.

<sup>1</sup> The use of “damned” is probably indicative of the artist's grudge against Pound on account of his anti-Semitism.

2. ELIOT'S "INSPIRED NOTES," KITAJ'S *TAROT VARIATIONS* AND "PREFACES"  
*Tarot Variations* (1958) was one of the paintings Kitaj completed during his first year at the Ruskin School of Art in Oxford, the city where Eliot had tried to settle during the outbreak of war in the autumn of 1914. It is Kitaj's earliest allusion to Eliot's poetry, specifically to the Tarot cards that add to the anthropological and Arthurian symbolism of *The Waste Land*. The canvas is divided into four numbered sections that might either remind the viewer of cards laid out on a surface or be perceived as the windows of an urban façade. The sections contain several human figures stylised to varying degrees (figure 1).

Figure 1. R. B. Kitaj, *Tarot Variations*, 1958. Collection Fondation Grandur pour l'Art, Genève.  
 Oil on canvas. 109 x 86 cm. Photograph courtesy of Sotheby's. © R. B. Kitaj Estate



The most immediate assumption is that images, characters and situations in Eliot's poem inspired Kitaj. However, in writing about *Tarot Variations*, he laid emphasis on his attempt to make images stand for poems, which he thought of as visual textual objects—"to lay down pictures as if they were poems to look at" (Kitaj 2010, 232). Kitaj's comparison suggests an equivalent for concrete poetry in art, as well as the reversal of the Horatian simile *ut pictura poesis*. The juxtaposition of visual images in *The Waste Land* led the bookish young artist to experiment with composition, but he was equally fascinated by Eliot's notes to his poem: "Eliot inspired me [...] to place images abreast (and later annotated) as if they were lines on a page" (Kitaj 2010, 232).

Kitaj makes this statement in a short text about *Tarot Variations*, where he quotes one of Eliot's notes: "I am not familiar with the exact constitution of the Tarot pack of cards, from which I have obviously departed to suit my own convenience" (Eliot 2015, 72). The artist declares that he was "besotted since teenage years by Eliot and Pound and *The Waste Land*," identifies with both poets as American expatriates in Britain and recalls that the poem "seemed revolutionary to me"; he praises Eliot's "inspired" notes, alluding specifically to the one where the poet explains how Tiresias subsumes all characters, male and female; and finally, as Eliot himself does with the Tarot, acknowledges the poet's influence but subordinates it to his creative purposes (Kitaj 2010, 232).<sup>2</sup>

As he did with *Tarot Variations*, Kitaj wrote commentaries for many of his other works. These commentaries, which the artist called "prefaces," often developed from notes he took during the process of composition, were displayed beside the paintings in some exhibitions and were eventually included in catalogues. Kitaj's prefaces "are not intended as explanations, but rather as accompanying short stories or prose poems" (Lambirth 2004, 61). Far from being descriptive or merely explanatory, these prefaces should be considered ekphrastic in the broadest sense, in that they do not fulfil the purpose of authoritative or restrictive clarification but are supplementary in nature: "it is precisely the gap between the apparent explanation provided by the associated texts or references and the experience of looking at the painted or drawn object which is the most pungent and memorable result of encountering one of Kitaj's works" (Peters Corbett 2000, 51). Commentary both connects and creates a gap with its object, which is also true of Eliot's "peculiarly selective and evasive notes" (Longenbach 1994, 180) and the content of *The Waste Land* upon which they are supposed to shed light. Eventually, Eliot would regret "having set so many enquirers off on a wild goose chase" (1957, 110), encouraged by his notes. Kitaj's paintings, which have been termed "picture puzzles" or "visual riddles" (Livingstone 1998b, 113, 115), coupled with their ambiguous and digressive prefaces, also invite a hermeneutic approach.

While the initial inspiration and model were Eliot's notes to *The Waste Land*, "in his later years Kitaj came to conceive of his prefaces as his own acts of Jewish exegesis"

<sup>2</sup> The notes to *The Waste Land* quoted and alluded to by Kitaj are those relating to lines 46 and 218 of the poem.



(Grosen 2007, 77). He had been a Jewish child growing up in a “heavily Irish Catholic” community (Livingstone 2010b, 12). In his early twenties, in Vienna, where he was a student at the Akademie der bildenden Künste, he became aware of the Shoah and affirmed his Jewish identity: “people like me had recently been pulled off the streets and taken away to be murdered” (Kitaj 1998, 132). At the same time, during this stay in Vienna, Kitaj established a friendship with the artist Frederic Sprague and with Monsignor Leopold Ungar. He found their Catholic faith “tempting” but, in those days, he “had no [strong] Jewish faith to convert from” (Kitaj 1998, 132).

Kitaj’s Jewish faith strengthened in later years, taking prominence in his art from the mid-1970s and becoming stronger in the following decade through the influence of his second wife, the artist Sandra Fisher, and of close friends like Isaiah Berlin and Philip Roth (Grosen 2007, 88). This religious commitment—a personal transforming force accompanied by a sense of communal and cultural belonging—can be compared to Eliot’s new vision of life and art following his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism in 1927, when he had come “to believe that religious sentiment could be a potent catalyst for artistic emotional forces” (Cuda 2014, 8). In this period, Eliot and *The Waste Land* would continue to exert a significant influence on Kitaj’s art.

### 3. PRESENCE OF *THE WASTE LAND* IN KITAJ’S *IF NOT, NOT*

The most interesting product of Kitaj’s exploration of Jewish culture and history is arguably *If Not, Not* (1975-1976). Surprisingly, the Jewish theme emerges as a result of the artist’s interpretation of *The Waste Land* and is visually concretised as the image of the vaguely anthropomorphic Auschwitz gate that, from the upper left corner of the canvas, crowns the composition (figure 2). In his preface, Kitaj quotes Eliot’s famous assertion, made during a lecture, that *The Waste Land*, far from having been intended as an expression of the collective state of mind after the First World War, “was only an insignificant grouse against life” (Kitaj 2010, 241). Although Kitaj echoes Eliot’s wording, he does so in a radically different mood in order to evoke the fatal development in the Second World War: “the grouse here [in *If Not, Not*] has to do with [...] the murder of the European Jews” (2010, 241-42).

Kitaj also comments on “Death by Water,” the section of *The Waste Land* that most intensely conveys the ambiguity at its core: is the dead Phlebas, the Phoenician sailor, vanishing into physical and spiritual nothingness in the depths of the sea, or are we to entertain hopes of rebirth, where drowning is not such, but rather a baptismal rite? In Kitaj’s view, the drowning central to the poem is “the death of someone close to the poet or the death of a Jew” (2010, 242). These identifications of Phlebas, however, cannot be derived directly from the text of *The Waste Land* or its notes. Instead, they suggest Kitaj’s familiarity with the poem’s history and scholarly reception. During the 1950s and 1960s, John Peter defended a controversial “new interpretation of *The Waste Land*” (1969, 140) as a homoerotic elegy for Jean Verdanal, Eliot’s beloved

Paris friend, killed in action in 1915—“someone close to the poet” (Kitaj 2010, 242). On the other hand, 1971 saw the publication of *The Waste Land* drafts, including peripheral material like the discarded poem “Dirge,” where the drowned man is not Phlebas but Bleistein—“a Jew” (Kitaj 2010, 242).

FIGURE 2. R. B. Kitaj, *If Not, Not*, 1975-1976. Oil and black chalk on canvas. 152.40 x 152.40 cm. National Galleries of Scotland. Purchased 1976. Photograph by Antonia Reeve. © R. B. Kitaj Estate



Eliot’s “Dirge” parodies Ariel’s song “Full fathom five” from *The Tempest*, whose echoes remained in the definitive version of *The Waste Land*, reinforcing the central thematic death-rebirth tension. “Dirge” not only makes the predictable anti-Semitic association of the Jewish Bleistein with materialism and ostentatiousness—“Though he suffer a sea-change / Still expensive rich and strange,” “From the teeth, gold in gold”—it also describes with disturbing coolness his decomposing body, dehumanising it beyond animalisation—“Under the flatfish and the squids,” “Lower than the wharf rats dive” (Eliot 2015, 285). The lines in question have been defined as “the ugliest

touch of anti-Semitism in Eliot's poetry" (Ricks 1988, 38) and as "an anti-Semitic poem of exceptional force" (Julius [1995] 1996, 143).<sup>3</sup>

Kitaj's association of "Death by Water" with "the death of a Jew" would thus suggest that he was familiar not only with the definitive text of *The Waste Land*, but also with sections integral to the poem in its earlier stages, specifically with "Dirge." Despite the landmark publication of the *Waste Land* drafts in 1971, five years before the completion of the painting under discussion here, the artist does not comment on the anti-Semitism of Eliot's pre-*Waste Land* verse in his preface for *If Not, Not*. And yet, he identifies the "grouse" in the painting as "the murder of the European Jews" (Kitaj 2010, 242). Kitaj's painting could be considered, in Harold Bloom's terminology, an act of "misreading" or "creative interpretation" (1997, xxiii). His reference to Eliot's poem in order to support the Jewish theme is a further example of his free use of sources: as he suggests in writing about *Tarot Variations*, he does not always endorse sanctioned meanings or interpretations, often adapting them to the execution of his creative purpose.

In the general plan of *If Not, Not*, the presence of the Shoah, both as an image—the Auschwitz gate—and as a theme, "coincides with the view of the Waste Land [*sic*] as an antechamber to hell" (Kitaj 2010, 242). Kitaj's definition would be even more exact for the Unreal City, the Dantesque London depicted in "The Burial of the Dead":

Unreal City,  
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,  
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
I had not thought death had undone so many.  
Sighs, short and infrequent were exhaled,  
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet. (Eliot 2015, 56-57)

By quoting Canto III of Dante's *Inferno* and documenting the source in two of his notes (Eliot 2015, 73), Eliot clearly identifies the Unreal City with the threshold of Dante's hell, reserved for the neutrals, neither virtuous nor sinful, and having no place in the circles of hell nor in the spheres of heaven. Kitaj may have linked these banned souls, as well as the crowd in the Unreal City, with those whose moral neutrality was complicit in making the Shoah possible. Interestingly, in an interview, the artist declared that "Hitlerism was like the Living Dead: *unreal*" (Kitaj 1998, 132; italics in the original).

Another indirect allusion via *The Waste Land* links *If Not, Not* with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), further evoking the imagery of Dante's hell. Kitaj claims that Eliot "used" Conrad's novella and that "my canvas makes similar use" of that source (2010, 241). It is well known that the poet had chosen Kurtz's dying words, "The horror! The horror!" (Conrad 2002, 178), as the epigraph of *The Waste Land*, that

<sup>3</sup> Daniel T. McGee discusses "Dirge" focusing on anti-Semitic images and sound qualities and connecting these with the jazz poetry of Langston Hughes (2001, 512-13).



Pound did not consider the quote “weighty enough,” that Eliot defended it as “much the most appropriate,” and that he finally capitulated (Eliot 2011, 625, 629). The definitive poem does not, therefore, quote *Heart of Darkness* and, although Eliot did not acknowledge any allusions to the novella in it, his earlier emphatic vindication of the original epigraph is suggestive of deep associations. One of these may be the convergence of both texts in Dante.

In *Heart of Darkness*, as he climbs his way to the traders’ Central Station from the river bank, Marlow finds himself in a shady grove, only to discover the spot where enslaved natives who have fallen ill are abandoned to their death:

It seemed to me I had stepped into the gloomy circle of some Inferno. [...] Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair. [...] They were dying slowly—it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now,—nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. (Conrad 2002, 118)

Although these dying men are the victims of exploitation, the poignancy of their state and their fate, as well as Marlow’s role as witness to it, his horrified pity and impotence, are reminiscent of Dante’s vision of the neutrals in Canto III of *Inferno*. Conrad’s scene is also an integral part of *If Not, Not*, as Kitaj explains—“the dying figures among the trees to the right of my canvas make similar use of Conrad’s bodies” (2010, 241)—which echoes Eliot’s use of *Heart of Darkness* in *The Waste Land*.

The correspondence of certain images in *If Not, Not*—the Auschwitz gate, the dying men among the trees—with themes or literary allusions—“the murder of the European Jews”, *Heart of Darkness*—give them a special individual relevance within a composite whole. The same applies to other images that allude to specific art works that are identified by Kitaj in his preface: “the scattered fragments [...] suggested by a Bassano painting,” “the Matisse bust” on “the waste-like middle ground,” “the little pool” that is “a reminder” of Giorgione’s *Tempesta* (2010, 242). All these allusive visual units are juxtaposed on the canvas, creating an effect of fragmentation that is also reminiscent of Eliot’s use of images, languages, scenes and allusions in *The Waste Land*.

Significantly, *If Not, Not* has been defined as “these fragments” or as “a heap of broken images, where the sun beats,” quoting or echoing Eliot’s verse lines (Ríos 1997, 26). Kitaj compared his composition with the structure of *The Waste Land*, which he considered remarkable for “its family of loose assemblage” (2010, 241). A characteristic of Kitaj’s style is also the assemblage of conceptually powerful images, a practice that could be traced back to his earliest influences: surrealism, Warburg iconography and the collage technique, which he used “literally,” but also “obliquely, in the translation of a number of sources onto a single surface” (Livingstone 2010b, 15). As a student in Paris during the academic year 1910-1911, Eliot had become interested in the various

currents of avantgarde art, which would prove inspirational in subsequent years—"the most radical technique which Eliot adapted for the poem [*The Waste Land*] was collage," associated with Picasso, Braque and Synthetic Cubism (Hargrove 2009, 137). Writing about Kitaj and Eliot's poem, John Ashbery argues that "*The Waste Land* achieves its effect as a collage of hallucinatory, random fragments" mirroring "the randomness and discontinuity of modern experience" (1983, 10). The absence of a unified lyrical voice, the incongruous elements that make up the spatial and temporal setting, the multiple allusions, the episodic structure—all these aspects make of Eliot's poem "a Cubist collage" (Patea 2011, 145-46).<sup>4</sup>

In sum, *The Waste Land*, including drafts and secondary literature, is present in both the compositional technique and allusiveness of *If Not, Not* and the theme of both works revolves around the collective experience of trauma. Further, it has been claimed that Eliot himself is present on the bottom left of the canvas, "a clerkish figure with spectacles and hearing aid [...] an irritable St. Anthony dreaming of the horrors of history and tempted by a naked demoness, in the manner of Bosch or Pieter Brueghel" (Hughes 1990, 270). The character has alternatively been identified as "an archetype representing a condition of man" (Livingstone 2010b, 35) and, more specifically, as a prototypical Jew whom Kitaj calls Joe Singer and who appears in several other paintings from the same period, for example in *The Jew, Etc.* (1976), where he is also portrayed with a hearing aid.

As "a secretly continuous, chronological figure, but with a changing face" (Krempel 1998, 136), Joe Singer has something of Pound's personae and of the recurrent shapeshifting characters of Eliot's early poetry, such as Bleistein or Sweeney. He can also be compared to the character who sums up all characters in *The Waste Land*, Tiresias: Singer is deaf and Tiresias, blind; Singer is a "witness" or "intruder" and Tiresias is a "mere spectator" whose perspective, nevertheless, delimits "the substance of the poem" (Eliot 2015, 74). Indeed, in a similar way, what the man with a hearing aid sees is the essence of *If Not, Not* (Livingstone 2010b, 29). The tendency to allude to art and literature from the past creatively and comprehensively is, as we have seen, an important component of this essence, which invites reflection on Kitaj's vision of tradition.

#### 4. KITAJ, OR HOW TO BE A TRADITIONAL MODERNIST AFTER 1945

Kitaj's use of literary sources does not consist in illustration or simple transposition to a different medium. In *If Not, Not*, for example, "a wonderful equivalent" to *The Waste Land*, the artist chooses Eliot's poem in order to "dramatize his own dilemma" (Hyman 1977, 55). Considering the relevance of literary allusions in Kitaj's style, his friend Robert Creeley pointed out that the texts chosen are "occasions for his [Kitaj's] own

<sup>4</sup> For a general assessment of the influence of painting on Eliot's early poetry, see Frances Dickey and John D. Morgenstern (2016, 4-5).

preoccupations” (quoted in Eckett 2011, 48). This *modus operandi*, exceptional in the art scene of the 1960s and 1970s, is what, in Eliot’s view, also defines “mature” or “good” poets, those who turn what they borrow from their predecessors “into something better, or at least something different” (2014, 245). This is one of the basic contentions in the essay “Philip Massinger” (1920), where the critic also claims that “immature poets imitate; mature poets steal” (Eliot 2014, 245)—the statement that an artist like Kitaj “scrounges more than invents” (Grosen 2007, 82) echoing Eliot’s famous distinction. Kitaj’s practice as an artist is thus remarkably akin to Eliot’s ideal of creative “maturity”; at the same time, Eliot is one of the literary authors from whose work Kitaj frequently “stole.”

Eliot’s “mature poets” can be assimilated with the “traditional writers” defined in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” those who have developed the “historical sense,” consisting in “a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together,” and involving “a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence” (Eliot 2014, 106). Becoming aware of the simultaneity of past and present, and of the timelessness inherent to it, will lead to the acquisition of the historical sense. Kitaj’s artistic practice correlates with Eliot’s concept, as it follows from “the searching out of pre-existing forms in order to keep alive the experience of the past in the present” (Aulich 2000, 154). Kitaj’s “visualizing strategies [...] render the dissimultaneous simultaneous” (Krempel 1998, 139) and his allusions—like Eliot’s, in *The Waste Land* most particularly—neutralise temporal as well as geographical demarcations: “from Giotto to Degas, from Kafka to Benjamin, he attempts to build up a certain lack of definition of time and space” (San Martín 1998, 127).

If past literature is present by virtue of its resonance and past and present literature are simultaneous, literary tradition is a timeless body and allusion stands out as the most direct way for creators to interact with it. Although Eliot’s most immediate referent is poetry (or literature more generally), his notion of tradition can be understood comprehensively to embrace thought and the arts. For the School of London, tradition is certainly inclusive and multifaceted, “defined by what actually exists in the museum, the gallery and the library” (Aulich 2000, 159). Kitaj’s allusive and traditional style has a parallel in the bibliophilia of an admired Jewish intellectual: he “gathers together images, styles and ideas from the history of art in much the same fashion that [Walter] Benjamin collects books” (Grosen 2007, 80).

Eliot’s tradition is comprehensive, nonchronological and liable to change as its components accrue or when innovative artists successfully engage with it: “the existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them” (Eliot 2014, 106). Kitaj’s interactions with cultural tradition find a model in Talmudic study of the Torah and the accumulated rabbinic exegesis, a body of literature that, resembling Eliot’s organic tradition, is subject to constant analysis, revision and reelaboration. For Kitaj, equally acquainted with art and literary history and with his Jewish inheritance, “tradition is no dead letter, but a living creative process of the acquisition of textual sources” (Deppner 2000, 191).

A writer with a historical sense, Eliot argues, will be aware of the simultaneity connecting “the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer” and “the whole of the literature of his own country” (2014, 106). Kitaj, however, lacks a nationalist sense of belonging; his commitment is to Judaism and to Jewish culture. His work can be considered a continuation of the Jewish “liberal Enlightenment tradition preserved in Europe amongst secular Jews whose energies had been directed towards assimilation in the years leading to the Second World War” (Aulich 2000, 164). The development of this tradition and the possibility that it should inform and add to European culture were truncated by the rise of National Socialism and ultimately by the Shoah, “the one single event in history that speaks for the failure and collapse of the project of modernity” (Aulich 2000, 162). In his *First Diasporist Manifesto* (1989), Kitaj declared that “after 1945, the world changed for the Jews” (quoted in Krempel 1998, 140) and that Jewish artists could not ignore this. There is an echo of Virginia Woolf’s famous assertion that “in, or around December, 1910, human character changed” (2008, 38). The years in question have an obvious historical and social relevance—the end-of-nineteenth-century mores and models around 1910, the defeat of Hitlerism in 1945—as well as coinciding with significant phases in the history of modernism: its heyday and its decline.

Modernists like Eliot and Pound were traditional writers in times of upheaval. Kitaj is an artist with a comparable approach but, as a Jew, his exploration of history and cultural tradition cannot be dissociated from the trauma of the Shoah (Aulich 2000, 168). His art honours Semitic culture and, more specifically, aspires to reconnect with a disrupted Jewish modernism that, as he argued in an interview, lacks the “great iconoclastic father figure in art” that exists in other areas of creativity and knowledge (Kitaj 1998, 134).<sup>5</sup> It would seem that Kitaj attempts to fill this significant gap, becoming a late or anachronistic modernist who revives the Eliotic model of tradition in a postmodern context decades after the horrors of 1940s Europe.

Although his work is contemporaneous with postmodern currents such as Pop Art, Kitaj is considered to have maintained a modernist affiliation, and this is largely due to his indebtedness to Eliot. Like the poet, who expressed the zeitgeist of the 1920s-1940s in a way that is emblematic of modernism, Kitaj “alludes to the sense of loss and estrangement experienced by many people in the twentieth century in relation to the roots of their own culture” (Livingstone 2010b, 118). Kitaj can also be compared with Eliot on account of their allusive and figurative style, characteristic of high modernists but considered—especially in Kitaj’s case—objectionably conservative, opposed to “the principles and techniques of nonfigurative arts” on which “the aesthetics of twentieth-century Anglo-American poetry is based” (Patea 2011, 137). It can be

<sup>5</sup> Kitaj argues that Jewish modernism has “no Marx, no Freud, no Schönberg, no Wittgenstein, no Proust, no Kafka, no Einstein, no Warburg, no Hollywood and so on. In other words, no Jewish Picasso or Matisse or Bonnard or Mondrian or Duchamp or Brancusi” (1998, 134). Nevertheless, Marc Chagall (1887-1985), whom Kitaj does not mention, could be the missing Jewish artist on his list.

claimed, however, that the artist's "stance was by no means retrogressive or reactionary, for Kitaj has always loved and identified with the Modernist spirit" as essentially innovative (Lambirth 2004, 39). Similarly, Eliot is unquestionably a traditionalist but finds tradition especially interesting as the basis for innovation. His allusions are "distinctively modern (if not postmodern)" and, in any case, the "stylistic pastiche" and "radical fragmentation" of *The Waste Land* prefigure "the irreducible multiplicity of the postmodern condition" (Schwartz 2014, 16, 25).

We can think of Kitaj, therefore, as a late modernist, namely an artist who still believes in the imbrication of art with history and experience and in its universality (Peters Corbett 2000, 50), who can still relate to the language of modernism—as opposed to the developing varieties of postmodernism—and who continues to find it relevant and productive beyond the 1940s, adapting it to his own style. Chronological relativity characterises Kitaj's notion of modernism not as a clear-cut period, but as a creative philosophy whose exponents flourished throughout the twentieth century. In a letter to Livingstone, Kitaj declares, "if Cézanne in 1906, Degas in 1917, Kafka, Joyce and Eliot in 1925, Matisse in 1953, Picasso in 1971, Auerbach in 1991, etc., etc. are modernists then so am I" (Livingstone 2010b, 48). Kitaj followed the earliest of his modernist predecessors, Cézanne, in drawing from the works of the masters as if from life (Grosen 2007, 103-104). Tradition, therefore, is more than a repository to preserve and resort to. Almost a physical entity, it is itself the object of representation and daring transformation. A tradition with this potential, vindicated in Eliotic terms, has something of progressive resistance for Kitaj: it "exists as a challenge to contemporary cultural values rooted in the market" (Aulich 2000, 165).

These values are associated with Pop Art, often with the idealisation of the American way of life portrayed with carefree immediacy. Kitaj used the adjective *Diasporist* to refer primarily to artists who are geographically displaced or who occupy marginal positions. He called himself a Diasporist and included Eliot and Pound in this category—Americans for whom European tradition was a fertile territory. Eliot equated tradition with "the mind of Europe" (2014, 107); Kitaj was defined as a "European" artist, having distanced himself from postmodern trends in his country of origin (San Martín 1998, 127). In considering Kitaj's and Eliot's affiliation to either American or European culture, Ashbery distinguishes between their subject matter and its treatment: "a deep-seated sense of cultural malaise that seems distinctly European [...] though presented with a directness that seems distinctly American" (1983, 10).

Like Eliot, Kitaj relied on European tradition in order to develop as an artist. The interaction between the art of the past and the creativity of the present, essential to the modernism represented by Eliot, is also characteristic of Kitaj's work. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot argues that superior art should be traditional but also impersonal. Kitaj can be defined as a traditional artist, but he never championed impersonality. His objection to the ideal of impersonal art is one of his disagreements with the poet and critic whom he otherwise admired.



5. ESCAPE TO PERSONALITY (*THE KILLER-CRITIC*) AND REJECTION OF ANTI-SEMITISM Eliot concludes “Tradition and the Individual Talent” hinting at a contradiction between personal emotion and the historical sense, having argued that the artist should undergo “a process of depersonalization” and that “the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind who creates” (2014, 112, 108-109). The emphasis on impersonality characterises Eliot’s early criticism and, although the poetry of the same period is generally assumed to be coherent with it, it is difficult to read its culmination as purely impersonal: “despite its elliptical allusions and apparent detachment, *The Waste Land* is a profoundly personal poem” (Cuda 2014, 7). However indirectly, it translates the poet’s difficult circumstances at the time of its composition, exemplifying a paradox that applies to Eliot’s verse in general: “the more the poet [Eliot] tries to hide himself the more he seems to give himself away” (Ellmann 1987, 15).

In later critical works—*The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933) and “The Frontiers of Criticism” (1958)—Eliot would reconsider the prominence he had given to impersonality, conceding that readers inevitably receive and interpret poems on the basis of their personal experience (Shusterman 1994, 40). In parallel, in his poetry polyphony and ventriloquism are gradually superseded by a single unified voice, perceived as not wholly distinct from that of the poet. *Four Quartets* (1936-1942), for example, has been defined as Eliot’s spiritual autobiography (Olney 2014, 5), and his *Collected Poems 1909-1962* close with the heartfelt, sincere poem, “A Dedication to My Wife.”

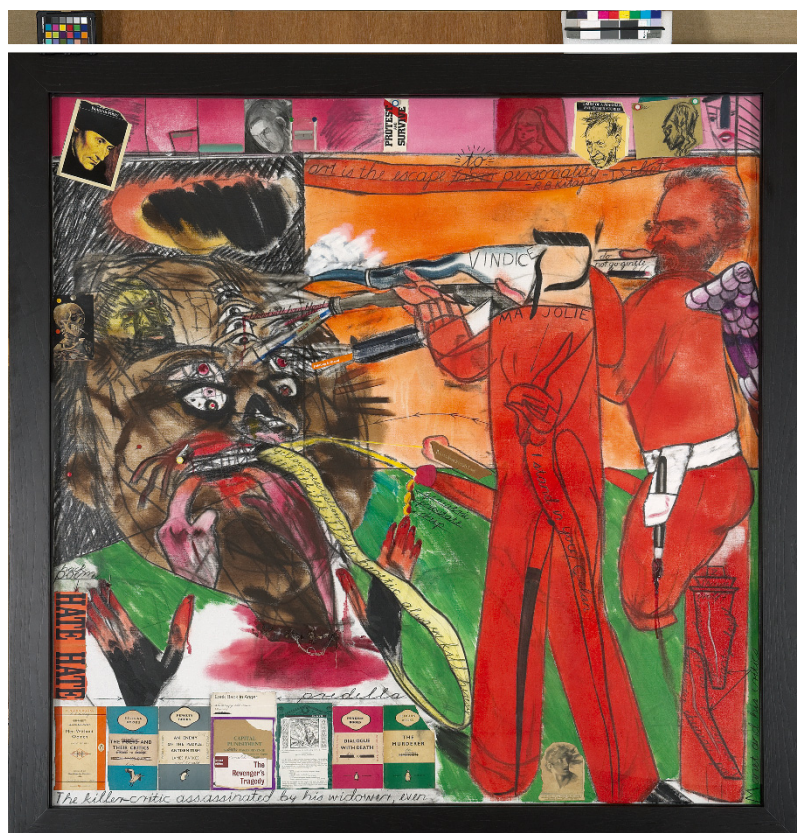
In Kitaj’s art, where the historical, the autobiographical and the emotional mingle (Lambirth 2004, 55), we can trace a comparable evolution towards unity, which Ashbery expresses in terms of contrast: “there is the tension between the extremely fragmented look of Kitaj’s early work and the apparently more unified and single-minded character of the late work” (1983, 12). The latter is also more personal. Livingstone argues that, from the 1980s and 1990s on, Kitaj’s frequent self-portraits and paintings from life confirm the predominance of “frankness” over “secrecy,” pointing to an art “with a therapeutic or autobiographical intention,” to “the honest and naked expression of self” (1998b, 122, 125). The climax of this progression is the *Los Angeles* series, produced in the 2000s—after Kitaj’s return to the United States in 1997, three years after the tragic death of Sandra Fisher—and depicting the artist and his deceased wife in scenes of spiritual and erotic intimacy.

The artist was certain that Fisher’s sudden death from a brain haemorrhage had been precipitated by her distress over the fiercely negative reviews of Kitaj’s retrospective at the Tate, earlier in 1994. In the context of the so-called “Tate War,” Kitaj’s counter-attack consisted in an art of revenge, powerfully exemplified by *The Killer-Critic Assassinated by His Widower, Even* (1997) (figure 3). The artist is represented in it as two separate figures: one has his face and wings, but only one leg, and carries his brush in a holster; the other has the Hebrew letter *kof* for a head (the initial of “Kitaj”, transliterated) and contains the silhouette of a winged naked woman, presumably Fisher. The two bright red figures

shoot at a monstrous head—large and dark between two bloody hands—and one of them urinates or ejaculates into its mouth. The painting incorporates written words and phrases, as well as pasted sketches or book covers that define the thematic spectrum of the work—artists and their critics, revenge, anger, death, murder, anti-Semitism. All these elements characterise Kitaj's style—his earlier use of collage, his commitment to Jewish culture, his propensity to allusion and quotation. In short, “all the aspects of his art to which they [the critics] had expressed such violent objection” (Livingstone 2010b, 52).<sup>6</sup>

FIGURE 3. R. B. Kitaj, *The Killer-Critic Assassinated by His Widower, Even*, 1997. Oil and collage on canvas. 152 x 152 cm. Astrup Fearnley Collection, Oslo, Norway. Photograph by Thomas Widerberg.

© R. B. Kitaj Estate



There are three literary quotations in *The Killer-Critic*. “I stand in you / Celan,” written on the body of the winged female figure, is a present tense variation on a line by the

<sup>6</sup> For a dissection of the allusive components of *The Killer-Critic*, see Cilly Kugelmann et al. (2012, 234-38).

Jewish poet, “ich stand / in dir,” which closes his poem “Es stand” (“There stood”). Apart from describing literally the position of the female angel in the painting, the line echoes an earlier one in the poem that hints at the lovers’ being Jewish (“es stand / Jerusalem um uns,” “there stood / Jerusalem around us”) and it can also mean “I was erect / in you” (Bernstein 2000, 118-19), which may explain why the two red figures have erect penises and anticipates the eroticism of Kitaj’s *Los Angeles* series. “Do not go gentle,” written on one of the guns, quotes Dylan Thomas’s famous elegy for his father, “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night.” Finally, above the firing squad, in a red band, we can recognise Eliot’s dictum “poetry is an escape from personality,” from “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (2014, 111). Crucially, however, it is altered and contradicted: Kitaj writes “art” instead of “poetry,” and the preposition “from” and the name “T. S. Eliot” are crossed out and replaced by “to”—marked with scintillations—and by “R. B. Kitaj” respectively.

Kitaj’s deliberate misquotation shows that, by the time *The Killer-Critic* was first exhibited in the late 1990s, he had indeed come to think of art as “an escape to personality.” The painting shows that his style remained as allusive as ever and still indebted to Eliot, but he makes allusions and quotations cohere in order to transpose his personal anger and bereavement in a very direct way. He confronts the critics by affirming the defining traits of his style, his love for Fisher, her memory and their union in the Jewish faith. The loss of his wife made Kitaj even more committed to his religion (Eckert 2011, 48). His refutation of artistic impersonality, expressed in *The Killer-Critic*, precedes a stronger rejection of the anti-Semitism of Eliot’s poetry.

In 2007 Kitaj published *Second Diasporist Manifesto*, defined in its subtitle as “a long poem in 615 free verses”—these are, in fact, short paragraphs reflecting on various aspects of art and Jewish culture. One of them begins with the capitalised motto “PAINT THE OPPOSITE OF ANTISEMITISM,” then quotes two lines by Eliot—“The rats are underneath the piles, the Jew is underneath the lot,” from the poem “Burbank with a Baedeker, Bleistein with a Cigar” (1920)—and ends “Hi, Tom. Fuck you in my art each day” (Kitaj 2007, n.p.). Kitaj’s sharp remarks, which may be read as exemplifying the “Oedipal rivalry” often associated with Bloom’s “anxiety of influence” (1997, xxii), can be connected with the intensity with which the anti-Semitism of Eliot’s poetry had been discussed in recent years. Anthony Julius’s *T. S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism and Literary Form* had appeared in 1995, proposing what he called an “adversarial reading” ([1995] 1996, 1-2). As John Xiros Cooper explains, “Julius’s book had the effect of inciting others to disparage Eliot” (2011, 287) and it was followed by heated debate in cultural supplements and academic journals. Julius himself defended his study in an article bearing a revealing dedication: “For R. B. Kitaj” (1998, 43). Subsequent scholarship continued to reinforce Eliot’s reputation as an anti-Semite, with accusations of expelling Jews from the realm of tradition, of associating them with “noise” rather than language, with “an absence of poetry” and with “barbaric liberalism” (McGee 2001, 518, 523, 520)—such prejudice standing in stark contrast to Kitaj’s vision of Judaic culture as eminently literate.

Asked about his favourite poets in a 2004 interview, Kitaj mentioned Paul Celan and Emily Dickinson (Lambirth 2004, 121), but not Eliot. Yet, despite this, he would approve the project for a limited Arion Press edition of *The Waste Land* using details of *If Not, Not* to illustrate the poem, which appeared in the year of his death (Eliot 2007).

## 6. CONCLUSION

Kitaj first approached Eliot's poetry as an art student and it seemed natural for him to establish connections between his interests and inclinations in art and literary modernism. The literary quality of Kitaj's paintings can be ascribed to the artist being an avid reader and a Jew, educated to honour the textual. It is not surprising, therefore, that the artist was as attracted to the visual imagery of *The Waste Land*—*Tarot Variations*, *If Not, Not*—as to its "Notes," on which he modelled the exegetic "prefaces" or "commentaries" that accompany many of his paintings.

Kitaj's art and his religious and cultural commitment soon became closely interconnected. *If Not, Not* finds inspiration in the Dantesque imagery of *The Waste Land* in memorialising the victims of the Shoah. If aspects of Eliot's poem had urged Kitaj to experiment with images and their layout in *Tarot Variations* and to enrich or condition reception through commentary, *If Not, Not* attempts to offer a visual correspondence for the same source as a whole in order to express a subjective moral concern. Further, Kitaj's painting not only draws on the definitive text of *The Waste Land*; it alludes to literary works to which Eliot alluded in the poem—Dante's *Inferno*, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*—shows knowledge of earlier drafts—the poem "Dirge," for example—and familiarity with secondary sources that elucidate the text. At a formal level, *If Not, Not* reproduces the poem's collage effect and its aesthetics of fragmentation.

Allusion to *The Waste Land* is thus central to *If Not, Not*, but it is only one among many. Like Eliot's, Kitaj's style is highly and multiply allusive, evidencing the artist's "historical sense" and his way of relating creatively with a tradition inclusive of all the arts and bringing the past into the present. We can therefore think of Kitaj as the equivalent in art of Eliot's "mature" or "traditional" poets. In reflecting on modernism, the tradition most immediate to him chronologically and culturally, Kitaj notices and laments the absence of a prominent Jewish visual artist. Bearing this observation in mind, his work may be perceived as an attempt to fill in this gap. Aware of the continuities of his art with that of the first half of the twentieth century and of the substantial differences with the dominating postmodern trends of his own time, Kitaj thinks of himself as belonging to modernism as a creative philosophy rather than a delimited period in art history.

Kitaj's vision of modernism is largely shaped by his knowledge of Eliot's poetry and criticism. Although he adapted the imagery of *The Waste Land* to his purpose of dealing with the trauma of the Shoah in *If Not, Not*, he inevitably distanced himself from Eliot after the anti-Semitism of his poetry was exposed and openly discussed

in the 1980s and 1990s. In these years of Kitaj's artistic maturity, his allegiance to Judaism was stronger than ever and he forcefully rejected Eliot's controversial poems in his *Second Diasporist Manifesto*. At the same time, Kitaj strongly vindicated an eminently personal art: for example, in *The Killer-Critic Assassinated by His Widower, Even*, where Eliot's early emphasis on artistic impersonality is contested, the challenge taking the form of deliberate misquotation from "Tradition and the Individual Talent."

And yet, despite aesthetic differences and moral objections, which cannot be overlooked, Eliot was far more than an occasional or superficial influence on Kitaj. The artist found in the poet and critic a model that allowed him creatively to embrace tradition while developing his own art. That art does not cling nostalgically to the past or renounce originality. Rather, it attests to the continuities between modernism and postmodernism as well as to their chronological relativity, thereby perpetuating the spirit and validity of modernism beyond its decline in the 1940s.<sup>7</sup>

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