

Asher D. Biemann. *Dreaming of Michelangelo: Jewish Variations on a Modern Theme*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012. 200 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-6881-8.

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## The Jewish/Modern Michelangelo

The title of this review provides the subject of this thoughtful, dense, and extended essay. Its main focus, modern Jewish thinkers and writers, is viewed through a very specific, possibly surprising lens: Michelangelo and Renaissance Italy. The readership of such a volume, principally addressed to the cultural wing of Jewish studies, doubtless will think first of Sigmund Freud, who returned to the *Moses* (1513-15) of Michelangelo in a pair of writings. But the roster of Jewish writers who engaged deeply with the great artist in Rome and in Florence provides a veritable “who’s who” of modern Jewish thinkers, beginning with Heinrich Heine: Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, Martin Buber, Hermann Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig, and of course Freud, among lesser-known names. And the entire study begins with a touchstone quotation from Gershom Scholem—about German rather than Italian culture—characterizing German Jews as “unhappy lovers” of *Kultur* and *Bildung* (p. 7); that insight sets the tone for the entire essay’s concern with cultural eroticism. Readers of this book will surely want to consult the magisterial overview of German-Jewish cultural and political history, Amos Elon’s *The Pity of It All: A History of Jews in Germany, 1743-1933* (2002), primer to both the people and the period. And echoes arise of another recent complementary study, Abigail Gillman’s *Viennese Jewish Modernism: Freud, Hofmannsthal, Beer-Hofmann, and Schnitzler* (2009), especially her chapter on Freud and art.

Of course, German longing for Italy extends well beyond this Jewish subculture, to the heritage of Johann

Wolfgang von Goethe in his famous trip to Italy and portrait of *Goethe in the Campagna* (1787) by Johann H. W. Tischbein, followed by the “Nazarene” painters (among whom the young Jewish artist Moritz Daniel Oppenheim engaged at the margins) and hosts of artists and poets (Rainer Maria Rilke makes repeated cameo appearances in this book) who celebrated with Goethe “*das Land wo die Zitronen blühn*” (The land where the lemon trees blossom). Many of the first great art historical works on Michelangelo at the turn of the twentieth century—the period under scrutiny by Asher Biemann—were written in German.

Biemann, a professor of religious studies and Jewish studies at the University of Virginia, is the author of the seemingly related but quite different prior study, *Inventing New Beginnings: On the Idea of Renaissance in Modern Judaism* (2009), which focuses closely on Buber, Cohen, and Rosenzweig but does not engage with German *Sehnsucht* (longing) for Italy in any way. So this smaller volume provides a fresh take on the same cultural moment and principal figures but against a different background that makes their feelings and thoughts stand out in new ways. This book is really a *jeu d’esprit*, juxtaposing two cultures in an I-Thou relationship that illuminates modern Jewish thinkers through their encounter (as members of the post-Goethe German *Bildung*) with Italy and Italy’s most celebrated artist, creator of both *Moses* and the Sistine Chapel ceiling.

The book consists of three essays. The first, “The Un-

requited Eros,” clearest and most compelling, addresses the larger issue of German-Jewish fascination with Italy as an alternate setting. There Germans of all backgrounds can mingle together; there they can share a love of historic and aesthetic achievement (*Kultur*); and there they can also experience an alternative, more sensuous way of life. Ultimately, like the transformative “green world” of William Shakespeare’s forests, this other world of Italy offers a liberation and an assimilation without social stigma or self-consciousness—in short, Italy and the love of Renaissance art provides an occasion for a common German experience, however fanciful, that can affect a smooth acculturation, a shortcut to modernity, for Jewish Germans.

Chapter 2, “The Dream of Moving Moses,” addresses Michelangelo’s great statue of the Jewish leader and the complex of personal responses by German writers. In the process, Biemann invokes both the Pygmalion effect of stone turned into life and the enduring Jewish tension about idolatry—by Moses toward the Hebrews and by Jews toward a compelling stone work of art depicting one of their own. The chapter rehearses all of the projections that varied poetic, philosophical, or sensitive individuals could impose on that single figure itself (led by Freud himself). Of course, two issues are tangled; *Moses* presents both a Jewish founder figure, shown with the tablets of the Law, and a masterwork by an artist valued for his own idealism and rebelliousness, for his alienation and his passion. Freud represents just the most extreme and outspoken individual confrontation with the statue as well as with the subject of the statue, first in his 1914 “The *Moses* of Michelangelo” and later in his revisionist “historical novel,” *Moses and Monotheism* (1937).

Chapter 3, “Fragments of Desire,” addresses the Sistine and primal creation as well as creativity, with attention to the theory of Cohen, who saw aesthetics as integral for ethics and religion. For Cohen, the Sistine ceiling fuses the pagan with the prophetic, evoking human creative power essential to Jewish continuity across history. Rosenzweig contended that Michelangelo abandoned a quest for ideality or beauty to provide worldly witness, in what Buber called an “art of pathos,” which for

him resonated with struggle, rebellion, and Jewishness. In the era of emerging expressionism in Germany, these Jewish thinkers found its origins in Michelangelo. The artist’s own uncompleted strivings in individual works and larger projects embodied the very principle of creation.

Sometimes Biemann’s sympathy for his authors carries his own prose to soaring heights of passion and pronouncement. An example: “To Blanchot, as to Heidegger, as to Rosenzweig, it is the poem that ultimately fulfills ‘the answer’s absence’ with its own beginnings. It is the poem’s solitude and poverty, grasping, powerlessly, in ‘prophetic isolation,’ towards the future and announcing, ‘before time,’ the beginning that makes man necessary” (p. 81). Yet throughout the book, Biemann offers a wide range of writings with rich command of specifics in each work, carefully scrutinized through his confident command of original languages. His comments on Buber and expressionism suggest that he might profitably have engaged the then-contemporary Jewish artistic world outlined in *Ost und West* and other German Jewish cultural publications; there, for example, two towering carved figures—*Mattathias* by Boris Schatz (1894; lost) and, especially, *The Wandering Jew* (1899; lost) by Alfred Nossig—served as models of Jewish sculpture for a new century.

If Biemann sometimes joins his sources in poetic diction during his “meditation,” his passionate engagement with them never flags, always seconded by his reading immersion and rich learning. This stimulating and pensive book is not merely a tenure document or converted dissertation but rather a different kind of scholarly engagement with both elements of its equation, Michelangelo as well as Moses (though the latter emerges as the real center through its Jewish perspective). In addition to the author, Stanford University Press should be commended for sponsoring such a publication, which recalls one other publication from the same press—another Michelangelo-based essay of passion, learning, and deep personal engagement, whose very title proclaims its own minority orientation: Leonard Barkan’s *Transuming Passion. Ganymede and the Erotics of Humanism* (1991).

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