

Prefatory Note

“The dream is the reawakening of the interminable.”

—Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*¹

I

Michelangelo matters. In a recent essay for *Commentary*, the Renaissance scholar Theodore K. Rabb made this passionate point, explaining Michelangelo’s significance to our age.² The present book is an exploration into why Michelangelo matters to modern Jewish thought. It encompasses the period from the early nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries, focusing, with some exceptions, on the German Jewish cultural context; but it is not, by any means, a book about Michelangelo. What is before you, rather, is an essay about Jewish imagination, about Jewish “dreaming” and dream work, about Jewish affinities and self-expression. It is a book primarily about German Judaism looking beyond German Judaism, an inquiry into elective affinity and cultural love as forms of self-creation. Thus, even if inspired by the Jewish reception of Michelangelo’s works, this study is no reception history in the strict sense of the term. In fact, “reception” may not even be the correct concept for what this book seeks to accomplish. It is not the Jewish reception of Michelangelo that interests me but the Jewish confrontation: Not the response, but the calling forth.

Nor is this book, despite its intimate conversation with culture, a cultural history. Culture, that vast receptacle of Jewish reorientation in the modern period, can act only as a transitory concept for our study, a concept that thought needs to traverse, work through, in order to arrive at itself. Indeed, Jewish culture and material identity are often portrayed in opposition to practices of Jewish thought, while the history of thought

and “ideas” has fallen, in recent times, into disrepute. I have no intention of rehabilitating intellectual history as a history “merely” of ideas. But I see, for the purpose of this book’s argument, culture and material identity as leading into thought; I see thought as emerging from the encounter with the material world, from taking on its own “materiality”; I see ideas in their impure forms.³

Nor, for that matter, is the present study a history of art. Art history is its own discipline, to which *Dreaming of Michelangelo* could not claim to belong. If I write of art, then it is only through the screen of literature, through self-reflections of the beholders. Thus, the subject of Jewish artists inspired by and responding to the works of Michelangelo, which, if it is not a matter of mere “influence,” must itself be a substantial field of inquiry, did not enter this study, for it would require the turn to another discipline, another discourse and, most likely, a study of its own.⁴

Nor, finally, can this study measure up to the otherwise cognate field of German literature and culture. To be sure, its historical backdrop is German Judaism and its material is borrowed from the wells of German and German Jewish literature. Yet, it is not true to a particularly “German” angle, nor can it aspire to accomplish what a good *Germanist* would undoubtedly achieve: an encompassing digest of German Jewish literary reflection on the Italian experience and its fascination with Michelangelo. Indeed, what I can offer is but a truncated version of a phenomenon, which, to any student of modern German literature, was far more pervasive than these pages can possibly convey. Franz Kafka’s travel diaries between 1910 and 1912, Karl Wolfskehl’s letters from his Italian exile between 1933 and 1938, Rudolf Borchardt’s vignettes on Italian cities, or Walter Benjamin’s Italian journey of 1912 are only a few of the canonical texts the student of modern German literature could not afford to miss.⁵ But this study is less concerned with canons than with exemplary patterns. It acknowledges no more than that there existed, as we shall see, a Jewish tradition of Italy travel, just as there existed a similar German tradition, reading texts only as they exemplify, epitomize, and variegate the origins and meanings of that tradition. Thus, like any synthetic book, *Dreaming of Michelangelo* is driven into the dilemma of omission, into an economy of texts, which reveals, in turn,

the direction of its argument; a direction that cuts through literature, as it cuts through culture, without lingering where other disciplines must offer a fuller account. Italy may be this book's context and Michelangelo its text, but they are not its proper theme. I write as little "about" literature as I write about art.

2

What sort of study, then, is the present book? For a generation of interdisciplinary scholars, such a question may sound moot, if not indecent. As the boundaries of disciplines vanish, so does our apperception of the historical world. We speak today of borderlands, periphery, junctions, and hybridity to capture this new historical complexity.⁶ *Dreaming of Michelangelo* quietly engenders these concepts, taking them for granted not because of its nervous passion for new trends, but because its subject presupposes them, and because its discipline is accustomed to functioning, as Martin Jay once put it, "at the shifting intersection of different, often contradictory discourses." Intellectual history, in Jay's understanding, navigates a field of conflicting forces, eminent to the afterlife of past ideas as they appear in the "tangled skein of misreading and misappropriations that characterize the afterlife of any idea and cultural creation."⁷ The afterlife and ever new and unpredictable constellations of ideas constitute, for Jay, the history of thought, which, "inevitably attuned to recent historical trends," also "distrusts historical approaches that feign indifference to current theoretical disputes."⁸

But it is not merely the attentiveness to "theory"—a given, surely, to most historians today—that determines the intellectual historian's craft. Ideas or, as Dominick LaCapra writes, "texts" in a broader sense do not only emerge from contexts but are able to reshape them, to rethink, even "disorient" them.⁹ A text, LaCapra argues, encompasses a "transhistorical dimension" that both derives from and deconstructs historical "immanence." It offers, as philosophy and art, a dimension of "transcendence," which relates, because it endures, historical experience to the "problematic constellation or more or less changing configuration of subject positions" we call "identity."¹⁰ Originating, then, in the lived life of the "intellectual," intellectual history accepts the simultaneous,

“unhistorical,” presence of ideas and their essential impurity, yet also their need for distinction and resistance to temporal abstraction and universality. Unlike history in the proper sense of the trade, intellectual history, in LaCapra’s understanding, is less reconstructive than it is dialogical, a “conversation with the past” that becomes “performative” and, in Bakhtin’s sense, “heteroglossic,” for it must engage, or “dialogize,” multiple voices at once.¹¹ Bakhtin himself speaks of a theme’s “dispersion into the rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia,” which resists purely monologic documentation demanding, instead, a constant vigilance of voices and an act of response.¹² Because ideas themselves are never uttered in indicative speech but always in a subjunctive responding to reality and putting into question, the intellectual historian cannot reconstruct them as past events but only through their continuous “interillumination” (Bakhtin). Thus ideas cannot have an “afterlife” in the strict sense; nor can they be explained from the context of the intellectual alone. Rather, they are, as dialogues and contestations, always re-created and renewed. But this renewal also means that intellectual history is a discipline whose method is always reshaped by its own subject. Thought, ideas, texts, participate in their historical reiteration, and intellectual history is, in this respect, thought self-aware of its own genealogy.

3

Who are the “intellectuals” in intellectual history? In a canonical essay on the “Jewish intellectual,” Paul Mendes-Flohr argued that intellectuals in general, and the Jewish intellectual in particular, constitute cognitive insiders articulating, by virtue of being simultaneous outsiders, axionormative dissent.¹³ The intellectual, in other words, is defined by a cognitive and, as it were, “existential” in-between, or ambivalence and loneliness, as Zygmunt Bauman put it, which enables, but also demands, a process of constant reorientation.¹⁴ Indeed, Erich Auerbach, writing from his Istanbul exile, identified the modern human condition as the “problem of man’s self-orientation” and “task to create for himself a place to be at home without fixed points of existence,” a task the intellectual,

perhaps even already in ancient times, relives at any moment of thought dissenting from the fixities of life.¹⁵ Intellectuals are “dissenters,” not because they think against mainstream or common sense, but because they inhabit a space of simultaneous boundlessness and demarcation, a place historically epitomized, though, of course, not solely occupied, by the Jewish intellectual. “I assume,” writes Mendes-Flohr, “the fundamental or ultimate boundary of the Jewish intellectual to be that demarcating of space—the cognitive, cultural, and social space—in which his or her primordial identity as a Jew appertains, and the realm in which another more universal (or at least what is construed to be universal) identity prevails.”¹⁶ Thus dissent becomes a function of a certain liminal position, of a spiritual borderland, defined by both its demarcation and permeability; and thus dissent directs itself both inward and outward, toward the “inside” and “outside” of the demarcated, in which the protest against one is the affirmation of the other.

We find, among countless examples, this particular ambivalence expressed in the Zionist thinker Walter Goldstein, who, writing of such intellectuals as Hermann Cohen and Martin Buber in 1942, noted what seemed self-evident to his contemporaries: that “in their minds everything resonated, everything that came from an alien source, whether Goethe or Mozart, Bach or Schiller, Lessing and, of course, time and again, Immanuel Kant.”¹⁷ For Goldstein, whose Jewish universe rested upon three contradictory pillars, Buber, Cohen, and Herzl, the meaning of exile, *Golah*, was indeed to “absorb the alien and learn from it—but to learn from it *for us*, for our own purpose.”¹⁸ What Goldstein gleaned from the retrospective vantage point of a failed—or never existent—German Jewish “symbiosis” and, as he wrote, “unhappy love of Europe,” was a theory neither of assimilation nor of mere “borrowing” or spiritual appropriation. The distinction between *in eigener Sache*, “for us,” and “alien sources” (*das Fremde*), which, nonetheless, are “for us” and thus not entirely foreign, should be read, rather, as the trace of an invisible line of limitation, a boundary drawn with the ethereal finger of the mind on the virtual, endlessly circuitous, map of thought, a map precariously suspended between the horizon of ideas and what Mendes-Flohr called “primordial identity.” Within and despite the Jewish intellectual’s mental and cultural universality, across and against the boundlessness of

the ideal world of ideas, beyond and because of the dynamics of cultural love, there remained a faintly affirmed “for us”—the ability and necessity to articulate something resembling selfhood: the awareness of things “alien,” yet the simultaneous embracing of precisely these “alien” sources, an attitude we might describe as xenophilia, an eroticism of the “foreign” not for its exoticism but *as familiar*. The process of acculturation, then, which naturally defined the Jewish encounter with modernity, must be viewed, as Steven Aschheim wrote of the “German-Jewish Parnassus,” as a drama between the “possibility and limits of assimilation and cultural activity in general,” a drama of ever shifting, yet never vanishing, boundaries, which produced, as Aschheim continues, a variety of “discourses of ‘essences,’ of visible and hidden external and internal characteristics of such Jewishness, the inward and outward manifestations of an elusive but powerful Jewish being and ‘spirit,’ which assimilation in the last analysis could neither repress nor dissolve.”¹⁹ To delineate this interminable space of selfhood, to trace this residue, the dissent of being, may be the disciplinary justification of intellectual history as a form of history. It may justify the focus on “intellectuals”—not, to be sure, as particularly trustworthy, much less superior, representatives of an historical period, but as interspersed instances of a period’s self-reflection and imaginative horizons.

Intellectual history, more perhaps, than history itself, is always a history of the present, *Gegenwartsgeschichte*, for it knows no historical events but the life of the mind as being simultaneously engaged with and disengaged from the life of history. It synchronizes, even anachronizes, what history must keep in order. This does not render it, to use a favorite term of recent theory, “radical.” To the contrary, intellectual history, to this author at least, listens more than it narrates. It retreats before strong methods and lives in great insecurity. At once permeating and contaminated by time, its events are “ideas.” But these ideas lack the authority of origin and authenticity, for they become events only by being in dialogue with, or by confronting, the historical world through restless mutual constitution. In these dialogues and confrontations, in the in-betweens of demarcation and dissent, lies the field of intellectual history as it is employed in our study. *Dreaming of Michelangelo* is a meditation on the spaces of Jewish selfhood. But its fundamental argument

assumes that these spaces can be outside the cultural and social demarcations and boundaries the self had drawn for itself, that the self can find itself in distant mirrors, that, in other words, the spaces of selfhood are demarcated by its own as well as by its *alternate* spaces: By the powers of “being” and “dreaming.”

4

Many studies treating Michelangelo and the Jewish imagination begin—and frequently end—with Sigmund Freud, whose ever puzzling essay *The Moses of Michelangelo* has become the pinnacle of the modern Jewish fascination with both the figure of Moses and the work of Michelangelo. I have placed this essay at the middle of this book and built around it the broader theme of what I consider modern Jewish statue love. But I have not placed it at the center. For Freud, as I intend to show, stood in a longer tradition of Jewish pilgrimages to the *Moses*, to the Sistine Chapel, or to the Florentine Sagrestia Nuova, the home, most famously, of Michelangelo’s *Night*. We will, in the following pages, see Michelangelo through the eyes of Heinrich Heine, Hermann Cohen, Georg Simmel, Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, and others from this period, along with Jewish writers much less known to the canon or even outside of it, such as the Italian Jewish poets of the revolutionary period, Giuseppe Revere and David Levi. We will meet Jewish travelers to Italy, Jewish lovers of the Mediterranean, and Jewish dreamers of the Eternal City turned Promised Land. We will meet them without particular order, without ambition for completeness, and without necessary tags identifying the degrees of their Jewish commitments. But we will meet them as writers, thinkers, and rabbis, to whom, in one way or another, Michelangelo mattered.

Jewish statue love occupies the middle of this book. But constitutes no more than a middle. From Jewish statue love the book moves backward to love itself, to cultural eroticism as a form of encounter questioning the model of reception, before moving forward to love again: to love as an aesthetic category vouchsafing the dignity of man. Michelangelo will be the interlocutor in all three of this book’s parts: Michelangelo the

unrequited lover, Michelangelo the sculptor of living form, Michelangelo the painter of humanity's original image. But in each part, Michelangelo will also be a metaphor, or as I prefer to say, a mirror to Jewish modernity: Michelangelo and Jewish Italophilia, Michelangelo and Jewish Pygmalianism, Michelangelo and Jewish thought as art. Each of these "ands" reflects an encounter that is at once a response and a calling forth, reflecting, epitomizing even, the response and calling forth to modernity. Jewish statue love, in this respect, embodies the Jewish call to a world withholding response, the Jewish love for Italy emerges as an accusation of the absence of feeling in a world weighed down by Nordic constraints, and in Jewish thought as art, we recognize the desire for an aesthetics postulating, in its last analysis, the human image as one of dignity and inclusion. Each encounter, then, with Michelangelo's work and historical persona, is the beginning of a meditation on the Jewish condition inside the human condition. But each encounter is also a confrontation.

5

Dreaming of Michelangelo, as this book argues, is no half-conscious passion but a work of wakefulness. It is *Traumarbeit*, dream work, in a sense that takes Freud to where Lyotard inserted figuration, and to where this book will encounter self-formation.²⁰ The theme that connects and entangles, triadically, the chapters to follow is the theme of unromantic love, of love as judgment and imperative. I take seriously Gershom Scholem's famous, though far from original, image of German Jews as "unhappy lovers," not because I think of German Judaism as a romance, but because I recognize "love," in the Jewish experience and self-reflection, as an act of self-creation and emancipation. Modern Jewish thought, which shall be the vehicle of our meditations, has been cognizant of this unromantic love, viewing, on more than one occasion, itself as love's demanding speech. "Only the lover," writes Franz Rosenzweig, "and he alone, can truly speak and say: Love me."²¹ Modern Jewish thinkers, in this regard, were lovers trying to free the concept of love from its Christian monopoly, not only because it belonged to their own

tradition as well, but also because it challenged the assumptions of the modern world. Thus, “love,” as it shall permeate this book, is both a commentary on modern Jewish self-perception and a hermeneutical category. It denotes a particular being towards the world, not by “loving” it unconditionally, but by accusing it, as the unrequited lover will, of its statuesque muteness.

Dreaming of Michelangelo, then, is first and foremost an instant of Jewish cultural love, yet one that is perhaps particularly self-aware of being the embodiment of this love itself. Its Jewishness, of course, is all but elusive and lacking in precision. Indeed, what will emerge as modern Jewish variations will also emerge as variations of modern Jewishness. The voices of this book will not speak in unison and not with equal “Jewish” accents. I have paid no particular attention to this disharmony and to the disparate variety of Jewish experiences. For it seems to me that these experiences, no matter how distant and disparate, intersect where dreams disrupt the dreamers’ ordinary existence to reawaken something that proves to be, even against their will, interminable.