

Accepted contribution to *German Quarterly* forum on

Emily J. Levine, *Dreamland of Humanists: Warburg, Cassirer, Panofsky, and the Hamburg School* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

In current streams of academic Jewish history (at least) two tendencies may be detected. On the one hand, there is a concentration on political posturing, nuances, and shifts of individual Jews and Jewish groups among themselves. This is revealed, for instance, in the work of Simon Rabinovich, Joshua Shanes, Aryeh Saposnik, Gur Alroey, Joshua Karlip, and Barry Trachtenberg. Their studies of changes in attitudes toward politics, language, and Judaism adds layers and contexts, with an occasional corrective, to the pioneering scholarship of Jonathan Frankel (1935-2008) and Ezra Mendelsohn (1940-2015)—towering figures who are sorely missed. While it has been long acknowledged that the Jewish scene embodied tensions of "promised land" versus "fatherland", Zionism versus Bundism, diasporism versus Palestino-centrism, Yiddishism versus Hebraism, territorialism versus Zionism, and traditionalism versus progressivism, these historians underscore the cross-fertilization and porous boundaries of such self-imposed labels that were earlier cast as mutually exclusive or self-evident dichotomies.

Another strain in the current historiography may be described as the attempt to discern the significance of how Jews functioned, and the resonance of their actions, in secular society. Derek Penslar, Paul Lerner, Scott Ury, Julie Mell, and Lisa Silverman achieve new reaches of sophistication in illuminating relations between Jews and non-Jews in diverse contexts. Each of them convincingly demonstrates that there was more to the Jewish/non-Jewish dynamic than that which was expressed overtly as either antisemitism or the defense of Jewish rights and interests. Jews came up with new ways of conceiving of and fashioning themselves--defying

conventional categorization. What marks all of these is the recognition that such changes did not transform those with Jewish origins simply into "non-Jewish Jews", to use Isaac Deutscher's over-used phrase.

Emily J. Levine's superb book, *Dreamland of Humanists: Warburg, Cassirer, Panofsky, and the Hamburg School*, is more aligned with the spirit of this second camp. It is a German history, Jewish history, cultural history, and intellectual history refreshingly unlike most of the work on the Warburg Institute. Levine, with unrivalled perspicacity, goes beyond her precursors by who were wary of venturing beyond the fact that the progenitors of the Warburgian project were mainly Jews. With rare exception, Jewishness was viewed primarily as an element in the combustible mix that pushed the Hamburg School out of Germany after the Nazi rise to power. Levine persuasively argues that Aby Warburg and his cohort, who came together over their historical interest in symbols and myths, must be understood by considering not only the fact of their Jewish origins and the ways they were perceived as Jews. Even more important is the sense that Warburg and his followers had of themselves as Jews—and how this was manifested in the flowering of their collective effort. The Hamburg School's "experience as German Jews" was especially pronounced in "iconology, the most visible legacy of this intellectual circle. While these ideas cannot be exclusively attributed to some characteristic 'Jewishness,' the experience of the secular German Jew clearly informed the scholars' understanding of the relationship between the particular and the universal, one of the central epistemological and methodological issues taken up by the scholars in the humanities in their day." (168) The Hamburg School, then, is inconceivable without foregrounding its specific Jewish histories that fostered its emergence from German (and Austrian) contexts into a distinctive entity in Hamburg. The exceptional

circumstances, and institutional histories that impinged on Hamburg also gave shape to approaches to scholarship and cultural production.

As an example of intellectual migration, the Warburg Institute may be seen as a greater success story than the Frankfurt School—but much more ink has been spilled about the Frankfurt School. Perhaps it is the persistence and ongoing accomplishments of the Warburg that have allowed it to fly under the radar. Yet more important is that fact that it has taken scholars so long—until Levine—to imagine how it arose in the first instance. For an institution so spectacularly important, and that shaped so large a share of the academic disciplines of intellectual history, art history, literature, and semiotics, the scholarly excavations of the institution have been excruciatingly narrow. In part, this is due to the fact that Jewishness was either ignored, minimized, or compartmentalized in ways that detracted from a better understanding of Warburg and his followers. What Levine has done, in richer measure than anyone, is to show that rather than seeking to insulate themselves from myths—the Warburg School sought to study them in rigorous yet open-ended way. Above all, these scholars sought to situate mythologies and their explanations in historical context. And they did not do so in a dry, detached manner. They respected myth, as a way of thought and accommodating oneself to the world, like the ideal way a doctor should treat her or his patients, or a teacher, her or his students. The Warburgians appreciated myth as a fundamental means by which human beings express their humanity. They surmised that better comprehension of changes in mythologies, over time, is integral to any intelligent understanding of history generally, as well as to its discrete components recognized as art, architecture, literature, and, equally, material and spiritual culture. At the close of the book Levine writes: "if these scholars shared something, it was an awareness of the

challenges posed by understanding ideas in the world from which they emerge, from their 'conditions for the possibility of knowledge.' And it is their enthusiasm for that project that I have tried to bring to their story—the story of how Hamburg, a mercantile city, became a haven for German-Jewish intellectuals who quietly led one of the most significant intellectual revolutions of the twentieth century." (284)

I do, however, have some small bones to pick. One is that there is sparse notice of the importance of photography to Warburg and his project. (3-4, 156) I believe that the Hamburg School's revolutionary embrace of photography also derives from highly specific Jewish circumstances. Yet more important, I fear that the use of George Mosse's thought, particularly from his small but suggestive book, *German Jews beyond Judaism*, is misleading. (xii) Rather than taking issue with Levine, Mosse would likely have regarded her work as complementary to his own thought. One should remember that *German Jews beyond Judaism* was delivered as lectures to Hebrew Union College, so the title, and some of his formulations, were deliberately provocative. Indeed, Mosse was one of the first scholars, along with Carl Schorske, to try to explain the basis of Jewish intellectual and cultural creativity as beyond both Judaism and antisemitism, which has been refined by David Sorkin and others. Although one cannot say for certain, I suspect that Mosse would have been thrilled with *Dreamland of Humanists*, and proud that he contributed in some way to its gestation. Mosse shared with the Hamburg School a fervent belief in "redemption through friendship and shared work." (117) His scholarly career was mainly driven by his desire to learn how myths and symbols emerged and changed over time. Levine's book is both Warburgian and Mossean as "a thoroughly *positive* view of German Jewish identity." (190) Her reflections on Jewish cultural creativity, a fine balance of attention to both "myth and reason" (252), is one of the best ever offered.

(194-5, 254-55) Levine has reimagined and explained this group of important scholars and their legacies, who were perhaps wiser and more resilient than any other academic cohort of their time. Levine has even succeeded, spectacularly, in capturing a delicate sense of what they were like as human beings. This is humanities scholarship, and the Warburg project, at its best.