

BOOK REVIEW

A Life in Letters, 1914-1982

by GERSHOM SCHOLEM,

edited and translated by ANTHONY DAVID SKINNER

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Reviewed by
Benjamin Balint

To peer into letters intended for family, friends, and foes is often to glimpse the most unbridled of a writer's thoughts, the rawest of his judgments, and the fullest range of his feeling. These glimpses are especially illuminating in Gershom Scholem's case; not only because he left some 16,000 letters behind, and not only because the list of his correspondents reads like a who's who of several generations of German-Jewish intellectuals—Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, Walter Benjamin (his closest friend),¹ Theodor Adorno, Hannah Arendt, Walter Kaufmann, Leo Strauss, Emil Fackenheim—but also because he considers a personal letter to be “second in power only to the Bible. It, too,” he says, “works like an act of revelation.” “Among the greatest and most elevating phenomena,” Scholem writes, “is the liberation that a letter produces in one.”

Arguably the most influential scholar of Jewish studies of the twentieth century, Gershom Scholem founded the academic discipline of Jewish mysticism, bringing historical and philological rigor to what before then had been a sacrosanct and esoteric *terra incognita*, off-limits to scholarly analysis. With characteristic self-assuredness—even arrogance—Scholem bravely mapped this new land of the Kabbala, and the breakthrough work he produced has long been admired—also much criticized—if never quite fully absorbed: the magisterial breadth of *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (1941) and the learned depth of *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah* (1957)—his study of the seventeenth-century pseudo-messiah.² But, as Scholem himself once said to Cynthia Ozick, “The scholar is never the whole man.” Only now, twenty years after his death, thanks to letters appearing for the first time in English in Anthony David Skinner's translation (culled from Scholem's German correspondence edited by Itta Shedletzky and Thomas Sparr), can we fully understand what he meant. Only now can we appreciate the complexities and passions of the man beneath the detached prose.

TRADITION

Gerhard Scholem was born in 1897 into an assimilated Berlin family. His grandfather, oddly named Scholem Scholem, abandoned his traditional roots and changed his name to Siegfried, after Wagner's operatic hero. Gerhard's father, Arthur, became a self-declared atheist, and as a result each of his four sons seemed to search for something to believe in. One was an intermarried, prominent Communist elected to the Reichstag in 1924 as its youngest member, and another embraced German nationalism. The family would celebrate Christmas with a full panoply of presents, a decorated tree, and renditions of "Silent Night." "I was raised in a totally non-Jewish environment," Scholem later claimed.

Yet, despite this past, these letters, which Skinner arranges chronologically, show that—seemingly *ex nihilo*—a Jewish consciousness, one that clearly contained the elements of his future philosophic landscape, exploded into view. Scholem's early letters—though they describe rather than explain the causes of this sudden evolution—accordingly hold the most fascination. The deep impression made on Scholem by Heinrich Graetz's *History of the Jews* instilled in him the desire to learn Hebrew (his interest in Kabbala was also inextricably linked, from the beginning, as he puts it, with a "desire to understand the enigma of Jewish history"). By age thirteen he began poring over the new Zionist literature; Moses Hess, Theodor Herzl, Max Nordau, and Nathan Birnbaum all absorbed his attention. With growing enthusiasm, he read Martin Buber on *hasidut*, and studied Talmud for four years with Rabbi Isaac Bleichrode, great-grandson of Rabbi Akiva Eiger.

And we learn that by age sixteen, Gerhard, soon to Hebraicize his name to Gershom, had turned his back on Germany. During World War One he led a Zionist group called Jung Juda ("Young Judea") and helped publish an underground Zionist antiwar paper in which he gave first, crude expression to a lifelong creed: "Jewish national interests do not coincide with those of Germany." For his unpatriotic antiwar activities he was promptly expelled first from school and then from his parents' home. (The banishment, however, was fortuitous. In the hostel where he went to live, he met and was enchanted by Zalman Rubashov, known later as Zalman Shazar—to become the third president of Israel—and by an unknown Hebrew writer named Czaczkes, known later as Agnon.)

The letters from Arthur to his nineteen-year-old son announcing the eviction clarify a source of Gershom's deepening antibourgeois convictions:

I have decided to cut off all support to you. . . . You have until the first of March to leave my house, and you will be forbidden to enter it again without my permission. . . . Real work will do your arrogance a world of good. What you call work is nothing more than a game. No doubt the people who must come up with money to support your literary activities and discussion groups are secretly angry about it. Money is something very concrete, and those people who busy themselves with abstractions consider earning it indecent. . . . If you come out with any of your anti-German activities, I will break off all contact between us.

Four years later, Arthur (who died in 1925) was still rather dismissively harping on the same theme: “Three cheers for Hebraica and Jewish studies—but not as a career! Take my word for it: if you don’t change, you will experience a bitter shipwreck.”

But the ship sailed on, and the son grew only more resolved. Gershom feigned insanity to escape German military service in order to devote himself to his studies in Jena, Bern, and Munich, where he earned his doctorate in 1922 with a dissertation on *Sefer ha-Bahir*, the 12th-century kabbalistic work attributed to Rabbi Nehunia ben ha-Kana.

If it is true, as Scholem says in a different context, that “selection and abbreviation themselves constitute a kind of commentary,” Skinner, a research fellow at Hebrew University, in winnowing down thousands of letters, has produced a commentary as eloquent as Scholem’s letters are revelatory. The most expressive parts of Skinner’s compilation (which is interspersed with five biographical essays) show how Scholem’s Zionism gained its enormous conviction and power from his answer to the dilemma posed by the relation of “Germanness” and Jewishness. What does it mean, Scholem and his friends relentlessly asked themselves (a question not without relevance to Diaspora Jews today), to be both a German and a Jew?

Scholem’s answer—so he thought—couldn’t be more clear. “The confrontation with German culture which presents so many Jews with such painful dilemmas has never been a problem for me,” Scholem writes in 1917. “The inherent distance between German culture and Judaism clearly precludes a shared life in any proper sense.” And many of German Jewry’s missteps, Scholem thinks, can be traced back to its naïveté on this score. For him, the decline of German-Jews began “when they were seized by the confused belief that a synthesis was possible between the decisive commands of a foreign spirit and their

own.”³ This confusion, Scholem contends, caused harmful philosophical mistakes too. Thus he dismisses out of hand the neo-Kantian philosopher Hermann Cohen’s attempt to harmonize *Deutschtum* and *Judentum*, and criticizes a certain group of thinkers for peddling “Schlegelism with Torah sauce” (though it should be noted that unlike others who typically lodged this kind of complaint, Scholem never accepted Orthodoxy).

These sentiments, all recorded before Scholem was twenty, remain a theme of his letters to the end of his life. In 1962, Scholem was invited to contribute to a *festschrift* intended, in its editor’s words, to be (among other things) “a document of the indestructible German-Jewish dialogue.” These may not have been the best words with which to entice the formidable scholar. Rather than simply decline, Scholem released a torrent of denunciation in a letter that later grew into an essay he unsubtly called “Against the Myth of a German-Jewish Dialogue.”

I deny that this German-Jewish dialogue . . . ever took place in any real sense. . . . The attempt that Jews have made to explain themselves to Germans and to place at their disposal their own Jewish productivity, even to the point of complete self-abnegation, is an important phenomenon that has yet to be analyzed with adequate categories. . . . Despite all this, I am unable to detect a dialogue. No one responded to this cry. And it was this simple yet vastly consequential realization that shocked many of us in our youth and led us to abandon the illusion of a German Jewry. . . . To whom, then, did the Jews speak in this famous German-Jewish dialogue? They spoke to themselves . . . as if the echo of their own voice would suddenly change into the voice of the others they so longed to hear. . . . The ostensibly indestructible spiritual community of Germans and Jews . . . was composed solely of Jewish voices. . . . It was never more than a fiction—a fiction that, if I may say so, exacted too high a price.⁴

Zionism was the truth that, in Scholem’s mind, replaced the fiction. “Taking Zion and Berlin as spiritual principles,” Scholem writes, “one can and indeed must work from the perspective of Zion, just as one can perhaps work from the perspective of Berlin; *but one cannot and must not work from the perspective of Berlin as if one were doing so from Zion.*” Recoiling from the self-delusion and hypocrisy he perceived all around, Scholem was driven ever more deeply into an astonishingly unambivalent Zionism, not at all touched by self-doubt or tentativeness. Here,

too, he was precocious and ahead of his time—a kind of Zionist wunderkind. In a letter dated 1916, Scholem writes, “It’s as if God, myself, and Zion were alone in the world. . . . Here I build my Zionism into a structure strong enough so that I can erect my entire life upon it without any fear that it could collapse.” And a year later he declares, “I measure all things against Zion.”

Scholem believed that *all* things should be transformed by love of Zion: how one lived, where one resided, and—not least—in what language one dwelled. Before he moved to Jerusalem in 1923 to begin a long and eminent career at Hebrew University, Scholem wrote to a friend, “When directed at Jews, the living word of God cannot be comprehended in the German language. Only from the innermost soul of Hebrew can the inner form of Judaism be understood.”⁵

His own great love, moreover, prevented him from befriending those he thought lacked it. He broke relations with Hannah Arendt after she published *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, her controversial report on the Nazi leader’s 1961 trial. In a withering letter, he lamented to her

the heartless, the downright malicious tone you employ in dealing with a topic that so profoundly concerns the center of our life. There is something in the Jewish language that is completely indefinable, yet fully concrete—what the Jews call *ahavat Israel*, or love of the Jewish people. With you, my dear Hannah, as with so many intellectuals coming from the German left, there is no trace of it.

Scholem’s scholarly projects and personal passions alike partake of the rebelliousness that is his singular strength. Though he never grasped the degree to which he was a product of the very German-Jewish synthesis he scorned, in dedicating himself so intensely to Judaism’s past and future, Scholem defied the bourgeois, assimilated community his father embodied. In seeking out all that was mythical, messianic, antinomian, paradoxical, and anarchic in Jewish tradition, Scholem passionately rebelled, if that is again the word, against Judaism’s post-Enlightenment view of itself as a largely legalistic, rationalistic faith. Mysticism, he emphasized, “is a product of crises.” (The Nietzschean resonances here, echoes of the Apollonian—Dionysian dichotomy, are no coincidence. “To compose a Jewish *Zarathustra*,” Scholem astoundingly—and very Germanically—records in his teenage diary, “that’s my plan.”) Finally, in a sense Scholem rebelled even against the horrific crises of his own time. As Skinner observes in one of

his valuable introductory essays, Scholem's studies aimed to uncover the creative core of Jewish religiosity and renewal just as European Jewry was being destroyed.

As readers of his letters, we might do well to contemplate the words Scholem wrote to Escha Burchhardt, the woman who would become his first wife, but which might as aptly be addressed to us: "My letters seek not to elicit a reply, but to be absorbed into your wordless silence. . . . I hope that your life, which is invisible to me, is the reply."

NOTES

1. See *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship* (1981) by Scholem and *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1932-1940* (1992).
2. For excellent appreciations of Scholem's work, see "The Achievement of Gershom Scholem," by Robert Alter in the April 1973 *Commentary*, and "The Greatness of Gershom Scholem" by Hyam Maccoby in the September 1983 *Commentary*. For criticism of Scholem's approach, see David Biale's *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History* (1979) and Moshe Idel's *Kabbala: New Perspectives* (1988).
3. Though clear-sighted in this regard, Scholem was by no means prescient in every respect. In 1933 he advised his mother to stay in Berlin: "Don't lose hope," he wrote to her. "Just think how often the most terrible circumstances can change." (When they failed to change, she emigrated to Australia.)
4. Other German-Jewish writers, of course, negotiated the confrontation between Germanness and Jewishness much differently. Steven E. Aschheim's new book, *Scholem, Arendt, Klemperer: Intimate Chronicles in Turbulent Times* (Indiana University Press, 2001), uses recently unearthed letters and journals (the "intimate chronicles" of its subtitle) to draw an intriguing juxtaposition of Scholem with Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) and Victor Klemperer (1881-1960). Aschheim argues that the author of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* bore an "essentially ambiguous" relation to her Judaism, in part because she opposed "essentialist," nationalist forms of identification. When asked by Karl Jaspers whether she considered herself a German or a Jew, Arendt replied: "To be perfectly honest, it doesn't matter to me in the least on the personal and individual level." Klemperer, on the other hand, author of *I Will Bear Witness*, declared: "I do not feel myself to be a Jew, not even a German Jew, but rather purely and simply a German." This leads him to the conclusion that "the Nazis are un-German."
5. The significance of Hebrew to Scholem cannot be overstated. In a letter to Franz Rosenzweig in 1921, he refers to "the true moral aspect of our

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language, the *hatsnea lekhet*." Rosenzweig, himself a famous translator (with Buber) of the Bible, agreed: "He who translates into German must in one way or another translate into a Christian language." Scholem greatly admired Rosenzweig, his senior by eleven years, though he was eventually to break with him. In 1922 he taught at Rosenzweig's Lehrhaus in Frankfurt. Of *The Star of Redemption*, Scholem writes, "the day may come when people will study and discuss this book as they do *The Guide for the Perplexed*."

REVIEWER IN THIS ISSUE:

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