THE CORRESPONDENCE OF WALTER BENJAMIN AND GERSHOM SCHOLEM

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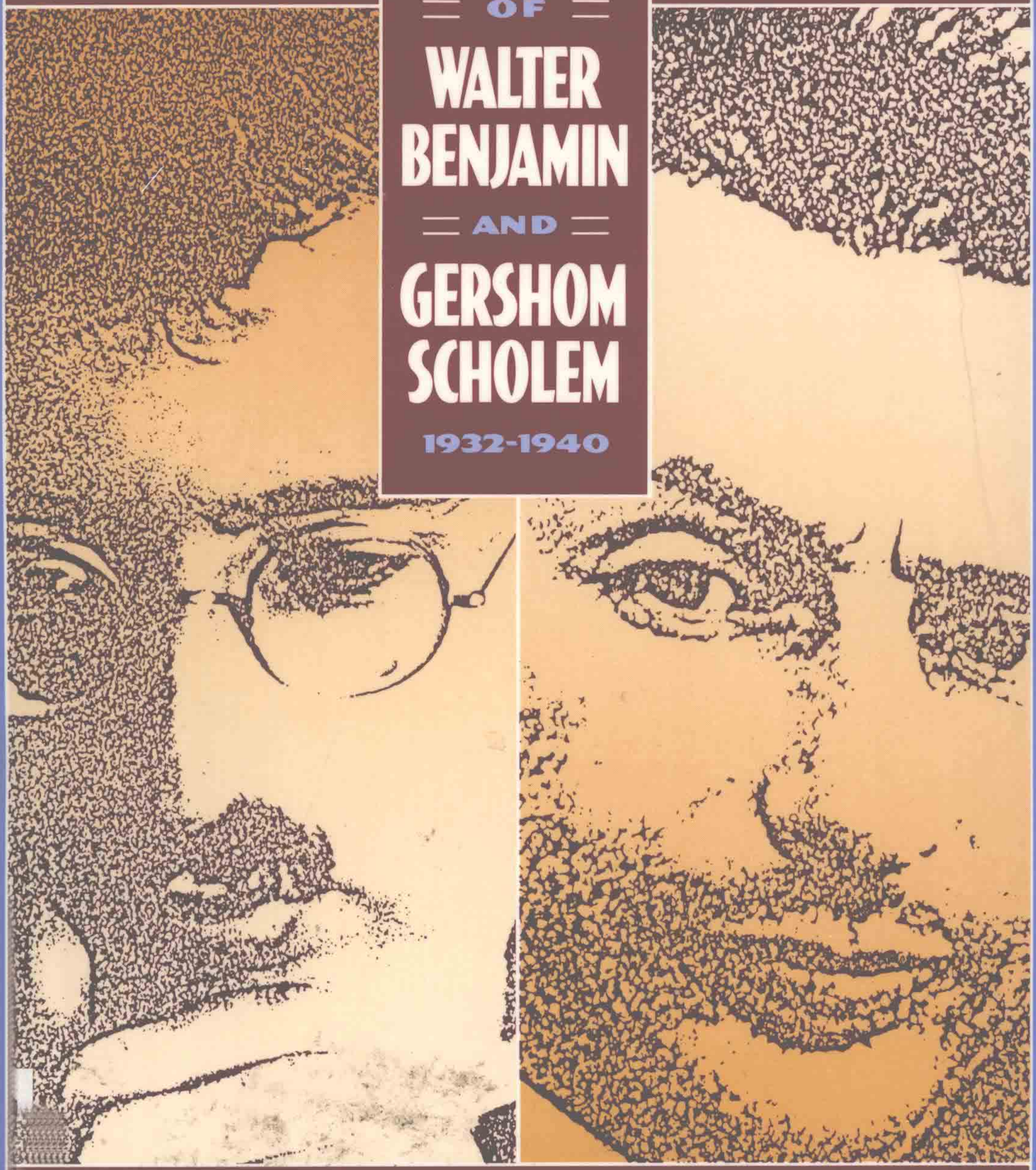

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Translated by Gary Smith and Andre Lefevere
from the German volume
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1932–1940

With an Introduction by Anson Rabinbach

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INTRODUCTION

by Anson Rabinbach

In 1936 a collection of twenty-six letters appeared in a small Swiss edition under the name Detlef Holz, a pseudonym of Walter Benjamin. Its title, *Deutsche Menschen*, was chosen as a camouflage, to pass Nazi censorship, which it apparently did. Hardly what one might expect, these letters (including some by Hölderlin, Schlegel, Förster, and Nietzsche) convey rather ordinary moments in unadorned and sober prose. The Olympians of the German Romantic age reduced, as it were, to the earthly scale of their friendships, intimate relations, circumstances of exile, and sad occurrences—for example, the death of Hegel, reported by his student Schleiermacher. By this change of register, Benjamin hoped to achieve a reversal of perspective. The "meager, limited existence" and "true humanity" visible in this "secret Germany" was a modest assault on the Nazi pantheon, into which all spiritual "forebears" were posthumously initiated.[1]

Many years later Theodor Adorno remarked on the illusions and limitations of the book's subversive potential: "Benjamin shared with us other émigrés the error that spirit and cunning can possibly accomplish something against a force which no longer recognizes spirit as something autonomous, but only as a means to its own ends, and therefore no longer

[1] Typescript of "Deutsche Briefe I," Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, (hereafter *GS*) vol. 4.2, ed. Tilman Rexroth (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1980), p. 945.

fears a confrontation with it."[2] There is nevertheless a close resemblance between the letters of *Deutsche Menschen* and Benjamin's correspondence with Gershom Scholem. What Benjamin valued in those older letters was, above all, "the light cast by substantive references, allusions, and details" in which the distinction "between the human being and the author, between the private and the objective" fades, and "we find ourselves surrounded by humanness."[3] In Scholem and Benjamin's correspondence too we find a wealth of detail, an austerity of style, and a depth of allusion, as well as a loyalty and intensity that recalls the legendary German-Jewish intellectual friendships of the post-Enlightenment generation. Those friendships, as Hannah Arendt recognized in her thoughts "On Humanity in Dark Times," were nurtured less by intimate confession than by a common intellectual discourse carried on in a society "without either Christians or Jews."[4]

Such intense friendships, which were not a flight from reality but a recognition of its terrors, allowed educated German Jews to create their own kind of tradition, one which took the best from German culture and ignored the rest. As George Mosse noted, the fierce attachment of German Jews to Goethe, Schiller, and the other titans of German philosophy and literature was not simply the chasing after noble illusions, but a bulwark against nationalism and anti-Semitism.[5] By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, dedication to the universal spirit of *Bildung*, or cultivation, was itself in crisis. This tradition reached its *denouement* in Scholem and Benjamin's generation, a century and a half after emancipation. Not the Enlightenment, but Marxism and Zionism were far more alluring for those intellectuals, like Scholem and Benjamin, who witnessed the collapse of what was later called the German-Jewish "symbiosis." By then exile was the only means of survival. And yet, the intensity of intellectual friendship seemed to increase with the growing irrationality of the world that surrounded it. The conflicts and shared passions that infuse their correspondence are not simply the surface topography of a tradition in dissolution; they are, as we shall see, an encounter with its deepest recesses. A passage from Benjamin's final letter to Scholem could serve as their epigraph: "Every line we succeed in publishing today—no matter how uncertain the future to which

[2] Theodor W. Adorno, "Nachwort," *Deutsche Menschen: Eine Folge von Briefen*, selected and introduced by Walter Benjamin (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1962), p. 121.

[3] Typescript of "Deutsche Briefe I," p. 944.

[4] Hannah Arendt, "On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing," *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), p. 24.

[5] George L. Mosse, *German Jews beyond Judaism* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1983), pp. 12–15.

we entrust it—is a victory wrenched from the powers of darkness" (127).[6]

Though many of Benjamin's letters were preserved and published earlier, Scholem's side of the exchange only emerged from the powers of darkness (they were confiscated by the Gestapo) through a series of accidents and circumstances which are described in his preface.[7] These letters begin a few months before Hitler's rise to power and end with the fall of France and Benjamin's death by suicide on the Spanish border on September 26, 1940. With the restoration of the full correspondence from 1933 to 1940, we have the record of an extraordinary intellectual relationship, and, at the same time, an extended discussion of the fate of the Jewish and German intellectual tradition on the eve of catastophe. It is fitting, therefore, that very few bear a German postmark. In these last years of their friendship, political circumstances and intellectual commitments placed Scholem and Benjamin at considerable geographic and spiritual distance from Germany and from each other. German and Jewish as these two men were in their learning and language, the backdrop of this correspondence is not the "unconsolingly clean" streets of Berlin, but "Jerusalem's battlements" and the "grayish blue façades of the boulevards" of Paris (91).

Together with Scholem's *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, this volume offers Anglo-American readers a more intimate and detailed insight into Benjamin's years of exile in Paris, and his relations with contemporaries (particularly members of the Frankfurt School). From Scholem's side, especially if we read his letters together with his autobiographical memoir *From Berlin to Jerusalem: Memories of My Youth*, we learn a great deal about his involvement with political events in Palestine, and of his reaction to the dire emergency of European Jewry. When these letters begin, Benjamin had already opted for Marxism, a decision he took shortly after Scholem's emigration to Palestine in 1923. Also in the past was his university career, which collapsed precisely when Scholem's began.

The tensions in their relationship—the result of Scholem's perception

[6] The numbers in parentheses refer to the standard numbering of the letters (not to page numbers) in both the German and the English editions.

[7] This edition, originally published as *Walter Benjamin/Gershom Scholem Briefwechsel 1933–1940* appeared in 1980. One letter, incomplete in that edition, has since been located and is published in full here. Twenty-nine of Benjamin's letters to Scholem during this period were originally published in the two-volume *Walter Benjamin–Briefe* edited by Scholem and Adorno and published in 1966, not all of them in full. Revised in 1978, the *Briefe* will be published in English by the University of Chicago Press. Subsequently, other Benjamin letters have come to light and to some extent have been included in the *Gesammelte Schriften*, as part of the apparatus to specific texts. An edition of Gershom Scholem's correspondence is currently in preparation in Jerusalem.

of Benjamin as a person "incapable of making a decision between metaphysics and materialism," and of Benjamin's frustrations with Scholem's insistence that he acknowledge the Jewish core of his work—were by now deeply sedimented. They are still very much in evidence, but no longer as personal discord or political disaffection. The most fascinating aspect of this phase of their correspondence is the emergence—through their ongoing discussion of Kafka—of the contours of their most serious philosophical dispute about the messianic core of Judaism and its relation to exile and tradition. Thus, apart from any scholarly interest in the Scholem-Benjamin relationship, their correspondence assumes a place of importance on its own as a profound and moving commentary on the German-Jewish intellectual tradition in its final hour.

The letters published here thus chronicle a difficult period in a relationship that had reached its "zenith" many years before. When they first met in 1915 Benjamin was twenty-three and Scholem seventeen. Scholem had heard of Benjamin several years earlier as a leading figure of a German youth movement influenced by the communitarian ideas of the experimental educationalist Gustav Wyneken. By then Scholem was already a Zionist, a direction he chose in 1911 when he was fourteen years old, and from which he never wavered. From the outset Scholem's Zionism was characterized by strong anarchistic and antibourgeois leanings which he later described as "post-assimilatory."[8] Both Scholem and Benjamin, like many others of their generation, were deeply affected by Martin Buber's powerful challenge to German-Jewish youth to repudiate their material comforts and find their spiritual identity in a decisive "transvaluation of values." In 1912 Benjamin too flirted with Zionism, but, unlike Scholem, rejected it for a different kind of Jewish self-definition. In a lengthy and crucial exchange with Ludwig Strauss, a young Zionist (and Buber's future son-in-law) who wanted to publish a journal of Jewish thought in Germany, Benjamin examined his attitude toward his "Jewishness" and found Zionism to be an inadequate response. "For me," he wrote, "Jewishness is not in any sense an end in itself but the noble bearer and representative of the intellect."[9]

In contrast to Scholem, whose father and grandfather were printers educated in the nineteenth-century traditions of German liberalism, and whose family belonged to the struggling middle class of Berlin's Jewish entrepreneurs, Benjamin grew up in a wealthy, bourgeois setting (his father was a successful art and antique dealer and collector). His bitter-

[8] "With Gershom Scholem: An Interview," *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis: Selected Essays*, ed. Werner Dannhauser (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), p. 1.

[9] Walter Benjamin to Ludwig Strauss, November 21, 1912, *GS* 2.3, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977), p. 839.

sweet memoir, "A Berlin Chronicle," recalls a childhood spent in the villa on the Delbrückstrasse in the Grunewald section of Berlin where the physical presence of the Wilhelminian *fin de siècle* was preserved in the style and decor of the interiors.

And yet both reacted against the culture of middle-class, assimilated German Jewry. This was especially true of their reaction to World War I, which both abhorred and avoided. Scholem and Benjamin were united by a profound outrage at Buber, Wyneken, and other German and Jewish intellectual idols whose patriotism they saw as a "spiritual" betrayal. Their correspondence in those years gives an extraordinary portrait of the Swiss exile milieu in which they congregated with other "anti-Kaiser Germans" whose antipathy to rationalism was a badge of honor. Their associates in those years included the Jewish-Nietzschean expressionists Kurt Hiller and Salomo Friedländer, the Dadaist Hugo Ball, and their mutual friend Ernst Bloch, who was then a messianic anarchist *en route* to becoming a messianic Marxist.

Both Benjamin and Scholem combined a distaste for conventional academic scholasticism with a ravenous erudition (their private joke, the fictitious "University Muri" which parodied the pomposity of German University life stems from that period). They shared a chronic "bibliomania," a penchant for uncharted intellectual byways, obscure ideas (numerology, graphology), and a fascination with arcane spirits such as Franz von Baader, the early nineteenth-century philosopher who rediscovered sources of Medieval Catholic and Jewish mysticism (Benjamin's sale of a prized edition of von Baader's works to the Hebrew University Library is the subject of a lengthy transaction in these letters). Most importantly, they shared, as Scholem recalled, "a resoluteness in pursuing our intellectual goals, a rejection of our environment—which was basically the German-Jewish assimilated middle class—and a positive attitude toward metaphysics."[10]

In 1916 Benjamin completed his first major philosophical essay, "On Language as Such and the Languages of Man."[11] In it he describes human language as a condition of fall from its Adamic state where, as God's language, it was not yet plagued by confusion or ambiguity, or even distinct from the language of "immaterial" things and nature. God's language revealed a world "of all-sided and integral actuality," e.g., of complete immediacy and transparency; human language revealed only

[10] Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship* (hereafter *W.B.*), trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1988), p. 21.

[11] Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), pp. 314–32.

"decay" and "parody." Benjamin claims for language a status totally opposed to its denigration as a means to an end. His image of human language as identical with the "Fall" recalls the original state of language before its exile and decay into corrupt speech. For Benjamin, the affirmation of an identity between Jewishness and language sets out, in esoteric form, the attitude that he communicated to Strauss four years earlier. In a letter to Buber, in which he expressed his deep disappointment with the latter's partisanship for the war, Benjamin explained his idea of language as a human expression of the inexpressible as opposed to its "sullied" condition as a "means."[12] Since language can retain something of the "inexpressible" it contains a "residue of the creative word of God" and offers a glimpse of its original character. The esoteric language entrusted to "the elite in the party of the intellectuals (*die Geistigen*)," the Jews, is the absolute counterpoint to the disintegration of the word in the "abyss of prattle," an allusion to Buber's propagandistic efforts.[13] Benjamin's early philosophy of language thus contains the seminal idea of his life and career: human language, in its irreparable confusion, is the expression of a primal exile from God's word.

In the summer of 1918, which they spent together in Berne, Scholem and Benjamin read and discussed the great Jewish neo-Kantian philosopher Hermann Cohen's influential work *Kant's Theory of Experience* (1871). Cohen's philosophy, which assimilated the Jewish "religion of reason" to the Enlightenment, epitomized for Scholem and Benjamin the exorbitant price of the reconciliation of Jewishness to Germanness. Several months earlier Benjamin sent Scholem his paper "On the Program for the Philosophy of the Future," a set of reflections that subsequently played an important role in their conversations. Though he praised the systematic coherence of Kant's thought, he argued that by equating all human knowledge with the greatly reduced "minimum" of knowledge accessible to rational thought, the Enlightenment "worldview" sacrificed an entire realm of experience to its "historical and religious blindness."[14] At that time, Benjamin also remarked that Kant's (and, by implication, Cohen's) concept of experience was "inferior" because "a philosophy that does not include the possibility of soothsaying from coffee-grounds and cannot explicate it cannot be a true philosophy."[15]

[12] Walter Benjamin to Martin Buber, July 1916, *Briefe*, pp. 125–28.

[13] For a discussion of the political background of Benjamin's essay see Anson Rabinbach "Benjamin, Bloch, and Modern German Jewish Messianism," *New German Critique* 34 (Winter, 1985), pp. 78–124.

[14] Walter Benjamin, "Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie," *GS* 2.1, p. 159. An English translation appeared in *The Philosophical Forum* 15:1–2 (Winter/Spring, 1983/84), pp. 41–55.

[15] Scholem, *W.B.*, pp. 58–60.

Though Scholem concurred with Benjamin's evaluation of Cohen's rationalism, which he considered to be a "major disappointment," and saw as illusory Cohen's conviction that there was "no discord between Germanism and Judaism," Scholem was drawn to an aspect of Cohen's work that apparently held little interest for Benjamin. As David Biale has shown, Scholem adopted Cohen's view of the true basis of the Jewish tradition as a revelation that does not guarantee truth, but only the possibility of its transmission through centuries of interpretation. Scholem's research into the Kabbalah spelled out the terms of that tradition as one in which God is alienated from the world, from Creation itself, and in which exile or *galut* is the most fundamental condition of existence. In contrast to Benjamin's purely linguistic messianism, Scholem's understanding of Jewish tradition is of a historical and exegetical enterprise: if "God is meaningless, but meaning-bestowing," then "not system but *commentary* is the legitimate form through which truth is approached."[16] For Scholem the problem was to redefine that tradition to include far more than rabbinic orthodoxy could ever admit. It had to come to terms with the inner nihilism of Judaism itself: "All that befalls the world is only an expression of this primal and fundamental *galut*. All existence, including God, subsists in *galut*. Such is the state of Creation after the breaking of vessels."[17] This philosophical distinction is enormously significant for Scholem's idiosyncratic view of Zionism, as it is for understanding his attachment to, and distance from, his most important philosophical partner, Benjamin.

Scholem was drawn to Zionism by a passion for Jewish learning and Jewish history, rather than by its contemporary political manifestations. For him, "return" was not only associated with an end to physical diaspora, but also with a restoration of the radical core of Judaism. Like many others of his generation Scholem was attracted by the lure of Eastern Europe as it appeared in the nouveau *Yiddishkeit* popularized among German-Jewish youth by Buber's famous literary renderings of hasidic legend (especially *The Tales of Rabbi Nachman*, 1906, and *The Legend of the Baal Shem*, 1908). "We did not come to Zionism because of politics," Scholem later recalled of his generation's desire for a renewal of Judaism as a cultural rather than as a strictly political revolt. An admirer of Ahad Ha'am, the Russian Zionist who emigrated to Palestine in 1922, Scholem shared Ahad Ha'am's vision of a spiritual regen-

[16] David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 110–11; Gershom Scholem, "Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories in Judaism," *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), p. 289.

[17] Gershom Scholem, "The Star of David," *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, pp. 45–46.

eration of Judaism in the land of Palestine as a beacon and a workshop for the emergence of a new Hebrew language and a new Jewish culture. Before his emigration to Palestine in 1923, Scholem was a sharp critic of the German Zionist *Blau-Weiss* youth movement, which he attacked as "German Romanticism in Zionist guise."[18] Yet Scholem's early Zionism, predicated as it was "on the power of a tradition thousands of years old," resisted conceptualization, because, he admitted, it "contains a secret life."[19] Beneath the tradition of normative Judaism, Scholem believed, there existed a deep vein of esoteric Judaism, embedded, above all, in the mystical and Kabbalistic writings, to which he devoted his career to unearthing and deciphering.

Scholem's lifetime project as a historian can thus be understood as an attempt to bring an authentically esoteric tradition to a modern Judaism incapacitated by a surfeit of rationalism and constrained by orthodoxy. For Scholem the message of modern Judaism was nihilistic: "the whole world was in exile." Though personally close to Buber, Scholem doubted that Buber's mystical and ecstatic vision of Judaism, drawn from the hasidic movement, was a sufficient basis to awaken contemporary Jewry to a new personal Judaism of deep feeling (*Erlebnis*). Buber and his closest followers in the Prague Jewish student association *Bar Kochba* (some of whom, like Samuel Hugo Bergmann, Robert Weltsch, and Max Brod became important writers and intellectuals) wanted to create a bridge between Western Jews and what Buber called the "Asian" Judaism of Eastern Europe, by updating a mystical Jewish tradition without too closely attending to its historical dimension, and by removing what Scholem called its "apocalyptic sting."[20] Nineteenth-century historicism, exemplified by the "Science of Judaism" of Heinrich Graetz and Leopold Zunz, was historical in its scholarly approach to the traditional texts, but estranged from the esoteric tradition in its anxiety over the irrational. Scholem tried to steer clear of the weaknesses of both by attempting to restore the esoteric tradition historically, with its "sting."[21] Rediscovering the ancient texts of Jewish mysticism and unlocking the anarchistic tradition of Kabbalah opened up a dimension of Judaism that he believed was of enormous significance for contemporary Jewish experience: "For the mountain, the corpus of facts, needs no key at all; only the misty wall of

[18] "With Gershom Scholem: An Interview," p. 13.

[19] Gershom Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem: Memories of My Youth*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1980), p. 48.

[20] Gershom Scholem, "Martin Buber's Conception of Judaism," in *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, pp. 126–71.

[21] Gershom Scholem, "The Science of Judaism—Then and Now," *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, pp. 304–13.

history, which hangs around it, must be penetrated. To penetrate it was the task I set for myself."[22]

Despite their philosophical differences, which persisted in appropriately esoteric form to the very end of their relationship, Scholem and Benjamin were always united by a deep religiosity of thought coexisting with an "anarchic suspension" of traditional and ritualistic forms of belief. Their religiosity took the form of a messianic sensibility or attitude, a spiritual radicalism that constituted a Jewishness without doctrinal Judaism. This messianic spirit, hostile to political gradualism in any form, skeptical of the Enlightenment, and thoroughly radical in its attitude toward philosophy and politics, became the thread connecting not only Scholem and Benjamin, but an entire generation of intellectuals who rejected the optimistic synthesis of rational Judaism and liberal politics that was the hallmark of the Wilhelminian German-Jewish world. Before World War I this new messianic attitude embraced an apocalyptic antipolitics, a spiritual redefinition of Jewishness, and, simultaneously, a Nietzschean vision of the transfiguration of European culture. As early as 1912 Ernst Bloch remarked that for his generation "the social manifestations of submissiveness and self-deprecation have disappeared." Instead "one sees an anticipation."[23] This messianic impulse appeared in many different Jewish-secular guises in the early decades of the century. It included the negative theology of Franz Kafka, the messianic Marxism of Georg Lukács and Ernst Bloch, the existential Judaism of Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, the expressionist Nietzscheanism of Kurt Hiller and Salomo Friedländer, Gustav Landauer's mystical anarchism, and certainly Benjamin's linguistic messianism and Scholem's nihilistic and esoteric Zionism.[24]

If the prophetic tradition in Judaism expressed itself in public testimony, the messianic tradition invoked its opposite, an esoteric, or even secret, knowledge that defines redemption as a "restoration" of a lost truth. Since, as Scholem points out, messianism is always nourished by its dark vision of the absolute negativity of the existing order of things, it "is not directed to what history will bring forth, but to that which will arise in its ruin."[25] This accounts for its chronic tendency to oscillate between utter pessimism and contemplative withdrawal on the one hand, and

[22] Gershom Scholem, letter to Salman Schocken, October 29, 1937; cited in Biale, *Gershom Scholem*, p. 76.

[23] Ernst Bloch, *Durch die Wüste: Frühe kritische Aufsätze* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1964), p. 122.

[24] On this movement, see Michel Löwy, "Jewish Messianism and Libertarian Utopia in Central Europe," *New German Critique* 20 (Spring/Summer, 1980), pp. 105–15.

[25] Gershom Scholem, "Towards an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism," *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, p. 10.

impatient and inchoate bursts of radical activism on the other. The post–World War I garden of messianic Jewish radicalism, to which both Scholem and Benjamin belonged, grew according to this disorderly and apocalyptic design.

The Berne period (May 1918 to September 1919) was not only a time of great mutual intellectual influence for Scholem and Benjamin, but also brought out "a deep-seated bitterness and disillusionment over the images of one another that we had fashioned for ourselves."[26] As often proved to be the case in subsequent years, such mutual idealizations diminished with greater intimacy. After the war, their political and intellectual paths diverged still further. In the early 1920s Scholem was more "excited by Palestine than by the German revolution," while Benjamin was emphatic in his view that history as sphere of action was "incapable of fulfillment." Rejecting the promiscuous amalgamation of history and utopia which he found, for example, in Ernst Bloch's classic *Spirit of Utopia* (1918), he wrote that "the Kingdom of God is not the *telos* of the historical dynamic."[27] Benjamin's essays of the early 1920s took on an increasingly "anarcho-messianic" tone, distinguishing "pure violence" from the means-ends violence of the State and of the European revolutionary tradition. The political cataclysm of the postwar years was registered in terms of an inner conflict between language as the nonviolent sphere of redemption, and a Sorelian politics of revolutionary action.[28] Consistent with the inherent dilemma of messianism there is an unresolved tension between his antipathy to history and his embrace of revolutionary violence, between his total contempt for the German political landscape and his attraction to the "higher ethic" of the "deed." By the mid-1920s his apolitical stance had become a politics opposed to political goals.

The early 1920s were also personally difficult for Benjamin. In 1921 his relations with his parents completely broke down, his marriage to Dora Pollak (born Dora Kellner) collapsed (though they continued to live together intermittently until 1929), and a passionate liaison with Jula Cohn, sister of his school friend Alfred Cohn, ended with her marriage to another friend, Fritz Radt. Benjamin's study of Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, a novel of two couples whose loves tragically cross, is in part an evocation of his own circumstances at that time.[29] This period of personal disequilibrium coincided with Scholem's decision to emigrate to Jerusa-

[26] Scholem, *W.B.*, p. 68.
[27] Walter Benjamin, "Theologico-Political Fragment," *Reflections*, p. 312.
[28] See Rabinbach, "Modern German Jewish Messianism," p. 119.
[29] See the excellent brief biographical study by Bernd Witte, *Walter Benjamin* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1985), pp. 43–48.

lem in 1923, provoking Benjamin to consider a similar move. But, as Scholem observed, "Benjamin himself displayed an attitude of reserve toward Palestine precisely in the year in which the catastrophic development of inflation and the general breakdown of interpersonal relationships rendered the prospect of emigration acute for him."[30] In November Benjamin noted that "as regards Palestine, at this time there is neither a practical possibility nor a theoretical necessity for me to go there."[31] This reserve and ambivalence persisted, in varying degree, throughout the 1920s and well into the period after 1933.

Much less ambivalent were Benjamin's growing apprehensions about relations between Germans and Jews, which he elaborated in a letter to the critic Florens Christian Rang, whose "Christian-messianic" spirit was kindred to his own:

> Here, if anywhere, we are at the heart of the contemporary Jewish question: the Jew today, even if he *publicly* stands up for the best German cause, abandons it. Since every public German expression is necessarily purchased (in the deepest sense), it cannot be accompanied by any certificate of authenticity. Only in another way can the secret relations between Germans and Jews be legitimately maintained. For the rest, I believe that my sentence is valid: that everything in German-Jewish relations that today has a visible impact, works toward its destruction, and a healthy complementarity of the noble nature of both peoples today requires a silence about their ties to each other.[32]

Benjamin's insistence on a "secret" relationship to German traditions and a "healthy complementarity" is instructive. Scholem too believed in a "secret" core of tradition, but he did not think it could be found outside of Judaism itself.

In 1924 another difference began to divide the two friends. While on vacation in Capri Benjamin met and fell in love with Asja Lacis, "a Russian revolutionary from Riga," as he put it, who offered him "an intensive insight into the relevance of radical communism."[33] Through conversations with Lacis and with Bloch, who was also in Capri, Benjamin began his long encounter with Marxism. Among the first books he consulted at Bloch's recommendation was Georg Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*. Lukács's messianic vision of the proletarian revo-

[30] Scholem, *W.B.*, pp. 116–17.

[31] Letter of Walter Benjamin to Florens Christian Rang, November 18, 1923, *Briefe*, p. 311.

[32] Ibid., p. 310.

[33] Witte, *Walter Benjamin*, p. 54; Scholem, *W.B.*, p. 122. Lacis describes their meeting in her *Revolutionär im Beruf: Berichte über Meyerhold, Brecht, Benjamin und Piscator*, ed. Hildegard Brenner (Munich: Rogner & Bernhard, 1971), pp. 41–51.

lution as the practical solution to all of the knotty epistemological problems posed by classical German philosophy naturally ignited a strong attraction, though even before reading it Benjamin predicted that "my essential nihilism" would assert itself against Lukács's hyper-Hegelianism. If Benjamin's embrace of Marxism was enthusiastic, it was hardly orthodox. Even at the outset it was colored by the political and ethical ambiguities that his anarchist leanings—especially the ideas of Sorel—already posed so acutely in the early 1920s.

Scholem did not conceal his "misgivings and apprehensions," noting that he "knew more than he [Benjamin] did about the practices of the Communists—not only through my brother, with whom I had had long and rather heated discussions . . . but also on the basis of my own experience in Palestine."[34] Scholem's complex relationship with his older (by two years) brother Werner and Werner's deep and longstanding communist involvement (he was a leading figure in the KPD's left wing until he was finally expelled in 1926, and remained a Reichstag delegate for some time afterward) contributed to Scholem's apprehensions. This association was not wholly lost on Benjamin, who commented ironically on the "elective affinity between Walter Benjamin and Werner Scholem." (Scholem's concern for and frustration with his brother, arrested by the Gestapo in 1933, is also a theme of this correspondence.)[35]

For Scholem, Benjamin's Marxism was always an alien component in his thought, though he conceded much later that "this interlocking of the two elements that by nature are incapable of balance" accounts for the "profound brilliance" of his Marxist writings.[36] To Scholem's charge that he had "put himself behind some principles" which were once foreign to him, Benjamin replied in 1926 that he could hardly "refrain from the study, from the practice, in which things (and relations) and the masses interact." Yet, from a Jewish point of view, he added that "a 'just' radical politics, which does not claim to be anything more than politics, can always be useful for Jewry and, what is infinitely more important, will always find Jewry useful for its own purposes." The diminished status accorded to "politics" is worth emphasizing. In any case, he admitted that Scholem was, at least in concrete matters, "far more at home in [his] current life and decisions than I am in mine."[37]

Scholem's version of Benjamin's divided self does not have to be taken at face value. Even during his student days as a disciple of Wyneken, Benjamin's ethical ideals were tied to a political program, just as his

[34] Scholem, *W.B.*, p. 122
[35] Walter Benjamin to Gershom Scholem, December 22, 1924, *Briefe*, p. 368.
[36] Scholem, *W.B.*, p. 124.
[37] Benjamin to Scholem, May 29, 1926, *Briefe*, p. 426.

linguistic messianism was tied to his antipathy to wartime politics. And it is no less true of Scholem himself that he conceived of his early Zionism in terms of the Kabbalah and its nihilistic conception of spiritual renewal. We can afford to be generous in retrospect. Scholem's assertion that the "split" between Benjamin's "metaphysical mode of thinking" and his "Marxist mode" left him "a theologian marooned in the realm of the profane" assumes, after all, that such a leap into praxis is somehow uncharacteristic for the messianic sensibility.[38]

Moreover, the attempt to disentangle these elements, whether from the Marxist or the theological side, yield little for a thinker like Benjamin, in whom, as in Freud's famous analogy of Rome, "all the earlier phases of development continue to exist alongside the latest one." The exhausting polemics between Benjaminians "of the left" and "of the right" during the 1970s attests to the poverty of the endeavor.[39] Benjamin gives no indication that he suppressed or abandoned earlier conceptions for later ones. In the same letter to Scholem, he emphasized that he was "not ashamed of my earlier anarchism" and that he "considered communist 'goals' to be nonsensical and nonexistent." This, he added, did not diminish the value of "communist action" at all, since it was a "corrective to its goals," and "because there is no such thing as meaningful *political* goals." If he were to join the Communist Party (needless to say, he didn't) he would "always proceed in a radical manner, but never consistently."[40] Messianic impatience demanded acts, not ends, which remained outside the realm of human affairs. As the letters in this volume indicate, even in 1932, during the first months of his exile on the island of Ibiza, Benjamin resumed the highly esoteric and messianic reflections on the correspondence theory of language which he had first set down in 1916 and discussed with Scholem in Berne in 1918.

Ironically, Scholem did not intend to become a scholar when he arrived in Jerusalem. But after serving briefly as librarian of the nascent university, he quickly advanced to a professorship in Jewish mysticism after the Hebrew University was established on Mt. Scopus in 1925. By contrast, Benjamin's academic career was far less auspicious. In 1925, after much "inner resistance" he completed his *Habilitation* on baroque drama, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (*The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*). The first chapter, entitled "Epistemo-critical Prologue," surely one of the most impenetrable philosophical statements in the Ger-

[38] See Gershom Scholem, "Walter Benjamin," *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, pp. 187–88; Scholem, *W.B.*, pp. 123–25, and *passim*.

[39] For the prototypical Marxist defense see Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso, 1981).

[40] Walter Benjamin to Gershom Scholem, May 29, 1926, *Briefe*, p. 426.

man language, was characterized by its author as a text of "boundless *chutzpah*."[41] Yet it presents Benjamin's most essential ideas in a highly compressed and abstract form. In this prologue we find an exposition of his crucial concept of "origin," through which the essence of phenomena, as they will one day be revealed in light of messianic fulfillment, can be glimpsed in their incomplete, ephemeral, and empirical existence. Here also is the "monadic" character of authentic knowledge "in which every idea contains the image of the world." Though it deals with seventeenth-century drama it is at the same time a commentary on aesthetic modernism which sets the microcosm, or fragment, in opposition to systems of thought or artworks whose totalizing or aestheticist pretenses offer more than they can deliver.[42] In this aesthetic, which condemns the work of art that lays claim to classical completeness, we can see both the Jewish proscription of idolatry and, at the same time, the modernist regard for allegorical representation. Indeed, Benjamin explicitly connects them by rejecting the notion that art could "be appointed a councillor of the conscience" or that it could "permit what is represented, rather than the actual representation, to be the object of attention."[43] The "anticlassical" attitude required a "melancholy immersion" in the detail or allegory as a possible site of truth; it opposed the illusory claims of art and metaphysics to "symbolically" represent reality—a central component of Benjamin's messianic modernism even in his later explicitly Marxist writings.

The hermetic *Trauerspiel*, published in 1928, was the rock on which Benjamin's academic career in Germany foundered. After he withdrew it from the University of Frankfurt (it was certain to be rejected), Benjamin assumed the role of literary critic and *feuilletonist* for a number of periodicals, including the prestigious *Frankfurter Zeitung*. Benjamin's position outside of the university made him dependent on his writing—he became a master of the review form, a largely unacknowledged accomplishment—but it also allowed him to pursue his "elliptical lifestyle Berlin–Paris." And it allowed him to indulge his "fanatical travel addiction" resulting in the masterful portraits of cities (Naples, Rome, Marseilles, and, significantly, Moscow) that he published in the 1920s. In December 1926 Benjamin visited the Soviet Union, homeland of the revolution, to renew his liaison with Lacis. Hardly the model revolutionary tourist of the 1920s, Benjamin's *Moscow Diary* reveals him adrift among

[41] Walter Benjamin to Gershom Scholem, February 19, 1925, *Briefe*, p. 372.

[42] For a thorough discussion see Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 90–106; also see Bernd Witte, *Walter Benjamin, Der Intellektuelle als Kritiker: Untersuchungen zu seinem Frühwerk* (Stuttgart: Metzler Verlag, 1976).

[43] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: New Left Books, 1977), p. 105.