

Gershom Scholem and America

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“I rode with acquaintances in their car back here from Cincinnati across the Virginia mountains, a wonderful tour for the most part. Trying to see something of the country without a car is a project doomed to failure.”¹ Thus Gershom Scholem wrote to Walter Benjamin from New York City in the spring of 1938. Scholem had come to the United States for the first time earlier that year to spend a semester in New York. He had made the trip to America from his adopted city of Jerusalem to deliver a series of lectures, the Stroock Lectures, on Jewish mysticism at the Jewish Institute of Religion. In New York and in Cincinnati Scholem visited libraries that contained Hebrew manuscripts and books essential to his work. In New York he met Theodor W. Adorno for the first time, a meeting that led to a long and productive friendship critical to the making of Benjamin’s intellectual legacy.² Although Scholem encountered America as a fully formed scholar, the country would have a decisive impact on his later career and, to a lesser extent, on his scholarship.

Scholem and America thus seems a relatively straightforward subject. Dozens of correspondents, a number of distinguished speaking engagements, and a handful of visiting professorships all seem to make for a conventional story of a respected academic and intellectual for whom the United States was a source of patronage and validation over a long and celebrated career. There is a certain truth to this simple story. Yet, as with so much else relating to

1. Scholem to Benjamin, May 6, 1938, in *Complete Correspondence*, 219.

2. Adorno and Scholem, *Briefwechsel*.

Scholem, the harder one looks, the more opaque things appear. To recount the entirety of Scholem's reception in the United States would take far too long and would be far too tedious. Rather, I hope here to make a single point: Scholem's relationship with America is simultaneously a story of extraordinary success and one of abject failure. I insist on the coexistence of these two poles, but before doing so, I think it important to emphasize a sense of proportion. As the title of his memoir *From Berlin to Jerusalem* suggests, the two most significant places in Scholem's life were the Germany of his youth and the Palestine and later Israel of his adulthood.³ America never competed for pride of place in Scholem's intellectual world.⁴ Nonetheless, the country played an important role, particularly in the second half of his career. Scholem's reception in America turned a professor of mysticism in Jerusalem into an intellectual celebrity abroad. At the same time, in the 1960s and 1970s, Scholem increasingly defined himself against America.

Scholem's engagement with America begins in the late 1930s and continues until the years before his death in December 1982. By the time he died, Scholem was a household name among American intellectuals, particularly in and around New York City. This was no accident. Scholem was actively involved in curating his own reception in three distinct milieus: his adopted homeland, the country of his birth, and finally the United States. He interacted with two distinct intellectual circles in the United States. The first included close colleagues and friends, some of whom he knew from Germany or from Jerusalem, who had settled in the United States. These colleagues—Shalom Spiegel and Saul Lieberman, as well as Salo Baron and Harry Wolfson—were well-known scholars of Judaica and were roughly Scholem's contemporaries. Scholem corresponded with them, exchanged views in public and in private, dedicated articles in their honor, and contributed to their *Festschriften* for nearly half a century: in short, the stuff of academic life.

These colleagues were instrumental in arranging Scholem's initial visits to the United States and in overseeing the publication of some of his work in English. They were essential for the making of Scholem in America, but without a second and overlapping group Scholem probably would have remained simply another academic who had come to the United States, given a few talks, and published a few books in English. This second group can be catego-

3. Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem*. On Scholem's memoirs, see Campanini, "Case for Sainte-Beuve."

4. Scholem himself emphasized the centrality of Palestine in his memoirs. For the centrality of Germany, see Mosse, "Gershom Scholem as a German Jew"; Zadoff, *From Berlin to Jerusalem and Back*; and Necker, Morlok, and Morgenstern, *Gershom Scholem in Deutschland*.

rized somewhat loosely as the New York Intellectuals: men such as Daniel Bell, Irving Howe, and Norman Podhoretz, and, significantly, women such as Hannah Arendt and Cynthia Ozick, all of whom played a vital role in turning Scholem into an intellectual icon.⁵ Unlike the first group, many but not all the figures in the second group were younger than Scholem, and their encounter with him took place in the latter decades of Scholem's life. In this respect, as in so many others, Arendt was an exceptional figure. Within this group a certain paradox emerges, a critical point about Scholem and America: the very success of Scholem's reception in the United States was simultaneously its failure. This reception was a success in all the ways an academic could desire: Scholem was published, anthologized, translated, interviewed, and profiled. Yet his reception was also a missed encounter, less easy to define but no less important to articulate.

Scholem's meteoric rise in the literary world of America had the perverse effect that most of what he wrote was taken at face value. To make this point, I chart his engagement with the United States through a brief chronology and then turn to one example: a comparison between the reception of his monumental study of Sabbatai Sevi as a two-volume Hebrew work in Israel in the 1950s with the one-volume English translation in the United States in the 1970s. I conclude with a brief survey of remarks Scholem made in passing about American Jewish writers and scholars in the 1960s and 1970s. These comments offer another perspective about America's role in Scholem's life. Not only was America a source of patronage and prestige, but it also provided him with an alibi against which he defined himself.

Chronology

By the mid-1930s Scholem had lived in Jerusalem for well over a decade. Having first worked as a librarian at the Jewish and National University Library, he later taught courses on Jewish mysticism at the recently founded Hebrew University in Jerusalem.⁶ In the late 1920s he published two substantial works of bibliography: a descriptive bibliographic guide to the literature of the Kabbalah, and descriptions of the kabbalistic manuscripts in the library where he worked.⁷ First as a lecturer and then as a professor, Scholem assembled a glittering gallery of students. By the late 1930s this circle included Chaim Wirszubski,

5. On the term, see Howe, "New York Intellectuals." Howe's essay first appeared in *Commentary* in 1968. On Scholem as an icon, see Aschheim, *Beyond the Border*, chap. 3.

6. On Scholem's appointment, see Myers, *Re-inventing the Jewish Past*, 58n18, 159n40.

7. For the former, see Scholem, *Bibliographia Kabbalistica*; for the latter, see Scholem, *Hebrew Manuscripts in the National Library*.

Isaiah Tishby, and Moshe Perlmutter; later it included Joseph Weiss and Jacob Taubes. Between his immigration to Palestine in 1923 and his first visit to the United States in 1938, Scholem wrote a series of brilliant and highly technical articles in his native German and his adopted Hebrew. In the early 1930s Scholem was a regular contributor to *Kiryat Sefer*, the bibliographic journal of the Jewish and National University Library, and *Tarbiz*, the journal of Jewish studies founded by the great Talmudist J. N. Epstein and affiliated with the Institute of Jewish Studies at the Hebrew University.

In 1937 Scholem received an invitation from Shalom Spiegel to come to New York and lecture on Jewish mysticism. At the time Spiegel worked at the Jewish Institute of Religion, an educational institution loosely affiliated with Jewish Reform. A native of Habsburg Romania who had studied at the rabbinical seminary in Vienna, Spiegel had moved to Palestine before immigrating to New York. He was a scholar of medieval Hebrew literature whose writings on *piyyut* in Ashkenaz have the rare quality of being works of literature in and of themselves.⁸ Spiegel and Scholem had known each other in Palestine, and the invitation marked the beginning of a long and fruitful correspondence.⁹ Spiegel's invitation, first broached in a letter sent from New York in June 1937, had evidently been preceded by several discussions between the two when Spiegel was in Jerusalem.¹⁰ Over two letters Spiegel made it clear that he and Stephen Wise, the head of the Jewish Institute of Religion who would serve as Scholem's official host, hoped that Scholem would deliver five or six lectures in English on Jewish mysticism. Spiegel specified that the lectures should be less technical than Scholem's earlier written work. As if to sweeten the deal, Spiegel emphasized that a visit to New York, with its vibrant intellectual life, would allow Scholem to consult the extraordinary collections of Hebrew manuscripts in the United States.

Spiegel's invitation was perfectly timed. Scholem was close to forty and at the height of his scholarly powers. He had recently discovered Sabbatianism and had just published one of his most important articles, "Mitzvah ha-ba-ah

8. For one instance that later appeared in English, see Spiegel, *Last Trial*; for an account of Spiegel, see Goldin, "About Shalom Spiegel."

9. A few samples of Scholem's letters to Spiegel were published posthumously. See Scholem, *Briefe*. For Spiegel's letters to Scholem, see below; Spiegel's papers, still unprocessed, are housed at the Jewish Theological Seminary Library in New York.

10. Shalom Spiegel to Gershom Scholem, June 18, 1937, in Gershom Scholem Papers, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem, Arc. 40 1599 01 2523.1. A second undated letter from Spiegel to Scholem appears in the same file. As it refers to the contents of the earlier letter from June 18, 1937, but discusses Scholem's upcoming lecture series in more specific terms, I assume that it dates to slightly later in 1937.

ba-averah: Le-havanat ha-shabtaut.” One might render the full title in English as “Fulfillment by Transgression: Toward an Understanding of Sabbatianism.” It eventually appeared in an English translation by Hillel Halkin as “Redemption through Sin.”¹¹ Scholem had sent Spiegel a copy of the article, and in his response Spiegel had followed up on their earlier discussions about the possibility of Scholem’s visit to New York. The pressure and challenge of delivering the public lectures that became “Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism” prompted Scholem to present a synthetic account of his field from rabbinic antiquity up to Hasidic modernity. Moreover, it forced him to improve his English. While Scholem drafted the lectures in German, he delivered six of them in English and one in Hebrew. For the English translations, Scholem had the help of George Lichtheim, a German intellectual who lived in Jerusalem, and Morton Smith, an American student at the Hebrew University who went on to a distinguished career as an ancient historian in the United States.¹² Over and above these substantial intellectual benefits, the invitation afforded Scholem the opportunity to leave Jerusalem at an opportune time. Mandate Palestine between 1936 and 1939 was punctuated by increasingly violent conflict, which Scholem referred to in letters to his mother, Betty Scholem, and to Benjamin. The extended stay in New York provided Scholem a respite from the violence and allowed him to travel through Europe on his return from Palestine.

Scholem delivered his lectures early in 1938. New York seems to have lived up to Spiegel’s promise in his initial letters of invitation. In a March 1938 letter to Benjamin, Scholem referred to “the flood of New York life,” mentioned the lectures that he had completed “with enormous success,” and said that “I am now spending all my time studying the manuscripts.”¹³ Scholem spent much of the summer of 1938 traveling in Europe, where he attempted but failed to see Benjamin. He returned to Jerusalem in late September. In early November he wrote a long letter to Benjamin that picked up the thread of the latter’s proposed book on Franz Kafka from earlier correspondence. The letter also included a short sketch of Scholem’s stay in America, replete with gossip—he had gotten along with Adorno but could not stand Max Horkheimer—and general impressions of the United States. “It’s a most attractive country,” he declared, but added, “where life is easy only if you have sufficient means at your disposal.” Scholem’s impressions of life in New York

11. In Scholem, *Messianic Idea in Judaism*. On this article, see Alter, *Necessary Angels*, 37–38; Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion*, chap. 14; and Lazier, *God Interrupted*, pt. 3. On Halkin’s translation of the title, see Maciejko, *Mixed Multitude*, 21.

12. On Lichtheim, see Laqueur, “George Lichtheim.” On Smith, see also Scholem and Smith, *Correspondence*.

13. Scholem to Benjamin, March 25, 1938, in *Complete Correspondence*, 214–15.

were written with sympathy, distance, and concern. He emphasized that “there is widespread openness to and interest in matters Americans aren’t supposed to be interested in,” and even conceded that “the intellectual atmosphere is better than we in Europe are accustomed to presume.” Scholem’s positioning of himself as a European would mark almost all his contact with America and his correspondence with Americans. He adopted the polite condescension of a European cosmopolitan rather than the cloying inferiority of a Jewish settler in the Orient. He also seems to have understood the parochialism that marked American life and even speculated on its causes: “The security they feel in their awareness that they are still essentially protected from airborne attack by the two oceans and the present state of technology influences their behavior in the extreme.”¹⁴ Scholem’s letter to Benjamin, written over several days, was completed on November 8, 1938, the day before Kristallnacht.

For the next two and a half years, between his return to Jerusalem in September 1938 and May 1941, as the world descended into war, Scholem labored to revise the draft of the lectures into the text of a book. In 1941 the Schocken Publishing House in Palestine issued Scholem’s *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. Its dedication to Benjamin has been read as Scholem’s epitaph for his recently deceased friend.¹⁵ The book also contained a short preface that amounted to a declaration of war on any scholar who had written on the Kabbalah or any other aspect of Jewish mysticism prior to Scholem.¹⁶ All the ambivalence and complexity that had characterized Scholem’s discussion of America in his correspondence with Benjamin during and after his 1938 visit disappeared in the preface’s final paragraph. Immediately before offering his thanks to Spiegel for serving as his host, Scholem referred to the scene of his lectures that made up the book as “the great desert of New York.”¹⁷

It was over a decade before Scholem returned to the United States. In March 1946, as he prepared to return to Europe for the first time since the war, Scholem informed Morton Smith that he had been invited back by Stephen Wise to deliver another set of lectures at the Jewish Institute of Religion.¹⁸

14. Scholem to Benjamin, November 6–8, 1938, in *Complete Correspondence*, 234.

15. Anidjar, “*Our Place in al-Andalus*,” chap. 3.

16. On Scholem and his scholarly predecessors, see Schäfer, “Gershom Scholem und die ‘Wissenschaft des Judentums’”; and Abrams, “Defining Modern Academic Scholarship.”

17. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, ix. For a recurrence of this phrase, see Scholem to Smith, July 3, 1961, in *Correspondence*, 128.

18. Scholem to Smith, March 24, 1946, in *Correspondence*, 14.

Scholem had originally planned to spend the late spring and early summer in Europe before continuing on to New York. This was not to be. As Scholem's many letters attest, the trip to Europe to assess the fate of Jewish books in the immediate wake of the war was a grueling experience. The Hebrew University had delegated Scholem, along with Abraham Yaari, to identify and, with luck, acquire Jewish books that the Nazis had stolen from Jews and their communities before and during the war and that were now in Allied hands. Scholem's trip, which was so difficult that he canceled his plans to continue on to the United States and returned to Jerusalem, has been vividly reconstructed by Noam Zadoff.¹⁹ Scholem's change of plans meant that he did not travel to the United States until the spring of 1949, after most of the 1948 war had already occurred.

Scholem may not have traveled to America in the summer of 1946, but his journey to postwar Germany involved a prolonged and sustained contact with the US government and with American Jewry. The fate of Jewish property in Europe was of central concern to American Jews even before the war ended. In 1944 prominent American Jews led by Salo Baron established the Commission on European Jewish Cultural Reconstruction to coordinate the rescue and repatriation of Jewish property with other institutions worldwide, including the Hebrew University. In 1947 Baron's commission grew into Jewish Cultural Reconstruction Inc., which received authority from the US Office of Military Government to assume responsibility for the identification and dispersal of Jewish property in Allied zones.²⁰ Scholem's trip to the Allied depot in Offenbach occurred in the spring of 1946, as various Jewish institutions competed to assert their claims. During his time in Offenbach, Scholem examined and classified Hebrew manuscripts according to a system of roman numerals from I through V. With the help of the American military chaplain Herbert Friedman, who remained in Europe after Scholem had returned to Palestine, five boxes containing the most valuable manuscripts labeled I and II were transferred from Offenbach to the offices of the Jewish Agency in Paris. From Paris, Friedman drove the boxes to Antwerp, where they accompanied Chaim Weizman's personal library to Palestine.²¹

Scholem's involvement with the removal of Hebrew manuscripts from Allied-occupied Europe to Mandate Palestine points to a crucial aspect of his

19. Zadoff, *From Berlin to Jerusalem and Back*, chap. 5.

20. Herman, "Hashavat Avedah."

21. *Ibid.*, 169–80.

encounter with America that an examination of his ideas and their circulation might otherwise leave unaccounted. In the immediate postwar period, Scholem fought for the priority of the Hebrew University and, by extension, for the Jewish settlement in Palestine to serve as the principal custodian of the Jewish cultural materials that remained in Europe. Yet the primary institution through which the examination and allocation of Jewish cultural possessions occurred was American and run by Americans. Between 1947 and 1950, when the Jewish Cultural Reconstruction carried out its most significant work, Scholem was often overwhelmed by his American colleagues. His correspondence with Hannah Arendt, who worked for long periods as the executive secretary of the Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, reflects his increasing frustration. In the spring of 1950 he wrote to Arendt about the fate of Jewish archival material from Germany that was designated for a memorial library to German Jewry at the Jewish Institute of Religion:

I am sorry to say I have never been asked about this matter and I consider it of great importance that the position of the Hebrew University is made clear to everybody concerned. Archival material shipped to America is not a matter for the American institutions alone to be decided upon and we expect no decision to be taken without consultation with us. I fail to understand why the material has not in the first place been shipped to Israel, but, conceded the technical necessity for shipping it to the U.S.A., this does not change the claim in principle of the Hebrew University to have these materials assigned to it.²²

Possession was nine-tenths of the law, both for the manuscripts that Scholem had identified in Offenbach and that ended up in Jerusalem and for the materials shipped to the United States. Scholem knew this all too well and repeatedly asserted the precedence of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Scholem made two extended visits to the United States over the next decade. In the spring of 1949 he returned to New York to deliver a second set of Stroock lectures at the Jewish Institute of Religion. The final chapter of *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* had been titled “Hasidism: The Latest Phase,” and Scholem devoted the entirety of these lectures to “major trends in Hasidism.” Unlike the first series of lectures, which became Scholem’s first English book and established his international reputation, “Major Trends in Hasidism” did not appear in print in his lifetime.²³ Although he repeatedly returned to the study of Hasidism in the ensuing decades, notably in a memo-

22. Scholem to Arendt, April, 6, 1950, in Arendt and Scholem, *Der Briefwechsel*, 255.

23. Meir, “From Scholem’s Archive.”

rial lecture for his student Joseph Weiss delivered in London, Scholem never wrote a synthetic account of the movement, as he did with Sabbatai Sevi and Sabbatianism and with the origins of the Kabbalah.²⁴

Scholem next arrived in the United States in late 1956 to serve as a visiting professor in the spring of 1957 at Brown University, a position arranged for him by his longtime friend and former student Morton Smith. If Scholem's second set of lectures in America dealt with one of the most contemporary movements of Jewish mysticism, his third treated an ancient theme. Scholem gave the lectures, which treated gnosticism and the Hekhalot literature of late antiquity, in New York during the spring of 1957, and they subsequently appeared as an English book in 1960.²⁵ The book attempts to trace the relationship between gnosticism and early Jewish mysticism, a subject that Scholem had been interested in for many years. It remains one of his most speculative and challenging works. The level of difficulty may not have been accidental. Scholem was lecturing on this occasion at the Jewish Theological Seminary, at a time "when the faculty of the Jewish Theological Seminary was the most formidable array of Jewish scholars ever assembled in a single institution."²⁶ Spiegel, Lieberman, and H. L. Ginsberg were all on the faculty, and a few blocks south Baron taught at Columbia. Here again, one can see the intellectual relationships Scholem had formed in Jerusalem decades earlier on full display. Lieberman, who had been a student at the Institute for Jewish Studies at the Hebrew University in the 1930s, delivered perhaps the most celebrated introduction in Jewish studies for one of Scholem's lectures: "Nonsense is nonsense, but the history of nonsense is a very important science."²⁷ Allegedly as penance for his caustic remark, Lieberman furnished one of the appendixes to the published lectures that treated the Talmudic origins of an esoteric teaching discussed in Scholem's book.

The 1957 work on ancient Jewish mysticism marked the final time Scholem delivered a lecture series in the United States. Over the next twenty-five years Scholem returned on occasion to America, notably as a visiting professor at Boston University in 1975. If the period between 1938 and 1957 marked an intense exchange between Scholem and Jewish scholars in America, as well as considerable tension between Scholem and his American colleagues

24. On Scholem and Hasidism, see Scholem, *Final Phase*.

25. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition*.

26. Wieseltier, "Sidney," 34.

27. The phrase appears in Lieberman, "How Much Greek in Jewish Palestine?," 135, cited in Abrams, "Defining Modern Academic Scholarship," 267–68. Two lines later Lieberman cites Scholem's *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* (135n4).

over the fate of Jewish books in postwar Europe, the succeeding two decades represented a different stage of Scholem's engagement with the United States.

Sabbatai Sevi in America

At almost the same time that Scholem was delivering his lectures in New York, his two-volume history of Sabbatai Sevi and the Sabbatian movement had appeared in Hebrew in Israel. The work built on Scholem's earlier studies of Sabbatianism, such as the chapter "Sabbatianism and Mystical Heresy" in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* and his aforementioned article "Redemption through Sin." Scholem sought to recount the history of a movement that had formed around a Jewish messiah named Sabbatai Sevi and his prophet Nathan of Gaza in 1665–66. Drawing on a wealth of sources in print and in manuscript, but largely eschewing those that could have been found in state archives, Scholem demonstrated that the messianic enthusiasm had spread throughout the Jewish world from Yemen to England, Palestine to Poland. He reconstructed the frenzy in all its detail and sought to reconstruct the mind-set of the messiah and his prophet in the year and a half during which they spread their faith. Scholem focused on the spectacular suspension of norms within Jewish law that he identified as a defining feature of the Sabbatian movement. Equally, if not more important, he insisted on studying the development of Sabbatianism as a movement within Judaism even after Sabbatai Sevi's forced conversion to Islam at the behest of the Ottoman sultan in September 1666.

When *Sabbatai Sevi* appeared in Hebrew, Scholem was excoriated in the popular press and in scholarly journals. In the newspaper *Ha-arets*, the literary critic Baruch Kurzweil attacked him on several fronts.²⁸ Kurzweil rejected Scholem's account of Sabbatianism as the point of origin for Jewish modernity, denied the political significance that Scholem had attributed to the movement, and dismissed Scholem's claims about the nature of Judaism, stating pointedly that "Judaism is whatever Gershom Scholem decides it is." In the academic journals, one of Scholem's colleagues, R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, and one of his former students, Isaiah Tishby, wrote extensive and disparaging reviews. In a wicked gesture, Werblowsky alluded to Scholem's attack on nineteenth-century German Jewish scholarship in the title of his review.²⁹ Tishby

28. Kurzweil, "Notes on 'Sabbatai Sevi' by Gershom Scholem." On Kurzweil and Scholem, see Myers, "Scholem-Kurzweil Debate and Modern Jewish Historiography"; and Zadoff, "Debate between Baruch Kurzweil and Gershom Scholem."

29. Werblowsky, "Reflections on 'Sabbatai Sevi' by G. Scholem." The title alludes to Scholem, "Reflections on Jewish Studies."

sought to chip away at Scholem's scholarly edifice and, in a way that neither Kurzweil nor Werblowsky had attempted, actually challenged Scholem's interpretation of specific sources and individuals.³⁰

Shortly after Scholem published the Hebrew version of *Sabbatai Sevi*, he published in the *Eranos Jahrbuch* his celebrated essay "Towards an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism."³¹ The essay expands on many of the ideas Scholem had developed about Jewish messianism in the opening chapter of *Sabbatai Sevi*. Yet its place of publication was hardly incidental. The *Eranos Jahrbuch* published papers from the annual conferences on the history of religions held in Ascona, Switzerland. From 1949 to 1979 Scholem addressed the Eranos Conferences, lecturing in his native German before a distinguished audience of scholars who did not hail from the narrow confines of Jewish studies.³² Scholem's presence at Eranos echoed far beyond Switzerland. Many papers that first appeared in the *Eranos Jahrbuch* were later collected as volumes of essays published in German and in English.³³ Moreover, Scholem's presence at Eranos facilitated his contact with a new set of patrons that had a decisive impact on the making of *Sabbatai Sevi* as an English book.

The central figure at Eranos in its early years had been Carl Gustav Jung, about whose past Scholem had deep reservations.³⁴ Nevertheless, the Eranos Conferences and the Bollingen Foundation, a philanthropic organization founded by Mary Mellon and Paul Mellon that funded the Eranos Conferences for a time, proved decisive in the making of the English translation. The Bollingen Foundation had a publishing house devoted to issuing the works of Jung and other figures as diverse as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Paul Valéry, as well as a fellowship program that supported scholarship such as Charles de Tolnay's work on Michelangelo and Alfred Kazin's study of American literature. At the 1952 Eranos Conference the publisher Kurt Wolff had urged Scholem to apply for a fellowship to complete the Hebrew edition of *Sabbatai Sevi*, a grant that he received and acknowledged in its preface. Yet after the book's appearance in Hebrew, it was hardly a matter of course that an English translation of *Sabbatai Sevi* would follow. An early adviser to the Bollingen Foundation who also had links to Jung, but who was not a Jungian, was the

30. Tishby, "On Gershom Scholem's Approach to the Study of Sabbatianism."

31. Scholem, "Towards an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism." The essay first appeared as "Zum Verständnis der messianischen Idee im Judentum."

32. On Scholem at Eranos, see Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion*; Dan, "Gershom Scholem, *Eranos*, and *Religion after Religion*"; and Zadoff, *From Berlin to Jerusalem and Back*, 294–331.

33. Scholem, *Zur Kabbala und ihrer Symbolik*.

34. On Scholem and Jung, see Zadoff, *From Berlin to Jerusalem and Back*, 299–306.

Berkeley anthropologist Paul Radin. The son of a rabbi, Radin had been born in Poland in 1883 and raised in New York City. Radin understood the importance of *Sabbatai Sevi* and convinced the Bollingen Foundation and its president, John D. Barrett, to fund Werblowsky's translation into English.³⁵ In 1967 the Bollingen Foundation had signed an agreement to publish future works with Princeton University Press, and Werblowsky's translation duly appeared under their joint imprint in 1973.

It was thus due to a series of American patrons that *Sabbatai Sevi* appeared as a one-volume English book. The English publication of *Sabbatai Sevi* presents several contrasts to Scholem's earlier work in English and in Hebrew. His two previous book-length studies in English, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* and *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition*, had both appeared under the imprint of Jewish publishing houses. While both books earned Scholem the respect and admiration of his colleagues, neither generated a sustained discussion in and of itself. The Hebrew edition of *Sabbatai Sevi*, by contrast, set off a storm of controversy about Scholem's ideological commitments to secular Zionism and anarchic nihilism in his scholarship. Between the Hebrew edition of *Sabbatai Sevi* in 1957 and its English translation in 1973, several events may have shaped the reception of the latter. The first was Scholem's participation in the controversy over Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. This heated exchange placed Scholem at the center of a burning contemporary issue.³⁶ By virtue of her 1951 publication *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and the force of her presence in New York, Arendt was a well-known figure in American intellectual life.³⁷ This was hardly the case with Scholem, whose byline in *Encounter Magazine*, one of the many places where his exchange with Arendt was published, labeled him "a world-famous scholar who is Professor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem."³⁸ The second was the publication in English of two volumes of Scholem's essays, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* in 1965 and *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* in 1971. These volumes, both of them paperbacks, presented a Scholem considerably more accessible than his previous book in English on Jewish gnosticism. They included some of his most celebrated pieces, some in German and others in English, in a sin-

35. McGuire, *Bollingen*, 152–54.

36. On Scholem and Arendt, see Raz-Krakotzkin, "Binationalism and Jewish Identity." On the reception of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, see Rabinbach, "Eichmann in New York."

37. King, *Arendt and America*.

38. Arendt and Scholem, "*Eichmann in Jerusalem*," 51.

gle volume. Perhaps most important, many of them treated subjects in the modern period.

If the Hebrew edition of *Sabbatai Sevi* ignited controversy and sparked scholarly debate, the English edition brought Scholem fulsome praise.³⁹ In the *New York Review of Books*, D. P. Walker confessed: “Being unable to read Hebrew and Aramaic, I have no firsthand knowledge of the main sources of Professor Scholem’s book; indeed what little acquaintance I have with Jewish religious thought comes almost entirely from his other works.”⁴⁰ What Walker had the decency to acknowledge, other writers about Scholem covered over with bombastic rhetoric. In the *New Yorker* George Steiner compared Scholem to Joseph Needham and Frances Yates: “These scholar-artists are, consciously or not, the legatees of the classic novel, and in particular of Proust. Theirs also is a ‘remembrance of things past’ so vivid that we enter into their world of documents and analysis so confidently as into our native scene. Gershom Scholem is of this family.”⁴¹ In the *New York Times Book Review* Ozick declared:

There are certain magisterial works of the human mind that alter ordinary comprehension so unpredictably and on so prodigious a scale that culture itself is set awry. . . . An accretion of fundamental insight takes on the power of a natural force. Gershom Scholem’s oeuvre has such a force and its massive keystone, “Sabbatai Sevi,” presses down on the gasping consciousness with the strength not simply of its invulnerable, almost tidal, scholarship, but of its singular instruction in the nature of man.⁴²

Rather than write about Sabbatai Sevi and Sabbatianism using Scholem’s work as a point of departure, as Kurzweil, Werblowsky, and Tishby had done, those writing about the English translation wrote about Scholem himself. The author had overwhelmed his subject.

Moreover, Scholem’s scholarly project had begun to make its way into American culture. Harold Bloom used Scholem’s work as the basis for his misguided attempt to trace a theory of literary influence with concepts from the Kabbalah.⁴³ Barnett Newman pointed to Scholem’s writings on the Kabbalah as the source of inspiration for his paintings and sculpture. In *Gravity’s*

39. The text of this paragraph appears in substantially the same form in Dweck, “Introduction to the Princeton Classics Edition,” lix–lx.

40. Walker, “Mystery in History.”

41. Steiner, “Inner Lights,” 172–73.

42. Ozick, “Slouching toward Smyrna.”

43. Bloom, *Kabbalah and Criticism*. On this work, see Wieseltier, “Summoning Up the Kabbalah.”

Rainbow Thomas Pynchon invoked kabbalistic concepts so frequently that they constitute a leitmotif. Early on, Pynchon described Captain Geoffrey “Pirate” Prentice listening to a record on the gramophone: “There to stumble into an orgy held by a Messiah no one has quite recognized yet, and to know, as your eyes meet, that you are his John the Baptist, his Nathan of Gaza, that it is you who must convince him of his Godhead, proclaim him to others, love him both profanely and in the Name of what he is.”⁴⁴ In *Sabbatai Sevi* Scholem had written: “Borrowing a metaphor from an earlier but in many ways analogous messianic movement, Nathan [of Gaza] was at once the John the Baptist and the Paul of the New Messiah.”⁴⁵ Later on in the novel, in a description of Nora Dodson-Truck, the wife of Sir Stephen Dodson-Truck, who had tutored one of the central characters, Slothrop, in rocketry, Pynchon wrote: “She must prove herself now—find some deeper forms of renunciation, deeper than Sabbatai Zvi’s apostasy before the sublime port.”⁴⁶ I cannot point with certainty to Pynchon’s reading of Scholem prior to the writing of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Yet Scholem’s chapter on Sabbatai Sevi in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, the repeated references to him in the essays in *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, and the long discussion of him in “Redemption through Sin” would have made such a reading possible.⁴⁷ Leon Wieseltier’s rebuke of Thomas B. Hess in the correspondence pages of the *New York Review of Books* should give one pause before pointing to sources about Sabbatai Sevi and the Kabbalah other than Scholem. Hess had written a monograph on Newman, which Wieseltier referred to in his discussion of Scholem’s impact on Newman’s art. When Hess wrote a fulminating letter to the *New York Review of Books* disavowing Scholem’s influence but maintaining Newman’s interest in the Kabbalah, Wieseltier responded: “He [Newman], like so many others, would certainly have known most of what he knew about Kabbalah from Scholem.”⁴⁸ The same could easily be said of Pynchon.

In the years that followed, this trend only increased.⁴⁹ Scholem became a field of study unto himself.⁵⁰ In 1979 David Biale wrote a book about

44. Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, 14.

45. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, 207.

46. Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, 639.

47. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, 74, 83, 90, 135. For Scholem as a source for Pynchon, see Weisenburger, “*Gravity’s Rainbow*” *Companion*, 144, 305, 377.

48. Wieseltier, “Response to Justus George Lawler.”

49. The text of this paragraph appears in substantially the same form in Dweck, “Introduction to the Princeton Classics Edition,” ix.

50. Weidener, *Gershom Scholem*; Aschheim, “Metaphysical Psychologist”; Kriegel, *Gershom Scholem*.

Scholem's thought that accepted his portrayal of Sabbatai Sevi and respectfully relegated the criticism the Hebrew edition had received to a brief summary.⁵¹ Bloom's contribution to a volume of essays he edited on Scholem constitutes the apotheosis of this trend: "The negative moment opens up, and what appears by the light of the sparks generated through that opening might be called Scholem's final and unstated paradox. Sabbatai Zevi, Nathan of Gaza, and Jacob Frank are no more and no less representative of Jewish spirituality than are, say, Maimonides, Judah Halevi, and Franz Rosenzweig."⁵² Bloom, Ozick, and Steiner were tourists in the subject, and like tourists they saw what they wanted to see. Scholem was taken at his word and had come to serve as a stand-in for Judaism itself. Very few people who wrote about *Sabbatai Sevi* in English had any firsthand knowledge of the material on which it was based. Instead of a sustained engagement with the actual sources that Scholem had used, his reviewers read Scholem and wrote about Scholem. He thus served as an alibi for engaging with something that had the patina of authenticity, that offered a touch of the real, an encounter with the Jewish tradition that enabled his readers to avoid the rabbis. Scholem's work in English enabled its readers to avoid the law.

Scholem on American Jewish Writers

Yet just as Scholem was becoming an icon in America, he had harsher and harsher things to say about it. When Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* appeared in 1969, Scholem wrote a scathing review of the book for *Ha-aretz*. He accused Roth of Jewish self-hatred and claimed that he had written the very book anti-Semites had hoped to write themselves for years. Scholem's acidic comments did not go unnoticed, and one of his colleagues from the Hebrew University challenged his criticism by calling attention to Roth's gifts as a writer. In response, Scholem conceded that his criticism had nothing to do with Roth's literary abilities and that he had read the book as a historian seeking to ascertain its social significance. He maintained that the Jewish community would be forced to pay a price for such a book, but he rejected any attempt to construe his own review as an attempt at self-censorship. He concluded: "True: we should not conceal anything out of fear of what the gentiles might say, and I myself have emphasized this simple truth in a number of my articles condemning Jewish apologetics. But we also need to understand and recognize that the declaration of this kind of truth, even a 'truth from America,' exacts a

51. Biale, *Gershom Scholem*, 155.

52. Bloom, "Scholem," 208–9.

price, and there is no need to be angry with the person who says so.”⁵³ Roth’s profanity, Scholem insisted, was bad for the Jews. Scholem associated Roth’s truth—the young Jewish man’s fascination with the *shiksa*—as a “truth from America.”

A year later Scholem published an article first delivered as a lecture in memory of his recently deceased student Joseph Weiss. “The Neutralization of the Messianic Element in Early Hasidism” argued that the Jewish pietism in eighteenth-century Poland and Lithuania known as Hasidism had transformed classical Jewish teachings about the doctrine of the Messiah. For Scholem, the early Hasidim had stripped the messianic teachings of Lurianic kabbalists of their acute apocalyptic sting by emphasizing the communion with God on a strictly personal level. They replaced collective messianism with a personal and mystical concept of salvation. Scholem had written the essay largely as a response to the claim made by Tishby, his former student and colleague, about the messianic character of early Hasidism. Scholem’s dispute with Tishby on this score was sharp but conducted well within the confines of normal scholarly disagreement. The tone of one of Scholem’s later footnotes, by contrast, was extremely, even aggressively, polemical. In the essay’s final section Scholem had called for an examination of the links between Sabbatianism and Hasidism: “Not only ideas stemming from the heretical theology of the sectarians, but also customs, which were destined to occupy a vital place in Hasidic group life[,] would have to be investigated in this connection.” In a note to this call for research he remarked:

This holds true for such customs as dancing, violent gestures during prayer, and probably also for the Sabbath meal. The extraordinary statements of Yafa [*sic*] Eliach in this connection, maintaining that these things, as well as the substance of Hasidic teaching, came originally from the Russian sect of the Khlysti, are entirely without foundation. Cf. *Proceedings, American Academy for Jewish Research* xxxvi (1968), 53–83.

Had Scholem stopped there, it would have been a harsh remark, but not much different in tenor from the character of his remarks about Tishby earlier in the article. But he continued: “This paper and all its hypotheses are a deplorable example of scholarly irresponsibility, leaving the reader wondering about the state of Jewish studies.”⁵⁴ From the misspelling of Yaffa Eliach’s first name to

53. Scholem’s review had appeared in *Ha-aretz* on April 7, 1969, and his letter to the editor on June 6, 1969. See Scholem, *Devarim be-go*, 537.

54. Scholem, “Neutralization of the Messianic Element in Early Hasidism,” 196n37.

the generalizing comment about the state of the discipline, Scholem's statement bristles with rage.

One might dismiss each of these comments as momentary lapses of scholarly etiquette or the temporary venting of intellectual bile. Nearly a decade later, however, Scholem reviewed a biography of Harry Wolfson in the *Times Literary Supplement*. Born a decade earlier than Scholem and trained in the Lithuanian Yeshiva of Slobodka, Wolfson had emigrated to the United States in 1903. He attended Harvard as an undergraduate, and, except for two brief interludes—one to travel in Europe prior to World War I and another for military service—he never left Harvard. Wolfson held the first chair in Jewish studies at a secular American university and wrote on an astonishing range of subjects in medieval Jewish philosophy. Moreover, he wrote in limpid English. Wolfson had died in 1974. Four years later a biography by Leo Schwarz, a student of Wolfson's who had predeceased him, appeared.⁵⁵ Scholem's review of this biography was anything but generous, either to Schwarz's portrayal of his teacher or to Wolfson as a scholar. Early on, Scholem had this to say about his late colleague from Lithuania:

That the first professor of Jewish studies at Harvard should be a *Yeshiva Bocher*, a pupil of one of the most famous places in Talmudic learning in Lithuania, the Yeshiva of Slobodka, may not be so surprising, given the background of most Jewish scholars who came to America. What is surprising is that after having gone through the school of Harvard and bearing the imprint of his education, he remained essentially a *Yeshiva Bocher* and transplanted the mind of a remarkably gifted exemplar of this species into the august halls of Harvard and into a method and language that could be given a modernist name: in his words, the "hypothetico-deductive method of text-interpretation."

A bit later he continued:

Fully aware of his sovereign standing as a Jewish scholar of the first rank, he hankered after Gentile praise. The eulogy of a Jesuit Father, I was flabbergasted to witness, meant more to him than the admiration of his most distinguished Jewish colleagues. There was always about him something of the air of an unfinished personality, a personality who had paid for his ambitions by sacrificing the fullness of his life for something that, in his last years, he came to disparage and to decry.⁵⁶

55. Schwarz, *Wolfson of Harvard*.

56. Scholem, "Sleuth from Slobodka," 16.

The barely implicit contrast was with Scholem himself, who had come to Hebrew and Jewish studies through Zionism rather than through the Talmudic Yeshiva of Slobodka, who had emigrated to Palestine rather than to New York, who wrote in Hebrew and German rather than in English, who taught at the Hebrew University rather than at Harvard, and who did not hanker after genteel praise.

Of course, this was all nonsense. Moreover, Wolfson was neither Eliach nor Roth. But by 1979 he had already been dead for five years. Scholem's review would in all likelihood have gone unanswered, and his vicious portrayal of Wolfson would have endured in the hallowed pages of the *Times Literary Supplement*, had it not been for Judah Goldin. In an article in the *American Scholar* the following summer, "On the Sleuth of Slobodka and the Cortez of Kabbalah," Goldin parted company with nearly every other American intellectual, Jewish or otherwise, who had written about Scholem. Rather than take Scholem at face value and offer worthless praise, Goldin took him to task. Goldin described Wolfson's love affair with Harvard and with the English language, provided a description of his scholarly achievement, and responded head-on to Scholem's indictment of his person:

Nor is it particularly instructive to be informed "of the air of an unfinished individual," of paying "for his ambitions by sacrificing the fullness of life" (is there another form of payment?), every word of which is true. Who is a finished individual? The man who never marries but devotes his whole long life to creative study and teaching is doubtless unfinished. How about the man who marries a madwoman and in humiliation scurries to collect a hundred rabbinical signatures to be granted release to remarry, yet all the time produces important papers? Or the scientist who can no longer satisfy even his mistress? Or the lady classicist who has never married because she has been too busy classifying artifacts from excavations? Everyone is unfinished, and very likely everyone is saved from insanity or meaningless existence by being fragmentary, being consumed by the work he gives himself over to—which is to our profit also.⁵⁷

Goldin was withering in his final sentences: "As Milton Anastos put it when he began his address on Wolfson's eighty-fifth birthday celebration in the Rare Book Room of the Widener Library, he was 'Magister Noster.' There aren't that many around in the halls of ivy or on adjacent greenswards. And in its own way Scholem's review also attests to this."⁵⁸ Scholem was very much alive

57. Goldin, "On the Sleuth of Slobodka and the Cortez of Kabbalah," 402.

58. *Ibid.*, 404.

when this response appeared, which had all the marks of “intellectual honesty and personal integrity” for which Goldin had praised Wolfson.

To sum up: Gershom Scholem and America is a story of profound ambivalence. Scholem understood the importance of America early on and in a way that none of his colleagues at the Hebrew University did. He used it as a site of patronage for his work, as a means of reprieve from the stresses of Jerusalem, and as a continued source of validation. With great skill he played on the fact that he came to America as a German intellectual who taught in Jerusalem. But Scholem was appalled at the vulgarity of American life and the ignorance of its Jews. America, or its Jews and its intellectuals, by contrast, could not get enough of him. Scholem, like many other German intellectuals, became an icon abroad, whether abroad meant New York or Frankfurt, before he became one in his adopted homeland of Jerusalem.

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