

Reading Gershom Scholem

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GERSHOM SCHOLEM HAS BEEN rising into prominence in recent years. He is currently considered one of the most important representatives of twentieth-century Jewish thought, as well as a major spokesman of modern Jewishness. This is a little surprising, considering that his main works are historiographical, consisting of rather specialized research on the Kabbalah and its role in Jewish history. Important as Scholem's historical discoveries may be, his recent fame does not rest on them alone. However, it is difficult to define what else adds to his fame. Is it the emergence of a new vision of Jewish history in its totality? Is it Scholem's combination of historiography and political commitment? Is it the philosophical background indebted to young Scholem's close connection with Benjamin? Or is it a secret theology, a hidden affinity with Kabbalah itself? None of these explanations are very convincing. Scholem's vision of Jewish history is not original; his political affiliation with Zionism was actually precarious; he saw himself less as a philosopher than as a historian; and finally, his theology is anything but clear. To a certain extent, the deeper importance of Scholem's oeuvre remains vague, and I believe this vagueness is an essential part of his legacy, as well as a source of fascination for his readers. In any case, this ambiguity poses the question of how to read and understand his texts, a question that has changed with the publication of new sources.

In this essay I first characterize these new sources, reflecting on their potential benefit for the study of Scholem's thought and stressing the importance of a new and deeper reading of Scholem's texts. Afterward, I develop exemplary readings of three short texts by Scholem, the common theme of which is tradition. I read them not so much as texts *about* tradition but as texts that *perform* and *imitate* "tradition" and its paradoxes in modernity through different rhetorical and literary means. Using a collection of aphorisms Scholem wrote at the age of twenty-one, I then show how he tries to establish a certain terminology and a certain literary

form—fragments—to inscribe himself into tradition. This produces a certain ambiguity on which the reading has to focus, an ambiguity that perfectly corresponds to the young Scholem's ambivalent and even paradoxical relation to tradition. In the next step, I read several texts about the relation of philology and Kabbalah written in the 1920s, showing how Scholem expresses his paradoxical drive to be and not to be part of tradition, in a new form: not explicitly but by the structure of the text. Thus, I propose to read this text "poetically" with special care for the imagery and textual ambiguity that are mostly overlooked. Finally, I consider a similar text on Kabbalah and philology written by the mature Scholem, which represents a smoother style by means of which he, again "poetically," directs the reader to a certain reading of his own text and thereby generates the aura of a "deep" and even "mystical" author.

The technical terminology in this analysis is anything but sacrosanct. In fact, my use of literary theories will be rather eclectic, an uncomfortable but unavoidable fact since there is no fixed standard on reading nonfictional texts. Therefore, I will not elaborate and will only occasionally refer to the theoretical models I use. However, a certain theoretical viewpoint is necessary in order to gain new and more complex insight into Scholem's work and to replace an old-fashioned "history of ideas" with a more recent critical approach.

NEW SOURCES—NEW WAYS OF READING

As a result of the growing interest in Scholem's work, several volumes of hitherto unpublished texts have been published over the last years. Avraham Shapira edited a collection of Scholem's public addresses and interviews, which shed much light on his public existence alongside the academic writing. In addition, the book contains a number of programmatic lectures where Scholem explicitly reflects upon the orientation and aim of his historical studies.¹ Even more interesting are publications of texts by the young Scholem: two German-language volumes contain Scholem's diaries from 1913 to 1923, that is, from his earliest notes until his emigration to Palestine. A large number of short texts and essays on different themes have been included—partly reprints of Scholem's publications in the Jewish youth movement's press, partly private drafts from the Scholem estate in Jerusalem.² Scholem's letters have also been published in German, with the Hebrew or English originals, as the case may

1. Gershom Scholem, *On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in Our Time and Other Essays* (Philadelphia, 1997).

2. Gershom Scholem, *Tagebücher nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt M., 1995–2000).

be, and for the most part have been included in the edition.³ Smaller publications are dedicated to Scholem's poems and to a selection of his shorter texts on theology.⁴ There is still material waiting for publication, particularly notebooks from the twenties containing Scholem's first conceptions of the history of Kabbalah. However, reports from Jerusalem suggest that we will have to wait some time for the publication of this material, as we did for the diaries and letters—the pattern of publication is itself esoteric and kabbalistic in a way Scholem might have liked.

What do these new sources tell us about Scholem? The early texts are of the greatest interest. We learn of the young Scholem's hard struggle for identity and his deep involvement in "romantic" ideas originating from Buber and others, whom Scholem will despise later. We find out that the relationship with Benjamin was not as harmonious as it appears in retrospect. We can observe that, again contrary to later autobiographical recollections, Scholem's faith is challenged not only by enthusiastic atheistic confessions in the diaries but by desperate religious crises as well. But the diaries do not contain biographical information only; even more important are the young Scholem's reflections about language, religion, and Judaism in the notes and in separate texts like "On Jona and the concept of justice" or "On lamentation and the book of lamentations," and more. These texts show Scholem in confrontation with Jewish and Christian thought, with philosophy, theology, and even literature, with Hermann Cohen and Samson Raphael Hirsch, with Gottlob Frege and Novalis. We can see how Scholem, more often than not in close connection with Benjamin, develops philosophical and theological speculations about tradition, messianism, and other themes that he will only allude to later.

Is it the "real" Scholem we are discovering here? At first glance, Scholem seems to be more direct in his early diaries, speaking plainly about theology or philosophy, on which he is rather reluctant to express himself in later years. Since laying bare the "real intentions" of an author and finding the germ out of which all his thought emerges has always been a hobbyhorse of the history of ideas, it would not be surprising for such an

3. Gershom Scholem, *Briefe*, 3 vols. (Munich, 1994–99). Partly translated as Gershom Scholem, *A Life in Letters: 1914–1982* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002).

4. Gershom Scholem, *The Fullness of Time: Poems* (Jerusalem, 2003). Gershom Scholem, *"Es gibt ein Geheimnis in der Welt": Tradition und Säkularisation* (Frankfurt M., 2002). On the recent publications, see Willi Goetschel. "Scholem's Diaries, Letters, and New Literature on His Work," *Germanic Review* 72 (1997): 77–91. Goetschel could not take into account the second, far more interesting volume of the diaries.

interpretation to emerge. However, this kind of interpretation would always run (at least) two risks which we may call the “biographical” and the “ideational” fallacies. The former consists in explaining the ambiguity and complexity of Scholem’s position by a narrative about his life, arguing that Scholem holds certain ideas by reason of the influence of someone, or that he does not yet know or already anticipates ideas at this or that time, and so on. Usually, this sort of interpretation will conceive of the author’s life as a teleological process, often simply reproducing his own autobiographical self-fashioning.⁵ The “ideational” fallacy, on the other hand, does not construct a unique life but rather focuses on Scholem’s “ideas,” in the sense of both concepts and opinions. As an interpretative procedure, it usually starts by stating that certain themes are central for an author or a text, for example, messianism and philosophy of history. Afterward it extracts the “ideas” Scholem held on these themes out of his texts and links them to each other in order to construct a more or less systematic worldview, which is finally pigeonholed according to the current isms and labeled as, say, “irrationalist,” “anarchist,” or “historicist.”⁶

Both biographical and ideational interpretations fail to take into account that the ideas, opinions, motivations, or influences with which they operate are their own secondary constructions and do not exist apart from texts. Both interpretations tend to produce too much coherence and clarity at the price of imprecision and reductionism. The danger of blindly taking “ideas” out of their context, which is inherent in this act of reconstruction, becomes visible in the way quotations are used. More often than not, readers of Scholem tend to use a combination of a small number of isolated sentences as evidence for their interpretation, sentences which do not only belong to different phases of Scholem’s work but also have different statuses: historical statements about the Kabbalah appear next to biographical recollections and next to speculations about his own method and position.⁷ In general, in interpreting Scholem one perma-

5. The pathbreaking study by David Biale (*Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History* [Cambridge, Mass., 1979]) tends to construct the genius of Scholem biographically by rather strictly following Scholem’s self-interpretation. For a more complete review of the literature on Scholem, see my *Gershom Scholem: Politisches, Esoterisches und Historiographisches Schreiben* (Munich, 2003), 13–20.

6. Much of the older literature struggles especially with the “irrationalism” of Scholem, e.g., Robert Alter, “The Achievement of Gershom Scholem,” *Commentary* 55 (1973): 69–73, or Eliezer Schweid, *Judaism and Mysticism according to Gershom Scholem* (Atlanta, Ga., 1985).

7. Even Irving Wohlfahrt’s brilliant reading of the ambivalences of Scholem’s position (“Haarscharf auf der Grenze von Religion und Nihilismus,” *Gershom Scholem—Zwischen den Disziplinen*, ed. P. Schäfer and G. Smith [Frankfurt M.,

nently runs the risk of either dividing too sharply between the speculative and the scientific Scholem or of ignoring their difference: Josef Dan simply denies that there is any connection between Scholem's scientific work and his youthful speculations; Eric Jacobson, on the other hand, looks for the early Scholem's philosophy of language—in order to compare it to the young Benjamin's—by reading Scholem's 1973 essay on language in Kabbalah, as if nothing had changed for Scholem by that time.⁸

However, the new sources could also generate a different kind of interpretation, an interpretation which would be oriented not so much toward the content of Scholem's writing, be it biography or philosophy, but rather toward his writing as such. In fact, Scholem was a manic writer throughout his life. From youth on, he filled diaries and notebooks with all kinds of texts—excerpts from works read and plans for works to be written, poems and linguistic essays, translations of religious poetry and theological speculations, exegeses of biblical passages and political manifestos. Even later as a professional historian, Scholem still produced nonscientific texts, such as biographical essays, recollections, his autobiography, and even poems. Maybe, instead of looking for common ideas or biographical coherence, we should search for common traits and interrelations between these different ways of text production.

Especially in his early years, Scholem's writing activity never stopped. He reworked, revised, and rewrote his texts continually, thereby exhibiting the very procedures of their production, not only their explicit thematic and argumentative structure but also his rhetoric and literary techniques. Until recently we knew only Scholem's finished essays and books. The new sources bear witness of an ongoing process of writing; thus, they open up a perspective on Scholem that was not available before. More than once, Scholem's excellence as a writer has been stressed, but his texts have rarely been read as being more than a mere conduit for content. In the following, I will try to correct this imbalance: to read three short texts by Scholem a little more deeply, though without offering a complete interpretation. The texts in question belong to different phases of Scholem's life but share some common topics, such as tradition and commentary. I do not presume that these are the only or even the main

1989], 176–256) is for the most part a web of decontextualized highlights of Scholem's texts.

8. See Joseph Dan, *Gershom Scholem and the Mystical Dimension of Jewish History* (New York, 1987); and Eric Jacobson, *Metaphysics of the Profane: The Political Theology of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem* (New York, 2003). The latter work persistently mingles Scholem's own position and the kabbalistic sources to which he merely refers.

themes in Scholem's oeuvre, but the similarity in content will provide us with a structure for the comparison of their different forms.

READING THE LITERARY FORM

95 Theses on Judaism and Zionism
partly from old, partly from unwritten books
extracted and asserted by
Gershom Scholem

delivered on July 15, 1918
to be discussed for fifteen years

1. Judaism is to be deduced from its language.
2. Teaching is the sphere of double negation.
3. "He gave us Teaching in the sign and commented it in tradition."
4. Strictly speaking, the rationalists maintain that the divinity of the Bible consist in its humanity.
5. History is the term for the inner law of Teaching.
6. Samson Raphael Hirsch denies the evil instinct.
7. Religions are to each other as languages are, but without being languages.
8. "The just ones prepare the earth as the site of the Holy."
[. . .]
15. "In Teaching, there is no before and no after."
16. Written tradition is the paradox in which Jewish literature essentially unfolds.
[. . .]
21. Zion is no metaphor.
22. Tradition is the absolute object of Jewish mysticism.
23. Samson Raphael Hirsch is the last Kabbalist we know of.
24. The law of talmudic dialectics is: Truth is a continuous function of language.
25. Jewish humor is the overturning of Teaching.
26. No man has the right to be a Zionist for reasons.
27. Teaching is the medium in which the pupil is transformed into the teacher. The scholars are the pupils of the Wise.
28. In Teaching, there is neither subject nor object, it is a medium.
[. . .]
31. Commentary, i.e. legitimate interpretation, is the inner form of teaching.
32. The spoken, oral Teaching consists of questions.
[. . .]

58. Teaching is transmitted in silence—not by silence.
 59. Where teaching breaks silence, its relation to life becomes dialectical. The outward history of teaching is based upon this fact.⁹

In May 1918, Scholem moved from Germany to Switzerland, escaping the threat of German military service and finally coming together with Walter Benjamin, whom he had known since 1915. Looking forward to an intensive intellectual exchange, Scholem reread his extensive notes and drafts and used central ideas and succinct formulations for the *Theses* cited above, which he planned to give to Benjamin on his birthday as a submission to their intended discussion. However, because of their growing estrangement in those days, he never gave the manuscript to Benjamin. Thematically, the *Theses'* range is very broad, extending from philosophy of history, linguistic speculations, and theology to contemporary controversies with Buber and the Zionist Youth Movement. The selection I quote above should give an impression of their form and roughly contains the theses related to tradition and history. However, there is obviously no clear boundary between different themes; more theses could be added without any substantial change.

At first glance, this text looks promising and seems to confirm that the young Scholem's writing already contains the metaphysical germ of his entire thinking. A reader of Scholem's later writings will easily recognize some of their central topics in this early text: the central role of tradition, the tension between spoken and written language, the strong notion of commentary, and so on. With the Kabbalah being mentioned only superficially, we can see Scholem's thought in a "pure" form here, devoid of its historiographical veil.¹⁰ On closer inspection, however, the *Theses* are highly obscure. Surely, the twenty-second thesis ("Tradition is the absolute object of Jewish mysticism") confirms that the young Scholem has already established a close connection between tradition and Kabbalah, but we still do not understand what exactly he means by tradition, let alone by "absolute object." Of course, each thesis refers to others, giving the whole text a systematic appearance. But trying to understand the text this way also leads to a certain frustration, since the different hints take the reader into a labyrinth rather than into an open field of clarity. The

9. Scholem, *Tagebücher*, 2:300–304. All translations of Scholem are mine.

10. The seventy-sixth and seventy-eighth theses refer to the Kabbalah ("The Kabbalah calls God, the infinite, also 'nothing.' This is the true way of Jewish mysticism, leading to Hermann Cohen." "The Kabbalah states: Every language consists of the Names of God."); however, in the *Theses*, the biblical and rabbinical context is much more prominent.

twenty-second thesis seems to refer to the sixteenth thesis (“Written tradition is the paradox in which Jewish literature essentially unfolds”), but their relation is far from clear. Is tradition in itself mystical because of this paradox or does it become the object of mysticism because it is paradoxical? Furthermore, we do not know if “tradition” and “teaching” are synonymous, or what their relation to each other may be. Finally, we could ask ourselves whether the twenty-third thesis on Hirsch follows the twenty-second only accidentally or if it comments on its predecessor. The twenty-third thesis refers back to the sixth, and so on. Despite their clear, apodictic appearance, the *Theses* are by no means a system of definitions and more often than not obscure terms are explained by others no less obscure.

At this point, it is revealing to have a look at the genesis of the *Theses*: As noted above, Scholem used older diaries and manuscripts, and he did so in a very specific way. Compared to the clear-cut and generalized formulations of the *Theses*, those original drafts obviously refer to quite specific situations. To give an example, the fifty-eighth and fifty-ninth theses were first coined in a polemical letter against the Jewish youth movement, which, according to Scholem, replaced learning by talking.¹¹ However, their original context is cut off in the final formulation, which leads to a certain shift in meaning. Whereas it was more or less clear what Scholem meant by a “silent tradition” with respect to the Jewish youth movement—he was thinking of secret societies and the like—it becomes rather obscure when isolated from that context. In other cases, a preliminary version contains an important detail which is omitted in the final version, as in the following predecessor of the first thesis: “There is only *one* proof for Judaism: the language. This insight is a paradox unless it is unfolded.”¹² Even the citations have been cut down; the fifteenth thesis was originally drafted as follows: “‘In Teaching there is no before and no after.’ I.e. the teaching is a medium.”¹³ In this case, the second sentence is omitted, thereby cutting off the link to another term, “medium,” which is now only implicit. As a result, the connections among the final theses remain vague; their cohesion consists less in explicit relations or conjunctions than in the repetition of keywords such as teaching and tradition.

11. To take another example, the twenty-fourth as well as the twenty-ninth stem from an attempt to grasp the talmudic *pilpul* in neo-Kantian language. Cf. the open letter to Siegfried Bernfeld, in Scholem, *Briefe*, 1:461–66. On Neo-Kantianism, see “On the Talmudist’s Mode of Research,” in Scholem, *Tagebücher*, 1:438–42.

12. Scholem, *Tagebücher*, 2:213.

13. Scholem, *Tagebücher*, 2:206.

Moreover, given their thetic form, even the order of the theses seems rather arbitrary and every reader can rearrange the theses into a different order, thereby coming to a different result. The procedures of condensation that produced the final theses also cause a lack of coherence in the text; its common semantic universe is hard to determine—the text seems to speak about a lot of different things with no clear relation to each other. Characteristically, the reader can hardly determine what the (rare) metaphorical expressions stand for or if they are metaphorical at all, as in the twenty-fifth thesis (“Jewish humor is the overturning of Teaching.”). In this contextual vacuum, it is often difficult to say what the theses are about at all.

Of course, it is possible to pick out this or that thesis as proof for this or that interpretation; this will be the *Theses*' fate in future criticism, I fear. However, to interpret them in isolation seems hardly possible without a reprojection of Scholem's later thought (or, to be more precise, what the critic thinks Scholem's later thought is). But such an interpretation would not only presuppose the continuity between Scholem's earlier and later thought that it wants to prove, it would also ignore the formal difference between the condensed, direct, albeit cryptic *Theses* on the one hand, and the later historical essays, which are much more reserved and classical, on the other.

Maybe it is better to change the viewpoint and to focus on the *form* of the *Theses*, since it is this very form that inhibits our understanding them. This involves moving closer and stepping back at the same time. We are moving closer, for instead of giving an overall interpretation of Scholem's “ideas,” we have to look at the minute details of expression. At the same time, this implies distance, as we will no longer ask what Scholem says but how he says it. Such a reading is aimed at neither a paraphrase of the text according to its content nor a “creative interpretation” which develops the ideas of the text according to its own terms, but at a textual analysis focused on the (linguistic, rhetorical, poetic) means by which a text's specific meaning is constituted. As these means correspond to the operations the reader has to perform in deciphering the text's meaning, we can call this kind of analysis *reading* and will contrast it with a content-oriented *interpretation* of Scholem's “ideas.” Whereas interpretation is fundamentally semantic, that is, an analysis of what a text actually “means,” reading is concerned with semiotics, that is, with the linguistic procedures by which that meaning is made possible.

Reading has to concentrate on the form of the text, which is fundamental to the way it constitutes the text's meaning and textuality—what transforms a mere aggregation of signs into a single utterance. As we have

seen, the unity of the text of *Theses* is rather weak on the level of its syntactic cohesion and thematic coherence. The different sentences are welded together by their literary form: by the recurring pattern of the thesis, and by the title and subtitle which locate the text as a distinct utterance in time and space. These features are not part of the semantic code of the text—the thesis pattern does not “mean” anything with respect to the things the text speaks about—but belongs to a secondary, literary code in which title and form induce the reader to read the text as a carefully produced artifact.¹⁴ At first sight, even this secondary unity is rather weak, since the form of the theses is fundamentally open: new theses could be added endlessly. The total of ninety-five theses loses its complete arbitrariness only by an explicit reference to Luther’s theses.¹⁵ But the formal code is not only decisive in terms of the text’s unity but shapes the very form of every sentence. In this respect, the form of the fragment harks back to German romanticism, specifically Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel, which is even more important than the literary paradigm of the Lutheran theses. For both, the fragmentary form, by reflecting its own limits, ironically refers to a totality that is impossible to express directly. In 1917 and 1918, somewhat frustrated by neo-Kantian philosophy and stimulated by Benjamin, who was writing a doctoral thesis on Jena romanticism, Scholem read Schlegel and Novalis and wrote a lot of fragments in the romantic style. The most important literary model is, however, a third one: the Jewish tradition. In fact, classical rabbinic literature mainly consists of a kind of “thesis,” of collections of short and concise pericopes and “sayings” of the sages, the meaning and order of which is often only implicit and difficult to conceive. The importance of this form for Scholem is revealed by the fact that he cites such sayings among his own theses, as in the third, eighth, and fifteenth. Even in his own theses, Scholem not only writes about tradition but tries to write *like* tradition. Obviously, he tries to imitate the authoritative, succinct, and sometimes obscure sayings of the sages. The relation to tradition is therefore not (only) a direct, designative one but also an indirect, mimetic one of formal resemblance.

Actually, for the young Scholem, the relation to tradition never was a mere theoretical concern. Reading his esoteric speculations, one should always keep in mind that they accompany a more practical project in

14. On literariness as a secondary modeling system, i.e., as a code which is based on the linguistic one but adds a new level, cf. Jurij Lotman, *The Structure of Artistic Text* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1977), esp. chap. 4.

15. Of course, even this unity is external and rather weak, as Scholem’s text contains ninety-six theses. The number 73 is erroneously used twice.

which Scholem was engaged at that time: he fervently attempted to acquire Jewish knowledge of all sorts by learning Hebrew, taking Talmud lessons, reading classical and modern Jewish literature. Ever since his break with Buber in 1916, Scholem had stressed the importance of this traditional knowledge: “You don’t conceive or experience (*erleben*) the Jewish notion of God,” he writes to a Zionist colleague, “if you do not know the work and deeds of God. This work is the ‘Tradition,’ the ‘Torah.’ Torah is not only the Pentateuch, Torah is the epitome, the integral of the Jewish tradition.”¹⁶ According to Scholem, Judaism is constituted by neither a rational essence nor an existential attitude but by “tradition.” Therefore, the question of tradition is decisive for Scholem’s *entire* body of thought. Even if he speaks, for example, of messianism, he claims not to develop a personal opinion or philosophical “idea” but to speak about the meaning of *Jewish* messianism, by which he means *traditional* Jewish messianism. This project is anything but simple. Scholem differs from most of his contemporaries in considering the acquisition of tradition as highly problematic. From early on, he vehemently resisted any attempts at a direct actualization of the past that would ignore the historical distance: “It is no solution to jump over the abyss. We cannot jump.”¹⁷ Scholem is well aware that he is not part of the tradition but comes from an assimilated background that he cannot completely leave behind. Perhaps he is even aware that his vigorous Jewish learning is not the traditional one, that his solitary reading of books can hardly replace learning in the context of community, immersed in Jewish law and life. It seems as if it is precisely his strong and absolute category of tradition that makes it impossible for him to be part of it, a dilemma that more than once leads to existential crisis. As early as 1915 Scholem planned to write “the novel of my suicide,” namely, the story “that I shoot myself because I come to the conclusion that the paradox in the life of the decided Zionist is unresolvable.”¹⁸ If tradition is so absolute that one can only be inside or outside, it seems impossible to enter it from the outside, from an assimilated background, and Jewish existence becomes meaningless. His own radicalism has led Scholem into an impasse.

However, Scholem considers this problem as typically “traditional:” “I feel in my own life the legitimacy of the prohibition to write down the

16. Scholem, *Briefe*, 1:48.

17. Scholem, *Tagebücher*, 1:123. The defense against all attempts of “actualization,” be it by Buber, Schoeps, or the Canaanites, remains fundamental for Scholem’s intellectual stance.

18. Scholem, *Tagebücher*, 1:221.

oral teachings very clearly.”¹⁹ By alluding to the category of the Oral Torah, Scholem gives his personal problem a distinctively Jewish touch. Moreover, in a paradoxical twist, this opens up the possibility not only of a Jewish existence (by not writing) but also of Jewish writing. For traditionally, the “oral teaching” refers less to verbal instruction than to a specific form of writing, namely, the “fragmentary” and terse writing of the Jewish classics, which Scholem imitates in his theses. In the realm of writing, finally, the impasse of being outside tradition is not necessarily hopeless, since even for the outsider, it is possible to write *as if* he were in the tradition—primarily, the imitation of tradition is a fictional act. In other words, the literary means mentioned above (the integration of traditional citations, the condensed and even paradoxical form of the thesis, the authoritative style, the interrelations, the lack of context and of order) transform the descriptive writing about tradition into a performance which produces what it describes. Or rather, the text becomes an utterance in which descriptive and performative speech are no longer distinguishable, because its signs undergo an essential overdetermination. This is most obvious in the sixteenth thesis: “Written tradition is the paradox in which Jewish literature essentially unfolds.” In the first place, this sentence refers to historical tradition and to the paradox that the oral tradition is indeed written and even canonized. Second, the thesis refers to the problem of acquiring the tradition from the outside, the paradox of writing as if the author belongs to tradition. Finally, it speaks about itself. By claiming to be traditional in its written form, yet at the same time confessing to be mere writing, this thesis performs what it speaks about—an act which is made possible only by the thesis form and by its elusive context.

Thus, the *Theses* are not simply a descriptive text but a literary enterprise, an attempt at inscribing oneself into tradition without explicitly crossing the border. It is this very move that a semantic interpretation of what Scholem says *about* “tradition” necessarily misses. Such an interpretation is simply too late, for in looking for explicit statements on tradition, it tends to presuppose the way Scholem speaks about tradition, the “language” (or *ideolekt*) he uses. The main intention of the *Theses*, however, is precisely to constitute such a language—materially, as a semiotic interrelation of terms like “tradition,” “commentary,” “paradox,” “teaching,” and so forth; and formally, as a paradoxical, ironic, and condensed way of writing. But this mode of text-production only leads to very short aph-

19. Scholem, *Tagebücher*, 2:156. Also: “No Jew is able to express the last and most important things in written and writeable language,” *ibid.*, 200.

orisms. As we have seen, the text of the *Theses* suffers from a lack of coherence and cohesion, its unity consisting mainly in its title and address, as for example in the projected discussion with Benjamin. And yet Benjamin was not the close companion Scholem had believed him to be. The diaries testify to the growing distance, even estrangement, between the two during their stay in Switzerland, for which reason the discussion about the *Theses* never took place. Thus, Scholem had to find another form of expression that would be even more solitary and self-reliant.

POETICIZATION

On Kabbalah Viewed from Beyond

The philology of Kabbalah is merely a projection onto a plane. And in this projection, many relations are ultimately transformed into a punctuality that is only intensely perceptible, namely, those relations which are fundamental for the mystical-corporeal dimension of Kabbalah, which constitute the Kabbalah's space. Philology is a symbol, albeit an extraordinary one, a strangely constructed concave mirror in which today's man can perceive the totality of Kabbalah somehow still present in an originary and pure way.

The critical history of Kabbalah is its ultimate goal: to roll up the symbolic carpet that is illuminated from within. The philology of mystical disciplines has to be of the very infinity of a goblin. This critical history is the appearance without which there can be no insight into the essence during an unmessianic time. In this history, the existence of the system—the basic fact of mysticism—is ironically challenged, and indeed, the multidimensional-substantial-corporeal necessarily disappears in the projection onto the plane and is transformed into the great illusion of the line of development.

Yet he who traverses and is able to stand in the middle, at the almost utopian yet infinitely near point from which the living source addresses him as a simultaneous manifestation, is redeemed and is himself a redeemer. For here, the situation is simple: it is simply a question of going through the plane, nothing is needed but a virtual displacement and transformation into substantiality, the border of which was the very symbol which always belongs to its object.²⁰

20. Scholem, *Tagebücher*, 2:685. On this text and its variants, see Peter Schäfer, "Die Philologie der Kabbala ist nur eine Projektion auf eine Fläche: Gershom Scholem über die wahren Absichten seines Kabbalastudiums," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 5 (1999): 1–25.

This text, written in 1921, is only three years younger than the *Theses*, but it belongs to a different biographical situation. By that time, Scholem had already begun his historical and philological research on Kabbalah, which led to his doctoral thesis on the book *Bahir* in 1923. Accordingly, Scholem reflects less upon tradition itself and more upon the relation of philology to it. On this topic, we find a number of sketches in his notebooks and diaries that were later transformed into several texts. Besides the one cited above, the diaries contain a longer version, dating from the same time, which is entitled *Observations on the Meaning and the Phenomenon of the Kabbalah*, probably a staging for the later text. Elements of both versions were reformulated in 1937 in an open letter to Salman Schocken and, finally, in the *Unhistorical Aphorisms* published in 1958, which I will analyze in the following part of this essay.

Compared to the *Theses*, *On Kabbalah* has a very different appearance. It is much more homogenous and coherent; the different sentences are not only connected on the level of explicit syntax but also through a strong and coherent imagery. In particular, there are two figurations for the relation of philology to Kabbalah that can be found everywhere in the first two paragraphs: a series of philosophical concepts such as “appearance,” “essence,” “system,” “substance,” and a series of geometrical metaphors such as “point,” “line,” “plane,” “space,” “projection,” and “virtual displacement”; in addition, there is the metaphor of the “carpet,” which probably stands for the endless philological work of connecting and disconnecting pieces of text. Since the last paragraph seems to transgress the situation stated in the first and second one, the text has a certain order and direction. All these factors contribute to the text’s unity, which far surpasses that of the *Theses*.

At first glance, the text does not seem too difficult to understand. Scholem speaks about the relation of the Kabbalah to its philology in terms of “essence” and “appearance.” The philological, historical, or critical study of the Kabbalah only perceives its outside appearance; even if this may be legitimate in our “unmessianic time,” philology has only a provisional meaning, which the redeemer of the third paragraph will surpass by reaching “the things themselves,” the Kabbalah proper. We can describe the theme of this first, purely semantic interpretation as “historicism and messianism.” History is conceived of as a superficial description of essentially transhistorical objects; messianism would end history and let us face things proper, devoid of their historical veil. This topos of a “crisis of historicism” is very common in early-twentieth-century German dis-

course under which Scholem's text can be easily subsumed.²¹ To this ideational interpretation we could add, biographically, that at this point of his life, Scholem was "still" swaying between a metaphysical and a historical understanding of the Kabbalah.

True as this may be, several features of the text do not really conform to this interpretation. First, the strange metaphors of "projection," of the "carpet," and of the "redeemer" seem rather superfluous, like personal arabesques on a very common and simple argument. Moreover, on closer inspection, these metaphors do not really match. The "historicism" interpretation mainly rests on the philosophical terminology of "essence" and "appearance"; however, the geometrical figuration does not operate in the same way. For in geometrical terms, the "essence," or Kabbalah proper, is not a simple, extensionless entity beyond any dimensions but rather something expanded (a corpus). The spatial metaphor implies an entirely different model of experience, since, to stay with the logic of the image, it is no longer possible to have a direct, immediate perception of the "thing itself" in its integrity, just as it is not possible to perceive a three-dimensional cube in its integrity unless one moves around it. Whereas the first, historicist figuration seems to imply a platonic model of passive vision and contemplative knowledge of an intelligible substance, the geometrical figuration points to a phenomenological model of an active kinesthetic experience, a kind of movement, a *process* of experience. Accordingly, the philologist is modeled in a twofold way. In the platonic model, he is but the naïf who only perceives a secondary image of reality, whereas in the geometrical model, he is the one who *produces* the images by projection. Since those two models seem hardly compatible, it becomes difficult to resolve the text's metaphors into a single plain sense. Moreover, not even the third paragraph is as clear as it seems. If the first sentence describes a transgression directed at the unhistoric essence of the Kabbalah itself, the second again claims to perform this very same transgression. This repetition, however, makes the whole movement ambiguous: is transgression already fulfilled or is it still to be achieved? Where is the "here" from which the second sentence speaks, before or beyond transgression?

Thus, if one takes the text, its metaphors, and its structure seriously,

21. The self-critique and the urge for an "overcoming" of history expressed by Scholem are by no means exceptional but rather belong to the very structure of German historicism. See the classic analysis by Fritz Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969).

the semantic interpretation leads to problems, even to paradox. Now, this is precisely the moment when, in my eyes, the text becomes interesting, because it is not just an example of a very common ideological discourse on historicism but a unique text that asks for a more thorough reading. I would propose to read the text as a *poem*, by which I do not mean a text constituted by meter but by a formal structure, condensation of meaning, ambiguity, semantic closure, and self-reference. As we will see, this is not only a formal feature of expression; it gives essential insights into the complexity of Scholem's thinking about tradition and philology.

To use Michel Riffaterre's categories, the reading of a poem normally consists of different levels; a first, heuristic reading tries to read the text on the semantic level, or, in Riffaterre's words, *mimetically*, as if it just described the world outside. The mimetic description never starts *ab nihilo* but refers to an existing code, which Riffaterre calls a "hypogram": a prefabricated system of meaning, a cultural cliché. This is exactly the way we have been reading Scholem's text so far: as a text about history and Kabbalah using the commonplaces of the "crisis of historicism." However, this first reading on the mimetic level encounters certain contradictions, uncertainties, or "ungrammaticalities" which, according to Riffaterre, prompt the reader to give up the semantic reading and re-read the poem on another, semiotic level. In the preceding section of this essay, we have already seen that semantically insignificant formal traits, such as repetition, can have a secondary, "literary" meaning. In poetry, these secondary meanings point to the poem's unity. Everything that is ungrammatical on the level of mimesis becomes functional on the level of the formal unity of the poetic message, which Riffaterre calls "significance." The seemingly irrelevant details appear to be realizations of a common "matrix," that is, the central but implicit structure of the poem. This matrix can be epitomized by a word that, according to Riffaterre, will not be present in the poem but will rather appear transformed according to a certain "model." In Scholem's case, this "matrix," which implicitly dominates the whole text and appears manifestly as transformed according to the model of geometry, is probably "tradition."²²

22. See Michel Riffaterre, *The Semiotics of Poetry* (Bloomington, Ind., 1978): "The poem results from the transformation of the matrix, a minimal and literal sentence, into a longer, complex and non-literal periphrasis. The matrix is hypothetical being only the grammatical and lexical actualization of a structure. The matrix may be epitomized in one word, in which case the word will not appear in the text. It is always actualized in successive variants; the form of these is governed by the first or primary actualization, the model. Matrix, model, and text are variants of the same structure" (p. 19). Therefore, in Scholem's case, geome-

For this second reading, the limits of “historicism” are no longer the message of Scholem’s text but its intertext, which is, however, not external but absorbed into the very text as hypogram. Thus the text, by the platonic figuration, evokes the very meaning it transgresses by posing the question, as it were, of how historicism can be viewed from the perspective of tradition. It is important to note that it does not answer this question. The significance of a poetic text is not another message, different from the one literally said. As we have seen, this purely figurative reading is made impossible by the contradiction between the two images and consists in the *process* of *transformation* of meaning. This unfixed answer corresponds very well to Scholem’s own situation vis-à-vis tradition, which resists easy answers too.

As a result of this “poetization” of the text, each single element becomes powerfully overdetermined and no longer refers to one code but to (at least) two. “The Kabbalah itself” is addressed by oxymorons like “multidimensional-substantial-corporeal” or “mystical-corporeal,” which both refer to the platonic hypotext and to the geometrical model. Similarly, the “concave mirror” of philological criticism is both passive-reflective and active-operative, for a concave mirror does not show objects in their plain, two-dimensional appearance but visualizes their depth, albeit in a distorted way. Thus, as a concave mirror, philology can only conceive of a historical image of Kabbalah, an image that does represent the unrepresentable somehow. Finally, the “plane” onto which Kabbalah is projected stands for the ambiguous sense of its historical “appearance,” which is at the same time a delusion, since we are able to see the Kabbalah on this plane but are also urged to transgress it. This is even more obvious in the pre-stages of the text. In *Observations on the Meaning and Phenomenon of Kabbalah*, Scholem calls the plane “the ironic paper of historiography,” as well as “a wall—history,” “the veil of history,” or “history’s veil of fog.”²³ Here, the paradoxical nature of the “plane” is distributed to two images, “paper” and “veil,” which are, however, implicitly connected. *On Kabbalah* melts these images into the singular, highly condensed image of the plane which is, in the terminology of Riffaterre, a dual sign: an equivocal expression belonging to two different codes, which therefore cannot be completely paraphrased in either of these codes.²⁴ The text is semantically closed, for its “meaning” no longer rests in its (general) codes, but

try, and not philosophy, is the model, since the former precedes the latter and sets the tone for the whole text.

23. Scholem, *Tagebücher*, 2:687.

24. On dual signs, see Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry*, 86–109.

in the very operations by which these codes are connected and transformed: in the significance of the text.

The dominance of significance over meaning is possible because of the formal closure of the “poem,” the interrelations of which are by far stronger than those of the *Theses*. The text’s title strongly contributes to this closure, the situation of utterance no longer being outside the text. *On Kabbalah Viewed from Beyond* does not refer to an event (as the *Theses* did in referring to the discussion with Benjamin) but to the performance of the text itself, since the text *is* this view on Kabbalah. The viewpoint “beyond” obviously designates the place of the redeemer to which the third paragraph refers, a place that is not unambiguous, given that the transgression remains ambivalent. Moreover, the very last line of the text, establishing a relation between the “object” and its “symbol,” tends to deconstruct the very opposition of Kabbalah and philology constitutive for the text. Does this imply that we have come to an end or that the text negates itself? Does this last line complete the text or does it rather ask for another reading informed by and proceeding from this end? This compositional irony, a technique very common for fictional literary discourse, further disturbs the direct, semantic reading, since the reader cannot determine whether the text itself already is the observation of the Kabbalah from abroad announced in the title or whether it refers to an observation yet to come.²⁵ Compared to the *Theses*, this indeterminacy is new. Whereas the older text appears to be an objective description, spoken from nowhere with the heavy weight of traditional authority, *On Kabbalah* figures its own utterance in an ironic way, by reflecting the place from which it appears to be spoken in the text. It is the presence of a fictional voice or, in other words, of the implicit author, that distinguishes the text from mere description and contributes to its formal unity, since everything is uttered from a certain, not necessarily reliable, viewpoint.²⁶

Again, it is interesting to compare *On Kabbalah* with its variants. In *Observations on Kabbalah*, Scholem directly refers to his own text in the first paragraph, plainly speaking about its status and intention (“The fol-

25. This compositional irony is quite typical of Scholem’s writings from this period. To give only one example, a short text dating from 1919/20, “The Teaching of Zion” (Scholem, *Tagebücher*, 2:621–23) is subtitled “To my pupils whom I will not have.” This subtitle not only addresses the audience in a paradoxical way but leaves indeterminate the question of whether the text is already the teaching of Zion or only speaks about a teaching yet to come.

26. See Gerard Genette, *Fiction and Diction*, trans. C. Porter (Ithaca, N.Y., 1993).

lowing observations do not have a philological goal")²⁷ and referring to the extrasemiotic situation during the entire text by using "we" and "today." By contrast, *On Kabbalah* omits these references, probably a conscious procedure which leads to semantic closure. In later versions, the text becomes referential once again. In an open letter sent to Salman Schocken in 1937, entitled "An open word about the true intention of my study of Kabbalah," Scholem inserts the problem of the philology of Kabbalah into an autobiographical vein, stressing that he did not turn to the philology of Kabbalah by accident but rather because of his metaphysical longing. In this context, Scholem resumes the central metaphors from *On Kabbalah*. Maybe we do not lack a "key" to Kabbalah, after all:

For the mountain, the corpus of facts, needs no key at all; only the misty wall of history, which hangs around it, must be penetrated. To penetrate it was the task I set for myself. Will I get stuck in the mist, will I suffer, so to speak, a "professorial death"? But the necessity of historical criticism and critical history cannot be replaced by anything else, even where it demands sacrifices.

Certainly, history may seem to be fundamentally an illusion (*Schein*), but an illusion without which, in temporal reality, no insight into the essence of things is possible. In the strange concave mirror of philological critique, that mystical totality of the system, whose existence disappears precisely when being projected onto historical time, can become visible for today's man in a primary and pure way, in the legitimate discipline of commentary.

Today, as at the very beginning, my work lives in this paradox, in the hope of being truly addressed from within the mountain, of that most inconspicuous, that smallest possible fluctuation of history which causes truth to break forth from the illusions of "development."²⁸

In this autobiographical frame, the problems of Kabbalah and philology seem to be intermediary obstacles rather than fundamental paradoxes. The "existential code" (already present in the third paragraph of *On Kabbalah Viewed from Beyond*) dominates the younger text, albeit in a less mystical form, opposing "virtue" to "professorial death." The "compositional irony" is less present; the paradox of philological criticism and the figure of the concave mirror are mentioned but are hardly compelling. The whole sentence (the second of the second paragraph) is rather isolated

27. Scholem, *Tagebücher*, 2:686.

28. Scholem, *Briefe*, 1:471–72.

and obscure, the image of “projection” not being motivated by the geometrical imagery of the earlier one. One has the impression that Scholem uses an older phrasing in a context where it no longer fits. Despite this sentence, and some other uncertainties, we must ask: Does Scholem strive for the mountain or has he already arrived, is “courage” or “hope” the central virtue? The text is quite readable and easy to interpret, for example, as some kind of personal “compromise” between science and metaphysics.

Nonetheless, even this text contains dual signs, albeit of a different type. In particular, the “mountain” does not only refer to the “corporeality” of Kabbalah from the former text but to a series of other mountains as well, to Mount Sinai, the place of revelation, as well as to the proverbial mountain to which the prophet must go if the mountain won’t come to the prophet. The misty mountain even has a tinge of German romanticism, of Ludwig Tieck’s “Runenberg” (in which Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin saw an allegory for memory); the philologist facing the mountain strongly alludes to Kafka’s parable *Before the Law*. The “mountain” evokes many associations and, as in literature, we are fascinated precisely by this affluence. The mountain is still ambiguous, but no longer paradoxical, since the different codes do not annul each other in the way the more abstract figures in the older text do. In a way, Scholem embodies his older thinking by a kind of secondary mimesis. He transforms the rather abstract speculations into a visible image that blurs the contradictions by means of its very materiality. However, because the image of the mountain appears to be simple and natural (compared to the imagery of “projection,” “plane,” etc.), the difficulties in deciphering it are all the more astonishing. The reader faces an intriguing tension between the image and its content, which is typical for allegory. By representing most abstract ideas (such as justice) through concrete images (a Greek goddess with sword, scales, and other attributes), allegory reveals the unbridgeable distance between signs and their reference in a privileged way.²⁹

To sum up our reading: By its structure, as well as by its complex signs—the concave mirror, the plane of history, or the mountain of Kabbalah—Scholem’s text becomes poetical in a technical sense. The text’s significance cannot be expressed through a different text.³⁰ It cannot be

29. For this conception of allegory, see Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven, Conn., 1979).

30. For the definition of the poetic function as the reference of the message to itself, see Roman Jakobson, “Linguistics and Poetics,” *Style in Language*, ed. T. A. Sebeok (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), 350–77. Against an aestheticist interpretation, Paul Ricoeur stresses that the poetic function constitutes another frame of refer-

paraphrased according to its meaning, since its structure as well as its articulation, inscribed into it as a fictional voice, make up a unique combination and transformation of meaning. As a poetic text, Scholem's *On Kabbalah* is not a statement of a certain proposition in a given code but a singular proposition with a singular meaning—seemingly a paradoxical entity, since a proposition is, by definition, coded and “meaning” is, by definition, general. However, as we have seen with Riffaterre, this paradox is created by a specific transformation of the hypogram—in other words, by the fact that the text evokes the code and negates it at the same time.

It is precisely this structure that enables Scholem to state at the same time that he is part of tradition and that he has a critical relationship to it. As an explicit proposition, such a statement would be rather meaningless; “poetically” spoken, however, its contradictions propose a new frame of reference, in which the seeming absurdities become meaningful. What is actually at stake here is a displacement of the code of historicism. Obviously, the common model of historicism is not very appropriate to Scholem's research on the Kabbalah, for religious history implies an epistemology different from that of passive vision. If the political historiographer, facing sources about the deeds and intentions of actors, can perhaps still believe himself to be nothing more than a passive instrument that makes the sources speak—or, to remain with the visual image, to give an “overview” of the events—the religious historian by definition has to read his sources “against the grain,” against the intention of their writers. To read a kabbalistic text as a reflection of, say, social tensions, even to read it as a text belonging to a certain historical moment, necessarily breaks with its self-understanding according to which it is part of an ahistoric, ever-present divine revelation. It seems to me that Scholem has a very precise consciousness of this problem, even if he tends to use historicist vocabulary when asked about his method.³¹ Maybe this kind of reading of the poetic transformation of historicism in Scholem's early

ence. See “What Is a Text? Explanation and Understanding,” in his *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, trans. and ed. J. B. Thompson (Cambridge, 1978), 145–64.

31. For example, a close reading of Scholem's essay “Revelation and Tradition” would demonstrate that Scholem consistently blurs the distinction between the traditional and the critical stance toward texts, without however neglecting their fundamental difference. In general, the importance of biblical criticism for the epistemic rupture between historicism and a hermeneutics of suspicion cannot be overestimated. Wellhausen did not only heavily influence Nietzsche's *The Genealogy of Morals* but, via Robertson-Smith, also Freud's *Totem and Taboo*.

texts could serve as a guideline to the analysis of how Scholem distorts historicism in his later historiographical writings. We cannot undertake such a reading here, but we can have a look at a later text in which Scholem, already established as a historian, continues to write on philology.

CONTROLLING THE TEXT

The philology of a mystical discipline like the Kabbalah has an ironic touch. It is concerned with a veil of fog, which, like the history of mystical tradition, hangs around the corpus, around the space of the thing itself, a fog however which emanates from the very thing.

Does there remain in this fog something of the law of the thing itself, in a way visible for the philologist, or does the essential disappear in this projection of the historical? The uncertainty in answering this question is inherent in the nature of the philological enterprise itself, and thus the hope from which this work draws its life retains something ironic that cannot be severed from it. But does not such an element of irony rather reside in the object of this Kabbalah itself, and not only in its history?

The Kabbalist affirms that there is a tradition of truth which is bequeathable (*tradierbar*). An ironic statement, since the truth in question here is anything but bequeathable. It can be known, but not handed down, and precisely the element of it that can be handed down does not contain it any longer. Authentic tradition remains hidden; only the fallen tradition (*verfallende Tradition*) falls upon (*verfällt*) an object. Only in falling (*Verfall*) does its greatness become visible.³²

This text is the first of the *Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms* published in 1958 in a Festschrift for Daniel Brody. Probably because of this rather hidden place and of the general obscurity of these aphorisms, they have often been read as the secret key to Scholem's entire life work, as the "metaphysics" behind his "simple" historiographical writing.³³ We already

32. Gershom Scholem, "Zehn unhistorische Sätze," in Scholem, *Judaica* (Frankfurt M., 1970), 3:271. On the theses, see David Biale, "Gershom Scholem's Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms on Kabbalah: Text and Commentary," *Gershom Scholem: Modern Critical Views*, ed. H. Bloom (New York, 1987): 99–124. My translation roughly follows Biale's.

33. The aphorisms are indeed central for David Biale's general reading of Scholem, as well as for Nathan Rothenstreich's "Symbolism and Transcendence: On Some Philosophical Aspects of Gershom Scholem's Opus," *Review of Metaphysics* 31 (1997): 604–14. Ironically, the *Unhistorical Aphorisms*, having been written late but published early, have even been read as the key to the other esoteric texts we read in earlier sections.

know by now that this platonic distinction between a historical “surface” and a “deep” ahistorical truth is not adequate to Scholem’s thought. Maybe, with our preceding readings in mind, we can read this text anew in a more thorough way.

There are obvious similarities to *On Kabbalah* both in content and form. The aphorism is concerned with the relationship between Kabbalah and philology as an irony. It has the form of a general, impersonal statement articulated in a closed text, which even has three paragraphs running roughly parallel to the older text. However, the tone is smoother, the sentences are shorter and less complicated, and there are neither abrupt turns nor disturbing repetitions. The earlier text only alludes to the imagery central to its own predecessor: the geometrical code is just hinted at—Scholem speaks of “corpus,” of the “space,” and of “projection,” but not of “dimensions” nor of the “mountain.” The platonic code is present through “the essential” and “the thing itself” but lacks its opposite, “appearance.” Most importantly, the deconstruction of the platonic code does not take place at the end, as in *On Kabbalah*, but already in the second sentence. Thus, the irony of this text is not implicit, contained in the structure of the text. It is everywhere. In particular, the second paragraph, framed by two questions, is a variation on the double irony of the philologist who strives for the thing itself, thereby losing it, but who may actually find it *by* losing it.

The most obvious change can be seen in the third paragraph, which no longer speaks about Kabbalah “from beyond,” that is, about the relation between Kabbalah and philology and its messianic end, but about the Kabbalah itself. Tellingly, the concluding sentence is not about the vanishing subject of the philologist but about the object. This shift entails another: “tradition,” being only implicit in the former text, becomes explicit, even semantically central. Accordingly, the “essence”/“appearance” opposition is replaced by one internal to tradition: the opposition between “true” and “falling” (that is, declining) tradition. Being explicit now, the former text’s matrix, “tradition,” is apparently no longer the organizing principle of the aphorism but a function in another structure we will have to look for.

However, this explicitness does not dissolve the text’s poeticity into a simple mimetic description. “Tradition” is still as equivocal in the last paragraph as it generally is in Scholem’s texts. The “tradition” affirmed by the kabbalist can stand for a certain content passed down through time (the “traditum”), as well as for the process of passing down itself (the “traditio”). It can be understood secularly, as a process of cultural transmission, or as an authentic, authoritative, or even sacred realm of

truth. Moreover, "tradition" implies a broad range of internal semiotic differentiations like living-dead, esoteric-exoteric, or written-spoken, which allow one to formulate apparent paradoxes like the "silent" or "invisible" tradition we have already come across in the *Theves*. Thus, for Scholem, and even more generally in a Jewish context, tradition is never a simple descriptive term belonging to a neutral metalanguage but is always a highly overdetermined, even controversial category. In Scholem, this is even more complicated, since he uses "tradition" also as a *translation* for Kabbalah. Thus, the term not only represents the inherent bilingualism of Scholem's work but also implies a certain *mise-en-abyme*, at once designating and analyzing the very object of Scholem's entire work.

Therefore, the presence of tradition does not lead to semantic stability but prompts a series of semiotic shifts which further destabilize the text. To give an example, the "object" representing Kabbalah itself in the first paragraph becomes the object that the declining Kabbalah "falls upon" (*verfällt*) in the third. This not only blurs clear-cut divisions, it also enforces the cohesion of the text by repetition, most obviously in the last sentence, which is a kind of variation on the term "tradition" as well as on the German *verfallen*, meaning to hit upon something, to decline, and to become addicted to something. This is more a repetition of words than of terms, for the text does not imply that the different recurrences of the object or the falling refer to the same thing. Nevertheless, its fascination is a result of designating very different things by one and the same word.

The repetition of words is, according to Roman Jakobson, a fundamental principle of poetry. Whereas in normal language, words are selected from out of equivalent terms (according to the principle of similarity) but combined to form a phrase by completely other principles (contiguity), poetry uses the similarities to construct a sequence. Thus, poetry says things again and again: "Every sequence is a simile. Similarity which is transferred on contiguity gives poetry its altogether symbolic, multiple and polysemantic nature."³⁴ The most important example is the rhyme. However, other semiotic dimensions, like semantics or syntax, can be repeated as well. In any case, repetition leads to the unification of the different levels of semiosis, for in a poetic structure, the repetition of a word appears to be meaningful as an unfolding of its meaning. Being an integrative whole, the text seems to become necessary or motivated.

34. Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics," 370. This definition of poeicity through "recurrence" is the technical formulation of the functional definition of poeicity through self-reference. See above, n. 30.

Its elements are no longer contingent but belong to the totality of the text.³⁵

The aphorisms combine this formal motivation with another strategy: reference to other texts by Scholem. The condensed last sentence of the aphorism evokes the history of the Kabbalah, to which the *Unhistorical Aphorisms* already point by their title. As every reader of Scholem will know, the crisis of Sabbatianism is key to his reconstruction of the inner dynamics of Kabbalah. When, after Sabbatai Zvi's apostasy, Kabbalah becomes heretical, announcing "redemption through sin," we face the very moment "when all concepts of Jewish mysticism meet, just to explode through their own dialectic—or, said more wearily, fulminate."³⁶ Seen from this angle, the ambiguity of *verfallen* becomes clear, since it is the objective ambiguity in which the inner structure of the Kabbalah (its "greatness") becomes visible in the very moment when it "falls upon" messianic activity and simultaneously "falls into" pieces. Thus, to understand the rather obscure idea of the fallen tradition, we have to refer to Scholem's other texts on Kabbalah; its meaning is neither intertextual (referring to texts of other authors) nor hypogrammatical (referring to cultural clichés) but *intratextual*, referring to Scholem's own texts. If the older texts, like the *Theses*, were programmatic in proclaiming what had to be done, the younger *Aphorisms* are paragrammatic in the sense of being a paratext commenting on a text already in existence.³⁷

In fact, by their title, the *Aphorisms* present themselves so clearly as a paratext that one wonders why they have so often been read as the real foundation of Scholem's thought. A paratext is never an axiom from which the text it comments upon is deduced but, rather, the other way round. It is functional for the other text.³⁸ To understand the *Aphorisms*,

35. On the concept of motivation, see Gerard Genette, "Vraisemblance et motivation" in Genette, *Figures* (Paris, 1969), 2:71–101.

36. See Gershom Scholem, "Die Theologie des Sabbatianismus im Lichte Abraham Cardosos," Scholem, *Judaica*, 1:132.

37. This does not refer to the usual meaning of paragram as a nonlinear structure of textuality, but, of course, to Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. J. E. Lewin (Cambridge, 1997).

38. Scholem himself did not conceive of his *Aphorisms* as fundamental. To David Biale, who he thought was referring too much to the *Aphorisms*, he wrote: "To quote remarks which I myself called unhistorical as proof of my anachronistic concepts of 'counterhistory' is in no way to judge my historical *researches*. They were written consciously in *contrast* to these and every reader I know has read them as such." (Scholem to Biale, quoted in Schäfer, "Die Philologie der Kabbala," 24) Even here, Scholem did not give any clarifying comment on what he "really meant" by the *Aphorisms* but sent along another text not any clearer: the open letter to Schocken.

we should not so much focus our attention on the relationship between Kabbalah and history, complicated as it may be, but on the text's paratextual function: to ensure the "correct" reading of Scholem's entire work on *Kabbalah* by correcting possible misreadings. This does not mean that the aphorisms speak plainly in the manner of "I, the author of my book, do now declare what I really meant."³⁹ On the contrary, they do not reveal the real Scholem but direct the reader toward other texts by Scholem, which have to be consulted first, thereby affirming that Scholem alone has the authority to understand what he has said, that Scholem can be only understood by Scholem. It is essential for this move not to be spoken literally, since it is precisely through their cryptic and at the same time seemingly evident form that the *Aphorisms* produce a desire in the reader. He or she strives for more of this deep and easy knowledge and turns to Scholem's historiographical work where what is only hinted at in the *Aphorisms* is developed more broadly. It is therefore only natural that Scholem would refuse any request, as one by Adorno, to comment on his own *Aphorisms*. They have to remain isolated, brilliant in their auratic solitariness, and pointing to the authority of their author:

I have done wrong to myself when I agreed to published the unhistorical *Aphorisms on Kabbalah*, thinking however, according to what one of them said, that no one will take notice and that the safest way to hide them would be to publish them in a Festschrift like this one. Now you want a comment. But what do you think? This existed only in former times when the authors wrote the commentaries themselves, saying, if they were prudent, the opposite of what they had said in the text. I shall take care not to expose myself here. To my *Aphorisms* applies (the principle): "Beware who can."⁴⁰

The paratextual function of the *Aphorisms* is to comment on the research on Kabbalah; however, the comment is more than a mere summary. The functions we analyzed in the older texts—the rhetorical self-institution as writing in tradition, the semiotic displacement toward a paradoxical conception of tradition—are still operative, even strengthened by the growing subtlety of Scholem's writing. Yet they are incorporated into

39. Obviously, such a statement would itself be a rhetorical gesture, but it matches the general aim of paratexts: "The correctness of the authorial . . . point of view is the implicit creed and spontaneous ideology of the paratext" (Genette, *Paratexts*, 408).

40. Gershom Scholem to Adorno, in Scholem, *Briefe*, 2:91.

a new function, which seems to coincide with the central structure of significance of the first *Aphorism*. The *Aphorisms* no longer seek to establish a new code (“tradition”) or distort an older one (“historicism”) but rather aim at establishing a certain reading of existing texts, namely, Scholem’s own texts on Kabbalah. In other words, they signify a certain *authorship*, if we define the latter as the instance in which different texts can be traced back in a way that they comment on each other. Relating Scholem to Scholem, the ultimate function of the *Aphorisms* seems to be to constitute the totality of an oeuvre. Or to exaggerate slightly, their matrix is no longer “tradition” but “Scholem.” As they are still poetic, the *Aphorisms* do not do this explicitly, but by poetic means, by allusion, condensation, and semiotic displacement. Thus, the *Aphorisms* are not keys to Scholem’s work but thresholds, invitations to read Gershom Scholem.

CONCLUSION

The three texts we looked at have proved difficult to read. By their allusions, paradoxes, double-entendres, metaphors, and allegories they seem to promise a deeper meaning than is given. We could call them esoteric, but we have to be careful with this term. For it is a common misunderstanding that esotericism (literally, “hidden communication”) is the communication of hidden things like theology, messianism, and other dark affairs. Scholem himself had a more precise understanding of esotericism. Speaking of Walter Benjamin, he describes his friend’s “gesture of the esotericist” as the “gesture of producing canonical sentences, i.e. sentences that are essentially and from the outset citable.”⁴¹ In fact, some of Benjamin’s sentences, as well as of Scholem’s (e.g., the *Unhistorical Aphorisms*), are cited over and over again. We may now be able to understand why this is so. If citation is substantially the extraction of a phrase out of its context and its insertion into a new one, a phrase is uncitable to the extent that it depends on that context (as deictic structures are, for example). Conversely, it would be citable to the extent that it transports or activates a context by itself—which, as we have seen, Scholem’s texts perform by means of the hypogram or of poetic condensation, and so forth. It is precisely this poetic closure and overdetermination which seems to urge the reader to come back to them time and again, since what they express cannot be expressed in other words but only repeated

41. Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin und sein Engel* (Frankfurt M., 1983), 35.

verbatim. In every repetition, the authority of the author to have said things in the one and only correct way is confirmed and strengthened.⁴²

Citation is indeed fundamental for Scholem, because it relates to the most important practices he is engaged in: reading and writing. As we have seen, his texts are somehow produced by citation themselves. In his *Theses* as well as in his revisions of *On Kabbalah*, he likes to take phrases or words out of context and integrate them into another, even if they do not fit perfectly. It may be that the unity of Scholem's writings consists in such formulations, which are less central ideas than motifs in a musical sense: terms and half-phrases repeated here and there, weaving a dense network of allusions and producing a kind of literary coherence—the author “Scholem.” Citation is also essential for the two areas of writing Scholem wants to connect: Jewish tradition and the philological discipline. One can argue that rabbinic literature is essentially citational. Because the rabbis considered divine Scripture as true in itself, rabbinic interpretation mainly consists of a recombination of scriptural passages into new arguments. It is thus not so much commentary on Scripture as writing *with* Scripture.⁴³ On the other hand, philological writing as text-centered inquiry is essentially bound to citations. If Scholem always preferred to call his endeavour philology rather than history, the reason may not just be modesty but above all his sense of an epistemic difference. Whereas the historian, in a historicist understanding at least, narrates the real meaning of past events in an autonomous narration, the philological text essentially consists of two levels—the cited sources next to the interpretation (or even dating, emendation, etc.) of the philologist.

We therefore see Scholem between two modes of citation: the faithful citation of tradition and the critical citation of philology. They are not strictly opposed; even a short look at the Talmud raises serious doubts about the pious intentions of the citing rabbis who often reconfigure

42. Astonishingly, citation as the fundamental philological practice is hardly ever thematized in poetics. A valuable exception is Antoine Compagnon, *La seconde Main, ou le travail de la citation* (Paris, 1979). According to Jakobson, poetry could be described as citation: “Every poetic message is fundamentally cited speech with all the peculiar and complicated problems which ‘speech inside speech’ poses to the linguist” (Jakobson, “Linguistics and Poetics,” 371).

43. See Jacob Neusner and William S. Green, *Writing with Scripture* (Minneapolis, Minn., 1989). On the poetic effect of this practice, see Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington, Ind., 1990). Moreover, since rabbinic literature mostly consists of recordings of different interpretations in the form of “Rabbi x says . . . (Scripture says . . .),” the whole body of rabbinic literature can, at one level, be described as “cited speech acts.” See Arnold Golderg, *Rabbinische Texte als Gegenstand der Auslegung* (Tübingen, 1999).

Scripture rather forcefully. More than once, philologists have been accused of being enslaved by the letter. And yet traditional and philological citation are not the same. It is precisely this interplay of similarity and difference that Scholem uses to produce his ambiguous and fascinating phrases.

To understand Scholem's project, it is not appropriate to reduce him to one or another side of this spectrum. He is not only a traditionalist and not only a sober philologist, not just faithful and not just a pure rebel either. It is not especially fruitful to affirm his uniqueness or to say that he overcomes the tension between tradition and modernity. "Overcoming" oppositions is something that historians of ideas like to ascribe to their heroes. But what would it mean to overcome a distinction which really exists, for everybody else at least, and which, in Scholem's case, is fundamental to the whole enterprise of the philology of Kabbalah?

In this unhealthy situation, an in-depth reading like the one I proposed in this essay may open up the possibility of a different path that allows us to decipher this constellation without dissolving its ambiguities in either direction. It might enable us to establish a productive relation to Scholem as a founding father of Jewish studies, not by bowing to him slavishly nor by forgetting him as quickly as we can. Moreover, we may assume that further readings, be they of Scholem or other thinkers from the German Jewish Renaissance, would produce similar results—or results which differ significantly and can therefore lead to fruitful comparison. Such observations, which are still rare in the interpretation of German-Jewish thought, may give us some insights into the grammar of the invention of tradition, which may be more useful than another paraphrase of someone's thought or another conjuring of individual genius. I would even propose that we face a more general trait, fundamental to any cultural poetics. In this respect, the tension between a critical and a traditional stance toward Scripture (or the canonical texts of a given age) may be constitutive for any Jewish (if not any) intellectual identity, with its incessant movement between self-reliance on the one hand and submission to history on the other.