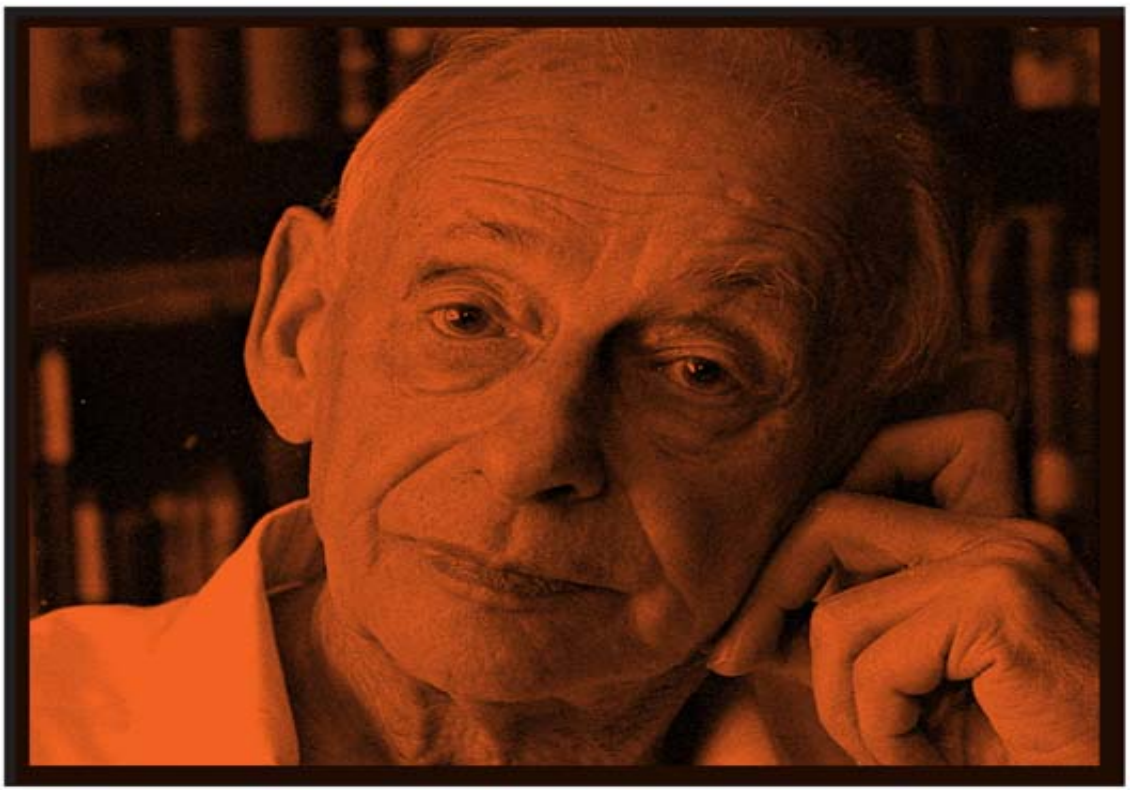
THEODOR W. ADORNO
GERSHOM SCHOLEM

CORRESPONDENCE 1939–1969



CONTENTS

Correspondence

1939–1969

Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem

Edited and with an Introduction by
Asaf Angermann

Translated by
Paula Schwebel and Sebastian Truskolaski

polity

Originally published in German as *“Der Liebe Gott wohnt im Detail” Theodor W. Adorno / Gershom Scholem Briefwechsel 1939–1969*, herausgegeben von Asaf Angermann © Suhrkamp Verlag, Berlin, 2015

The translation of this work was supported by a grant from the Goethe-Institut.

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
101 Station Landing
Suite 300
Medford, MA 02155, USA

ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-1049-8

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Adorno, Theodor W., 1903-1969, author. | Scholem, Gershom, 1897-1982, author. | Angermann, Asaf, 1978- editor. | Schwebel, Paula, 1981- translator. | Truskolaski, Sebastian, translator.
Title: Correspondence : 1939 - 1969 / Theodore W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem ; edited by Asaf Angermann ; translated by Paula Schwebel and Sebastian Truskolaski.
Description: Medford : Polity, [2020] | Originally published in German as “Der Liebe Gott wohnt im Detail”: Briefwechsel 1969-1969. Herausgegeben von Asaf Angermann © Suhrkamp Verlag Berlin 2015. | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: “Thirty years of epistolary friendship between two towering figures of the 20th century”-- Provided by publisher.
Identifiers: LCCN 2020005504 (print) | LCCN 2020005505 (ebook) | ISBN 9781509510450 (hardback) | ISBN 9781509510498 (epub)
Subjects: LCSH: Adorno, Theodor W., 1903-1969. Correspondence Selections English. | Scholem, Gershom, 1897-1982. Correspondence. | Authors, German--20th century--Correspondence. | Intellectuals--Germany--Correspondence. | Germany--Intellectual life--20th century.
Classification: LCC B3199.A34 A4213 2020 (print) | LCC B3199.A34 (ebook) | DDC 193 [B]--dc23

LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020005504
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020005505

For further information on Polity, visit our website: politybooks.com

Introduction

“Overall, my memory of this might involve much retrospective fantasy,” Theodor W. Adorno reminisced about his first encounter with Gershom Scholem, which must have taken place sometime around 1923.

> Anyway, the setting was the Frankfurt Civic Hospital; it seems to me that it was the garden. He was wearing a bathrobe, if I didn’t retroactively make that up, associating it with the impression of a Bedouin prince, which he invoked in me with his blazing eyes – at a time when I was blissfully ignorant of the situation in the Near East. It was this ignorance that made me irreverently say to him that I was envious of his imminent travel to Palestine – it was nothing other than the emigration itself. I imagined the Arab girls to be so appealing, wearing copper chains on their slender ankles. Scholem responded, in that truly down-to-earth Berlin dialect, which he kept through forty-five years of Zion and which the great Hebraist, as a rumor has it, faithfully preserved even in his Hebrew pronunciation: “Well, then you could readily get a knife stuck between your ribs.”[1]

This recollection, which may seem to be rather sexist and orientalist, filled, however, with fascination and admiration, featured in Adorno’s congratulatory article on Scholem’s seventieth birthday in December 1967. The concrete occasion for that first encounter was a visit to Siegfried Kracauer, the philosopher and cultural critic, who, as Scholem later recalled, had been hospitalized that day for a “minor malady.” Kracauer was a mutual friend of Adorno and Walter Benjamin, and it was Benjamin who had brought Scholem along for the hospital visit. For his part,

Scholem was hardly aware of Adorno's presence at that visit and was only reminded of it by Adorno decades later.[2] For Adorno, Scholem not only represented the Jewish sage – knowledgeable in all matters religious, especially regarding the mystical and esoteric – but he also seemed to be the conduit to a realm of cognition that transcends the given social reality, with its instrumental mores. Adorno's nebulous memory of their first encounter includes such esoteric, mystical, and indeed orientalist elements, which he associated with Scholem's life and work, as well as the latter's harsh, pragmatic words of caution: getting carried away with such fantasies could result in being knifed between the ribs. Adorno, the rational critic of irrational society, sought an alternative to instrumental rationality in Scholem's worldview, while Scholem, the renowned scholar of Jewish mysticism, was himself never weary of warning of mysticism's temptations and dangers.[3] "It was my first information about the conflict that reverberates in the world today," Adorno concluded his reminiscence, which he published in the widely read German-language Swiss newspaper *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* six months after the Arab–Israeli "Six-Day War" of June 1967.

The first brief encounter at the Frankfurt Hospital was followed by a decade and a half in which there was no communication whatsoever between Adorno and Scholem. However, each of them was virtually present in the other's exchanges with their mutual friend Walter Benjamin. Benjamin's continuous efforts to bring about an amicable relationship between his two close friends were often met with suspicion, skepticism, and presumably also some envy. Scholem – who had known Benjamin since 1915, when the two were eighteen and twenty-three years old, respectively – persistently resisted any closer bond with Adorno. Adorno, born in 1903, met Benjamin in 1923 in Frankfurt, either during a sociology seminar that both attended –

Adorno as a student, Benjamin while pursuing his *Habilitation* (a second doctorate required in Germany for academic posts) – or else at a meeting arranged by Kracauer in a Frankfurt café. Adorno was not able to recall which of these occasions occurred first.[4] Scholem had also lived for a short time in Frankfurt, before leaving for Palestine to pursue his Zionist political belief in a new Jewish national beginning. He had arrived in Frankfurt from Berlin in April 1923 and stayed until August of that year, before returning to Berlin, from which he left for Palestine in September.[5] During that brief stay in Frankfurt, in which his fleeting first encounter with Adorno took place, there was ample opportunity for the two to develop a more substantial personal or scholarly relationship. Not only were Adorno and Scholem mutual friends of Benjamin's, but they also socialized in intersecting intellectual circles. Both Benjamin and Kracauer, alongside, for example, Erich Fromm and Leo Löwenthal – all four would later belong to the wider circle around the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research – attended the Freies Jüdisches Lehrhau*s* ("Free Jewish House of Learning"), an institute for Jewish education established in 1920 by philosopher Franz Rosenzweig in Frankfurt. Among other attendees – who were at the same time instructors, as the Lehrhaus was based on communal learning rather than teacher-centered classes – were Martin Buber and Ernst Simon, as well as Scholem, who taught and studied Kabbalistic texts in Hebrew while there. Adorno kept his distance from the happenings at the Lehrhaus, however. Born to a Jewish father and a Catholic mother, Adorno entertained no particular interest in Jewish matters, religious, cultural, or otherwise. In fact, he reportedly referred derisively to his friends Fromm and Löwenthal as "*Berufsjuden*" ("professional Jews"), on account of their involvement in the Lehrhaus.

Scholem, for his part, made no effort to conceal his disdain for Adorno. “A strange reluctance kept me from an encounter with Adorno, which was due at that time and which he probably expected,” he recalled almost half a century later.[6] “I wrote Walter about this. He replied that my reserved remarks about Adorno could not keep him from drawing my attention to Adorno’s recently published first work on Kierkegaard.”[7] Adorno’s first book, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, was published in 1933 – “on the very same day in which Hitler seized the dictatorship,” as Adorno himself noted.[8] The book, based on Adorno’s *Habilitation*, which was written under the direction of the theologian Paul Tillich, was considerably indebted to the method that Benjamin had developed in his own work, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, based on his failed effort at a *Habilitation*. Benjamin’s method involved reading material and social phenomena allegorically so as to decipher their hidden “truth-content.”[9] Both Benjamin and Scholem received the page proofs of Adorno’s Kierkegaard book before publication. Following months of Benjamin’s persistent attempts to persuade Scholem to read Adorno’s book, Scholem finally wrote to Benjamin, in October 1933: “to my mind the book combines a sublime plagiarism of your thought with an uncommon chutzpah, and it will ultimately not mean much for a future, objective appraisal of Kierkegaard, in marked contrast to your analysis of the *Trauerspiel*. I regret that our opinions probably differ in this matter.”[10] Whether Scholem’s scathing critique of the book was motivated by political aversion due to Adorno’s Marxist approach (which Scholem generally rejected, although he critically tolerated Benjamin’s own Marxist positions), because of Adorno’s detachment from Frankfurt’s Jewish circles and from Judaism altogether (which Scholem interpreted as assimilatory and opportunistic self-denial), or perhaps

motivated by his envy of Adorno's close friendship with Benjamin, the latter's attempts to establish an amicable and productive relationship between these two great Jewish-German minds repeatedly led to a dead end. At least this was the case when both men lived in Frankfurt, surrounded by the same friends, arguably concerned with similar questions of identity, tradition, and prejudice.

This state of affairs had dramatically changed a few years later, on the other side of the Atlantic, as the world was sinking into murderous chaos. Adorno and Scholem encountered each other again in New York in 1938. Adorno had just arrived in the city, joining Horkheimer at the Institute for Social Research's new incarnation in exile at Columbia University, and also working on the Princeton Radio Research Project directed by an Austrian-Jewish émigré, sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld. Scholem traveled to New York from Jerusalem – via Paris, where he saw Benjamin for the last time – to deliver the Hilda Stich Stroock Lectures on Jewish mysticism at the Jewish Institute of Religion. On the ship from France, Scholem met Paul Tillich. It was Tillich who succeeded in initiating the contact between Adorno and Scholem, despite the difficult premises. Scholem reported to Benjamin on March 25, 1938: "Wiesengrund wasn't aboard the ship, and he hasn't been in touch with me either. However, I did meet with Tillich and his wife, who are resolutely determined to bring me together with Horkheimer and Wiesengrund, with whom, they said, they are very close, which placed me in a somewhat embarrassing position."[11]

But, as soon as the meeting took place, both sides readily overcame their predispositions. Scholem's disdain and mistrust of Adorno was transformed into a careful appreciation motivated by the discovery of mutual interests (although he retained an unrelenting aversion toward Horkheimer). Adorno's animadversion toward Scholem's

demonstrative Jewish-theological approach, while not overcome, was softened by the latter's enthusiasm for those radical, heretical dimensions of Judaism which might have resonated, to some extent, with the drives behind the project of critical theory. Both eagerly conveyed their impressions of that meeting, and of each other, to Benjamin. Their accounts shed much light on the origins and foundations of the long-lasting and wide-ranging dialogue that ensued. On May 6, just a few weeks after his arrival in New York, Scholem wrote to Benjamin that he:

> was able to establish a very sympathetic relationship [with Wiesengrund-Adorno]. I like him immensely, and we found quite a lot to say to one another. I intend to cultivate relations with him and his wife quite vigorously. Talking with him is pleasant and engaging, and I find it possible to reach agreement on many things. You shouldn't be surprised by the fact that we spend a great deal of time mulling over your situation.[12]

Benjamin responded from Paris two months later: "I was pleased to see that some things go smoothly as soon as my back is turned. How many complaints have I heard *de part et d'autre* about you and Wiesengrund! And now it all turns out to have been much ado about nothing. Nobody is more pleased about that than I am."[13]

Decades later, Scholem explained his sudden change of heart at these meetings, further elucidating his perspective on the beginning of his friendship with Adorno:

> The good spirit that prevailed in the meetings between Adorno and me was due not so much to the cordiality of the reception as to my considerable surprise at Adorno's appreciation of the continuing theological element in Benjamin. I had expected a Marxist who would insist on the liquidation of what were in my opinion the most valuable furnishings in Benjamin's intellectual household. Instead I encountered here a man who definitely had an open mind and even a positive attitude toward these traits, although he viewed them from his own dialectical perspective.[14]

Adorno reported to Benjamin on this remarkable meeting in a letter from March 1938:

You may find this hard to believe, but the first time we got to meet him [Scholem] was at the Tillichs…. Not exactly the best atmosphere in which to be introduced to the Sohar; and especially since Frau Tillich's relationship to the Kabbala seems to resemble that of a terrified teenager [*Backfisch*: also, literally, fried fish] to pornography. The antinomian Maggid was extremely reserved towards me at first, and clearly regarded me as some sort of dangerous arch-seducer…. Needless to say, nothing of the kind was actually said, and Scholem contrived to sustain the fiction, with considerable brash grace, that he knew nothing at all about me except that a book of mine had been published by the blessed Siebeck [publisher of Adorno's book on Kierkegaard]. Nevertheless, I somehow succeeded in breaking the spell and he began to show some kind of trust in me, something which I think will continue to grow.

We have spent a couple of evenings together, as the ringing in your ears has presumably already told you by now; once on our own, in a discussion which touched in part upon our own last conversation in San Remo concerning theology, and in part upon my Husserl piece, which Scholem read with great care, as if it were some intelligence test. We spent the second evening in the company of Max, and Scholem, who was in great form, regaled us in detail with the most astonishing things in connection with Sabbatian and Frankist mysticism; a number of which, however, sounded so clearly reminiscent of some of Rosenberg's notions about "the people," that Max was seriously concerned about the prospect of more of this kind actually appearing in print. It is not altogether easy for me to convey my own impression of Scholem. This is indeed a classic case of the conflict between duty and inclination. My personal inclination comes into play

> most strongly when he makes himself the advocate [*Anwalt*] of the theological moment of your, and perhaps I might also say of my own, philosophy.[15]

It is remarkable, though perhaps not surprising, that in this letter Adorno critically and presciently diagnoses exactly what Scholem would write years after his death, namely of the theological element not only in Benjamin's but also in his – Adorno's – own thought. Already during their first conversations, Adorno and Scholem discovered that they shared much more with each other than they had initially themselves presumed. Scholem displayed what seems to be a genuine and profound interest in Adorno's work. Although he dismissed the main thesis of Adorno's Kierkegaard book and accused its author of plagiarism, Scholem was indeed intrigued by the materialist, dialectical reading of a theological thinker. Adorno's work on Husserl, which began as his dissertation and continued – with various versions of papers published along the way – until the publication in 1956 of his book on Husserl, *Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie* [trans. as *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique*], seems to have sparked Scholem's own philosophical interest. Scholem's initially critical and often dismissive approach toward Adorno's work (in letters to Benjamin and others) was increasingly overturned, and he ultimately came to discover a common language with the dialectical social philosopher. His interest in Adorno's work, although motivated at first by Benjamin and the proximity to his work, largely transcends their shared interest in all things Benjamin. Adorno and Scholem's correspondence reveals, for the first time, the full scope of the thematic resonance that they found with each other.

Adorno, for his part, was – cautiously – fascinated by Scholem's work on religious mysticism and its heretical, transgressive offshoots. Baptized as a Catholic and raised

in an assimilated Jewish family, which kept its distance from anything “professionally Jewish,” Adorno was never a religious thinker, and even less so a Jewish thinker – at least not conspicuously. His interest in Kierkegaard’s theological thought was philosophical and predominantly aesthetic. Furthermore, as a harsh critic of irrationality and the occult, Adorno had an attitude toward Kabbalah and the mystical dimensions of life that could not, at first glance, have been more apprehensive. But in Scholem’s writings he did not perceive an irrational relapse into mythical thinking of the sort he critically diagnoses, for example, in *Minima Moralia*, as occultism. “The tendency to occultism,” he notes there, “is a symptom of regression in consciousness. This has lost the power to think the unconditional and to endure the conditional.”[16] On the contrary, Scholem’s work on mysticism represented for Adorno an alternative to the all-consuming power of instrumental reason, a realm of possibilities beyond the given social order and the limitations that this social order imposed on thought and the imagination. As Adorno understood Scholem’s project, mysticism does not necessarily seek to transcend the given reality in order to escape to an imaginary realm outside of it. Rather than fleeing the conditional into a regressive and escapist form of metaphysical surrogate for this world, it translated concrete, material, earthly life into mystical categories, thereby allowing for a critical perspective on this life.

At the time of their first encounter in 1938, Scholem had already published a significant body of work on various aspects of Jewish mysticism. His Munich dissertation, a German translation of the Bahir, the first book of the Kabbalah, was published in 1922. His annotated German translation of a chapter from the Zohar, the most central book of the Kabbalah, furnished with his detailed introduction on the book’s historical and conceptual

aspects, was published in 1935. In his lectures at the Jewish Institute of Religion in New York, held at the time of his first conversations with Adorno, Scholem elaborated on this topic, which was the subject, in part, of their discussion. But at that time Scholem was enthusiastically pursuing pioneering research into another dimension of Jewish mysticism, namely heretical messianism. In 1937, he published a text that would become a signpost of modern scholarship on Sabbatianism and Frankism, the Jewish heretical movements of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that followed the self-proclaimed messiahs Sabbatai Sevi (1626–1676) and Jacob Frank (1726–1791), respectively. “Mitzvah ha-ba’ah ba’averah” – literally: a commandment fulfilled by transgression – initially published only in Hebrew, was translated into English only decades later, in 1971, as “Redemption through Sin.”[17] Aware of the subject’s delicate, controversial dimensions and its inflammatory potential, Scholem insisted on keeping a discussion of its topic within the boundaries of Jewish communities. He published an abbreviated, expurgated German version of the text, excluding all the transgressive and contentious elements.[18] The Sabbatian and Frankist movements, Scholem explained, drew from Kabbalistic cosmogonic theories, especially Lurianic Kabbalah – the teachings of Rabbi Isaac Luria of Safed in the sixteenth century – on the notions of good and evil, and concluded that, in order to achieve redemption in times of exile and catastrophe, the messiah and his followers are commanded to transgress prevailing norms and laws, to commit evil deeds, overturning divine law and religious commandments. The original Hebrew text discusses such transgressions in detail – from moral crimes to forbidden sexual acts and religious blasphemies, culminating in apostasy: Sabbatai Sevi converted to Islam, Jacob Frank to Christianity. The followers of both, however, retained their

Jewish faith beneath the ostensive practice of their newly acquired religions as crypto-Jews, forever the subject of suspicion and aversion. But the need to transgress the given law, to challenge predominant morality for the sake of true redemption and liberation, was the main motif of Scholem's own modern rendering of the Sabbatian and Frankist doctrines. This was the subject of Scholem's conversations in New York with Theodor and Gretel Adorno, attended by Max Horkheimer, who, as noted above, feared that such scholarship might only affirm certain anti-Semitic prejudices (the year was 1938), and he was "seriously concerned about the prospect of more of this kind actually appearing in print." Adorno himself, however, must have been better able to relate to Scholem's theory, in particular to its disobedient, anti-normative, and anti-authoritarian – one might also suggest: anarchist – elements. Additionally, Scholem's historical reading of heretical messianism emphasized the materialistic, social, and psychological aspects of such soteriological theories. Rather than explaining them from a merely theological point of view, Scholem offered an interpretation that analyzed the heretical mysticism of the Sabbatian and Frankist movements – as well as Lurianic Kabbalah in which they originated – as giving expression to the material, social, and psychological needs of the exiled Jewish communities. Later on, in his autobiography *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, he in fact referred to Adorno and the Frankfurt School as a latter-day incarnation of such heretical sects.[19]

Nevertheless, whereas the personal meetings transformed Scholem's perception of Adorno, enabling him to transcend his initially skeptical premises and suspicions, Adorno, for his part, experienced this encounter as more complex. Along with his fascination for Scholem's anarchist mystical theories and his respect for the latter's erudition in both

German philosophy and Jewish history, Adorno was also somewhat perplexed by his theological – one might add, arguably, political-theological – worldview. Specifically, as he noted in his report to Benjamin, Adorno was definitely uneasy about Scholem's heavyhanded effort to advance the theological element in Benjamin's – and in his own – thought. Scholem, Adorno suspected, claimed authority not only over Benjamin's thought, which conspicuously merged theology with materialism, but also over Adorno's own philosophy, in which – despite numerous theological references and metaphors – theology ultimately plays a rather marginal role.

Such proximities of interest and differences of perspective did, however, allow Adorno and Scholem to establish a fruitful and profound dialogue. At the same time, it is important to note that their differences and dissensions were initially expressed only covertly, mainly in letters to Benjamin. After Benjamin's death, they were transmuted into a less tangible, underlying tenor of the exchange. As the correspondence shows, these differences were not detrimental to their relationship but contributed, rather, to the sensitive and nuanced communication. They added an underlying facet of irony that continuously conceals but never eliminates the discrepancies. Precisely because of these proximities and differences, much is left unsaid in the correspondence. What the authors agree on is assumed as a given; what they disagree about is softened in order to avoid confrontations. Although continuously kept at bay, however, the tensions – interpersonal and, more substantially, theoretical, conceptual, and perspectival – are hard to overlook. The correspondence therefore requires a form of active reading between the lines, of filling in the gaps with information available through other sources. What the authors write to each other gains an additional dimension once it is read in the light of their exchanges

with Benjamin and others, as well as their published and unpublished writings.

Benjamin's suicide in 1940 – which took place when he was attempting to escape the Nazi occupation of France but was turned back at the French border in Port-Bou, Spain – deeply affected his two close friends. Their correspondence, which began a year before Benjamin's death, grew more intense as they shared reports about his precarious situation, and their concerns about his fate became grave. After his death, their recently forged friendship was strengthened by their mutual efforts to preserve Benjamin's legacy. Adorno and Scholem joined forces in the project of editing and publishing Benjamin's writings and letters. Although not completely unknown, Benjamin's work eluded widespread public attention during his lifetime. His numerous newspaper articles and literary reviews, along with the four books he published between 1920 and 1928 (with an annotated edition of letters written by German intellectuals, entitled *Deutsche Menschen* [German men and women], in 1936), could not have guaranteed him the reputation he enjoyed in the succeeding decades. This reputation is entirely indebted to his friends' efforts – against all odds and in the face of countless obstacles. The correspondence provides extensive evidence of the struggles Adorno and Scholem undertook to establish Walter Benjamin as the outstanding seminal figure of modern European thought that he has meanwhile become. Readers familiar with Benjamin's work may find it surprising to discover in the correspondence that, without Adorno and Scholem's monumental efforts and harsh struggles, Benjamin's writings – and his status as an intellectual figure – would most likely have been doomed to oblivion. It is perhaps no exaggeration to suggest that Walter Benjamin as we know him today, as a writer, philosopher, and cultural critic, is, to a certain degree, a