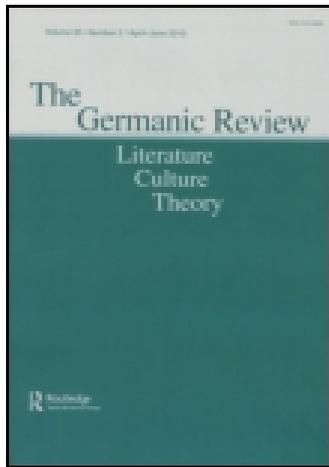


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Scenes from a Friendship: On the Epistolary Exchange between Gershom Scholem and Siegfried Unseld

Liliane Weissberg

Gershom Scholem had already had contact with Peter Suhrkamp at the Suhrkamp publishing house. It was Suhrkamp's successor Siegfried Unseld, however, who established a close relationship between the press and this important scholar of Jewish religion. Under Unseld's direction, Scholem's work was published or reissued by Suhrkamp, and Scholem served as an adviser to Suhrkamp's publication list in philosophy and Jewish Studies. Largely through Scholem's insistence, Suhrkamp embarked on a long-term project to edit the work and letters of Scholem's close friend, the critic Walter Benjamin, who had died in 1940. Unseld and Scholem were both strong personalities; their correspondence documents a friendship that would bridge West Germany and Israel and instigate books and projects; it is rich with information about friends and rivals.

Keywords: Gretel Adorno, Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, hashish, Gershom Scholem, Suhrkamp Verlag, Jacob Taubes, Siegfried Unseld

I. GERSHOM SCHOLEM AND SIEGFRIED UNSELD

Hidden among the many files collected in the Siegfried Unseld-Archiv (SUA) are the stories of many publisher/author relationships. One of them that should serve as an example here is that of Siegfried Unseld and the scholar of Jewish religion Gershom Scholem. The following notes should give first impressions on their friendship, as documented in many letters that are currently being collated and catalogued.

Unseld "inherited" Scholem from Peter Suhrkamp, the founder of the new publishing house that branched off from the S. Fischer Verlag in 1950. The exchange between those two had been very brief, however, and pertained primarily to Suhrkamp's planned edition of Walter Benjamin's works.¹ In 1959, Suhrkamp passed away, and Siegfried Unseld, who had

¹Walter Benjamin, *Schriften*, 2 vols., ed. Th. W. Adorno and Gretel Adorno with support from Friedrich Podszus (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1955).

been groomed for this position, assumed the leadership of the publishing house. Only now did Scholem's contact with the Suhrkamp Verlag intensify as Unsel'd initiated a frequent and lively exchange.

In contrast to Suhrkamp, Unsel'd seemed primarily interested in Scholem's work, and in issuing German editions and translations of his publications. Soon, however, Scholem became an important adviser regarding acquisitions in the area of Jewish Studies, and Jewish philosophy and religion in particular. He did not remain the only one to recommend publications in field, however, as Unsel'd asked Jakob Taubes to join his press as an adviser in the mid-sixties. Unfortunately, Scholem was rather critical of Taubes's scholarship and personality.

Scholem had moved from Berlin to Palestine in 1923 and assumed a position at the new National Library there before acquiring a professorship at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem shortly after its creation in 1933.² Taubes had moved from Switzerland to Jerusalem and New York for study and teaching before assuming a position in Jewish Studies, and then Hermeneutics, at the Freie Universität Berlin in 1965.³ While in Jerusalem, he had set out to work with Scholem, and their disagreements can be dated from this time on. For Unsel'd, it was difficult to keep both advisers in line, as is documented—for example, in the minutes Unsel'd kept of a meeting of August 30, 1973:

This was perhaps the best coming together yet (*Zusammenspiel*) of people who hated each other, i.e. Professor Scholem and Jacob Taubes. To prepare me for my conversation with Scholem, Taubes offered names of authors and books that we should publish, and asked me to test Scholem. He wanted to hear Scholem's opinion of those titles he thought Scholem would want to reject.

Still, with the help of Scholem and Taubes, both serving as advisers to the Suhrkamp publishing house, Unsel'd developed a new concentration for his program. His intent was to insert works of Jewish Studies into the intellectual discussion of the new Bundesrepublik. To do so, he relied not only on new editions of previously published and well-known texts, and of the authors of the Weimar Republic in particular—he was also eager to discover authors who had not been popular in the past and were perhaps forgotten, and to publish new, contemporary studies, translations from the English or Hebrew.

With this move, Unsel'd and his Suhrkamp Verlag assumed an important position. The press's program did not only look back in time to represent a vanished past of German authors from the pre-World War II period. It was also eager to consider the work by Jewish emigrants and thus serve as a bridge between authors no longer living in German-speaking lands and their former home, via publications in their mother tongue. In this category, the works by Paul Celan, Peter Weiss, and Nelly Sachs stand out. But Unsel'd was also interested in translating the works of non-German-speaking Jewish authors and providing a German reception for them. Finally, the Suhrkamp list served to document the remigration of Jewish

²In regard to Gershom Scholem's life, see his autobiography *From Berlin to Jerusalem: Memories of My Youth*, tr. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1980).

³In regard to Jakob Taubes's life, see the forthcoming biography by Jerry Z. Muller.

intellectuals to Germany, by tracking the careers of scholars such as Theodor W. Adorno, who had assumed a position at the Frankfurt Institut für Sozialforschung anew in 1949. The so-called *Suhrkamp-Kultur*, with its mix of critical theory and reflection on Germany's past and present politics, would have been unthinkable without these efforts. For Unseld, Scholem seemed to represent a tradition of Jewish thought that had been lost in Germany that he was trying to understand and, in some way, to reintroduce. Unseld was also personally attracted to Jews and Judaism, and in Gershom Scholem, he seemed to have found a perfect representation.

II. THE TAMING OF THE SHREW

The rich correspondence between Scholem and Unseld documents a relationship between author and publisher that went far beyond matters of business. This had, of course, much to do with the correspondents themselves, both of whom had larger-than-life personalities. Already as a young publisher, Unseld invested much energy in courting the Jerusalem scholar; he was fascinated by his work on the Kabbalah. Although it would seem rather esoteric and perhaps mysterious, it promised for Unseld an interesting addition to his program. In 1966, Unseld proceeded to buy the rights of those books that had already been published by other presses, such as the Südwest Verlag and the Metzner/Athenäum Verlag. By that time, Scholem became a *bona fide* Suhrkamp author.

With Unseld eager to nurture Scholem as an author and adviser, Scholem began to make more demands on his publisher. He visited Frankfurt regularly—often in combination to trips elsewhere in Europe, such as to the summer Eranos conferences in Switzerland. Unseld's office was to reserve a hotel room on such occasions—always at the Park Hotel in the Wiesenhüttenstrasse and, if possible, the same room. Unseld's hospitality was well known, and dinner invitations were expected. Finally, there were the wishes of the bibliophile. Individual copies of Scholem's Suhrkamp books as well as the occasional Suhrkamp volume by authors with whom he was friendly or whom he had recommended were to be specially bound for him in dark blue or dark green leather (at times, a matching copy was produced for Unseld's own personal library). And, of course, Scholem expected books from the current Suhrkamp lists to be sent to him and his wife, Fania, just for information, for reading. These were gifts. "Today, two major books from your publishing house arrived, and I am joyfully acknowledging the receipt," writes Scholem, for example, on July 20, 1977:

the big, illustrated biography of Sigmund Freud, a dear relative of Fania, and the lively but still undogmatic essays by Magnus Enzensberger, *Einzelheiten*, reached me safely, and weeks ago, likewise, the two volume edition of Rilke's letters to Mrs. Wunderly-Volkart [sic]. I have been very interested in them, and they are very illuminating. I have to thank you very much for such a support of my *Bildung* which I can always use, and which I then apply on random occasions, unexpectedly, and with great success.

Mainly, however, Scholem was concerned about the earnings from his books. Again and again, Scholem would ask about advances or the sales of his books, or the royalties that he would earn from them. A letter written in December 1966, just after the transfer of the rights to his work from the Südwestverlag to Suhrkamp, said:

What it means is the following, in other words: I had zero income after since switching to the Suhrkamp Verlag, for the longest time. I will have to console myself with—the albeit not small—enjoyment to have landed in the lap of this publishing house. It's nice, but in regard to an author's fulfillment of this love affair, it does leave things to be desired.

Scholem was adamant about the fact that his books were not to be discounted or remaindered; a book by Scholem was to be sold at full price.

The exchange related to manuscripts, advice, books, and travel arrangements was soon to be shared with a third partner, however. Burgel Zeeh, who had joined the Suhrkamp Verlag in 1967 as an unmarried woman, quickly advanced to become the director's secretary and privileged assistant. She knew about the daily business of the publishing house, knew the authors, and knew Unsel'd's plans and intentions. At the Suhrkamp Verlag, Zeeh became an institution. She may have been the only person who received the Bundesverdienstkreuz, a medal of honor from the German state, for her job as secretary; it was offered to her late in life, in 2007, by President Horst Köhler. Regarding the relationship between Unsel'd and Scholem, she was able to act less officially, to sketch situations to Scholem informally, and to protect Unsel'd from some of his own promises or Scholem's demands.

Scholem visited Unsel'd and the publishing house in Frankfurt, but Unsel'd also occasionally traveled to Israel and visited Scholem; occasionally, both of them met in Switzerland. And with his work at Suhrkamp, Unsel'd also created an imaginary realm in which his authors were learn to know one another and become friends. More often than not, this was translated beyond the book. In Frankfurt, Unsel'd introduced Scholem to Alexander Mitscherlich and Jürgen Habermas; in Switzerland, Scholem was to meet Max Frisch. He met Martin Walser, Unsel'd's friend from graduate school. As these friendships grew, Scholem would report back when he and one of Unsel'd's authors would meet.

Unsel'd's wife, Hilde, and Scholem's wife, Fania, befriended each other as well, and sometimes the Unsel'ds and Scholems socialized as families. By the 1980s, the formal address *Sie* gave way to the informal *Du*. Scholem's letters ended often with general greetings to the entire family: "greetings from house to house" (see letter of June 17, 1977; July 20, 1977; or June 28, 1977). These letters were filled with private information. Scholem reported from vacation trips ("*Juches*," as he would call these excursions; see letter of August 1, 1978). He wrote about the Israeli wars. He celebrated the Nobel prizes awarded to Nelly Sachs and Shmuel Yosef Agnon, with which, according to Scholem, both Jews in the diaspora, and in Israel, were honored and brought "under one hat" (letter of October 23, 1966). And he urged Unsel'd to celebrate their prizes as well, as after all, Sachs was one of his own authors (and Agnon would soon become one of his own).

In regard to book projects, Unsel'd gave ideas and pushed and prodded. He was anything but a passive editor. He decided, for example, that Scholem was to write a book about his

friendship with Walter Benjamin. For this, he not only offered Scholem an advance, but he paid as well for a secretary in Israel who was supposed to aid him with the manuscript. Unsel'd even came up with the title of this book, *Walter Benjamin. Die Geschichte einer Freundschaft*. The book was a common project. Thus, Unsel'd wrote on October 7, 1975, "I am delighted that you are delighted about *our* book on Benjamin. That I managed to inspire you to write it, and at times even pushed you to do so, will count as an eternal joy." The closeness between both can be documented by the signatures used. On December 11, 1980, for example, Scholem signs his letter to Unsel'd with "Gerhard," the German name that he had mainly ceased to use. In a very peculiar slip of the pen, Scholem signs on January 11, 1976 with "Gershom Unsel'd." Unsel'd notes this with surprise and gratitude: "Dear Master, your signature in your letter of January 11 has given me the greatest pleasure of the year yet. How can I show my gratitude to you? One does not even have to refer to Freud; you wanted to be like Unsel'd, no, you wanted to be Unsel'd. I am overjoyed"—(January 19, 1976). And when Scholem offers a poem to Unsel'd, Unsel'd responds alike. "*Heißa! Ruft's aus Scholem's Mund,/meine Niere ist gesund/und in diesem Buchgeviert/fließt die Arbeit wie geschmiert*" [Wonderful! Would Scholem shout,/my kidneys are healthy and without a bout/and the work for the book is well afoot], pens Scholem, for example, on June 22, 1977, and signs with Dr. Jeremias Müller. Unsel'd responds in verse as well: "*Aus eins mach zwei aus zwei mach eins/Scholem Schalom Scholem Hexeneinmaleins*" [one becomes two and two becomes one anew/thus is the Scholem Schalom Scholem witch's mathematical brew] and signs his Faustian missive partially in Goethe's name as Johann Wolfgang Siegfried Unsel'd (July 2, 1977).

III. THE CREATION OF A SUHRKAMP AUTHOR

If Unsel'd's early interest was carried by a general fascination with Judaism, by his wish to learn more about Jewish thought and to add Scholem to his roster of authors, the focus had by now switched. Again and again, Scholem introduced his former friend Benjamin into the conversation, and he insisted that Unsel'd pay attention.

In their early letters, Unsel'd and Scholem discussed a projected two-volume edition of Benjamin's letters. Scholem and Adorno were to serve as editors. In Scholem's always chatty but also confidential letters, the reader is now allowed to learn what the apparatus of the edition was supposed to hide. Scholem hints at the reasons for Benjamin's rejection from military service, at anti-Semitic remarks by Bertolt Brecht that shocked not only Benjamin, but even Brecht's own daughter. They discuss Benjamin's family. Scholem notes Benjamin's son Stefan's gambling problems, and Unsel'd describes his former wife Dora's physical decline. And Unsel'd reports from his first reading of Benjamin's early letters:

As you know, I disappeared from Frankfurt for several days. I have used the time to read the first volume of Benjamin's letter. I am more than delighted with this publication, it is a major accomplishment and an important feat. Even if I am less convinced by Benjamin's youthful letters—the lion's claw is palpable everywhere, and right at the moment when he begins his correspondence with you, the letters turn interesting and important. (October 19, 1966)

To which Scholem could only proudly indicate, that these letters would get better still.

Soon, Unseld was convinced that a more extensive edition of Benjamin's work would be important and appointed Adorno and Scholem as the main editors. The main editorial work of collating and deciphering the letters was, however, left to others—to the young Rolf Tiedemann but also to Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Tilman Rexroth, and Hella Tiedemann-Bartels. Unseld asked Scholem to write an application to the Volkswagenstiftung, to present this edition as part of a project of German reparation, or "*Wiedergutmachung*" (Unseld, letter to Scholem, August 16, 1968). The application was successful. Once the project was due for renewal, Habermas had to write a letter of recommendation for it as well.

However, problems soon emerged. More of Benjamin's material existed, but letters and apparently even manuscripts were housed in the Zentralarchiv der DDR, the central archives of the GDR in Potsdam; they had been shipped there from Paris after the war. How could they be accessed? Unseld's attempt to negotiate through one of his editors, Elisabeth Borchers, failed miserably. But in the late seventies, Scholem himself visited the GDR and forged his own contacts. The German-Jewish critic Hans Mayer introduced him to yet another German Jew, the author Stefan Hermlin, who had emigrated from Germany in 1936 but returned and moved to East Berlin in 1947. Hermlin promised to help. He did—soon, Scholem received copies of the correspondence. Unseld was impressed. Would it be possible for Scholem to use his contacts further and get access to more material from these archives, material by other authors as well? Unfortunately not. But Unseld tried to glean a victory from this defeat: "Apparently, one is upset in the GDR about Suhrkamp's position, especially regarding the refusal of publication rights to Joyce's work. I can only be delighted about this!" (minutes of a telephone conversation with Scholem, January 19, 1978).

For a publisher like Unseld, it was important to publish important books, but it was also vital to sell them. In regard to Benjamin's works, success of this kind was not a foregone conclusion, and here a second major problem posed itself. Unseld discovered, however, that one of Benjamin's texts might perhaps be profitable, namely Benjamin's notes on his experiments with hashish. In the early seventies, such a book would sell well; the text could be published as a separate volume. There were, however, some difficulties to be dealt with.

After Adorno's death in 1969, Unseld drew up a new contract with Stefan Benjamin. The rights for his father's work would be held in common by Adorno's widow Gretel, Scholem, and Unseld. On July 15, 1970—just on the day of Benjamin's birthday—Unseld sent a "Hashish" manuscript to Scholem that Rexroth had compiled. Unseld assured Scholem that the book would attract much attention, and his plan was to publish it in the series Bibliothek Suhrkamp as soon as possible. Unfortunately, however, "Mrs. Adorno has suddenly second thoughts" (July 15, 1970). As Scholem was always eager to publish Benjamin's work, Unseld had probably thought to draw him on his side if he could not win over Gretel Adorno.

Scholem, however, did not want to contradict her. Two weeks after Unseld's letter, he responds: "I am concerned about this!" (July 30, 1970). What was to be done? To persuade Scholem of the value of this project, Unseld is eager to draw on its pedagogical importance of the German youth. In a letter of February 5, 1971, Unseld writes:

To be sure, Benjamin himself did not think of the publication of these notes and not of those of his minutes either . . . but I would like to bring forth the

argument that this book could help today's youth. This youth has hardly any authority anymore to whom it may listen; and Walter Benjamin is perhaps one of the last. And I would like to add, that this book may be able to help in some way . . . I mean, for today's youth, which is facing the danger of drugs, this book could be of some healing power.

Unfortunately, Unseld's letter did not work. His desperate attempt to save the publication of a manuscript that he had already prepared for print simply failed. Scholem did not regard Benjamin's text as an educational tool. Unseld did not give up: "The notes on Hashish . . . could have a healing effect on young people who turn more and more into victims of drug consumption. The problem has become a dire one in all German schools. Benjamin points at experiences here, but also at the limits of those experiences. This would have a healing, positive effect," he wrote again on March 3, 1971. Scholem continued to resist and explained that the text was a document of an intimate experience, an "intellectual adventure" perhaps, of no value to drug users at all (August 16, 1971). Also in regard to the planned edition of Benjamin's work, Scholem did not think it useful to publish this text separately. Unseld's project was stranded.

Then, however, fate stepped in. In early 1971, Gretel Adorno, in a suicide attempt, took an overdose of pills. She was admitted to the Frankfurt Bürgerkrankenhaus and spent weeks there. As Unseld reports to Scholem, she was in a very bad state, and not very responsive (January 6, 1971). Interestingly, however, Unseld would very soon write to Scholem: "I have mentioned the impression of this work to Mrs Adorno, and she agrees now with the publication as well" (February 5, 1971). Two persons now voted for the publication—and only Scholem was against it. The majority ruled, and *Über Haschisch* appeared in 1971 in Unseld's series Bibliothek Suhrkamp; it was successful, of course—Unseld's instincts were correct. In the same season, Suhrkamp issued a volume on Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf* in the Materialien series. This combination was not without irony, as Scholem would remark; Benjamin had commenced his experiments with the drug after reading Hesse's book. Cause and effect were thus curiously reunited in the program of the Suhrkamp Verlag.

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A longer essay on the correspondence between Siegfried Unseld and Gershom Scholem appeared under the title *Über Haschisch und Kabbala: Gershom Scholem, Siegfried Unseld und das Werk von Walter Benjamin* as Marbacher Magazin 140 (Marbach am Neckar: Deutsche Schillergesellschaft, 2012). The essay served as a catalogue to the exhibition of this correspondence that I curated, with the assistance of Heike Gfrereis (Literaturmuseum der Moderne) and Jan Bürger (Siegfried Unseld-Archiv) at the Literaturmuseum der Moderne in Marbach, December 13, 2012–March 3, 2013. All translations from the archival material into English are mine.

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