Few, I suggest, would disagree with the proposition that Gershom Scholem (1897–1982) was the most influential Judaic scholar of the twentieth century, and one of its most fascinating intellectuals. Various aspects of his legacy are presently being heatedly questioned and contested, yet this only serves to underline the broad recognition as to the extraordinary nature of his work and achievements. Those who have read his memoir, *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, his interviews, and the story of his friendship with Walter Benjamin (as well as the letters they exchanged) will also have gleaned something of his intriguing life and spiky personality. But with the three-volume German publication, meticulously edited and annotated by Itta Shedletzky and Thomas Sparr, of a selection of his correspondence (we do not have a complete edition, for Scholem was an inveterate letter-writer), his ongoing epistolatory exchanges with his mother, the just-published English-language volume of a collection of letters (ably translated, introduced, and organized by Anthony David Skinner), the translations into English of his German poems by Richard Sieburth and, perhaps most revealingly, the two-volume compilation of his tempestuous youthful diaries and notes (covering the years 1913–1923), we have been provided access to intimate materials that illuminate and allow us to assess in some preliminary historical perspective Scholem’s inimitable self-creation and his stormy relationship to the world.

Master of vast domains of knowledge, Scholem was one of the great pioneers of the academic field of Kabbalah, bringing to the study of Jewish mysticism a finely honed philological rigor. He pored lovingly over musty texts and integrated sects and movements into his story that were previously regarded as too obscure or too obscurantist and notorious for serious consideration and decipherment—and bestowed upon them a vitalizing function at the very heart of historical Judaism. What is especially remarkable about his writings, however, was the ability to excite generations of readers whose worlds were entirely removed from that of Jewish mysticism and esoterica. How do we account for this?
Scholem created and was moved by a master vision. If his work was disciplined by the canons of Wissenschaft, it was animated by an intuitive grasp of, and profound identification with, the metaphysical ground of things, as well as an acute sense of its fragility and incommunicability. This was not a gradual acquisition. Before he was 21, he noted in his diary: “All my cognitions merely reproduce my metaphysical existence. If you will, I am also a metaphysical psychologist.” Never a positivist antiquarian, he constructed a sweeping, dialectical vision of history, replete with an overarching theory of language; a conception of commentary as the creative force in the active shaping of a dynamic tradition; and a grand narrative that plotted the totality—the structure, contestations, crises, and complex meanings (and loss of meanings)—of Jewish existence. It helped, of course that Scholem’s mode of writing combined a disciplined lucidity with a certain sense of transcendental mystery and hidden, sometimes lost, possibilities of redemption. But the fire they generated emanated most palpably from his daring and radicalism of thought: non-initiates could easily (and still can) warm to Scholem because the mind-set he bestowed upon the inner life of Judaism was so familiar to the modernist sensibility.

Scholem was fascinated by the apocalyptic, attracted to the anarchic, and drawn to the subversive. His Kabbalistic studies perfectly fitted (and were made to fit) these propensities. “By its very nature,” he wrote, “mysticism involves the danger of an uncontrolled and uncontrollable deviation from traditional authority.” Kabbalah also provided a fertile field for his feel for, and insistence upon, paradox. Thus his analysis of the Lurianic doctrine of divine self-contraction (tzimtzum)—“the only serious attempt ever made to give substance to the idea of Creation out of Nothing.” Tzimtzum, “a gigantic process of divine inhalation and exhalation,” had to be understood not as “the concentration of God at a point, but his retreat away from a point,” the Divine making “room for the world by, as it were, abandoning a region within Himself, a kind of mystical primordial space from which He withdrew in order to return to it in the act of creation and revelation.”

The early diaries demonstrate that many of his shaping categories were Nietzschean in nature. Early on he evinced the desire to write a “Jewish Zarathustra,” excitedly read works by and about the philosopher, and wrote in 1918 that “the only person who, in these times, has said anything substantial about ethics is Friedrich Nietzsche.” His later consistent and emphatic denials regarding this influence remain curious. His conceptual world revolved around transgression, catastrophe, and danger. “Who would be able to find himself,” the teenager asked in his diary of 1914, “were he not to descend into the abyss and seek himself in danger?”

As against the German-Jewish rationalists, Scholem’s post-Enlightenment historical universe provided space for the power of the mythical and the demonic. “Jewish philosophy,” he wrote, “paid a heavy price for its disdain of the primitive levels of human life. It ignored the terrors from which myths are made, as