If discussion of Moses Mendelssohn and his legacy is currently taking a more lively, or should one say, less anemic turn, such a clearly overdue development is certainly most welcome. But the transferential static that makes itself heard in this connection exposes the fragility of the theoretical lines dialed up that calls for attention of the callers themselves. As Mendelssohn returns with renewed interest to the scene of contemporary debates on modern Judaism, Jewish identity, enlightenment, and the question of emancipation, previous engagements in Mendelssohn research emerge as committed to hermeneutic expectations that have long become obsolete. If there is no doubt that it is time for a new look at Mendelssohn, it seems like it is also only now — with the publication of the complete edition of Mendelssohn’s work and the recent critical work on enlightenment — that the precondition has been reached to make a critical call possible.

With the publication of the monographs by Allan Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1994), and David Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Religious Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) two interpretations have been advanced that produced critical responses. As the authors of the two studies have taken on each other in critical exchanges, their own debate has, interestingly enough, narrowed rather than widened the scope of the debate between them on Mendelssohn.

The *New German Critique* theme issue on “German-Jewish Religious Thought” (#77, 1999) has become the most recent forum of a sparring that highlights the current efforts to reopen the case of Mendelssohn in a contemporary fashion. David Sorkin’s critical examination of what he calls the “Mendelssohn myth” analyzes the implications of the stress that scholarship up to the present has exercised in presenting Mendelssohn as primarily a German philosopher whose Hebrew writings have remained disproportionately misrecognized. This is
a critical point whose importance should not be taken lightly, as it warrants serious critical consideration. But having followed so far to the end of Sorkin’s argument, the reader is in the concluding paragraph confronted with a statement that seems rather peculiar in its affective charge. For there the reader is kindly informed that “Since we are now liberated from German Jewry’s preoccupations and inhibitions, we should endeavor to free ourselves from the constraints of an artificial and false canon.” While the tone of this claim rings eerily distorted, one wonders whether American Jewry’s preoccupations and inhibitions are exactly going to be the key to interpreting Mendelssohn. Certainly, Sorkin finds his composure in the next and final sentence of his article: “If we are able to employ a method that, by being sufficiently self-critical and historically informed, enables us to encompass all of Mendelssohn’s works, then we may be able to lay to rest the hundred-and-fifty year old myth.” Yet, from another viewpoint, being “sufficiently self-critical and historically informed” would seem to make it imperative to reconsider the verdict on German Jewry as a whole, especially when this German Jewry is reduced to a particular, and not a particularly representative line of its tradition.

In his paper “The Questionable Judaism of Moses Mendelssohn,” Allan Arkush gives Straussian paranoia a new twist. This curious rhetoric that speaks of Mendelssohn’s questionable Judaism smacks of the defamatory hunt for un-Americanness that fares ill with philosophical inquiry. Such an approach, however, reveals a hermeneutic view in which the object of knowledge is overshadowed by the investigator’s transferential urgencies that, or so it seems, call for a critical reflection of these epistemological concerns in the first place. Arkush’s essay is as suggestive as it is flawed, arguing for an intentionality that yields little or no insight into the way Mendelssohn’s philosophical argument works. For even if Arkush’s point were right, nothing would be gained for a proper understanding of the theoretically deeper implications of Jerusalem.

The deep-running ambivalence about Mendelssohn is maybe less startling if one reads that even Alexander Altmann, the dean of Mendelssohn research, had, after decades of study and research, a shockingly low opinion of his subject. Addressing the coincidence of the publication dates of Scholem’s study of Sabbatai Zevi and Altmann’s biographical study of Moses Mendelssohn, both weighty 900-page works, Scholem noted in a letter to Altmann that now they had, so to speak, become complementary companions in Jewish historiography. Altmann’s response may surprise or disappoint, but this is what he wrote to Scholem: “It is, indeed, remarkable that at the same time extensive biographies have appeared on two such different figures which, however, stand in hidden correspondence with each other. In a certain sense, Mendelssohn, too, was a ‘false Messiah’ [...].”

But while M stands for Mendelssohn for some, others like Sorkin see the problem less in Mendelssohn than in the scholarship surrounding his figure. These are serious complexes that must be worked through if Mendelssohn is to be more than one of the silk screens which he so famously produced as one of Berlin’s most successful silk manufacturers.
Covering the last decade of Gershom Scholem’s life, volume 3 completes the German edition of Gershom Scholem’s mostly scholarly correspondence spanning over seven decades and reaching across the world, except when wartime censorship or Israeli postal strikes interrupted the flow of mail to and from Jerusalem. Scholem’s sovereignly encyclopedic mind and his pen’s succinct signature not only make his letters a first-rate source for information and entertainment but attracted the kind of cathetic transference that, at times, induced his correspondents to venture unexpected comments. It seems as if Scholem’s so artfully achieved forms of understated self-stylization did invite, if not cause, some emulations on the part of his correspondents. The charm about Scholem’s biting sarcasm was that while mostly right on the mark, its cutting sharpness would numb the pain center in such a way that it would produce the kind of cold-blooded objectivism for which he was so feared by his contemporaries. But besides such moments of metaphysical chill, there are moments of human outrage that reveal a Scholem who is, in his sense of justice, often more to the point and radically more philosophical than thinkers such as Hannah Arendt. Scholem’s rage puts the finger on the right spot when, in a 1979 letter, he remarks, for instance, that the Nazi trials in German courts are a totally hopeless affair even if the judge is irrefrechable, for it is as immoral not to have such trials as to have them in accordance with the criminal law. For as Scholem points out, in both cases desperation is the only result: “Es ist sehr traurig, sich sagen zu müssen, dass im Grunde die einzig moralisch, wenn auch nicht gerichtlich einwandfreie Justiz wäre, wenn einer der Zeugen die Angeklagten im Gerichtssaal erschossen würde.” Far from simple revenge ideology, Scholem’s comment exposes the intrinsic problem of legal justice in a bleakness that digs deeper than the moralizing of Arendt, highlighting with an uncompromising directness the profound aporia of justice in the face of Auschwitz.

Much of this volume’s correspondence deals with Benjamin and his reception, including letters to surviving friends of Benjamin now scattered all over the world. Other aspects include exchanges with and on Mircea Eliade, Scholem’s (non)relationship to Jung, amusing remarks on Ernst Bloch’s shameless mining of Buber’s writings, the annual trips to Switzerland, his correspondence with his German publisher on the editions of Benjamin’s and his own work, and running commentaries on politics. Scholem’s impish view of the recognition he received towards the end of his life is given ironic expression in his comment (in a letter to his German publisher) of being awarded Germany’s highest distinction, the Order Pour le Mérite: “Ich werde dort mit Stolz den goldenen statt den gelben Fleck auf der Brust tragen.”

Scholem’s wit and acumen did not take exception of himself, and it is the
shlemiel-like quality of his self-conscious comportment that makes his often outrageously self-righteous comments readable and often a literary pleasure found only in the great masters of prose. Here is a master of the pen, a critical observer and commentator of his time, and a unique scholar whose letters document once more the remarkable fact that one of the twentieth century’s greatest Jewish scholars is at the same time one of the most formidable figures of German prose.

Richard Marius

_Martin Luther: The Christian between God and Death_
Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999. Pp. 542

Richard Marius brings us a Luther in the image of ourselves. Moving beyond Luther the great reformer and Luther the great scatologist ("I am the ripe shit; so also is the world a wide asshole; then we shall soon part"), we have a Luther motivated by a fear of death: a theology founded on uncertainty. "Living, no, on the contrary," wrote Luther, "dying and being damned makes the theologian." Marius has written a wonderful biography of Luther’s life, world, and works that makes the case why Luther’s theology of uncertainty is so relevant today.

We begin with Luther’s sixteenth century: a complex political network (German principalities); an age of reconnaissance and knowledge at a distance (Columbus); a rise of new media (Gutenberg); the relentless fears of death (the plague); and the evolution of a post-theological humanist program appear today in our own global structures, electronic media, public health anxieties, and post-humanism.

Marius’s thesis that the key to Luther’s theology is a fear of death—the certainty of uncertainty (as paradoxa replaces church doxa)—unfolds a Lutheran program that resonates with many of today’s theoretical doxa.

In the _Babylonian Captivity_ (1520), Luther tells us that the biblical sign (sacramentum) is based not on revelation, but mystery (the Latin deriving from the Greek _mysterion_). In his 95 theses, Luther rejects the barter economy of indulgences, that is, that a payment could be exchanged for penance, that good deeds equaled righteousness, that the church could distribute the “surplus of merit” accumulated through its saints. Instead, in his most important work, _Freedom of A Christian_ (1520), Luther develops a model of an asymmetrical economy of _justitia_ ("righteousness"). _Justitia_ is not good deeds to be exchanged for salvation, but rather self-abnegation. “We pray,” Luther writes, “because we are unworthy to pray.” We are all already and always guilty under the sign of Luther. In the new economy, _justitia_ can never be fully “repayed.” It has the structure of a promise: future-oriented, endless, and always uncertain. And thus, the function of another Lutheran tenet, rereading. Scripture must be continually reread because its meaning can also never finally be reached. Faith must be continually renewed.
This faith, for Luther, is also never wholly ours. It remains something outside of us. But it is not something hierarchically or externally organized. The priesthood of all believers that Luther imagined was a self-organizing system. Faith equals the accumulation of faith in the system of believers. Finally, the story of Luther is also the story of media—the new speed of distribution, the new possibility of sensation and spectacle. Marius's Luther—the one of doubt—encompasses much that is familiar: the negativity of signs, the asymmetry of exchange, the necessity of continual renewal, the absence of a definitive reading, a faith that is always outside of us, a system that is self-organizing, and the role of a new mode of communication in giving shape to this new theology.