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### **“A man alone is not the whole” – a letter as an entity of loneliness in Clara Schumann’s, Alma Mahler-Werfel’s and Ingeborg Bachmann’s correspondence**

The art of epistolary aesthetic writing is often attributed to women. It is the sphere where the beauty of a woman is not only understood as visual appearance, but above all as a form of her sensuality, passion, desire and her inner self. A letter can also be a cache, a hiding place, a safe place for thoughts, a way to survive hard times, or proof of an inner battle against loneliness and longing. This article proposes to discuss letters of three eminent women: Clara Schumann, Alma Mahler-Werfel and Ingeborg Bachmann. They symbolize feminine loneliness in their correspondence, which is, on the one hand, overflowing with a variety of emotions and sensuality and, on the other hand, a rich example of the self-strategy of each of these women. Clearly presented is their strong pursuit of happiness, harmony, social position, and self-realization, to be achieved not only by themselves but also by their addressees.

Keywords: correspondence, epistolary writing, female letter, loneliness, artists' couples

The art of epistolary aesthetic writing is often attributed to women. It is the sphere where the beauty of a woman is not only understood as visual appearance, but above all as a form of her sensuality, passion, desire, and inner self. Female letter writers in early modern Europe created lengthy correspondence, in which they expressed their intellect and their creativity. In the process, they also left a rich historic legacy. Over time, large quantities of women’s correspondence have been made the subject of publications. Some of them ignored the literary value of these missives which were sometimes circulated by their

recipients. Some correspondence was, on the other hand, strictly private and its literary value—and historic value, as well—was not revealed until the rediscovery of these letters, often long after the death of their authors. The collections of previously unpublished letters and diaries by women of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries document the details of their lives and highlight the roles they played within their families, their communities, and against the social and political background of their times.<sup>1</sup> The European epistolary culture is also illustrated by numerous paintings depicting women while writing. If one looks at Metsu, Vermeer, Van Mieris the Elder, one can discover some secret around those letters hidden in the paintings. The moment in which they are written, the mood, the place, the woman's clothes, her hair, her pose and the attributes around her are sometimes like a mystery that the viewer wants to solve, just to be a little bit closer to the true story which lies behind the painting.

A letter is a rich historic legacy but it can be also a cache, a hiding place, a safe place for thoughts, a way to survive hard times or a proof of some inner battle against loneliness and longing.<sup>2</sup> It can also be the one and only way not only to communicate but to connect or feel connected to the loved ones who are far away. Feeling connected to others is a fundamental human need. A letter can also be a way of communicating because writing everything down seems safer than saying it face to face. It can be a way to take the loved one that one misses on a journey, a trip, as travelling alone can increase your loneliness.

The subject of my analyses is a selection of letters of three eminent women: Clara Schumann, Alma Mahler-Werfel and Ingeborg Bachmann. They symbolize feminine loneliness in different ways because of three different characters, three different professions, the different centuries they lived in, as well as different goals, needs and intentions they probably had in their correspondence. On the one hand, these handwritten documents present a variety of emotions and sensuality, on the other hand, they represent a clear self-strategy of each of those women.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Gürtler, *Schreiben Frauen anders?*, 54.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Krauß, *Brief als wissenschafts-historische Quelle*, 1-4.

Clara Schumann was a German pianist, a composer and a piano teacher. She was considered one of the most distinguished pianists of the Romantic era. The daughter of a professional pianist and an accomplished singer, Friedrich Wieck, she grew up in Leipzig. She was a prodigy child, trained by her father. She married the composer Robert Schumann against her father's will. The relationship between this couple was a most stormy one. It was dominated by Robert's emotional states, his rules, his demands, his jealousy and rivalry, with many contradictions and incompatibilities on the one hand, and great love which inspires and calms, on the other.<sup>3</sup>

The Schumanns had contacts with almost all the important musicians of the time, but also with poets and painters, with publishers, with friends and family members. All these contacts are reflected in extensive correspondence, which was meticulously kept by Robert Schumann. About 10,000 letters of the musician couple are up for historical-critical editing, of which about 2000 were written by Clara.<sup>4</sup>

Clara corresponds with Robert when they are separated. When she goes on tour alone, between numerous concerts and receptions, when she changes locations or when she visits her father, she always finds a moment to write a letter, which results from her longing. What stands out is Clara's unabated intimate, loving, deeply touching tone towards Robert. She wanted to make him feel comfortable and loved no matter what happened. Everyday problems disappear and Clara is inundated

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Kross, *Briefe und Notizen*, 6 (all quotations from this book are translated by Anna Jagłowska).

<sup>4</sup> The project is led by Prof. Dr. Michael Heinemann, University of Music Carl Maria von Weber Dresden, and Dr. Thomas Synofzik, Director of the Robert Schumann House in Zwickau. Since 1 January 2010, the Schumann Letter Edition has been part of the research programme of the Saxon Academy of Sciences in Leipzig with its Series II, the exchange of letters with friends and fellow artists ("Artist Letter Exchange"). The long-term project is supported by the academy programme, which is jointly financed by the federal and state governments and is coordinated by the Union of German Academies of Arts and Sciences. The series I, the exchange of family letters, and the series III, the exchange of letters of the publisher, were financed by the German Research Foundation. (cf. <https://www.saw-leipzig.de/de/projekte/edition-der-briefe-robert-und-clara-schumanns-mit-freunden-und-kuenstlerkollegen>).

with intensive feelings, but the reader can also get the impression that this strong woman, hardworking composer, mother of eight children, is emotionally addicted and in some sense insecure, which is clearly visible in her letters written between 1839 and 1843 to her friend Hedwig Holstein. We can read words such as: ‘*At the end of the week my dear Robert was very kind and nice again, which made me happy and makes me feel good*’ or ‘[...] *the intensity of my work depends on Robert’s moods and the way he behaves.*’<sup>5</sup>

A number of letters written to her husband – containing words such as ‘*Oh Robert, what is an hour of life without you for me? Nothing! I love you too indescribably*’<sup>6</sup>, or after almost ten years of marriage: ‘[...] *now I will tell you Adieu, my man of my heart. I know that I love you infinitely, but if I don’t have you by my side, then I feel like you are my life, my everything – for me there is no world without you!*’<sup>7</sup> or ‘*writing this letter to you and thinking about you is the reason why I feel much better than at the beginning of this letter*’<sup>8</sup> – show her openness and her straightforward nature, which often seem superficial when reading. Clara seems to be aware that declarations of love are not a solution to the problems which prevail in her marriage, but she is afraid to name them. The following passage from the letter to her friend Hedwig Holstein confirms that: ‘*If I love a person with all my strength and soul, I completely feel the absence of, what people call, prudence – I have a lot to do with it, a concept of love and trust is too ideal.*’<sup>9</sup> The loneliness in Clara’s letters written to Robert is hidden. She concentrates on his moods, his behaviour, and tries to make him feel loved. She really cares, while hiding her fears, hiding her expectations and longings. The letters are not the *Freundschaftsbriefe* type – which is a German term taken from German 18th century poet Johannes Gleim. Clara’s letters are not just a kind of a dialogue sharing thoughts and everyday problems with the addressee. These letters that she started to write to Johannes Brahms, a friend of hers and her husband’s, a famous

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<sup>5</sup> Kross, *Briefe und Notizen*, 112.

<sup>6</sup> Ortheil, *Clara und Robert*, 37 (all quotations from this book are translated by A.J.).

<sup>7</sup> Kross, *Briefe und Notizen*, 34.

<sup>8</sup> Kross, *Briefe und Notizen*, 36.

<sup>9</sup> Kross, *Briefe und Notizen*, 113.

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German composer and pianist, who became her very close friend and later on her life partner after Schumann’s death in 1856, are of a different kind. Their rich correspondence was edited in a work called *Geliebte Freunde (Loving friends)* and it makes a perfect example for Gleim’s *Freundschaftsbriefe*, combining naturalness as the ideal of the new style on which the correspondence is based with their conversational character and an attempt for literary experimentation.

The correspondence with Brahms which was very regular gives us an insight into Clara’s everyday life. She was a widow, a mother, a composer, a close friend, later a mature woman in love, very conscious, controlling her feelings and taking care of herself and her musical career. All these feelings are included in her correspondence which is full of joy and sorrows at the same time. The loneliness, which she felt right after the death of her husband and later when she could not live together with Brahms, became an inspiration for her composition work. She shared with Brahms the way she was working, always waiting in excitement for his opinion. She wrote one or two letters a day.

[...] I like the changes you did in the concert quite well, but in the third solo I don’t want to feel the transition to D major after the long *fis moll* [...]. You make me so happy telling me about Heidelberg or a small town at the Rhine river. Wherever my dear Johannes you would like to go, I’m already there. A few days left for working, I will start now, because haven’t been able to work late at night recently.<sup>10</sup>

Another eminent woman, whose letters I would like to analyze, is Alma Mahler-Werfel – the daughter of the painter Emil Jakob Schindler and the singer Anna Sofie Bergen. She grew up in artistic circles, without financial worries, spoiled by her mother and stepfather, as often emphasized: *‘the most beautiful girl in Vienna, flirtatious and intelligent, musically talented, always in the social center, overflowing with loneliness – sometimes she appears cool, sometimes passionate, sometimes longing for death, sometimes weak and in need of inspiration,*

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<sup>10</sup> Litzmann, *Clara Schumann. Johannes Brahms*, 490 (all quotations from this book are translated by A.J.).

*sometimes strong and dominating*'.<sup>11</sup> Before she meets the composer and her first husband Gustav Mahler, she experiences her first love to Gustav Klimt and two years later to Alexander von Zemlinsky. During her marriage to Mahler, she had an affair with the German architect and founder of the Bauhaus School, Walter Gropius. She married him after Mahler's death, in 1915, meanwhile been involved in a relationship with the Austrian artist Oskar Kokoschka, a relationship which turned out to be a failure. She married for the third time in 1929 the Austrian writer Franz Werfel. Unlike Clara, Alma's correspondence is not regular, usually not so detailed, quite spontaneous. It is more determined by impulses, by her moods and by the external circumstances. Remarkably, in her correspondence, she very rarely mentions by the name the man whom she is currently dating. He is usually just a 'he', she is very cool, quite unlike other eminent women, who called their men by names, expressing love and feminine emotionality. Alma lacks tenderness and feelings. She writes openly about her role as a wife and a mother – the roles to which she was not up to or simply felt uncomfortable with. When Mahler falls ill, she writes – quite surprised at herself – in a letter to Gropius, with whom she had a love affair at that time: *'To my greatest wonder, I was able to do inhumane things. I was a nurse, mother, housewife – all and above all full of suffering, fear and sorrow.'*<sup>12</sup> Alma's letters have more the function of a staging of the self, are focused on herself, her thoughts, her joys or her suffering. She herself is in the centre of her correspondence. The most important archive documents for the analysis of Alma's correspondence are the letters that she wrote during and after her relationship with Oskar Kokoscha. She describes the time she spent with him as *'different, most stormy in her life'*<sup>13</sup>, which she summed up as follows: *'Those three years with him were nothing but a fierce love fight. Never before have I tasted so much cramp, so much hell and at the same time so much paradise.'*<sup>14</sup> These are months that have

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<sup>11</sup> Marchl, *Alma Mahler-Werfel*, 13 (all quotations from this book are translated by A.J.).

<sup>12</sup> Marchl, *Alma Mahler-Werfel*, 97.

<sup>13</sup> Weidlinger, *Kokoschka und Alma*, 13 (all quotations from this book are translated by A.J.).

<sup>14</sup> Weidlinger, *Kokoschka und Alma*, 14.

shaped Alma for years and triggered feelings that last until the end of her days. The letters, as well as the diary notes that she wrote at the time of this love affair, are testimonies to the most intimate confrontations with herself, her reflections, doubts and strong emotional states. She was on a permanent search for love and recognition. The glory and the manipulation of men was her goal. She was always in the center. The more she got of it, the lonelier she was, more insane and determined. In her letter to Oskar Kokoscha she wrote:

'I sat deep melancholic on my balcony, looked weeping at the funny, brightly dressed crowd, whose laughter hurt me, I longed for something, for love, for living, for a window to take me out of this ice-cold atmosphere'.<sup>15</sup>

Loneliness was a feeling she grew up with, a feeling she has learned to live with. The early loss of her beloved father might be the reason why Alma was so hungry for love and attention even though she knew that the relationship she was currently in was toxic or not right for her.

In her diary, we can read words showing the pain and destruction caused by loneliness and inner isolation: '*I have to rip him out of my heart. The arrow is deep in my heart. I know that he is the reason why I am lonely and sick. The moment is now. Away with him. Maybe we will meet in another world. The same us but in better times*'<sup>16</sup> followed by words:

my loneliness is bigger because I lost my hope, I lost my imagination, my fantasies, I lost my imaginary life I have been living for the last three years. There is nothing, even the memories are gone. All my senses are silent now.<sup>17</sup>

Female sexuality and female needs were at the turn of the 19th into the 20th century still a taboo. Alma felt very often misunderstood and with an inner sense of isolation because of her temperament and the way she expressed her sexuality by both her behaviour and the way she

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<sup>15</sup> Hilmes, *Witwe im Wahn*, 312 (all quotations from this book are translated by A.J.).

<sup>16</sup> Mahler-Werfel, *Tagebuch*, 675 (all quotations from this book are translated by A.J.).

<sup>17</sup> Mahler-Werfel, *Tagebuch*, 675.

dressed. She was perceived as an enemy by the women and represented a fantasy for the men around her. *'I long for some strong sentiency, the more important a man is, the sicker his sexuality. I want to cross the sick borders to be the one and only woman to the man I'm close to'*.<sup>18</sup> Alma was always in the center of high society, she was admired, she made decisions for herself which at that time were revolutionary and brave, she was always fighting and getting what seemed best for her. However, she wrote in her diary, published a few years before her death, words which were probably the essence of her life full of loneliness:

I've been unlucky for over 40 years and I was playing some roles. To the outside: the so-called happy lover, sometimes wife of important and eminent men. But I was neither a lover, nor a wife. I was too little in their lives and they were little in mine.<sup>19</sup>

Ingeborg Bachmann was perhaps the most famous female author in the contemporary German-speaking world, famous as much for her troubled personal life as for her sublime and stirring writing. She developed the themes of disappointed love, alienation, loneliness and desperation, focusing on unfulfilling relationships. She was highly acknowledged and one of the most influent Austrian poets and authors. She was born in 1926 and lived and worked in Vienna, Paris, Zurich and Rome, a city which she finally picked up as her 'Heimat'. Bachmann's loneliness is divided into unfulfilled love and placelessness. The most important relationships she was in were those with the Romanian-born German language poet and translator Paul Celan and with the Swiss playwright and novelist Max Frisch. *Herzeit*, a collection of correspondence between Bachmann and Celan, came out in 2008. It was a literary sensation because of the intimate and beautiful insight into a famous artistic couple as well as the rich social and political background of the times in which they lived and wrote. Bachmann was beaten by the confused emotional scrum. She writes about herself and comments immediately on herself while writing. She is defensive and

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<sup>18</sup> Hilmes, *Witwe im Wahn*, 312.

<sup>19</sup> Hilmes, *Witwe im Wahn*, 314.

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mentions the agony of becoming aware of all the missed opportunities in dealing with a loved one – up to self-incrimination in terms of failed love performance.

She seems grateful to the point of pain (and beyond) for what she experienced in the ultimately failed relationship, even for the humiliations, or at least for the lesson she learned from them.

In a letter from August 1949, she wrote to Celan:

A year has passed unquestionably and unanswerably. You don’t have to feel guilty for your silence. And you don’t have to feel guilty at all. I’m much easier to understand than you are. Forgive me for the plans, the walks by your side in Paris, for the April and the May, for misunderstanding your doubts.<sup>20</sup>

Bachmann and Celan’s correspondence presents a variety of letters. There are letters which express recent crisis and letters which suggest that another letter is being written but has not been sent yet, and there are also unsent letters which are discussed in the sent ones. The function of the letter as a way of exchanging information with someone close who is not in close proximity does not appear to be the only concern in Bachmann’s and Celan’s letters, especially, as some of the unsent letters become a topic of conversation within sent ones. The topic of unsent letters returns over and over again as many of these letters are either simply not sent or thrown away. In Bachmann’s correspondence the unfinished letters are frequently discussed within sent ones. She wrote to Celan: ‘*Now it’s November. My letter, which I wrote in August, is still there — everything is so sad. You may have been waiting for it.*’<sup>21</sup> The suggestion and promise of unfinished letters within the sent letters comes often from the person who wishes to receive them, the person who wants to pay attention. Bachmann wrote to Celan: “Try it, write me, ask me, write away everything you are thinking of!”<sup>22</sup> For Bachmann writing letters could be understood as a therapeutic remedy. The number of letters that she sent to Celan during their love affair

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<sup>20</sup> Bachmann/Celan. *Herzzeit*, 22 (all quotations from this book are translated by A.J.).

<sup>21</sup> Bachmann/Celan, *Herzzeit*, 13.

<sup>22</sup> Bachmann/Celan, *Herzzeit*, 14.

was much bigger than the number she received from him. She was begging for love, begging for the opportunity to meet him, begging for the time with a married man who didn't take their relationship like she did. Her words are overflowed with loneliness, with expectation and imagination, sometimes desperate and with a bit of lost self-esteem: *'I still don't know what the last spring meant to you. Spring was beautiful, and the poems, the poems we wrote together. I could come and visit you, for a few days only. Would you like to see me? For an hour or two?'* or *'I know it was right to visit you in Paris. What would you say when I came in autumn again? I got a scholarship in America. I can't believe it yet and wish I could go there with you'*, ending with *'Paul, my beloved Paul, I miss you and our fairy tale. What should I do? You are too far away and greetings you send me, though they used to make me happy before, aren't enough today'* or:

Sometimes I wish I could just go to Paris, feel your hands touching mine, touching me like a flower, don't want to know where you came from and where you will go. For me you are like from India, from a far and dark land, like a desert, like an ocean, like a mystery. I know so little about you and I worry about you and the only thing I wish is to have a castle where we can live, with a lot of carpets, a lot of music and love that we will create.<sup>23</sup>

Dating Max Frisch was the only way to silence the pain Bachmann felt after the bitter ending of her relationship with Celan:

I met Paul for the last time on 2nd of July, one day before my first date with Max. Paris seems to be the most disquiet city. So much pain and the next day kisses in the park and later the first coffee drunk together. At the next table the butcher with the bloody aprons, this too clumsy warning.<sup>24</sup>

Placelessness is also a surfacing of loneliness that comes out in Bachmann's and Frisch's correspondence. In a symbolic way, she lost

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<sup>23</sup> Bachmann/Celan, *Herzzeit*, 157.

<sup>24</sup> Gleichauf, *Ingeborg Bachmann und Max Frisch*, 29 (all quotations from this book are translated by A.J.).

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her safe homeland at the moment the Nazis (including her father) entered Klagefurt, where she was born. From that moment her searching after a place you can call 'home' was something she looked for, although she knew it would be impossible. The longing, the loneliness, the journeys and changing places of living and staying seemed to be a kind of inspiration for her work and something that she and Frisch just needed as a couple, but which was also relevant for their literary development:

We know the places we long for, the places where we came from. We are travellers and those who remain at the same time. We are looking for places where we can stay longer and then leave these places to go on further journeys. We are never quite where we are, because the actual place of residence ultimately determines our work, the literary process.<sup>25</sup>

The feeling of being lonely is presented in Bachmann's works and letters in a symbolic way. She uses the sea and the ocean as elements deepening the feeling. In her diary she noted:

I see islands, beaches, sand, the warm waves. Inside your breast is something that pulls me to the bottom. The sea I can watch from my window is dangerous and beautiful, because the borderless lures, the afterlife of reality, the delusion.<sup>26</sup>

In the conversation with the sea, understood as the real place of loneliness, Bachmann creates a new language. She designs her Utopia in a letter written in Rome in 1958, at the very beginning of their relationship, which was a highlight in artistic society. She asked Frisch: *'Will you endure being always near the sea? Aren't you afraid of being swallowed up? Do you have the desire to throw yourself into a wave and surf, and the fear of sinking into it?'*<sup>27</sup> Frisch had thrown himself into the love affair with Bachmann, which ended four years later, not only in a very spectacular way but, most of all, with tragic consequences for her.

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<sup>25</sup> Gleichauf, *Ingeborg Bachmann und Max Frisch*, 105.

<sup>26</sup> Gleichauf, *Ingeborg Bachmann und Max Frisch*, 110.

<sup>27</sup> Gleichauf, *Ingeborg Bachmann und Max Frisch*, 111.

The feeling of loneliness is a very well-known phenomenon in the 21st century, in our society. Although there are multiple possibilities, ways and tools in order to not feel lonely, there is a loneliness epidemic which is affecting more and more people every year. Isolation, intolerance, living in hurry, neglecting family and friends, high requirements and new technologies may be the reasons why people struggle today with the emotion of being lonely.

However, analyzing the correspondence of the above-mentioned woman, we can find some positive aspects of loneliness. It can be a driving force for creative inspiration, it can be an opportunity for the study of one's own needs, which may become innocent when we forcibly try to drown them out. The concept of spacelessness, the eternal search for one's place on earth, is a very common phenomenon and, as can be seen by the example of Bachmann, is crucial for self-development and realization. The most important and timeless aspect, however, is the pursuit for closeness with the loved ones, the longing for understanding and warmth, the sense of belonging and the possibility of sharing everyday life, which can seem sometimes boring, but meaningful and valuable.

The women discussed above, although strong, although independent, constituting themselves, embracing professions, which at the same time were their passions, become fragile in their everyday life. They need the presence of men, which are for them the basis for the correct functioning in all areas of their lives. This basis is, after all, love. Their correspondence offers an intimate insight into their lives, relationships, thoughts, as well as into their society and the rules characteristic of their lifetimes. Thus, women aesthetic writing provides a rich basis for extensive studies about their influence on private and professional lives, the development of social intellectual capacities, and the discourse about femininity clichés.

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