



# Kent Academic Repository

**Heinrich, Tobias (2025) *Ingeborg Bachmann and Paul Celan: The fragility of friendship in the shadow of the Shoah*. Oxford German Studies, 54 (3). pp. 408-431. ISSN 0078-7191.**

## Downloaded from

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/113515/> The University of Kent's Academic Repository KAR

## The version of record is available from

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00787191.2025.2549620>

## This document version

Publisher pdf

## DOI for this version

## Licence for this version

CC BY-NC-ND (Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives)

## Additional information

## Versions of research works

### Versions of Record

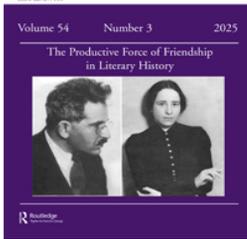
If this version is the version of record, it is the same as the published version available on the publisher's web site. Cite as the published version.

### Author Accepted Manuscripts

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding. Cite as Surname, Initial. (Year) 'Title of article'. To be published in **Title of Journal**, Volume and issue numbers [peer-reviewed accepted version]. Available at: DOI or URL (Accessed: date).

### Enquiries

If you have questions about this document contact [ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk](mailto:ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk). Please include the URL of the record in KAR. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our [Take Down policy](https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies) (available from <https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies>).



# Ingeborg Bachmann and Paul Celan: The Fragility of Friendship in the Shadow of the Shoah

Tobias Heinrich

To cite this article: Tobias Heinrich (2025) Ingeborg Bachmann and Paul Celan: The Fragility of Friendship in the Shadow of the Shoah, *Oxford German Studies*, 54:3, 408-431, DOI: [10.1080/00787191.2025.2549620](https://doi.org/10.1080/00787191.2025.2549620)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00787191.2025.2549620>



© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 28 Nov 2025.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 261



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# INGEBORG BACHMANN AND PAUL CELAN: THE FRAGILITY OF FRIENDSHIP IN THE SHADOW OF THE SHOAH

TOBIAS HEINRICH 

*University of Kent*

*This article explores the ethical implications and poetic resonances of Ingeborg Bachmann's friendships with survivors of the Shoah, foremost among them Paul Celan. Departing from the dominant scholarly tendency to read the Bachmann–Celan relationship primarily as a failed love affair, it reframes their bond as a failed friendship — shaped above all by Bachmann's effort to reconcile her ideal of friendship as a relationship of equals, in which she sought recognition as a writer in her own right, with the irreducible singularity of Celan's trauma as a survivor of the Shoah. Central to this inquiry is Bachmann's literary work, which not only reflects on the concept of friendship but also forges a language for a poetic dialogue that both supplements and, at times, counterpoints their correspondence, ultimately carrying the relationship forward even beyond the point at which their lived friendship had come to an end.*

KEYWORDS: Friendship, Shoah, Postwar German literature, Memory and trauma, Alterity

‘Wir wissen genug voneinander, um uns bewusst zu machen, dass nur die Freundschaft zwischen uns möglich bleibt. Das Andere ist unrettbar verloren.’<sup>1</sup>  
With these words from a letter dated February 1952, Paul Celan intends to draw

<sup>1</sup> Paul Celan, letter to Ingeborg Bachmann, 16 February 1952, in *Herzzeit. Ingeborg Bachmann — Paul Celan. Der Briefwechsel*. ed. by Bertrand Badiou, Hans Höller, Andrea Stoll and Barbara Wiedemann (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2008), pp. 41–42 (p. 41).

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

a definitive line under his love affair with Ingeborg Bachmann — a relationship that had begun shortly after their first encounter in Vienna in 1948. However, the correspondence between Celan and Bachmann, published in 2008, reveals that the transition from love to friendship was by no means as clear-cut as Celan here appears to suggest. Rather, their relationship — from its beginnings to the eventual silence of their letters in the early 1960s — remains suspended precisely on the threshold between friendship and love. Their letters bear witness to a relationship in which love and friendship, attachment and estrangement, were in constant negotiation, reflecting both their personal struggles and their engagement with literature as a means of reaching and making sense of one another.

Celan was not the only person in Bachmann's life with whom the boundaries between romantic love and intimate friendship — as well as between artistic and personal connection — became blurred. A similar constellation, for example, can be observed with Hans Werner Henze, though in this case the dynamics were reversed, particularly with regard to the physical dimension of her bond with the homosexual composer.<sup>2</sup> What complicates the relationship between Bachmann and Celan, however, is the unbridgeable gulf in their respective experiences of the Shoah — and the awareness that they stood on opposing sides of history. While Bachmann herself can of course not be regarded as an active perpetrator, her generational and familial entanglement in the crimes of National Socialism constitutes both a deeply personal concern and a central theme in her literary work.<sup>3</sup>

Bachmann's relationship with Celan may well have been the most intimate, but it was by no means her only friendship with a survivor of the Shoah. Alongside the writers Hilde Domin and Nelly Sachs, one must also recall her romantic relationship with the occupation soldier Jack Hamesh — but above all, her connection with the writer Ilse Aichinger. In the late 1940s, Bachmann and Aichinger were part of the literary circle surrounding the Jewish author, critic, and patron Hans Weigel and the early stages of Aichinger's and Bachmann's literary careers developed in tandem with them both being awarded the prestigious Gruppe 47 Prize in 1952 and 1953, respectively, firmly establishing them as leading voices in postwar German literature.

Bachmann's relationships with Jewish friends carry the weight of a history that both divides and connects. This essay seeks to explore the ethical dimensions of Bachmann's friendships with Jewish writers and the ways in which they find expression in her work, focusing on her fraught connection with Paul Celan, while also considering her ties to Ilse Aichinger and Nelly Sachs.

While Ilse Aichinger served as the central point of reference for Bachmann's identity as a female poet in her early years — both a role model and a mirror — her

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Renate Stauf, "'Erklär mir Liebe': Kunst des Liebens und Liebessprache im Briefwechsel Ingeborg Bachmanns mit Hans Werner Henze', in *Der Liebesbrief. Schriftkultur und Medienwechsel vom 18. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. by Renate Stauf, Annette Simonis and Jörg Paulus (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), pp. 401–25; Tobias Heinrich, "'Ich kann nur gut allein sein': Love and Friendship in the Correspondence of Ingeborg Bachmann and Hans Werner Henze', *Austrian Studies*, 32.1 (2024), 208–20, doi: 10.1353/aus.00015.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Holger Gehle, *NS-Zeit und literarische Gegenwart bei Ingeborg Bachmann* (Wiesbaden: DUV, 1995); Kirsten A. Krick-Aigner, *Ingeborg Bachmann's Telling Stories: Fairy Tale Beginnings* (Riverside: Ariadne, 2002); Leslie Morris, *"Ich suche ein unschuldiges Land": Reading History in the Poetry of Ingeborg Bachmann* (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 2001).

encounter with Nelly Sachs took place only after Bachmann had already established herself within the German literary sphere, and even then, primarily through the medium of correspondence. The first personal meeting between the two, which also included Paul Celan, did not occur until more than two years after Bachmann's and Sachs' exchange of letters had begun and took place at a moment of heightened tensions between Bachmann and Celan.<sup>4</sup> This first personal meeting with Nelly Sachs, on the occasion of Sachs' first return to Germany from exile in Sweden, left its mark on the work of both Bachmann and Celan. Their respective poems both grapple with the possibility — and impossibility — of communication and representation through language, not least against the backdrop of the Shoah.

Reading Bachmann's work — with a particular focus here on her poetry — in relation to her lived interpersonal relationships makes it possible to trace connections between life and work that avoid the pitfalls of reductive biographism. As both Bachmann and Celan emphasise in their poetological reflections, the poem is never merely a monologic expression, but always addresses itself to a 'you'. In this sense, the literary texts are to be understood both as a space for reflecting on relationships and forms of relating, but also as a medium of communication in itself that supplements, at times counters, or even entirely replaces the non-literary dialogue.<sup>5</sup>

In this context, the distinction between friendship and love is far from negligible, for Bachmann, as will be shown, attaches particularly high ethical and communicative demands to friendship. Whereas romantic love, in her view, is rooted in desire and the irrational, and must therefore, at its core, remain inexplicable,<sup>6</sup> friendship is grounded in language and conversation. It obliges friends to disclose and articulate both themselves and the relationship to the other — especially when doing so entails pain, conflict, or the risk of failure. Bachmann encapsulates this demand in the phrase 'Tapferkeit vor dem Freund' — a formulation that can be understood both as the courage to face one's friend with uncompromising honesty but also as the bravery to stand up in their defence.

## I.

### Alle Tage

Der Krieg wird nicht mehr erklärt,  
sondern fortgesetzt. Das Unerhörte  
ist alltäglich geworden. Der Held  
bleibt den Kämpfen fern. Der Schwache

<sup>4</sup> Cf. "Über Grenzen sprechend": Ingeborg Ingeborg Bachmann, Marie Luise Kaschnitz, Hilde Domin, Nelly Sachs. *Die Briefwechsel*, ed. by Barbara Agnese (Munich: Piper, 2023).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Linda Maeding, 'Gespräch und Schweigen. Zum Ort der Dichtung im Briefwechsel', in *Ingeborg Bachmann und Paul Celan. Historisch-poetische Korrelationen*, ed. by Gernot Wimmer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), pp. 93–110 (p. 108).

<sup>6</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, 'Erklär mir, Liebe', in *Ingeborg Bachmann. Anrufung des Großen Bären. Gedichte*, ed. by Luigi Reitani (Munich: Piper, 2022), pp. 48–49. On the inexplicability of love, see Sigrid Weigel, *Ingeborg Bachmann. Hinterlassenschaften unter Wahrung des Briefgeheimnisses* (Vienna: Zsolnay, 1999), pp. 153–54. For a more detailed discussion of the conceptual distinction between love and friendship in Bachmann's writing and thought, see Heinrich, 'Ich kann nur gut allein sein'.

ist in die Feuerzonen gerückt.  
Die Uniform des Tages ist die Geduld,  
die Auszeichnung der armselige Stern  
der Hoffnung über dem Herzen.

Er wird verliehen,  
wenn nichts mehr geschieht,  
wenn das Trommelfeuer verstummt,  
wenn der Feind unsichtbar geworden ist  
und der Schatten ewiger Rüstung  
den Himmel bedeckt.

Er wird verliehen  
für die Flucht von den Fahnen,  
für die Tapferkeit vor dem Freund,  
für den Verrat unwürdiger Geheimnisse  
und die Nichtachtung  
jeglichen Befehls.<sup>7</sup>

In Ingeborg Bachmann's writings, the term 'friend' first prominently appears in her poem 'Alle Tage'. Part of Bachmann's first poetry collection, *Die gestundete Zeit*, published in 1953, this poem is a significant piece within the canon of German-language anti-war poetry. Evoking the perpetual threat of conflict and the oppressive atmosphere of the 1950s, it expresses an ethic of dissent amid a war that has become 'alltäglich'.<sup>8</sup> 'Alle Tage' praises the heroism of those who resist engaging in conflict, and celebrates acts of disobedience, such as desertion ('die Flucht vor den Fahnen'), betrayal of secrets ('Verrat unwürdiger Geheimnisse'), and insubordination ('die Nichtachtung / jeglichen Befehls').

Included in this list is 'die Tapferkeit vor dem Freund', a reimagining of valour in combat, where the term for 'enemy' in the German expression *Tapferkeit vor dem Feind* is replaced with 'friend'. In this verse, as the preceding stanza implies, the enemy has quite literally become 'unsichtbar', inviting a deeper examination of how 'bravery before a friend' can be understood. Are we to show bravery in the defence of our friends against their enemies? Or does the poem compel us to take a stand against wrongdoing and injustice, even if it means opposing our friends?<sup>9</sup> Perhaps it is the enemies themselves who lurk behind the mask of the friend? In either case, the concept of the friend in this poem is presented in an existential, in a political sense, much in the spirit of Carl Schmitt.<sup>10</sup> And yet, the very distinction that Carl Schmitt regarded fundamental for the political, the difference between

<sup>7</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, 'Alle Tage', in *Ingeborg Bachmann. Die gestundete Zeit. Gedichte*, ed. by Irene Fußl (Munich: Piper, 2023), p. 39.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Thomas Anz, 'Alle Tage', in *Hundert Gedichte des Jahrhunderts*, ed. by Marcel Reich-Ranicki (Berlin: Insel, 2000), pp. 346–48.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Jörg Hienger, 'Alle Tage', in *Deutsche Gedichte von Andreas Gryphius bis Ingeborg Bachmann. Eine Anthologie mit Interpretationen*, ed. by Jörg Hienger and Rudolf Knauf (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1969), pp. 204–06 (p. 206).

<sup>10</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1932).

enemy and friend, appears blurred beyond recognition. The dystopian scenario that the poem describes — where war is no longer declared but merely continued (‘Der Krieg wird nicht mehr erklärt, / sondern fortgesetzt’) — dissolves any clear demarcation between war and peace. Similarly, the ‘invisible’ enemy haunts the poem, even where it speaks about the hero and the friend.

While the poem is most often read in relation to its contemporary Cold War context, one particular image stands out for its reference to the immediate past: ‘der armselige Stern / der Hoffnung über dem Herzen’. The star of hope, merging Jewish and Christian symbolism while simultaneously refiguring the *Judenstern* — the yellow badge of exclusion and persecution — plays a significant role in the work of both Celan and Bachmann, a fact that is underscored in Bachmann’s second *Frankfurter Poetikvorlesungen* which she concludes with a quotation from Celan’s poem *Engführung*: ‘Ein / Stern / hat wohl noch Licht. / Nichts, / nichts ist verloren.’<sup>11</sup>

A direct intertextual connection also emerges with Ilse Aichinger’s *Die größere Hoffnung*. Published in 1948, Aichinger’s novel represents a foundational moment in Austrian literature’s engagement with the crimes of the Shoah.<sup>12</sup> It recounts the semi-autobiographical story of Ellen, a young girl living under Nazi rule in Vienna. Although Ellen is socially marginalized due to her Jewish origins, Nazi racial laws classify her as only half-Jewish, exempting her from the requirement to wear the star-shaped badge. While this exemption spares her from some forms of persecution experienced by her peers, for the child protagonist, it appears as a profound injustice. In Ellen’s eyes, the yellow star becomes a mark of honour, a symbol of belonging, and an emblem of solidarity with the world of her friends.

If the appearance of the star in ‘Alle Tage’ alludes to Aichinger’s *Größere Hoffnung*, it also points towards Bachmann’s own engagement with the question of participation — or *Teilhabe* — an empathetic impulse that extends into a deeply personal identification with the victims of the Shoah. While Bachmann’s father was an early member of the Nazi Party, who had joined the party when it was still illegal in Austria and later served as a Wehrmacht soldier, after the war, his daughter Ingeborg actively sought intellectual and personal connections with those who had been persecuted.<sup>13</sup>

The correspondence with Ilse Aichinger reveals the emotional closeness between the two writers — particularly at the beginning of their literary careers. Strikingly, they refer to each other in their letters not merely as friends, but as sisters.<sup>14</sup> Family — especially Aichinger’s — plays an important role in their exchange, not least

<sup>11</sup> *Ingeborg Bachmann. Werke*, IV, p. 216. For Celan’s original: Paul Celan, ‘Engführung’, in *Celan. Werke*, I, pp. 197–204 (p. 204).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Hans Höller, ‘Die gestundete Zeit’, in *Bachmann Handbuch. Leben — Werk — Wirkung*, ed. by Monika Albrecht and Dirk Göttsche, 2nd edn, (Berlin: Metzler, 2020), pp. 70–82 (p. 74).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Weigel, *Ingeborg Bachmann*, pp. 464–82; Ariane Huml: “‘In eine dunkle Zeit hinein voller Hoffnung’”: Ingeborg Bachmann und ihre Beziehungen zur jüdischen Welt’, in *Ingeborg Bachmann in aktueller Sicht. Perspektiven der Forschung*, ed. by Fabrizio Cambi and others (Roma: Istituto Italiano di Studi Germanici, 2016), pp. 89–103.

<sup>14</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, Ilse Aichinger und Günter Eich, “halten wir einander fest und halten wir alles fest!”. *Der Briefwechsel*, ed. by Irene Fußl and Roland Berbig (Munich: Piper, 2021).

through the frequent inclusion of messages from Aichinger's later husband — the acclaimed writer Günter Eich — and her mother, Berta. Both embraced the playful notion of Bachmann's adoption into the family: Berta often signed her messages as *Mutti* or *Ersatz-Mutti*,<sup>15</sup> and when Günter Eich joined the correspondence in 1951, he soon referred to Bachmann as 'meine[...] kleine[...] Schwester'.<sup>16</sup> While Aichinger's family features prominently in the letters, Bachmann's own family remains largely absent — a striking omission given Bachmann's close bond with her parents and her two siblings. Yet, could we envision the Wehrmacht soldier Matthias Bachmann as a surrogate *Vati* for Aichinger, whose grandmother was murdered in a Nazi extermination camp?

Nevertheless, or perhaps precisely because of this, in her letters, Bachmann appears particularly intent on highlighting the parallels between her own experiences of hardship and those of her friend. This becomes apparent on multiple occasions, such as in 1954, when she writes to Aichinger from Rome, where she has chosen to settle and had just moved into her first flat:

[Die] Wohnung [ist] jetzt mein Um und Auf [...]. Sie ist wirklich zum festen Punkt geworden und richtet mich immer auf, wenn ich einknicke. Und Ihr versteht das sicher, weil für uns alle das Wohnen ja durch so viel Jahre gar nicht selbstverständlich war und mehr ein Geschenk, wenn es gerade gestimmt hat.<sup>17</sup>

Yet, while Bachmann seeks to convey a shared experience of postwar instability and precarious housing, it remains doubtful that she was specifically recalling the cramped quarters where Aichinger had hidden her mother from Nazi deportation during the war. The editors of the correspondence, Irene Fußl and Roland Berbig, observe that Bachmann frequently tends to frame her and Aichinger's past as a collective reality, yet they note that this generalization consistently fails to acknowledge the fundamental differences in their lived experiences.<sup>18</sup>

When Bachmann downplays difference in order to emphasise what appears to be shared, she is following a well-established topos in the discourse on friendship — one that can be traced back as far as Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he describes the friend as 'another self'.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, modern philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Hannah Arendt, Maurice Blanchot, and Jacques Derrida have underscored the importance of difference between friends. Friendship, in this view, is a bond that does not erase such differences, but rather recognises and cultivates them. In the words of Blanchot, friendship is sustained 'par la reconnaissance de l'étrangeté commune' between individuals — a strangeness he

<sup>15</sup> In particular Berta Aichinger describing herself as a substitute mother for Ingeborg Bachmann is something noteworthy, as Bachmann's actual mother, Olga Bachmann, was still alive and survived her daughter by more than two decades.

<sup>16</sup> Ilse Aichinger [and Günter Eich], letter to Ingeborg Bachmann, 5 May 1953, in "*halten wir einander fest*", pp. 32–34 (p. 34).

<sup>17</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, letter to Ilse Aichinger, 30 March 1954, in "*halten wir einander fest*", pp. 58–60 (p. 58).

<sup>18</sup> "*halten wir einander fest*", p. 311.

<sup>19</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 228.

describes as a ‘distance infinie’, a ‘séparation fondamentale à partir de laquelle ce qui sépare devient rapport’.<sup>20</sup> Jacques Derrida similarly emphasises the distinction between friendship and kinship. Whereas the latter tends to dissolve individuality into a larger collective, therefore effacing singularity, friendship can be a form of relation which is able to forge connection across difference without eradicating it.<sup>21</sup> Within this context, not only does Bachmann’s silence regarding Aichinger’s specific experience as a survivor of the Shoah appear problematic, but so too does their mutual projection of one another as members of the same family. The topos of familial connection evoked here in the intimate language of friendship attempts to construct closeness, but in doing so it silences essential realities that have shaped Aichinger’s life and writing as someone marked by this historical trauma.

## II.

Whereas in Bachmann’s friendship with Aichinger, the emphasis falls on constructing commonality, the relationship between her and Celan is marked from the outset by a clear awareness of their profoundly different worlds of experience. This is already evident in the first written document of their relationship — the poem ‘In Aegypten’, which Celan dedicated to Bachmann:

In Aegypten  
Für Ingeborg

Du soll[s]t zum Aug der Fremden sagen: Sei das Wasser!  
Du sollst, die du im Wasser weißt, im Aug der Fremden suchen.  
Du sollst sie rufen aus dem Wasser: Ruth! Noemi! Mirjam!  
Du sollst sie schmücken, wen du bei der Fremden liegst.  
Du sollst sie schmücken mit dem Wolkenhaar der Fremden.  
Du sollst zu Ruth, zu Mirjam und Noemi sagen:  
Seht, ich schlaf bei ihr!  
Du sollst die Fremde neben dir am schönsten schmücken.  
Du sollst sie schmücken mit dem Schmerz um Ruth, um Mirjam und Noemi.

Du sollst zur Fremden sagen:  
Sieh, ich schlief bei diesen!<sup>22</sup>

Celan’s poem invokes Miriam, Ruth, and Noemi as figures of lost beloveds, searching for them in the eye of the stranger (‘im Aug der Fremden’), a phrase that gestures towards Bachmann herself. The poem is both a love poem and a poem of remembrance. It calls upon the lyrical *Du* to remember the Jewish victims of the Shoah,

<sup>20</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *L’Amitié* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), p. 244.

<sup>21</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Politique de l’amitié* (Paris: Gelilée, 1994), p. 178. Cf. John D. Caputo, ‘Who is Derrida’s Zarathustra? Of Fraternity, Friendship, and a Democracy to Come’, *Research in Phenomenology*, 29 (1999), 184–98.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Celan, letter to Ingeborg Bachmann, 24 June 1948, in *Herzzeit*, p. 7.

metonymically evoked through the three women mentioned in the text. The non-Jewish beloved — the stranger — becomes the medium through whom the memory of the murdered is kept alive. The tension between the present remembrance of the Shoah, which is inherent to the lyrical *Du*, and the *Fremde*, who is untouched by this historical fate and thus rendered a stranger, does not efface memory. On the contrary, it is precisely this contrast that gives rise to remembrance in its elegiac and consolatory form.

Bachmann recognised — yet also grappled with — Celan's notion that *Fremdheit* would lie at the heart of their relationship. After Celan left Vienna for Paris in the summer of 1948, only weeks after their first meeting, their correspondence reveals a continual oscillation between emotional intimacy and distance. Over the following years, Bachmann visited Celan twice in Paris, though rather than solidifying a lasting romantic relationship, these visits appear to have confirmed the fragility and incompatibility at the heart of their bond.

Their letters do not explicitly reveal why their love affair could not endure, but they offer subtle hints. In one letter, Bachmann, in a passage she crossed out but which Celan was still able to decipher, reflects on the idea that there is 'etwas sehr Exemplarisches'<sup>23</sup> about their lives. She seems to be suggesting that their two lives might stand for something that goes beyond their individual selves. In his response, Celan firmly rejects the notion that their existence — or their relationship — could be seen as exemplary.

Wäre ich unbeteiligt — wie faszinierend wäre es da, wie sinnvoll auch, dieses doppelseitige Über-sich-hinausgreifen zu verfolgen, diese dialektisch potenzierte Schemenhaftigkeit unserer dennoch mit Blut gespeisten Wirklichkeiten! Indes, ich bin *beteiligt*, Inge, und so habe ich kein Auge für das, was Du in jener sorgfältig durchgestrichenen, aber doch nicht bis zur Unleserlichkeit getilgten Stelle in einem Deiner Briefe das "Exemplarische" unserer Beziehung nennst. Wie sollte ich auch an mir selber Exempel statuieren? Gesichtspunkte dieser Art sind nie meine Sache gewesen, mein Aug fällt zu, wenn es aufgefordert wird, nichts als *ein* Auge, nicht aber *mein* Auge zu sein. Wäre dies anders, ich schriebe keine Gedichte.<sup>24</sup>

Here, Celan touches on the core of writing after Auschwitz and the fundamental difference in experience between him and Bachmann. In Celan's poems, Bachmann can function as *die Fremde*, a counterpart to the murdered, precisely because of her distance from the horrors of the Shoah. For Celan, however, the Shoah is not something abstract or distant — it is what is lived, what is always his own and inescapably authentic, resisting any abstraction into the exemplary.

While Celan delineates the boundaries between himself and Bachmann, in the early years of their correspondence, she just as persistently affirms her feelings for him and her hope for a shared future — however uncertain or undefined it may be:

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 259.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Celan, letter to Ingeborg Bachmann, 7 July 1951, in *Herzzeit*, pp. 25–27 (pp. 25–26). Emphases in the original.

Lieber Paul, ich weiss, dass Du mich heute nicht mehr liebst, dass Du nicht mehr daran denkst, mich zu Dir zu nehmen — und doch kann ich nicht anders, als noch zu hoffen, als zu arbeiten, mit der Hoffnung für ein gemeinsames Leben mit Dir [...] <sup>25</sup>

Celan responds dismissively to these lines, describing the possibility of a romantic relationship as something that is irretrievably lost: ‘Lass uns nicht mehr von Dingen sprechen[,] die unwiederbringlich sind, Inge [...]’.<sup>26</sup> Between the currents of love and friendship, Celan now chooses the latter — not least against the backdrop of having met his future wife, Gisèle de LeStrange, just a few months earlier. Nevertheless, the reference to friendship in this letter should not be dismissed as trivial or understood merely as marking the end of Bachmann and Celan’s romantic bond.

Celan’s poem ‘Corona’, which engages with his relationship to Bachmann in complex and multifaceted ways, underscores the extent to which the tension between erotic desire and friendship is inscribed into the core of their connection. The emphatic declaration at the close of the poem’s opening line — ‘wir sind Freunde’<sup>27</sup> — stands in striking contrast to the poem’s central third stanza, which evokes the ecstatic oblivion of the sexual act. The key distinction lies in the concept of time, which shapes the poem’s structure and is itself drawn from Rilke’s poem ‘Herbsttag’. While time seems to stand still in moments of physical intimacy, friendship proves its endurance through time: ‘Es ist Zeit.’<sup>28</sup>

In Bachmann’s poem ‘Dunkles zu sagen’,<sup>29</sup> which responds not only to Celan’s ‘Corona’,<sup>30</sup> but also to the end of their romantic relationship, separation is portrayed as a state of no longer belonging to one another. The poem captures the irretrievability of their lost love, while also bearing witness to Celan’s suffering — suffering indelibly marked by the memory of the Shoah:

Wie Orpheus spiel ich  
auf den Saiten des Lebens den Tod  
und in die Schönheit der Erde  
und deiner Augen, die den Himmel verwalten,  
weiß ich nur Dunkles zu sagen. [...]

<sup>25</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, letter to Paul Celan, 10 November 1951, in *Herzzeit*, pp. 36–39 (p. 38).

<sup>26</sup> Paul Celan, letter to Ingeborg Bachmann, 16 February 1952, in *Herzzeit*, p. 41.

<sup>27</sup> Paul Celan, ‘Corona’, in *Paul Celan. Gesammelte Werke*, ed. by Beda Allemann and Stefan Reichert, 1, p. 37.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, ‘Dunkles zu sagen’, in *Die gestundete Zeit*, p. 23. Friendship understood as a relationship oriented toward permanence — in contrast to the emotional volatility of sexual and romantic desire — is an established topos in the philosophical discourse on friendship, traceable back to Michel de Montaigne and recently revived by the sociologist Eva Illouz in her critique of the idealisation of romantic relationships. Michel de Montaigne, ‘De l’amitié’, in Michel de Montaigne, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Albert Thibaudet and Maurice Rat (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), pp. 181–93 (p. 184). Eva Illouz, ‘Why We Don’t Celebrate Friendship With the Same Fervor as Love’, *Haaretz*, 13 February 2016. <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/culture/2016-02-13/ty-article-magazine/.premium/on-the-nobility-of-friendship/000017f-e36e-df7c-a5ff-e37e1ddc0000> [accessed: 16 July 2025]. For a more detailed discussion, see Heinrich, ‘Ich kann nur gut allein sein’.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Weigel, *Hinterlassenschaften*, p. 136.

Und ich gehör dir nicht zu.  
Beide klagen wir nun.<sup>31</sup>

While the poem draws a stark distinction between the lyrical *Ich* and the addressed *Du*, in their shared lament the two momentarily converge into a fragile *Wir*. The open sense of otherness that, in ‘In Aegypten’, functioned as a medium of remembrance and self-affirmation appears here transfigured into a mourned mutual estrangement. In the poetic act of elegiac lament, however, both forms of otherness are sublated — simultaneously annulled and retained within a higher synthesis. The poetic dialogue thus sustains a relationship that, in extraliterary reality, had already reached — or perhaps even surpassed — its limits.

In their correspondence, Bachmann acknowledges the transition from romantic love to friendship, but for her, it is above all laden with questions. She now insists on articulating what once seemed self-evident — such as how Celan would feel about seeing her again and whether he would want to know if and when she planned to come to Paris. While their relationship, when defined by love, was marked by indeterminacy and the unspoken — an aspect that was likely intentional on both sides but is now a source of lament for both — its transformation into friendship appears to require that every step be explicitly explained.

The need to articulate the ground rules of this new relational mode echoes a reflection Bachmann offers elsewhere on her friendship with Ilse Aichinger, where she observes that, in the absence of the implicit certainties provided by love, friendship demands continuous negotiation and self-definition. Following the birth of Aichinger’s children, the correspondence between Aichinger and Bachmann began to dwindle until it ceased entirely in 1962. Although the letters offer no direct evidence of a rift, later statements by both Aichinger and Bachmann suggest that their relationship, too, was marked by a gradual process of estrangement.<sup>32</sup> In 1970, in a draft letter to their mutual friend Uwe Johnson — who had sought to facilitate a reconciliation between the two — Bachmann contrasts friendship with the passion of romantic love. Love, according to Bachmann, more easily allows for new beginnings even after ruptures, while rekindling a friendship requires confrontation as well as the articulation and acknowledgment of the reasons for the break:

Wenn ich heute wieder anfangen müsste, dann ist eines unumgänglich, dass ich etwas sage, und da die Freundschaft, zum Unterschied von der Liebe, keine irrationalen Sprünge möglich macht, müsste ich ja etwas fragen, das wird mir sehr schwer fallen, und wenn ich es nicht frage, dann sind wir wieder am Nullpunkt. Denn ich habe nie aufgehört [...] Ilse [...] als den Mittelpunkt meiner Wiener Zeit zu sehen.<sup>33</sup>

Bachmann suggests that friendship — unlike romantic love — inevitably needs to bring the relationship itself *zur Sprache*, calling for articulation

<sup>31</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, ‘Dunkles zu sagen’, p. 23.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. “halten wir einander fest”, pp. 327–33.

<sup>33</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, letter to Uwe Johnson, 26 August 1970, in “halten wir einander fest”, p. 333.

and mutual explanation. Whereas lovers might be permitted to exist within an unspoken understanding of their bond, friends, she implies, bear the responsibility of making their relationship explicit to one another. In friendship, speaking becomes an ethical demand, a necessary act of recognition and commitment.

It is precisely this conception of friendship as continuous dialogue and mutual revelation that becomes problematic in the case of Bachmann and Celan (and likewise in the case of Bachmann and Aichinger, though the latter cannot be explored further here).<sup>34</sup> As will become apparent, Bachmann herself ultimately falls short — at least in the conventional sense — of the high ethical standard she sets for friendship. Yet the sincerity she envisions as central to friendship finds expression in literary language. One might even argue that literature achieves the very detachment from reality that Bachmann attributes to love, while at the same time offering, through its labour on language, a form of articulation in which the friends can find themselves both expressed and *aufgehoben*.

### III.

Despite an intense and sustained exchange of letters in the months following the decision to pursue friendship rather than a romantic relationship, Bachmann's and Celan's correspondence diminishes markedly after 1953. The immediate disappointment over the failed love affair and Celan's marriage placed the attempt to pursue a different kind of relationship between them under particularly difficult conditions. We can assume that any direct contact between Bachmann and Celan in the years following 1953 was rare — if it occurred at all.

This changed in October 1957, when they met again at a conference in Wuppertal, an encounter that resulted in a night spent together and a brief rekindling of their romantic relationship. Significantly, earlier that year, Bachmann had already been reflecting on the theme of *Fremdheit* again, particularly within the context of Jewish—non-Jewish relations. On the occasion of the birth of Ilse Aichinger's second child, her daughter Mirjam, Bachmann composed a poem dedicated to the newborn and bearing her name as its title:

Woher hast du dein dunkles Haar genommen,  
den süßen Namen mit dem Mandelton?  
Nicht weil du jung bist, glänzt du so von Morgen —  
dein Land ist Morgen, tausend Jahre schon.

Versprich, uns Jericho, weck auf den Psalter,  
die Jordanquelle gib aus deiner Hand  
und laß die Mörder überrascht versteinen  
und einen Augenblick dein zweites Land!

An jede Steinbrust rühr und tu das Wunder,  
daß auch den Stein die Träne überrinnt.

<sup>34</sup> For a more detailed discussion on the possible reasons for the end of Aichinger's and Bachmann's friendship, see "*halten wir einander fest*", pp. 327–33.

Und laß dich taufen mit dem heißen Wasser.  
Bleib uns nur fremd, bis wir uns fremder sind.

Oft wird ein Schnee in deine Wiege fallen.  
Unter den Kufen wird ein Eiston sein.  
Doch wenn du tief schläfst, ist die Welt bezwungen.  
Das rote Meer zieht seine Wasser ein!<sup>35</sup>

The poem draws upon the language and imagery of the Tanach and the Old Testament, evoking the expressionist poetics of Else Lasker-Schüler and also incorporating motifs from Paul Celan's work. The most significant intertextual reference, however, is to be found in Gertrud Kolmar's poem 'Die Jüdin'.<sup>36</sup> Kolmar's poem, first published in 1936, constitutes an attempt to affirmatively engage with the poet's own Jewish identity in the face of escalating antisemitic exclusion under Nazi rule. The text opens with the striking declaration 'Ich bin fremd',<sup>37</sup> which foregrounds the lyric speaker's subject position as an outsider and situates the experience of otherness at the core of the poem's reflection on selfhood and belonging. In Bachmann's poem, the titular Mirjam is not figured as an *Ich* but as an addressed *Du*. Her *Fremdheit* is intended to extend onto the collective *Wir* articulated by the lyric speaker, so that this *Wir* comes to experience a cathartic form of self-estrangement: 'Bleib uns nur fremd, bis wir uns fremder sind.'

The haunting presence of the persecution of the Jewish people — evoked through the reference to the murderers and the imagery of snow and ice, a recurring metaphor for the Shoah in both Bachmann's and Celan's poetry —<sup>38</sup> intensifies the poem's character as a response to Kolmar's 'Die Jüdin'. It forms the backdrop against which the collective speaking subject is compelled to confront the experience of otherness.

The motif of *Fremdheit*, so emphatically introduced by Celan at their first encounter, is reflectively appropriated by Bachmann in her poem for Aichinger's daughter. In the context of Bachmann's rekindled relationship with Celan, this becomes a means of asserting control over the terms of their interaction, as she deliberately insists on the presence of distance within their renewed closeness. In response to Celan's hopeful, at times euphoric letters, which he sent Bachmann in the weeks following their encounter, she remains reserved: '[S]ind wir nicht schon verzweifelt im Leben, auch jetzt, wo wir meinen, es käme auf einen Schritt an, hinaus, hinüber, miteinander?'<sup>39</sup> Bachmann also firmly insists that Celan must not leave his wife: 'Wenn ich an sie und das Kind denken muß — und ich werde immer daran denken müssen — werde ich Dich nicht umarmen können.'<sup>40</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, letter to Ilse Aichinger, Günter Eich and Mirjam Eich, 18/25 February 1957, in "*halten wir einander fest*", pp. 105–08 (p. 108).

<sup>36</sup> I am grateful to Ian Cooper for drawing my attention to this point.

<sup>37</sup> Gertrud Kolmar, 'Die Jüdin', in *Das lyrische Werk*, ed. by Regina Nörtemann, 3 vol (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2003) II, pp. 91–92 (p. 91).

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Höller, 'Die gestundete Zeit', p. 80.

<sup>39</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, letter to Paul Celan, 28/29 October 1957, in *Herzzeit*, pp. 62–64 (p. 62).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

Indeed, Celan had almost immediately confessed the affair to Gisèle, who reacted with a mixture of indignation and composure and, in time, initiated her own correspondence with her husband's lover. Bachmann, in turn, was soon to meet Max Frisch, with whom she would spend the following four years — a relationship that eventually also prompted an exchange of letters between Frisch and Celan.

Bachmann's newly asserted authoritative stance, together with the inclusion of their partners' voices and the fluid boundaries between love and friendship, created a fragile stability between her and Celan. Yet this precarious balance, sustained by negotiation and restraint, only underscored the impossibility of fully reconciling intimacy with the unresolved fractures of the past. The notion of *Fremdheit*, so affirmatively evoked by Bachmann in her poem to Mirjam Aichinger, would once again resurface as a source of rupture between her and Celan. The so-called Goll Affair, marked by accusations of plagiarism against Celan, placed the relationship under its greatest and ultimately final trial. The situation was exacerbated by a series of critical reviews that Celan perceived as antisemitic attacks, not only on his work but on his very identity. Together, these developments precipitated profound inner turmoil, leaving Celan increasingly unmoored and fundamentally undermining his capacity to place trust even in those closest to him.

Claire Goll publicly alleged that Paul Celan had drawn on verses from her late husband, Yvan Goll, who had died in 1950, without due acknowledgment. Although her claims were ultimately discredited, they deeply unsettled Celan. Around the same time, he increasingly perceived antisemitic undertones in literary criticism of his work, especially in a review of his 1959 poetry collection *Sprachgitter* by the journalist Günter Blöcker.<sup>41</sup> Blöcker describes Celan's poetry as 'Exerzition auf dem Notenpapier'.<sup>42</sup> He argues that 'Celans Metaphernfülle ist durchweg weder der Wirklichkeit abgewonnen, noch dient sie ihr'.<sup>43</sup> The Shoah, Auschwitz — the traumatic historical backdrop that underpins Celan's poetry — are either entirely obscured by Blöcker or deliberately denied. Blöcker claims that Celan's imagery operates in a void.<sup>44</sup> He cynically attributes this to Celan's 'Herkunft',<sup>45</sup> suggesting that it makes Celan less '[ge]hemmt' and 'belastet' by the communicative capacity of language.<sup>46</sup>

Outraged by the review, Celan sends it to both Bachmann and Frisch, urgently requesting a response. However, both reply with noticeable reserve. Frisch, in particular, responds with cautious hesitation, subtly probing whether Celan's accusation of antisemitism might have been driven, at least in part, by wounded vanity.<sup>47</sup> Bachmann replies more sympathetically, recalling her own experiences

<sup>41</sup> Günter Blöcker, 'Gedichte als graphische Gebilde', *Der Tagesspiegel* 11. 10. 1959. The antisemitically inflected rhetoric of Blöcker's critique is by no means an isolated case but rather indicative of a structural pattern in contemporary receptions of Celan. Cf. Barbara Wiedemann, 'Zeitgenössische Rezensionen', in *Celan Handbuch. Leben — Werk — Wirkung*, ed. by Markus May, Peter Goßens and Jürgen Lehmann, (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2008), pp. 23–27 (p. 24)

<sup>42</sup> Blöcker, 'Gedichte als graphische Gebilde'.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Max Frisch, letter to Paul Celan, 6 November 1959, in *Herzzeit*, pp. 170–71.

with Blöcker and attributing his attacks to jealousy over Celan's success.<sup>48</sup> Her reaction here recalls the identificatory comparison she had drawn with Aichinger regarding their living situations. Once again, there is a lack of specific awareness of the harrowing experiences of the Shoah survivor. While neither Bachmann nor Frisch outright dismiss the possibility of latent antisemitic bias in Blöcker's review, they ultimately extend the critic the benefit of the doubt.

For Celan, their reactions amount to a painful reversal of victim and perpetrator. He sees Frisch's and Bachmann's letters as further insults, failing to acknowledge the existential — and deeply personal — weight of his poetry. In his reply to Bachmann, he accuses her of disregarding a truth she had once clearly understood:

Du weisst auch — oder vielmehr: Du wusstest es einmal —, was ich in der Todesfuge zu sagen versucht habe. Du weisst — nein, Du wusstest — und so muss ich Dich jetzt daran erinnern —, dass die Todesfuge auch dies für mich ist: eine Grabschrift und ein Grab. Wer über die Todesfuge das schreibt, was dieser Blöcker darüber geschrieben hat, der schändet die Gräber.

Auch meine Mutter hat nur dieses Grab.<sup>49</sup>

For Celan, the responses from Frisch and Bachmann failed to reckon with what was at stake for him as a poet. *Todesfuge* is not merely a literary artifact — it is a tombstone and a grave, a site of mourning, especially for his mother. In the face of such perceived indifference, he draws a clear line: the friendship, as it stood, had become untenable. His demand is unambiguous. He urges Bachmann and Frisch 'mir nicht zu schreiben, mich nicht anzurufen, mir keine Bücher zu schicken; nicht jetzt, nicht in den nächsten Monaten — lange nicht'.<sup>50</sup> The final words of the letter, addressed to Bachmann, mark a definitive break: 'Ich wünsche Dir von Herzen alles Gute, Ingeborg! Leb wohl!'<sup>51</sup>

Having received Celan's message, Bachmann reaches out to Celan's wife, Gisèle. Bachmann expresses her resignation, explaining that she simply cannot offer the boundless solidarity Celan demands — that, ultimately, such a demand surpasses the scope of what, in her view, friendship can sustain:

Ma chère Gisèle,

Vous savez probablement que je voulais Vous envoyer une lettre, demandant Votre aide, quand j'étais si désespérée le mois dernier. Mais au fond je desire trop que Vous n'avez que porter la douleur et les soucis de Paul, et je sais que cela exige déjà toute Votre grand et belle force. Ainsi il me reste peu à dire — mai j'ai, après comme avant, plus confiance en Votre force et en Votre présence qu'en tous les mots, en toutes les lettres. Pour aider Paul dans le malheur, pour le délivrer aussie de toute méfiance, où elle existe sans

<sup>48</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, letter to Paul Celan, 9 November 1959, in *Herzzeit*, pp. 125–26.

<sup>49</sup> Paul Celan, letter to Ingeborg Bachmann, 12 November 1959, in *Herzzeit*, pp. 127–28 (p. 127).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 127–28.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

raison, ne suffira jamais l'amitié, mais cette présence et tout ce que Vous lui donnez, l'amour inépuisable et courageux.<sup>52</sup>

Once again, Bachmann contrasts friendship with love — and this time, it is she who makes clear that her relationship with Celan is, and indeed must be, one of friendship. In Bachmann's view, only love can offer the kind of unconditional support Celan demands — a commitment capable of withstanding what she perceives as his near-pathological distrust. Given the evocation of friendship and bravery in the poem 'Alle Tage', Bachmann's use of the adjective *courageux* in this context warrants particular attention, as it signals the limits of what she believes friendship can bear and the threshold where friendship must yield to a different, more self-sacrificing form of devotion.

Friendship itself, in Bachmann's view, is marked by a different kind of bravery. The ethics of friendship that Bachmann articulated in 'Alle Tage' must allow for contradiction: for a language that acknowledges separation, difference, and otherness. This, for Bachmann, includes the fortitude to voice painful truths and to endure the tension between intimacy and autonomy. Friendship, then, is not defined by unwavering harmony, but by the courage to remain present in the face of dissonance.

#### IV.

Amid the crisis that the Blöcker review — and Frisch's and Bachmann's muted responses to it — had brought upon Celan and Bachmann's friendship, and only shortly after Claire Goll had publicly levelled more accusations of plagiarism against Celan, he and Bachmann met in Zurich to accompany their mutual friend, the poet Nelly Sachs, on her first return to Germany from exile in Sweden. Originally from Berlin, Sachs had narrowly escaped to Sweden in 1940, just before she and her mother were to be deported to a concentration camp. Like Celan, her poetry seeks to give expression to the horrors of the Shoah, and from 1954 onward, an intense correspondence developed between them. Four years later, a friendship by correspondence also began to form between Bachmann and Sachs, when Sachs reached out to Bachmann, sending her a translation of a glowing review of Bachmann's work published in a Swedish newspaper.

In 1960, Nelly Sachs was awarded the *Droste-Preis* by the city of Meersburg. Accepting the prize in person meant returning — for the first time — to the country of her persecution. Both Bachmann and Celan planned to meet her in Zurich, where she arrived from Sweden, and to support her as she prepared for the final leg of her journey into Germany. Although tensions between Bachmann and Celan nearly prevented these plans, Sachs was ultimately welcomed by both, in the presence of Celan's wife and son. The encounter proved to be of lasting significance — not only for Sachs, who would continue to reflect on it for years to come, but also for Bachmann and Celan, for whom it marked a moment of reconciliation, as suggested by the more temperate tone of their subsequent correspondence.

This meeting with Nelly Sachs found poetic expression in the work of both Bachmann and Celan. In their respective poems, each engaged — both implicitly and

<sup>52</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, letter to Gisèle Celan-Lestrange, 20 December 1959, in *Herzzeit*, pp. 187–88 (p. 187).

explicitly — with themes of friendship and the potential of language to transcend the boundary between self and other. Both poems appeared 1961 in a *Festschrift* for Nelly Sachs' 70th birthday, edited by Hans Magnus Enzensberger.<sup>53</sup> Celan's poem 'Zürich, Zum Storchen'<sup>54</sup> takes its title from the hotel where he and Sachs met for a private conversation the day after their arrival. The poem explores the profound yet fundamentally different relationship that Sachs and Celan had with Judaism and faith.<sup>55</sup>

Von deinem Gott war die Rede, ich sprach  
 gegen ihn, ich  
 ließ das Herz, das ich hatte,  
 hoffen:  
 auf  
 sein höchstes, umröcheltes, sein  
 haderndes Wort —<sup>56</sup>

While the possessive pronoun *dein* emphasises that the faith in question is not a shared one, the central line of this stanza nonetheless expresses the hope that a common ground might be found in language, although it is a wrangling ('haderndes') word, perhaps spoken with one's last breadth ('umröchelt').<sup>57</sup>

At the same time, the very opening of the poem already makes clear that language often fails — and indeed must fail — to adequately capture experience, particularly when confronted with catastrophic events such as the Shoah: 'Vom Zuviel war die Rede, vom / Zuwenig.'<sup>58</sup> Celan adopts the phrase 'too little and too much' from the philosopher Margarete Susman, who, in her book *Hiob und das Schicksal des jüdischen Volkes*, asserts that in relation to the murder of the European Jews, every word is both 'ein Zuwenig und ein Zuviel'.<sup>59</sup>

The poem is situated within a primal scene of the social: the agonistic debate, which, following Nietzsche, also constitutes a primal scene of friendship.<sup>60</sup> 'Rede' is structured through opposition between a 'Du' and a countering

<sup>53</sup> *Nelly Sachs zu Ehren*, [ed. by Hans Magnus Enzensberger] (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1961).

<sup>54</sup> Paul Celan, 'Zürich, zum Storchen', in *Celan. Werke*, 1, pp. 214–15.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Theo Buck, *Paul Celan (1920–1970). Ein jüdischer Dichter deutscher Sprache aus der Bukowina* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2020), pp. 174–78. For a discussion of the role of negation in this poem, see Birgit R. Erdle, 'Bachmann und Celan treffen Nelly Sachs. Spuren des Ereignisses in den Texten', in *Ingeborg Bachmann und Paul Celan. Poetische Korrespondenzen* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1997), pp. 85–115 (p. 105).

<sup>56</sup> Celan, 'Zürich, zum Storchen', p. 214.

<sup>57</sup> On Sachs and Celan's contrasting approaches to language, see Erdle, 'Bachmann und Celan', p. 89.

<sup>58</sup> Celan, 'Zürich, zum Storchen', p. 214. The Shoah is present in the poem in the form of the pronominal adverb *davon*, which is fractured through a morphological enjambement. It refers to something that need not — and at the same time cannot — be named. Cf. Erdle, 'Bachmann und Celan', p. 106.

<sup>59</sup> Margarete Susman, *Das Buch Hiob und das Schicksal des jüdischen Volkes* (Zurich: Steinberg 1948), p. 11.

<sup>60</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, 30 vols. in 8 sections (Berlin: De Gruyter), sec. 6, 1, p.

‘Aber-Du’.<sup>61</sup> The lyrical *Ich* emerges through contradiction (‘ich sprach / gegen ihn’).<sup>62</sup> It is only in the final stanza that the appearance of a *Wir* begins to resolve these oppositions. Significantly, the speaking voice also shifts — from the lyrical *Ich* to the *Du*. The speaker thus becomes a listener: a true counterpart within the dialogue:

Dein Aug sah mir zu, sah hinweg,  
dein Mund  
sprach sich dem Aug zu, ich hörte:

Wir  
wissen ja nicht, weißt du,  
wir  
wissen ja nicht,  
was  
gilt.<sup>63</sup>

The penultimate stanza abstracts from the specific topic of discussion and foregrounds the act of conversation itself — as a visible scene, an exchange between two individuals shaped by their respective bodies and subjective experiences. The final stanza then dissolves the apparent boundaries established earlier in the embrace of doubt: ‘Wir / wissen ja nicht, weißt du’. The sentence takes off with a unifying *Wir* and it remains deliberately ambiguous to whom the *Du* refers — a pronoun that earlier stood in stark contrast to the poem’s *Ich*, but now blurs the distinction between the two interlocutors.

While opposition had previously served as the structuring principle of the encounter, it is now the gesture of looking beyond difference (‘hinwegsehen’) — of acknowledging the unfinished, open-ended nature of human existence that constitutes the basis of relation: a shared awareness that nothing can be known with certainty.

Bachmann’s contribution to the *Festschrift* for Nelly Sachs enters into a complex, if indirect, dialogue with Celan’s poem, yet ultimately distances itself from the hope he places in language and reciprocal exchange. ‘Ihr Worte’ was the first poem Bachmann completed after a five-year silence, a period during which — by her own admission — she lacked the courage to write poetry.<sup>64</sup> Commenting on the poem, Bachmann explains that it confronts the limits of language and aims to put words in their place (‘Worte in die Schranken [...] fordern’<sup>65</sup>).

Ihr Worte  
Für Nelly Sachs, die Freundin, die Dichterin, in Verehrung

<sup>61</sup> Celan, ‘Zürich, zum Storchen’, p. 214.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., pp. 214–15.

<sup>64</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, *Wir müssen wahre Sätze finden. Gespräche und Interviews*, ed. by Christine Koschel and Inge von Weidenbaum (Munich: Piper, 1983), pp. 25–26 (p. 25).

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

Ihr Worte, auf, mir nach!,  
 und sind wir auch schon weiter,  
 zu weit gegangen, geht's noch einmal  
 weiter, zu keinem Ende geht's.

Es hellt nicht auf.

Das Wort  
 wird doch nur  
 andre Worte nach sich ziehn,  
 Satz den Satz.  
 So möchte Welt,  
 endgültig,  
 sich aufdrängen,  
 schon gesagt sein.  
 Sagt sie nicht.

Worte, mir nach,  
 daß nicht endgültig wird  
 — nicht diese Wortbegier  
 und Spruch auf Widerspruch!

Laßt eine Weile jetzt  
 keins der Gefühle sprechen,  
 den Muskel Herz  
 sich anders üben.

Laßt, sag ich, laßt.

Ins höchste Ohr nicht,  
 nichts, sag ich, geflüstert,  
 zum Tod fall dir nichts ein,  
 laß, und mir nach, nicht mild  
 noch bitterlich,  
 nicht trostreich,  
 ohne Trost  
 bezeichnend nicht,  
 so auch nicht zeichenlos —

Und nur nicht dies: das Bild  
 im Staubgespinst, leeres Geroll  
 von Silben, Sterbenswörter.

Kein Sterbenswort,  
 Ihr Worte!<sup>66</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, 'Ihr Worte', in *Werke*, I, pp. 162–63.

Rather than affirming language as a site of encounter or healing,<sup>67</sup> the poem interrogates its capacity for distortion and failure. In this sense, Bachmann takes up a notion from Celan's 'Zürich, Zum Storchen': 'Trübung durch Helles',<sup>68</sup> which suggests that dialogue does not necessarily illuminate but can also obscure — overwhelming meaning through excessive or misplaced verbalisation (Es hellt nicht auf./ Das Wort).

Words do not elucidate, the poem implies. Instead, speech disperses — expanding outward in an unruly chain of utterances where meaning becomes increasingly unstable rather than clarified. Notably, Bachmann deliberately employs the plural *Worte*, which — unlike *Wörter* — abstracts from the specific meanings of individual words and gestures instead toward a speech emptied of significance. This resonates with Celan's use of *Rede*, which similarly connotes meaningless chatter (*Gerede*), in contrast to the more meaningful *sprechen* and *Gespräch*.<sup>69</sup>

Where Celan's poem engages with both sides of the exchange and thus preserves the possibility of dialogue as mutual understanding — even across fractured perception — Bachmann's poem fundamentally calls that possibility into question. It evokes a disquieting 'Wortbegier' that suggests not genuine communication, but a compulsive attachment to language. In doing so, Bachmann shifts the focus from the ethical promise of dialogue to the psychic strain of expression itself.

The poem calls for a pause in the craving for words. It gestures toward a boundary that language cannot cross: death. At this threshold, words falter; they cannot soften the pain of loss, nor can they give adequate expression to grief or offer genuine consolation: 'nicht mild / noch bitterlich, / nicht trostreich'. What remains is a recognition of the failure of speech in the face of death, a moment in which language must fall silent: 'Kein Sterbenswort, / Ihr Worte'.

This appeal to silence does not simply negate the communicative function of language; rather, it affirms the limits of expression where something absolute occurs. In contrast to Celan, who continues to explore the ethical possibilities of speaking across rupture, Bachmann's poem insists on the necessity of withholding speech when words become hollow or invasive. The gesture of silence thus becomes a form of integrity, a refusal to speak where speech would amount to denial or distortion of suffering.

The poem's dedication — 'Ihr Worte' being one of the few explicit dedicatory poems in Bachmann's oeuvre — reveals its particular relevance for the present discussion. The poem is addressed 'für Nelly Sachs, die Freundin, die Dichterin, in Verehrung'. This threefold dedication is more than a gesture of admiration; it marks Sachs simultaneously as a personal confidante, a poetic interlocutor, and a figure of ethical authority. In the context of a poem that calls for silence in the face of

<sup>67</sup> Sachs referred to the healing power of Celan's language in a letter to him. Nelly Sachs, letter to Paul Celan, 14 February 1960, in *Paul Celan, Nelly Sachs. Briefwechsel*, ed. by Barbara Wiedemann (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1993), p. 29. On the extent to which this perspective misreads Celan's poetics, see Erdle, 'Bachmann und Celan', p. 89.

<sup>68</sup> Celan, 'Zürich, zum Storchen', p. 214.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Erdle, 'Bachmann und Celan', p. 93.

death, this dedication foregrounds a model of friendship — one shaped not by mutual exchange and by the need to articulate oneself and the relationship, as Bachmann had expressed it in other instances, but by reverence and restraint. The poem honours Sachs precisely by refusing to speak on her behalf or about her, acknowledging the limits of what can and should be said in the presence of another's suffering.

## V.

Despite the brief rapprochement between Bachmann and Celan around the time of Nelly Sachs's stay in Zurich and Meersburg, their friendship remained lastingly burdened. After 1961, no further letters from Bachmann's side are extant, and the two letters that Celan sent to her in the following years<sup>70</sup> — written at considerable intervals — appear to have reached into a void, suggesting that their correspondence had dissolved into silence.

What has been preserved, however, is a revealing document from the autumn of 1961 — shortly before their correspondence fell silent — in which Bachmann reflects on her relationship with Celan with a candour and directness unparalleled elsewhere in her writings. It is a draft letter that was ultimately never sent, yet it offers profound insight into Bachmann's stance towards Celan at this juncture.<sup>71</sup> Above all, the document — and the gesture bound up with it, of drafting but not dispatching the letter — reveals Bachmann's inner tensions: between the need to articulate the strains in their relationship as openly as possible, in the hope of paving the way for a possible reconciliation, and a dawning recognition that words alone might prove insufficient to bridge the divergent worlds of experience separating her from Celan, or to address the trauma inscribed in Celan's insistent pleas for solidarity in the face of the attacks to which he saw himself subjected during these years. It is as if, within this single letter, Bachmann were enacting the dialogue between the two poems that she and Celan had written to mark Nelly Sachs's visit, and which had been published just a few weeks earlier — a dialogue in which Celan opted for speech, while Bachmann chose silence, and which now unfolds entirely within Bachmann's own inner conflict.

The letter amounts to a sweeping attack on Celan, in which two opposing yet interrelated motives are interwoven. On the one hand, Bachmann criticises Celan's apparent posture of victimhood in the face of the attacks he is subjected to: 'Du willst das Opfer sein, aber es liegt an Dir, es nicht zu sein.'<sup>72</sup> On the other hand, she articulates her own demand for recognition from Celan — both as a writer and as a woman: '[W]er bin ich für Dich, wer nach soviel Jahren? Ein Phantom, oder eine Wirklichkeit, die einem Phantom nicht mehr entspricht.'<sup>73</sup>

Critics have offered varying interpretations of the letter. Ina Hartwig, scholar and biographer of Bachmann, reads it as an act of self-assertion: 'Hier artikuliert sich

<sup>70</sup> Paul Celan, letter to Ingeborg Bachmann, 21 September 1963, in *Herzzeit*, pp. 158–159; Paul Celan, letter to Ingeborg Bachmann, 30 July 1967, in *Herzzeit*, pp. 159.

<sup>71</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, letter to Paul Celan, n.d. [after 27 September 1961], in *Herzzeit*, pp. 152–156.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 153–54.

nicht mehr die junge Frau, die sich von Celans schmerzerefüllter Sprache verzaubern lässt — hier spricht eine lebenserfahrene Dichterin, die ihm die Grenzen weist: ihre Grenzen.<sup>74</sup> On this point, Hartwig concurs with several other commentators who interpret the letter as an attempt to finally reconfigure the dynamic between Celan and Bachmann into one of mutual equality.<sup>75</sup>

Barbara Wiedemann, co-editor of the Bachmann-Celan correspondence, takes a markedly different position.<sup>76</sup> In Wiedemann's view, Bachmann draws inappropriate parallels in the letter between Celan's experiences of antisemitism and her own encounters with literary criticism:

Verstehst du: ich glaube Dir, alles, alles. Nur glaube ich nicht, dass sich der Klatsch, die Kritik, auf Dich beschränken, denn ich könnte ebensogut des Glaubens sein, dass sie sich auf mich beschränken.<sup>77</sup>

In framing the attacks on Celan as part of a general literary climate, rather than as something aiming at his very identity as a Jewish writer and Shoah survivor, she normalises the covert attacks. At no point in the letter does Bachmann engage with Celan's specific historical experience. Wiedemann interprets this omission as evidence that she is either unable or unwilling to acknowledge the fundamental difference 'die die Opfer der jüdischen Katastrophe von denen trennt, die dies nicht sind'.<sup>78</sup>

Only once — and even then only indirectly — does Bachmann allude to the fate that befell Celan and his family, namely when she perceives herself as being accused by Celan of being a murderer:

Ich bin oft sehr bitter, wenn ich an Dich denke, und manchmal verzeihe ich mir nicht, dass ich Dich nicht hasse, für dieses Gedicht, diese Mordbeschuldigung, die Du geschrieben hast. Hat Dich je ein Mensch, den Du liebst, des Mordes beschuldigt, ein Unschuldiger?<sup>79</sup>

The editors of the correspondence conjecture that Bachmann is referring here to Celan's poem 'Wolfsbohne' — specifically to the following lines:<sup>80</sup>

Mutter [...]
   
Gestern
   
kam einer von ihnen und
   
tötete dich

<sup>74</sup> Ina Hartwig, 'Schuld und Zauber', in *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 18 August 2008, p. 27.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Peter Hamm, 'Wer bin ich für Dich?', in *Die Zeit*, 21. 8. 2008 and Andrea Stoll, 'Wer bin ich für Dich, wer nach so vielen Jahren?', in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 30. 8. 2008.

<sup>76</sup> Barbara Wiedemann, "'du willst das Opfer sein": Bachmanns Blick auf Celan in ihrem nicht abgesandten Brief von Herbst 1961', in *Ingeborg Bachmann und Paul Celan: Historisch-poetische Korrelationen*, pp. 42–70.

<sup>77</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, letter to Paul Celan, [after 27 September 1961], p. 154–55.

<sup>78</sup> Wiedemann, "'du willst das Opfer sein"', p. 57.

<sup>79</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, letter to Paul Celan, [after 27 September 1961], p. 156.

<sup>80</sup> *Herzzeit*, p. 342.

zum andern Mal in  
meinem Gedicht<sup>81</sup>

However, if the editors' assumption is correct, then Bachmann is certainly misreading the poem, as the masculine form 'einer' makes it clear that the lines refer to a man — in all likelihood, to Günter Blöcker. Barbara Wiedemann suggests that when drafting the letter, Bachmann did not have Celan's poem before her in written form, but was instead recalling it from memory — or may in fact have known it only through friends or from having it read to her over the phone by Celan himself.<sup>82</sup> In any case, what crystallises at this point is the simmering yet never directly articulated problem that Bachmann — in contrast to the survivor Celan — might, within the annihilating logic of the Shoah, be positioned on the side of the perpetrators. Yet it is precisely through this attribution — one that Celan himself never explicitly made — that Bachmann now sees herself cast as a victim, and indeed by the very person whom she accuses of cultivating his own victimhood.

The letter becomes increasingly entangled in identificatory presumptions that consistently miss their mark. In this very failure, the limits of a friendship conceived in terms of the other as 'another self' come to the fore. In contrast to the positions Bachmann assumes in her poetry, the alterity between the two friends receives no genuine acknowledgment in this letter. Where Bachmann seeks to liberate Celan from what she perceives as his stance of victimhood — through acts of relativisation and by pointing to her own struggles — she repeatedly fails to grasp the singularity of the position in which Celan finds himself.

We do not know why Bachmann ultimately decided not to send the letter. Perhaps, upon reading over the draft, she herself realised that her words were neither gentle nor consoling, but became entangled in cascades of accusation — precisely the dynamic she had reflected on in 'Ihr Worte'. She articulates this dilemma to Celan in a message she sent to him at the end of October 1961, in which she remarks that the letter 'zu vieles möchte' and might perhaps need to be delivered in person, so that it could be 'ergänz[t] im Gespräch'.<sup>83</sup>

The fact that this clarifying conversation ultimately never took place may also have to do with the significance the unsent letter came to hold for Bachmann herself — a significance that exceeded her relationship with Celan. Not least as she ultimately appears to stand by what she wrote, conceding only that the letter may be overburdened with intent. For Bachmann, the letter is a document of self-assertion in her role as a female writer. The dissecting and accusatory tone, which is directed primarily at Celan but also draws on her own experiences within the literary world and on the tension-laden relationship with Max Frisch, reflects the very language Bachmann discovered in her short prose text 'Undine geht' and would later continue to develop in her *Todesarten* project. Thus, the letter is transformed from a medium of dialogue to a monological instrument of self-empowerment.<sup>84</sup> This context may in part account for the sympathetic readings

<sup>81</sup> Paul Celan, 'Wolfsbohne', in *Paul Celan. Die Gedichte. Kommentierte Gesamtausgabe in einem Band*, ed. by Barbara Wiedemann (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 2003), pp. 455–57 (p. 456).

<sup>82</sup> Wiedemann, "'du willst das Opfer sein'", p. 62.

<sup>83</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, letter to Paul Celan, 24 October 1961, in *Herzzeit*, pp. 156–57.

<sup>84</sup> Cf. Wiedemann, "'du willst das Opfer sein'", p. 63.

the letter has garnered in Bachmann scholarship, even though it offers little empathy for Celan and reveals significant argumentative limitations.

The friendship between Bachmann and Celan ultimately ends in silence — a silence which, when it emanated from Celan, Bachmann still lamented in her long unsent letter,<sup>85</sup> but which she ultimately comes to choose herself by leaving his final letters unanswered. When Bachmann had sought to support Celan — both publicly and in private exchanges — she increasingly felt as though her words were falling on deaf ears: ‘Du siehst ja, dass alle Erklärungen, jedes Eintreten, so richtig es auch gewesen sein mag, in dir das Unglück nicht verringert hat [...]. Du verlierst auch Freunde, weil die Menschen fühlen, dass es dir weniger gilt, dass auch ihr Widerspruch nicht gilt, wo er ihnen vonnöten scheint.’<sup>86</sup>

As has been shown, Bachmann had repeatedly affirmed that for her the essence of friendship lied in the ability — and indeed the ethical imperative — to articulate what, in her view, must be spoken, even when this meant criticising the other and challenging their worldview. In the unsent draft letter, she speaks of the courage required for a ‘Freundschaft [...], die hinausgeht über Mitgefühl und die Wünsche, dass sich alles zum Besseren wenden möge [...]. Diese Gefühle sind mir zu wenig, und sie müssen es ja auch für Dich sein.’<sup>87</sup> Yet in her final letter to Celan, written only a few weeks later, at the beginning of December 1961, this ideal gives way to an admission of communicative paralysis: ‘[I]ch kann nicht schreiben, bin schon versehrt, wenn ich das Datum hinsetze oder das Blatt in die Maschine ziehe.’<sup>88</sup>

The promise of a dialogic space that friendship might have once offered is here eclipsed by an overwhelming sense of rupture and speechlessness. In contrast to her insistence that friendship must bring things *zur Sprache*, Bachmann’s later poetry — beginning with ‘Ihr Worte’ and continuing in poems such as ‘Keine Delikatessen’<sup>89</sup> and ‘Wahrlich’<sup>90</sup> — articulates a profound crisis of language, emphasising the difficulty of ‘einen einzigen Satz haltbar zu machen / auszuhalten in dem Bimbam von Worten’.<sup>91</sup>

In this context, Bachmann’s decision not to send the long letter from autumn 1961 can also be understood as an ethical act — although, or perhaps precisely because in this letter, she does not find words that would adequately acknowledge Celan’s situation and offer empathy, perhaps even consolation — words that would do so in recognition of the differences between them and without lapsing into inappropriate identification. In the letter that preceded Bachmann’s draft, Celan had

<sup>85</sup> ‘Ich weiss nicht, ob es Missverständnisse sind, die zwischen uns getreten sind oder etwas, das einer Aufklärung bedarf. Ich empfinde es anders: Einbrüche von Schweigen, ein Ausbleiben von den einfachsten Reaktionen, etwas, das mich hilflos macht, weil ich nur Vermutungen anstellen kann, mit denen ich mich verirren muss [...]’. Ingeborg Bachmann, letter to Paul Celan, [after 27 September 1961], in *Herzzeit*, p. 152.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>88</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, letter to Paul Celan, 5 December 1961, in *Herzzeit*, pp. 157–58 (p. 157).

<sup>89</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, ‘Keine Delikatessen’, in *Werke*, 1, pp. 172–73.

<sup>90</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, ‘Wahrlich’, in *Werke*, 1, p. 166.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

still declared: 'Ich glaube an Gespräche'.<sup>92</sup> Only a few weeks later, in the context of her relationship with Celan, Bachmann appears to have lost that belief.

Even though Bachmann's silence toward Celan brings the dialogic dimension of their friendship to an end, the relationship continues to resonate on other levels in the years that follow and even beyond Celan's death. One such instance is her intervention on his behalf when the publishing house *Piper* initially considered appointing Hans Baumann — a poet and translator heavily compromised by his involvement with National Socialism — as the translator of Anna Akhmatova's works.<sup>93</sup> Bachmann advocated instead for Celan, and in his final letter to her, written in 1967, he thanks her warmly for her support.<sup>94</sup>

The fact that *Piper* would consider entrusting the translation of a poet who had suffered severe political persecution under Stalin to a former Nazi sympathiser ultimately led Bachmann to sever ties with the publisher. Her final book published during her lifetime, the novel *Malina*,<sup>95</sup> would appear with *Suhrkamp* instead. Shortly before completing the manuscript, Bachmann learned of Celan's death in April 1970, and she subsequently dedicated a literary memorial to him in the figure of the Stranger (*der Fremde*) in *Malina*. In keeping with Bachmann's ideal, her friendship with Celan continued to find expression even beyond the end of their correspondence — not through dialogue, but through the literary text, in which the relationship is preserved and brought into the openness of the poetic medium.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Ian Cooper, Katja Haustein-Corcoran, and Andree Michaelis-König for their critical engagement with the manuscript and for their numerous insightful and constructive comments.

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

Tobias Heinrich is Lecturer in German at the University of Kent. His research interests include life writing, biography, and the relationship between friendship and literature. His monograph *Leben lesen. Zur Theorie der Biographie um 1800* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2016) examines the genre history of biographical writing during the Enlightenment and Romantic periods. His current research investigates the German literary tradition through the lens of friendship, focusing on the interrelation between literary expression and the social practices of friendship in German-language culture.

## ORCID

Tobias Heinrich  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6666-2275>

<sup>92</sup> Paul Celan, letter to Ingeborg Bachmann, 27 September 1961, in *Herzzeit*, pp. 151–52 (p. 152).

<sup>93</sup> Cf. *Herzzeit*, p. 344.

<sup>94</sup> Paul Celan, letter to Ingeborg Bachmann, 30 July 1967, in *Herzzeit*, p. 159.

<sup>95</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, *Malina* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 1971).