

Ingeborg Bachmann und Max Frisch

Eine Liebe zwischen Intimität und Öffentlichkeit

I. Gleichauf

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Bachmann was a literary wonder and an Austrian icon of Gruppe 47 and a darling of the media. Frisch too was well-known as a Swiss writer. In short both were literary celebrities in a way which was still possible in the 50's. Thus their coupling was 'gefundenes Fressen'. However, not much of it is accessible in the form of documentation, while the correspondence between Bachmann and her lover Celan has been published, the letters between Frisch and Bachmann are not available. The Nachlass of Bachmann will be sealed until the centenary of her death in 2026. Thus the author has to make the most of the tidbits of documentation which nevertheless are at hand, and thus her account is more like an imaginary reconstruction than a straightforward documentation. As usual when there is a paucity of facts, every fact carries a heavy burden and has to carry it a long way.

Obviously due to their fame, they had heard of each other before they met. In fact Bachmann had put the stop to her relationship with Celan the day before she met Frisch in Paris in 1958. Frisch had had a more bourgeois experience. He had married, sired three children, run an architect firm, kept a mistress or two, and was now abandoning it all for the career of a 'freie Schriftsteller'.

The meeting of two souls at a cafe in Paris is one thing, but what about actually living together? How to handle the daily routines of 'Bett, Tisch und Stuhl'? While Frisch is not in principle adverse to the idea of marriage, and actually proposes it a few times seriously or not, for Bachmann it is out of the question. When she moves to Zürich, the hometown of Frisch, she first lives apart from him, and only later forced by circumstances moves in with him. Frisch is at home, she is not, and longs away. Their next step is to settle in Rome, a city she has made her native.

Both writers are obsessed with location, and I have noted with a mixture of admiration and fascination the unsurpassed skill of a Frisch to evoke a sense of place in a few well-chosen sentences. Frisch is excited about discovering Rome, walking through the city systematically, taking its measure. Like the good Swiss burgher he is a 'Spaziergänger'. His interest seems to be more geographical than historical, as opposed to Bachmann who is content to seek out her favorite cafes. We are talking late 50's and early 60's and we get a glimpse of the kind of fashionable post-war life of night clubs, tall drinks, exposed shoulders and fast cars, that was prevalent among the rich and famous at the time, and which the 'smart' programs (such as the Saint) on TV conveyed in various ways during my childhood, and which now appears a bit quaint not to say innocent .

Frisch smokes a pipe, while Bachmann is a chain smoker of cigarettes. Frisch is steady, after all he has managed a family life and running a firm, and he expects from a wife service. This he does not get from Bachmann. She is too fickle, too neurotic, too changeable, she constantly escapes his inventions of whom and what she should be

as a woman, unlike those women he has had in the past. This is of course exciting, the relationship is a real adventure in a way none of his earlier more predictable ones have been. She is a 'Schriftstellerin' just like he is a 'Schriftsteller' and they are on the same level. Maybe she even on a more elevated than he is on. But perhaps too much of a good thing? She is frequently away, traveling, giving lectures partaking in writers conferences. She is in demand. He is at home, longing for her, ravaged by jealousy and also working as he has discipline, he gets things done and written. This is on the other hand a trait that provokes her jealousy. His hammering away at the typewriter makes her feel guilty and stressed. He does not seem ever to suffer from a writer's block. She does. She escapes out of the apartment, to the hairdresser, to the fashion store. She is always well-dressed, even glamorously so, and he plays along willingly, as her companion. They belong to the smart set. He is around fifty, she is fifteen years younger. But, as the author notes, in spite of all the pictures that has been taken of her (and him) there is none in which both are shown together, although she is frequently photographed with other men in her life, such as Celan and her most steady friend the gay composer Henze.

The writing of Frisch is based on experience. Writing is a way of making sense of his experience. While for Bachmann writing comes first, experience later. The writing is a basis and inspiration for subsequent experience. Her world is more abstract, something that is illustrated by her interest in philosophy, something he was not able to share. Hers is a far more cerebral world. She was brought up on books, always a most voraciously inveterate reader. The world is known to her mainly through books.

In the end Frisch cannot hack it anymore. He has had enough of adventure, or at least the kind of incessant adventure which is the 'Zusammenleben' with Bachmann. This constant vigil. Of never saying the wrong word, never to step on the hidden mine, never to refer to what she dislikes, always to fully understand her point. He wants a safer kind of adventure. The lure of the new with the assurance of the old. Thus at the age of fifty-one he takes off with a young student of twenty-three. He wants a change or rather a return to a less demanding world. Bachmann is flabbergasted. She had never thought that he would have dumped her for a mere child, one without any distinction. Shortly thereafter she checks into a clinic. She would never get over the betrayal. And, at least according to the book, Frisch would never truly get over her. Many years later, long after her death, he would still regret the rupture, of rejecting the rewards he might have reaped had he resisted the impulse. Bachmann was a truly painful topic to him.

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