

1 Mozart the letter writer and his language

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Translated by William Buchanan

I

Mozart was an eminent letter writer, the most eloquent among musicians of his time, of almost unparalleled vitality of word and clarity of formulation. Anyone who now expects, on the basis of this statement, to find among the correspondence of the composer well-rounded literary entities, stylistically honed and sublimely argued, will be disappointed. Classical epistles of the kind and rank of his German contemporaries Goethe and Schiller were never written by Mozart, examples of poetry in their sense hardly ever, and of literature not at all. The hardly decipherable handwriting and the very free handling of orthography alone, even by the standards of the eighteenth century, hinder the impression that these pieces of correspondence might have been written with intentions beyond their immediate context. (On 29 December 1778 Mozart indeed admits that he had ‘bad handwriting by nature’ because he had ‘never learnt to write’.¹) Mozart’s letters captivate the receptive reader less for their disclosures of worldviews or aesthetic maxims than for the breath of ongoing life that they exude. It is usually the hasty exhalation of a person hardly able to catch his breath, not the marble respiration of an idealized, fictitious figure. To look for the latter and to wish to see it confirmed in the letters is a vain undertaking, and many a gentlemanly connoisseur of the arts or culturally zealous reader of previous generations has turned away from them in irritation. Not infrequently, later critics have taken their own life experience and worldview as the measure by which to understand what was once Mozart’s present. The reading that then takes place is not one which accepts insight into circumstances different from one’s own (with at least minimal prejudice), but a reading that serves primarily to confirm the reader’s own standpoint, *ex negativo* if necessary. For interpreters of this kind, Mozart’s letters have served as testimonies of absurd ineptness; creating distance from the ineptness may appear to be evidence of intellectual superiority – a strategy used successfully time and again in neutralizing ‘unsettling’ forces. Such

¹ MBA, vol. II, p. 529.

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projections from the present onto past epochs are nothing unusual and, in fact, are common. But they say more about the time of origin than about their object.

This finding is clearly confirmed by differing reactions to the so-called *Bäsle-Briefe* ('Letters to his cousin'), which comprise nine of at least eleven once-extant pieces of writing sent by Mozart to his cousin Maria Anna Thekla Mozart between 1777 and October 1781.² They contain effervescent and unbridled verbal buffoonery, draw sustenance from all processes associated with the digestive system and include detectable erotic nuances. In the *Bäsle-Briefe*, Mozart sets up the stage of the jester and verbal acrobat, adopting principally the role of uninhibitedly bragging jokester. What had no doubt been produced, quasi improvisatorily, in front of his cousin in direct interaction and had been tested for immediate effect, now continues in letters – not as an audibly perceptible, but rather a written linguistic game. We know nothing of the addressee's reactions – she will no doubt have been entertained – but the judgement of posterity speaks volumes.

In 1799 Constanze Mozart considered that 'the clearly tasteless, but nevertheless very witty letters to his cousin',³ although unworthy of publication in complete form, were deserving of mention in excerpts at least; less than twenty years later, Mozart's son Carl Thomas even thought of destroying them⁴ and Georg Nikolaus von Nissen, in his Mozart biography of 1828, only touched in passing on the much 'too childish and common pieces of fun'.⁵ Until the twentieth century, a general sense of propriety forbade publication *in toto* of 'Wolfgang's *Bäselbriefe*, notorious for their sordidness (and which are only known to the initiated in their full glory)'.⁶ Whatever reasons are given for suppressing them – esteem for Mozart's genius, contravention of respectability or aesthetic considerations – emphasis was always placed on the attitude of posterity towards these unusual works of Mozart's youth rather than on the letters themselves. When they finally became generally accessible via the complete edition and special publications, the perception of them turned from moral reserve to enthusiasm, inspiring fervently psychological interpretation. Suddenly, the *Bäsle-Briefe* were put

² In MBA the numbers are 361, 364, 371, 384, 432, 511, 525, 531, 635.

³ Letter to Breitkopf & Härtel, 28 August 1799; MBA, vol. IV, p. 269.

⁴ As explained to the composer Wilhelm Speyer in 1818; see Edward Speyer, *Wilhelm Speyer der Liederkomponist 1790–1878. Sein Leben und Verkehr mit seinen Zeitgenossen dargestellt von seinem jüngsten Sohne* (Munich, 1925), pp. 24ff.

⁵ Georg Nikolaus von Nissen, *Biographie W. A. Mozarts* (Leipzig, 1828), p. xxiv.

⁶ Arthur Schurig, *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Sein Leben und sein Werk auf Grund der vornehmlich durch Nikolaus von Nissen gesammelten biographischen Quellen und der Ergebnisse der neuesten Forschung dargestellt*, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1913), vol. I, p. 330, fn. 1.

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to service as evidence of an entirely new profile of Mozart's personality – in the popular Mozart films of the 1980s the screen teemed with adolescents constantly reverting to childish stages of basic impulses – and occasionally the question of whether the composer and his cousin had their first sexual experiences together seemed to assume the dimensions of a central problem in Mozart biography. All of this can be easily traced back to the societal and value-related changes in the Western world since the late 1960s. But seeing in the *Bäse-Briefe* the basis for a meaningful psychogramme of Mozart's personality will convince almost no one today.

One thing, however, can be detected in these nine letters: the verbal cascades can be attributed to ideas triggered in Mozart by the distant addressee. That she alone was capable of revealing precisely this side of the letter-writer Mozart was a fact of which she was probably unaware. Nowhere else in his correspondence did he strike this exuberant tone of unrestrained language, or allow this faecal-erotic babble of voices to emerge; comparable passages are encountered only occasionally in the later letters to his wife Constanze. Mozart was – as expected from an artist profoundly inspired by the theatre – an exceptional judge of character. What he had instinctively gathered about the nature of the other person determined his letter-writing behaviour. This statement may be of only limited relevance in view of the fact that he wrote to no more than twelve addressees in his entire preserved correspondence; the only constant correspondence he conducted as an adult, furthermore, was with his father (1777–9, 1780–7). In addition there are sporadic or situation-related letters to his mother, sister and cousin, to Constanze and to Johann Michael Puchberg. But the whole manner in which Mozart addressed these people and others, such as Joseph Bullinger, Martha Elisabeth von Waldstätten and Gottfried von Jacquin, reveals his ability to meet a correspondent as an individual human being. In this process, he never, or only seldom, dissembled (and then rather unskillfully), as far as a judgement of this kind can be made. In the course of the psychological interpretation to which the letters were subjected, it was now and again claimed that Mozart veiled the truth or sometimes disregarded it.⁷ Distrust of statements in parts of Mozart's letters and understanding them in ways contrary to the transmitted wording, however, succeeded in opening easy paths to interpretations that are more superficially striking than convincing. This is in no way to deny that Mozart, particularly in unpleasant

⁷ See, for example, David Schroeder, *Mozart in Revolt: Strategies of Resistance, Mischief, and Deception* (New Haven, CT, 1999).

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circumstances and under pressure to justify himself, embellished the truth for his father or gave him undertakings without any deep inclination and inner conviction. But what is so remarkable about behaviour of this kind in situations of extreme stress? In particular, the constantly observant, clear-sightedly strict Leopold hardly ever allowed himself to be deceived by such attempts on Wolfgang's part – at most, they temporarily distracted him. And the insidious alienation of father and son, which started in the Mannheim winter of 1777–8 with the 'affair' involving Aloysia Weber, and which the sensitive reader today can still detect in the letters, was noticed very early on by Leopold. The way he sought to counteract this process, including in the spring of 1781 in Vienna, desperate and powerless, certainly makes harrowing reading – in letters full of unadorned openness.

When reading these true records of life, subsequent generations have allowed themselves as a matter of course to peer inquisitively, indiscreetly and (only too often) with an air of superior knowledge into the private matters of other people – peering that these people would not usually have tolerated in person. Only historical distance justifies a conscious partaking of these personal documents, which are sometimes documents of the most intimate kind. But what does conscious partaking mean? Any proximity to persons of a long-gone age can only be superficial, and nothing is more laughable than a pretended camaraderie with them, even if motivated by the greatest and most genuine veneration. Reading roughly 250-year-old letters and seeking to meet Mozart in them can only be meaningful if, on the one hand, the circumstances of their time and origin are respected – laying such circumstances bare from under the rubble of history is the historian's task – and if, on the other hand, constant reminders are issued that later readers, with their current capacity for understanding and their epistemic interests, see a reflection of themselves in the old documents. We read Mozart in his letters, but we also read ourselves in them in that we deliberately make them our own. This is inevitable and in no way disreputable, but should warn us against interpretational appropriations – enticements of this kind are particularly seductive.

Mozart's letters and those of his family are not exotic discoveries suitable for being marvelled at in a display cabinet, but are bearers of communications that are still awaiting answers. Today, we are the addressees who can be inspired to react monologically to these historical messages-in-a-bottle. There are a number of hindrances to accessing the content of the letters, above all relating to the forms of language used. It is a major simplification to categorize the language without further ado as 'German'. The German of the eighteenth century is particularly marked in both oral and written usage by a broad palette of dialects, forming a closely meshed net of extremely varied

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morphological, phonological, semantic and syntactic characteristics. They occasionally depart so substantially from the regulated High German of the twenty-first century that even native speakers have difficulty immediately understanding letters by Mozart; indeed, the letters contain some passages that reveal their true sense only to the linguistically trained reader. Furthermore Mozart's German draws material from different dialectal sources. Probably taken from his father, the major constituent of his German was a number of Western Upper Germanic or Alemannic elements dominant in Bavarian Swabia, to which Augsburg belongs. Mozart's mother, who hailed from St Gilgen in the Salzkammergut, spoke a Southern Central Bavarian dialect; its sounds seem to have aroused little pleasure in Mozart, as one may deduce from his occasional sallies against Salzburgian. In contrast, Viennese, which is often linked thoughtlessly with the composer's manner of speaking and writing because he spent the last ten years of his life in this royal town of residence, would probably have been a less significant influence. In order to understand properly the linguistic form and content of Mozart's letters a double transcription is needed; namely, from dialectal into High German and from the historical status of the language into the present. In this process, close attention should be paid in particular to the development of semantics and the change in the relationship of linguistic utterances to the living environment. That these transcriptive processes cannot lead to complete congruence between what was and what is, comprises an experience as well known as the even greater blurring that occurs when texts are translated into foreign languages. A perusal of Mozart's letters thus leads only to partial understanding for both native and non-native speakers alike, even if the qualitative difference has a different magnitude in each case.

An approach to the 284 letters of Mozart – the number currently available – can be chronological, or related either to people or themes. While approaches orientated chronologically or towards people are self-explanatory, those relating to themes can be carried out very differently, whether with regard to Mozart's handling of, and play with, language, in relation to his worldview and religious persuasion, or by looking at his statements about himself. For our cursory examination, we will initially study Mozart's linguistic usage, moving on to explore other areas.

II

Hints about the variety of language in Mozart's letters have already been given, but it would be remiss not to note his use of a number of foreign languages. Even the first preserved letter, from 1769, ends with a Latin quotation. Mixing languages and dialects is one of Mozart's favourite writing

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practices, especially in closing flourishes, such as that of 12 August 1773: 'hodie nous avons encountered per strada Dominum Edlbach who passed on to us di voi compliments, et qui commends himself tibi et ta mere. Adio. W. M. Mainroad the 12 Aug.⁸ He also makes virtuosic use of different stylistic levels, the elevated style often being used as the object of ironic imitation:

I hope, my queen, you will be enjoying the highest degree of health and yet, now and again or, rather, occasionally or, better, from time to time or, even better, qualche volta, as they say south of the Alps, from your important and pressing thoughts |: which emerge constantly from the most beautiful and surest reason, which you possess besides your beauty; although in such tender years and in a woman almost nothing of that just mentioned is demanded, you, oh queen, possess these in such a manner that you shame the male persons, yes, even the aged woman :| you will sacrifice to me a number. Farewell.⁹

Placing himself at an ironic distance from a situation described or even from an entire letter shows that Mozart also looked over his own shoulder in the role of letter writer. His cousin, for example, is instructed on one occasion on the high import of an epistle:

Now there is too little space to present yet more cleverness, and cleverness all the time leads to a headache; my letter is, after all, full of clever and learned things anyway; if you have already read it, you will have to admit this, and if you have not read it, then please read it soon, you will derive much profit from it, you will shed bitter tears at some of the lines.¹⁰

Other addressees, such as his sister, fall victim to closing nonsense:

What fault is it of mine that it has just now sounded quarter past 7? – – Nor does my Papa carry any blame in this – – Mama will hear more about this from my sister. But now things have not been going well, because the Archbishop will not stay here long – – they are even saying he will stay until he departs again. – – My only regret is that he will not see the first evening concert. I commend myself to Baron Zemen, and to all good friends of both sexes. I send hand-kisses to Mama. Farewell. I will collect you at once. Your faithful Francis von Noseblood. Milan. 5th May 1756¹¹

The broad range of play on words opens up in front of us. From Mozart's inexhaustible stock, let us concentrate only on play with proper names and individual words. In Augsburg, the arrogant 'Mister von Longcoat' (Langenmantel) becomes 'the young ass von Shortcoat',¹² and the composer Seydelmann (= 'Pint-man'), not very capable in Mozart's eyes, would be better called 'Quart-man', more aptly 'if not *Drum-Bowlman*, then at

⁸ MBA, vol. I, p. 487.

⁹ MBA, vol. I, p. 488 (14 August 1773). And a comparable passage: 'If Your Grace, [regarding] my most reasonable, gracious Lady von Robinig and her Gracious Journey To

Munich . . . [...]', MBA, vol. III, p. 54 (13 December 1780).

¹⁰ MBA, vol. II, p. 95 (31 October 1777).

¹¹ MBA, vol. I, p. 518 (18 January 1775).

¹² MBA, vol. II, p. 63 (16/17 October 1777).

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least *Gillman*;¹³ his assistant Süßmayr (= ‘Sweet-dairyman’) has to accept apostrophization as ‘Sauermayer’ (= ‘Sour-dairyman’).¹⁴ Occasionally, the correct name is dispensed with altogether: ‘There was a plethora of nobility there, the Duchess Bohemian-Bum, Countess Fond-Pisser, Princess Smell-Like-Dirt, with her 2 daughters, who are already married, however, to the 2 Princes Mash-Belly of Pig-Prick.’¹⁵ Acoustic similarity in the words allows the (literal) ‘physiognomy’ of a merchant from Meiningen to slip into ‘symphony’;¹⁶ for a verb like ‘affirm’ a synonym ‘assolid’ is created;¹⁷ and the crab treatment of a fugue theme receives the less refined designation ‘arse-ling’.¹⁸ Associative ambiguities occur frequently:

It seemed to me the whole time as if I still had something to say – [...] – only no idea came down on me, as is usually the case with me; – I also often regret that I did not, instead of music, learn the art of architecture, for I have often heard that the best masterbuilders are those whose ideas do not fall from heaven.¹⁹

The linguistically creative fantasy of Mozart at the level of the word finds a continuation in freely invented stories. The wit in such stories usually lies in the way that a rising curve of suspense, constructed with much verbal elaboration, is finally left hanging in the air, and the point turns out to be trivial or even completely non-existent. Mozart, for example, announces to his cousin – who is the most important addressee for such fables – that he must ‘tell her a sad story’, yet the unfathomable, cumbrously told events with their references to the senses of hearing and smell, although seemingly originating from the street, turn out finally to come from a fart.²⁰ The apparently rational report of a midday meal in the house of the Mannheim musician Johann Baptist Wendling finally loses its way completely and fizzles out.²¹ Nothing less than a model of early nonsense literature in German is provided by the fairytale of the 11,000 sheep:

It is no great time ago that this took place; it happened in this country. It has furthermore attracted much attention here, for it seems impossible; nor does anyone yet know, strictly between ourselves, the outcome of the matter. Thus, to keep it brief, it was about 4 hours from here, the place I can no longer say – it was simply a village or the like; now, that is a thing after all, whether it was Tribsterill, where the dirt flows into the sea, or Burmesquick, where they turn the twisted arses; in a word, it was simply a place. There was a herdsman or shepherd, who was fairly old, but nonetheless still looked robust and sturdy for all that; he was a bachelor, and of substantial means, and lived in great contentment. Yes, I must say this to you before I finish telling the story, he had a terrible tone when he spoke; all had to feel fear

¹³ MBA, vol. IV, p. 87 (16 May 1789).

¹⁴ MBA, vol. IV, p. 150 (7 July 1791).

¹⁵ MBA, vol. II, pp. 66–7 (16/17 October 1777).

¹⁶ MBA, vol. II, p. 6 (23 September 1777).

¹⁷ MBA, vol. II, p. 547 (10 May 1779).

¹⁸ MBA, vol. II, p. 82 (23–5 October 1777).

¹⁹ MBA, vol. III, pp. 233–4 (2 October 1782).

²⁰ MBA, vol. II, p. 106 (5 November 1777).

²¹ MBA, vol. II, p. 165 (3 December 1777).

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when they heard him talk. Now, to treat of the matter briefly, you must know – he also had a dog, which he called Barker, a very fine, large dog, white with black patches. Now, one day, he was underway with his sheep, of which he had 11 thousand altogether; he had a stick there in his hand, with a fine, rose-coloured stick band. For he went nowhere without a stick. That was indeed one of his customs; now, onward. As he had gone on this way for fully an hour, he was of course tired, and sat himself down by a river. At last, he fell asleep, and he had a dream that he had lost his sheep, and in this terror he awoke, and saw however, to his greatest joy, all his sheep again. At last, he rose, and went on again, but not for long; for there will be hardly half-an-hour gone past when they came to a bridge, which was very long, but well secured on both sides, so that one could not fall off; now, there he contemplated his herd; and, because he had to cross, he started to drive his 11 thousand sheep across. Now just have the equanimity to wait until the 11 thousand sheep are across, then I will tell you the whole history to its end. I have already told you that no-one knows the outcome. But I hope that, by the time I write to you, they will surely be across; if not, then it is all the same to me; as far as I am concerned, they could have remained up there. In the meantime, you must indeed be content with things so far; what I knew about it I have written. And it is better that I stop now than that I should make up lies. In the latter case, you would perhaps not have believed the whole shistory [schistori], but this way – please believe me – not half of it.²²

Sometimes, however, mere signs suffice instead of words in order to conjure up meaning out of nothing, as when the following important message for ‘As Yet Nameless’ – Franz Xaver Süßmayer – is to be passed on by Constanze:

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Mozart then maintains that this message will hit his pupil and assistant where it is going to hurt most: ‘What does he say to that? Is he pleased? I don’t really think so, these are harsh expressions! and difficult to grasp.’²³ Through two examples, we can illustrate Mozart’s joy at experimenting with syntax and word order. The postscript to the letter of 16 January 1773 appears in the autograph as follows (the original alignment is reproduced here):

- 1 ^aI to have write for primo ~~homo~~ the homo a to motet be performed
- 2 the at Theatines tomorrow. ^bRemain health in I you beg. Fare well. Addio.
- 3 ^cI regret I nothing, my to good and ^dfare ^emy to Mama. ^fI you
- 4 feel that know new, greetings all friends women-friends. well. handkiss our kiss
- 5 in and as your brother thousandfold remain ever faithful Milan²⁴

²² MBA, vol. II, pp. 308–9 (28 February 1778).

²⁴ MBA, vol. I, pp. 475–6. Autograph in Salzburg, Internationale Stiftung

²³ MBA, vol. IV, p. 152 (9 July 1791).

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Mozart subjects each of the six sentences (a; b; c–f) to its own constructional model:

Sentence a (lines 1/2): groups of four words in the order 1 – 3 – 2 – 4

I to have write	I have to write
for primo homo the uomo	for the <i>primo uomo</i> uomo
a to motet be	a motet to be
performed the at Theatines	performed at the Theatines
tomorrow.	tomorrow.

Sentence b (line 2): groups of three words in the order 1 – 3 – 2

Remain health in	Remain in health
I you beg	I beg you.

Sentences c–f, beginning (lines 3/4): word order distributed alternately over both lines:

^cI feel regret that I know nothing new, my greetings to all good friends and women-friends. ^dFare well. ^eMy handkiss to our Mama. ^fI kiss you

Sentence f, continuation and end (line 5):

The first and last words frame the phrase and form its ending (= ‘in Milan’). The word ‘thousandfold’ forms the central axis, from which the words have to be read leaping to right and left: ‘thousandfold and remain as ever your faithful brother’. Together with the beginning in line 4, the complete sentence reads:

^fI kiss you thousandfold and remain as ever your faithful brother in Milan.

If the formation of word-groups and numerical combinations served in the previous examples as models for encoded sentence construction, purely internal linguistic principles dominate the end of the letter of 3 October 1777. My transcription once again follows the autograph precisely:

1	Tomorrow we
2	will give a slagademy together on the
3	miserable piano Nota bene. The pain! The pain! The pain. I wish
4	simply a restsome night and improve a good
5	wish in hearing, soon to hope, that our healthy completely
6	is Papa. I forgive to beg because of my abominable handwriting,
7	but ink, haste, sleep, dream, and simply everything – – –
8	I Papa to you, my most assorted kisses, 1000 times the most dear,
9	and my embrace, the hearts, sister I with my whole
10	guttersnipe, and am from now on until eternity, amen

Mozarteum, Bibliotheca Mozartiana. For the facsimile and transcription see *Briefe und Aufzeichnungen zu W. A. Mozart und seiner Familie aus den Beständen der Stiftung*

Mozarteum Salzburg (<http://dme.mozarteum.at/DME/briefe/>, accessed 5 December 2013).

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11 Munich the 3:^d octob: 1777
 12 Wolfgang most obedient your, sir
 13 Amadé Mozart son.²⁵

The passage begins in line 2 with plays on words: from ‘academy’, the contemporary word for a concert, comes a ‘slagademy’, for which the decisive impulse may have been the association with slag, inspired by the subsequently mentioned ‘miserable piano’. The following, nonsensical remark ‘Nota bene’ (= take good note!) spins the idea out further with three exclamations of ‘Auweh’ (‘The pain!’), whose final vowel sound and emphasis harmonize well with ‘bene’. A regularly formed sentence then starts with ‘goodnight’ wishes – although the word ‘ruhsam’ (‘restsome’) has an admittedly strange effect here – which immediately develops into what is initially a completely unintelligible succession of words. The principle used by Mozart works by having the words give up and interchange their correct places in the sentence, at the same time becoming different parts of speech and changing their syntactic function. In the section ‘and recover a good wish’, ‘recover’ and ‘wish’ are changed in the following way: from the verb ‘wish’ (‘wünsch’), which should be placed earlier, the substantive ‘wish’ (‘Wunsch’) is formed, and from the correct substantive ‘recovery’ (‘Besserung’) the verb ‘recover’ (‘bessern’). The right formulation would be ‘and wish a good recovery’. To enable the construction of correct sentences from such distorted words, they must first of all be placed in the presumed right place in the sentence; a determination of their grammatical function must then follow. A translation of the passage would then read as follows, with normalization of orthography and punctuation:

I wish a good recovery, in the hope of hearing soon that Papa is completely well. I beg forgiveness for my abhorrent handwriting, but ink, haste, sleep, dream and simply everything – – I kiss your hands 1000 times, my dearest father, and my sister, the guttersnipe, I embrace with my whole heart, and am, from now on into eternity, amen,
 Sir, your most obedient son Wolfgang Amadé Mozart.

Supplementing such linguistically creative transformations, the repeatedly encountered passages in secret codes in the correspondence between father, son and family deserve attention.²⁶ The Mozarts used this procedure in order to protect their communications from the inquisitiveness of the

²⁵ MBA, vol. II, p. 33. Autograph in Salzburg, Internationale Stiftung Mozarteum, Bibliotheca Mozartiana. For the facsimile and transcription see *Briefe und Aufzeichnungen zu W. A. Mozart und seiner Familie* (<http://dme.mozarteum.at/DME/briefe/>, accessed 5 December 2013).

²⁶ In MBA all these passages have been resolved, easily identifiable for the reader by words set in angle brackets. (On this issue, see the Foreword to MBA, vol. I, p. xii).