



Photo-montage (Theodor Barth). Backdrop (NLN): drawing by B.M. Keilhau (14th July 1820). 1814—the N. Constitution. 1821—abolishment of aristocracy.

In the wake of having read and commented the letters, transcription and usership of the letter-collection from author [Camilla Collett 1863-64](#)—in the [NLN's](#) keep—I wanted to go further in exploring the notation of *absences* «whether owing to garbled handwriting or destruction» in the commented transcription offered by NLN. That is, viewing the notation «...» in the scope of Roman Jakobson's theory of *shifters*: “The shifter is Jakobson's term for that category of linguistic sign which is ‘filled with signification’ only because it is ‘empty’ (...)” (Robinson 2009: 96).

Some instances from the Collett transcript: stige⟨r⟩, ⟨H⟩, ⟨ø⟩, Boghandle⟨rnes⟩, ⟨...⟩, samt ⟨1⟩, Resten [a]⟨f⟩ Brynie, aands⟨ri⟩skende, han kom ind⟨f⟩ i Skandinavismen, ⟨O⟩deren, preusi⟨s⟩che Thaler, d⟨ie⟩ Linden, bi⟨t⟩ 2 bitte smaa, ⟨Løfte⟩, h⟨æ⟩v, usmyk^{usmyk⟨k⟩[et]} ⟨...⟩t, pa⟨a⟩, man l⟨e⟩, seet ⟨...⟩, Umu⟨e⟩lige, Dagen før min Afreise Dag i Lommen af hin Kjøle, Her i denne S⟨c⟩[ene] udfoldede Taglion⟨i⟩ al sin Kunst, m⟨o⟩dtager Tegn, ⟨Fru⟩ Abelsted, populair⟨e⟩, Malerisamlinge⟨n⟩, belived⟨ede⟩, b⟨...⟩ke op om Berlins kolde Herlighed, Tænk paa ⟨S⟩-s, Slægtninge⟨r⟩, Dig a⟨[t]⟩, og ⟨n⟩aar, f⟨ra⟩ Din Moder.



In the 18th century the Mining Seminary in Kongsberg and the Military Academy in Christiania were the two only centres of higher learning in Norway. When a university was contemplated in 1811, its location was at first planned in Kongsberg (at a safe distance from the Swedes). But then relocated in the capital Christiania (Oslo). The studies at the Mining seminar were considered thorough, but the future prospects of the students bleak. In Christiania began the possibilities to combine career, wealth and a continental foothold. Photo: detail from hand coloured lithography by Joachim Frich (1954).

When gathered and concentrated as above, the rendition of the original handwriting from the manuscript letters also comes out as a form of encryption: that is, a code in its own write presenting itself as a material for decryption. And as *enigma*, the material for decryption. The sample in the above paragraph exceeds the «...» code, since it includes superscripts, strike-throughs and square brackets. The strikethrough version of «...» comes out as a *hybrid* since it indicates a correction made by Collett herself (and therefore falls *between* garbled and destroyed).

This is of some importance since garbling is in the production and description is at the reception. If seen in the perspective of Badiou's subtractive ontology, the removal and retrieval coded by «...» either is supplemented with what computes, or invites computation from the reader. In Badiou's perspective, as soon as something is named and counted, something is lost. What we name and count at the object level, can be revealed in photography, for example. What is lost in photography can be revealed in writing. Finally, what is lost in writing can be revealed by computing.

Programming from handwriting: this a candidate way of understanding the letter-transcription. Crossed-out garbled/destroyed elements do *not* compute, since the crossing-out is *intentional* (whereas the garbles/destroyed elements are not). This is interesting because it can mean that it is when they are given up, within *one* level of coding, that they can be revealed at a different level. Roman Jakobson's *shifters*: the *random* elements of production (as garbles) will be swapped for the *events* of writing by the receiver/reader/user, infusing the letters with *performativity*, while the random elements of destruction are markers of *contingency*. The warp and woof of *fiction*.

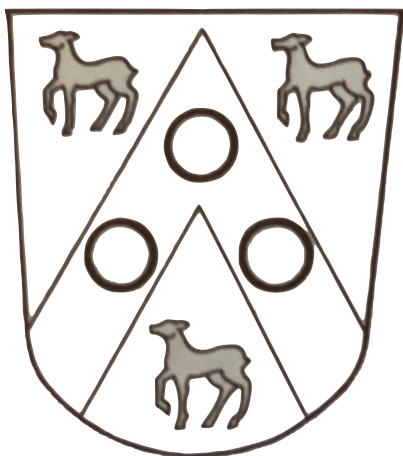
Whereby "ant-roads" of exchange emerging at the level of events—across time—bring up all the paradoxes of the *contemporary* as queried by [Agamben](#). It is this sort of exchange that makes the reader a contemporary of Collett's: they are not living in the same present, evidently, but they located within the precincts **1**) of the same *events* [garbles] under the terms **2**) of *contingency* [destruction]. In sum, the letter-manuscript goes through a series of anamorphoses: from being considered an *object* to its transposition as an *image*, from *image* to *script*, and then *computing*.

It this level, it clearly makes a difference whether Collett's letter-correspondence is **a**) considered as a world unto itself that contains its own reality (i.e. the hermetic illusion); or it is **b**) considered *fiction* in the sense that will both *attract* events and be *marked* by them. For instance, in Collett's literary career her status as an author (or, "authoress") was *virtual*, but in the wake of her Grand Tour—as a pauper from the upper rungs of society—her status as an author became *actual* (as the parliament granted her a salary, even though she was recognised only as half a man [in sum]).

The advantage of the fictional framework—being translucent rather than transparent—is that, contrary to the hermetic illusion, it moves from interception to transposition: from object to image, image to script, script to computing. It affords the transition from the virtual *to* the actual (how, in this sense, the virtual *computes*). Which, inasmuch as it was true for Collett, also applies to us. For instance, how the personal load of a lived burden—as experienced by Collett in her life and journey—becomes emancipated as soon as it is given up to history (though not redeemed).

What sums up the history of women, for instance, is being ever on the verge of not having one, if contribution, wealth or recognition failed. Even amongst the ranks of notable families, such as Collett's. In this aspect, women from this segment constitute an example of a dominated fraction of the dominating class. Of course, they *cannot* be compared with the dominated class (such as industrial workers). For instance, people of kin with family crests have been notables of some kind. Crests are curious, however, and often kept in the "attic": enigmatic and unresolved.

Comparable to Kafka's *Odradek*, they never leave us, keeping turning up at odd moments, nothing will rid us of them and they will survive us: if they can laugh at us, it is with a laughter without lungs and the sound of rustling leaves (Kafka, [Cares of a Family Man](#)). Were they ever taken seriously, or were they intrinsically defined by games and jousting? Drawn, branded, told and periodically altered. We take them as signs of honour and seals of power. But were they always?



The Collett family-crest. Like many other notable families in Norway this family came to Norway in the 17th century: at that time, a Klondike (European hinterland of opportunity), under the Monarchy of Danish Christian IV, who established the absolute Monarchy in Denmark: transformed Norway (previously part of a double Monarchy) into a colony. James Collett was a Londoner who came to Christiania 1683.

Each and every family had its ups and downs. Of course, they *were* counted *and* named.

In 1821 aristocracy was abolished in Norway. But there few wealthy aristocratic families, since Norway had been colonised by the Danes, and was under the Danish monarchy and court (Collett uses *recovering from Danish exploitation* in one of her letters). Many notable families had crests. As fortunes went up and down it may have granted them a status even as times were bad. In Bourdieu's terms a symbolic capital with some purchase as their social standing was ebbing. After 1814, the emerging elite recruited from these ranks. Social bearing was not enough. One also had to know success from university education, literature and the arts. The origins of "polite society" in Norway.

From Bourdieu's diversified notion of capital—symbolic, cultural, economic, social, intellectual etc.—comes the question of how they compute: that is, the [transpositions](#) (of the likes explored here) that comes out with a certain volume and structure. A better understanding will like improve our chances with [memes](#).