

Book Review: *Kjærlighetsbrev*

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TONE SELBOE: *Kjærlighetsbrev*. Forlaget Oktober, Oslo 2023. Pp. 341. ISBN: 978-82-495-2637-6.

This engaging study examines four different sets of love letters: the correspondence between Camilla Collett and Jonas Collett during their engagement (1839–41), that between Amalie Skram and Erik Skram from their first meeting in 1882 to their separation in 1899, the letters Karen Blixen wrote about but not to her lover Denys Finch Hatton (1914–31), and finally the much later letters between Bodil Cappelen and Olav H. Hauge (1970–75). All of these exchanges involve at least one creative writer, and the relationship between the letters and the literary creation is a central theme of the analysis. Roland Barthes' *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (1977) is a touchstone throughout, a kind of montage of the language of love as it is presented in the literature of the world, and an attempt to re-evaluate a discourse which he maintains has been dismissed and downgraded by the modern more scientific approach to literature and art.

The relationship between love letters and creative writing is evident from the outset; the story begins with Camilla Collett's self-identification with Héloïse, whose letters are often regarded as embodying the original tragic story of love and loss. At this time Camilla is thinking of her unrequited love for the poet Johan Sebastian Welhaven, a relationship which has traditionally been seen as the defining experience of her life. Yet Selboe argues that the correspondence with her future husband Jonas is no less significant, and portrays an unusual love story between two strong and independent personalities. It is also a story pervaded by the presence of Welhaven, who forms a third part of the dialogue; Jonas asks Camilla to use him as a confessor and an emotional support, and is told the whole story in return. The letters cover the period between Camilla and Jonas's engagement and their marriage. It is a time when Jonas is busy on the traditional European grand tour, whilst Camilla is waiting at home; a period not without tension on her part, at a time when nothing had changed and yet everything had changed. Literature is a part of their letters, as they admire and discuss the same authors – she often recommends works to him – as well as being an opportunity for her to learn and refine the art of writing. And the themes of their discussions are the themes of her later works, especially *Amtmandens datter* (1854–55), with its focus on the constraints and difficulties of women's lives in their restricted social sphere in nineteenth-century Norway.

The similarities between the correspondence of the Colletts and that of the Skrams are striking. Both sets of writers were conscious of

participating in a joint creative activity. Camilla's letters are a kind of literary training, where she can try out images and metaphors, and later in her life she prepares them for publication, revises and annotates them as if they were a story she was editing. The Skrams talk directly about their letters as a kind of novel. 'Vor Roman er smuk!' (Ours is a beautiful novel!) declares Erik, and when reading Thomasine Gyllembourg's published letters, he maintains that no novel can compare with them; Amalie's comment is: 'Det bli'er en gammeldags roman detteher, med et bjerg af forhindringer, som ingen "tro" kan flytte, med længsel og elskov på hundrede miles afstand ... og sluttelig resigneren, og et evig farvel, med selvmord eller drukkenskab i udsigt til trøst' (This is turning into an old-fashioned novel, with a mountain of obstacles which no 'faith' can remove, with love and longing five hundred miles apart ... and finally resignation, and an eternal farewell, with suicide or drink as the only consolation). All four collect and preserve the letters with a keen awareness of their significance. Camilla has a 'black box' in which she keeps important documents, including letters; the black box remains with her throughout her life. Early in their correspondence Erik presents Amalie with a casket in which she can keep his letters, which she faithfully does. Camilla and Amalie both reflect over the mechanics of writing whilst they are engaged in it. Camilla explains that she is writing on small pieces of paper because it is less daunting, and easier to convey her mood as it shifts from one session to the next; Amalie often experiences paper and pens as hindrances in her rush to record her feelings – the paper is the wrong size or shape, the pens are badly sharpened, scratchy or splodgy. Both also discuss forms of address. There is the 'Du / De' problem: Jonas prefers 'De' in public and in letters, the better to disguise their relationship, whilst Camilla prefers 'Du': "“De” er et meget daarligt og utilstrekkeligt Ord mellem oss, hvergang jeg skriver det ned, stivner hele Sætningen' ('De' is a really bad and unsatisfactory word between us, every time I write it the whole sentence goes stiff). With Amalie and Erik it is the other way round; Amalie tends towards the more formal 'De' whilst Erik prefers the intimate 'Du', and when they have a serious disagreement, she marks the difference between them with a reversion to the formal form. What they should call one another is also a subject for debate. At one point Camilla calls Jonas 'Jonah', because she thinks it is a more attractive name – his name sounds rather trivial. He is clearly hurt by this; his name may not sound so fine, but that is what he is. She never does it again. Erik calls Amalie by her first name from the start, and insistently, to the point that it sounds almost like an incantation, whereas he has great difficulty

persuading her to call him Erik. Most often she does not use a name at all. When she addresses him as 'Kjære Erik Skram' or he signs a letter 'E.S.', it is a sure sign that storm clouds have gathered.

Both couples had a long waiting period of around two years after they met and fell in love, when the relationship had to be kept secret – the Colletts' because Jonas hated all the fuss around public engagements and wanted theirs to be private, the Skrams' because Amalie had to be very careful of her reputation as a divorced mother of two sons – and in both cases, the happy ending came with marriage. The Colletts' correspondence, however, stops there, whilst the Skrams' continues for another 17 years, both writing letters every time they are apart. In both correspondences there were demons from the past to fight. Jonas was aware, as was everyone else, of Camilla's unhappy love for Welhaven, and a large part of her letters is taken up with going over and over events and her reactions to them; in asking for her confidences, Jonas may well have received more than he had bargained for. In the Skram letters, it is in Erik's past that the demons reside; his extraordinary revelations to Amalie that a) he has a mistress in Copenhagen and b) he has had lovers in the past (he was 35, after all!) almost capsizes their relationship before it gets started, and requires a great deal of explanation and justification before Amalie concedes that she had over-reacted.

There is an important difference between the two in this respect, however: it seems that the ghost of Welhaven was successfully exorcised, and the Colletts went on to have a fulfilling and harmonious marriage, whereas the ghosts of Erik's past continued to haunt the Skrams' future lives. Periods of harmony in their exchanges are short-lived, as Amalie time after time has to wrestle with her conviction that Erik has been a seducer, and her suspicions that he cannot really have changed as he insists he has. It becomes a blight on their whole relationship, and eventually scuppers it. Yet at the same time, as Selboe observes, it provides Amalie with the material for a literary career. Her emotional turmoil is transferred into her novels about marriage, as she returns time and again to the injustices in a society which tolerates sexual adventures in men whilst requiring young women to remain not only chaste but entirely ignorant of the nature of sexuality and what awaits them in the marriage bed. The whole of the 'Great Northern War of Sexual Morality', to quote Elias Bredsdorff, is fought both in their letters and in her novels; indeed she quite often uses direct quotes from the letters in her writing. Their relationship, concludes Selboe, is a novel of disillusion – life's own answer to Amalie's fiction.

Karen Blixen's letters, written when she was living in Africa from 1914 to 1931, differ in being written about rather than addressed to the love object, and one-sided in that there is no word from him. Many are to her brother Thomas, in whom she confided her feelings. Denys Finch Hatton was an adventurer, a free spirit, who visited Karen on her coffee farm when he was in the area; although she never declares that she loves him, her description of the visible effect of his visits on the landscape makes it clear enough: 'Naar han kom tilbage til Farmen, lukkede den sig op, den talte, som Kaffeplantagen taler, naar den blomstrer i de første Regnbyger, drivvaad, duftende, som en Sky af Kridt.' (When he came back to the farm, it gave out what was in it; it spoke, - as the coffee-plantations speak, when with the first showers of the rainy season they flower, dripping wet, a cloud of chalk.) Frequently she maintains that she is against marriage and the kind of 'possession' it involves; she cannot possess and does not wish to be possessed - and yet it is clear that the world is greyer when he leaves her, and that the whole relationship is conducted on his premises. He comes when it suits him, and never stays for long - until he deserts her for good, dying in a plane crash in 1931.

The link between life and literature is as evident with Karen Blixen as with our earlier letter-writers. She narrated stories to Denys when he stayed with her - stories which fascinated him and honed her skills as a teller of tales. In connection with their relationship she cultivated a consciously heroic attitude to life - 'heroic' is a word which crops up constantly in this chapter - which informed her later writing. Her account of the African years, *Den afrikanske Farm* (*Out of Africa*, 1937) transmutes her experiences into a tragic novel; the narration is a compensation for the loss. Yet the letters, maintains Selboe, constitute a wilder, freer, and less tidy novel, a kind of educational journey, a portrait of the artist as a young woman.

The final correspondence examined in this study, that between the poet Olav H. Hauge and the artist and weaver Bodil Cappelen, is from the 1970s, quite late for a relationship conducted by letter - and made necessary, as Selboe observes, by the fact that Hauge, as the peasant farmer he also was, did not possess a phone. It is also unusual in the fact that the two had not met when the exchange began, when the much younger Bodil (aged 40) wrote to the 62-year-old Hauge after reading his poems in *På ørnetuva* from 1961. The pair did not meet for four years - so they fell in love by letter. It was not until June 1974 that they finally met, and early in 1975 she moved in with him - and stayed until he died in 1994. These letters, like the Colletts', stop as life together begins.

As with the other authors, so with Hauge – the feelings expressed in his letters become literature. He thinks in and through writing. This exchange should perhaps be called a poem in letters rather than a novel in letters, as his emotions take lyrical form, whether expressed as poems or not. The strongest expression of his feelings, Selboe points out, comes in a poem called 'Teppet' (The Carpet), which he writes to Bodil in January 1975, not long before they begin to live together. The poem starts: 'Vev meg eit teppe, Bodil, / vev det av syner og draumar, / vev det av vind –' (Weave me a carpet, Bodil, / weave it of visions and dreams, / weave it of wind...). It is a declaration of love from one artist to another, which finishes with Hauge dreaming of sailing away on that carpet to another world.

Selboe's analysis of these four sets of letters, written by some of the leading Dano-Norwegian writers, is perceptive and full of insights which throw light on their creative work. There are a few small slips, which should be mentioned for the sake of accuracy rather than because they detract from the arguments: Erik Skram's main work of fiction is *Gertrude Coldbjørnsen* with a 'd', and Amalie Skram's first hospital novel is *Professor Hieronimus* (not Hieronymus). One of Denmark's most important writers is called Herman Bang (not Henrik!) And the Skrams' correspondence did not last until Amalie's death in 1905, as Selboe says at one point (p.131); it stopped when they separated in 1899.

The study concludes with an elegy to a defunct genre: '... min tid har vært brevets tid' (my time has been the time of letters). From now on the contemplative love letter will most likely be no more; it has already been replaced by rapid communications, which will inevitably affect the content, and perhaps also the durability of the exchange. These letters have expanded our understanding of what an author's work is, of what literature is – a dimension which from now on may be lost.