
To Take Possession of a Poet: Gunvor Hofmo and her Biographer

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[We] have developed endlessly subtle styles and techniques to reveal the secret meaning behind the apparent meaning, to open up the desires and assumptions behind what people say and explain about what they feel and believe. And all that can really be read into what we write is our own desire to translate everything, everyone, all reasoning, all irrational hope and fear, into our own Procrustean grid of priorities.

(A. S. Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale*)¹

Few Norwegian post-war poets differ more in poetic temperament and attitude than Gunvor Hofmo (1921-1995) and Jan Erik Vold (b.1939). Hofmo is known for her dark and expressive songs of lament that are marked by the horror of the Holocaust, and Vold is associated with a humorous, 'concrete' poetry visualising the everyday life of the city. Nevertheless, in November 2000 Vold published the first biography of Gunvor Hofmo, *Mørkets sangerske. En bok om Gunvor Hofmo* (The Singer of the Dark. A Book About Gunvor Hofmo), an event that was given a considerable amount of attention in Norwegian newspapers that winter. The biography had been preceded by several posthumous books by Hofmo edited by Vold. Most critics praised Vold for his effort to assign to Hofmo a well-deserved position in the history of Norwegian poetry. Many found the biography's impressionistic and fragmented style interesting from a genre perspective.² Some critics, however, were disappointed by the relative lack of information about Hofmo's homosexuality, claiming that Vold continued the tradition of concealment,³ whereas others felt that the biographer himself was too dominant at the expense of the poet, and were especially critical of the fact that Vold printed previously unpublished short stories written by Hofmo under his own name.⁴ Generally, though, Vold was respected for his

many years of thorough research and for presenting a great amount of previously unknown material about Hofmo's life. Many found the book valuable for the encounter between such different poetic temperaments as Vold's and Hofmo's. Øystein Rottem claimed that we meet Vold at his most generous in *Mørkets sangerske*; when Vold gets enthusiastic, he is willing to forgive almost everything, even Hofmo's insistent 'I' and metaphysical incantations.⁵

In this chapter our agenda is not to present this recent debate in full. Instead we will try to discuss some fundamental problems with Vold's biography of Hofmo with relation to gender, power and poetics. Vold's tribute to his poetic precursor Hofmo may not be as charming as Rottem presents it. The question is whether Hofmo really needs Vold's generosity and forgiveness. What does the biography's 'rhetoric of generosity' bring to the understanding of Hofmo's authorship? The encounter between the biographer and his object, between the imagist and the expressionist, the materialist and the mystic, between the younger male and the older female poet, may serve as a point of departure for a discussion of the interesting relationship between gender, text and power. Here we focus on the Norwegian post-war poet Gunvor Hofmo and her biographer Jan Erik Vold, but the problems of power and gender related to Vold's embracing of Hofmo are far from unique in Scandinavian literary history. This odd relationship seems to have an even more extreme parallel in Ernst Brunner's biographical novel *Edith*, where Brunner, as Ebba Witt-Brattström formulates it, follows blindly in the steps of biographical criticism and moves from textual assaults to a fictional violation of Edith Södergran's imaginary body.⁶ Numerous women poets, such as Emily Dickinson, Ingeborg Bachmann, Marina Tsvetayeva and Sylvia Plath, have been victims of similar textual violation and blurring of person and poetry. And still history seems to repeat itself.

Gunvor Hofmo: 'From Another Reality'

Gunvor Hofmo, born in Oslo 1921, made her debut in 1946 with the collection *Jeg vil hjem til menneskene* (I Want to Go Home to the People), and the reading public immediately paid attention to her insistent voice. Her early poems can be understood as an attempt to answer Adorno's question about how to write poetry after Auschwitz. For Hofmo, who lost her friend and companion Ruth Maier, an Austrian Jewish refugee, in the German concentration camps, the Holocaust and World War II were a personal as well as an historical tragedy. Writing became her way of working through her grief. As her contemporary colleague Paal Brekke said, Hofmo's poems are

attempts to build a bridge from the present to the past, but at the same time, they express the tragic insight into the impossibility of retrieving what has been lost.⁷ From 1946 to 1955 Hofmo published five books, but in the mid-1950s her career came to a halt when she suffered a mental breakdown. Diagnosed as schizophrenic, Hofmo was to be hospitalised for more than twenty years. In 1971, however, the poet made a remarkable comeback with *Gjest på jorden* (Guest on Earth); and between 1971 and 1994 she wrote another fifteen collections of poems. She died in 1995 at the age of 74. After her death the Norwegian reading public has witnessed a Hofmo renaissance, illustrated by the publication of *Samlede dikt* (Collected Poems) and *Etterlatte dikt* (Posthumous Poems) in 1996 and 1997 respectively, both edited by Jan Erik Vold, in addition to Vold's biography *Mørkets sangerske* in 2000. The first book of critical essays on Hofmo written by academic scholars was published in 2002,⁸ and the first doctoral thesis about the poet has recently become available.⁹

The title poem in Hofmo's second book *Fra en annen virkelighet* (From Another Reality) has become her poetic emblem. Hofmo herself valued the poem as one of her best. Commenting on the text in an introduction to an anthology, she said that the best poem is the poem you did not want to write because it cost you too much; the good poem exposes the innermost of identity.¹⁰ This statement may have contributed to the idea of 'Fra en annen virkelighet' as a key to the understanding of her authorship.

Fra en annen virkelighet

Syk blir en av ropet om virkelighet.
 Altfor nær var jeg tingene,
 slik at jeg brant meg igjennom
 og står på den andre siden av dem,
 der lyset ikke er skilt fra mørket,
 der ingen grenser er satt,
 bare en stillhet som kaster meg ut i universet av ensomhet,
 å av uhelbredelig ensomhet.
 Se, jeg svaler min hånd i kjølig gress:
 Det er vel virkelighet,
 det er vel virkelighet nok for dine øyne,
 men jeg er på den andre siden
 hvor gresstrå er kimende klokke av sorg og bitter forventning.
 Jeg holder et menneskes hånd,
 ser inn i et menneskes øyne,
 men jeg er på den andre siden
 der mennesket er en tåke av ensomhet og angst.
 Å, om jeg var en sten

som kunne rumme denne tomhetens tyngde,
om jeg var en stjerne
som kunne drikke denne tomhetens smerte,
men jeg er et menneske kastet ut i grenselandet,
og stillheten hører jeg bruse,
stillheten hører jeg rope
fra dypere verdner enn denne.¹¹

(From Another Reality

The search for reality ends in sickness.
I was much too close to things,
so I burned through them
and stand on the other side
where light is not divided from darkness
where there are no boundaries –
only a silence that casts me into the universe of loneliness,
of incurable loneliness.
See, I cool my hand in chilly grass:
that's surely reality,
that's surely reality enough for your eyes,
but I'm on the other side
where blades of grass are chiming bells of sorrow and bitter expectation.
I hold someone's hand,
look into someone's eyes,
but I'm on the other side
where the person is a fog of loneliness and fear.
Oh, if I were a stone
that could hold the weight of this emptiness,
if I were a star
that could drink the pain of this emptiness,
but I'm a person cast out in the borderland,
and I hear the silence roar,
I hear the silence call
from deeper worlds than this.)¹²

With expanding metaphors not so different from those of Edith Södergran, the poetic subject in 'Fra en annen virkelighet' manifests herself as something extraordinary. The experience of chaos, loneliness and melancholia is contrapuntally played off against an extreme, creative freedom. The prominent voice in the poem is connected to a reality different from everyday life and the marginal position of the 'I', and thereby her faculty of seeing through reality seems to imply a great responsibility.

Hofmo's absence from the public sphere, as well as the enigmatic character of her poems, have given her work a mystical aura which has triggered critics' fantasies and led to different interpretations. 'Fra en annen virkelighet' has been related to such different themes as religious ecstasy, post-war politics, existentialist philosophy, lesbian marginalisation and mental illness. Many contemporary reviewers of the 1940s and 1950s, apparently unfamiliar with the expressionist poetic code, were deeply concerned about the poet's situation and could not hide their feelings of pity for the young, lonely woman. They saw little or no distance between the lyrical 'I' and the biographical person in Hofmo's work. Just as her poetic subject is localised in emptiness, in the borderland, in deeper worlds than this, the biographical subject is supposed to have a similarly exposed position. Religiously oriented critics, however, had more positive expectations of 'the other reality' since they saw this kind of transcendence as an elevated form of understanding. Both the psychological and the religious approach, however, identified the textual 'I' with the biographical 'I'.

Vold reading Hofmo – 1984

Jan Erik Vold's materialist perspective presented in the early 1980s was in many ways a refreshing rereading of this authorship, considering the contemporary metaphysical and psychological framing of Hofmo's poetry. Vold does not seem to have been particularly interested in Hofmo's poems during the first decade of his critical work, but in 1981 he writes his first review of a Hofmo book, and in 1984 he publishes the forty-page essay, 'Gunvor Hofmo og det objektive korrelat' (Gunvor Hofmo and the Objective Correlative), in his book *Her. Her i denne verden* (Here. Here in This World). With his materialist perspective Vold interprets 'Fra en annen virkelighet' as a 'generational poem' that criticises the political optimism found in the post-war reconstruction of the nation. The poem illustrates the lack of interest in socialist ideologies in the late 1940s, according to Vold.¹³ More importantly, however, Vold outlines a context of poetic modernism in his essay which fits into his general conception of the development of Western poetry in the twentieth century, establishing an early expressionist and a later imagist phase in Hofmo's work, and placing 'Fra en annen virkelighet' in the expressionist phase. Vold's point, however, is that Hofmo does not remain in this mode. In the 1970s, she turns to imagism. It is the roguish aspect of Hofmo as a haiku-inspired poet Vold first of all wants to emphasise, as illustrated here in 'En hvit rose' (A White Rose) from *Det er sent* (It is Late):

En hvit rose

En hvit rose er månen
satt i himmelens ødslige
vase.¹⁴

(A White Rose

A white rose is the moon
put in heaven's desolate
vase.)¹⁵

Regardless of Vold's personal motivation for emphasising the so-called imagist poems from the 1970s and 1980s (they correspond of course to his own understanding of good poetry), his reading must be said to be a valuable expansion of the perspective on Hofmo at the time. Vold's essay became crucial for Hofmo scholars in the years to come. He lifted her poems out of the private sphere: read politically and related to the great tradition of European modernism, the lonely woman became a little less lonely. The question is, however, if Vold is able to continue in the same vein in the biography sixteen years later.

Strategies of positioning

Self-confident writers maintaining a high public profile have always had great influence on literary history and are often swiftly included in the literary canon. With polemic manifestos and pioneering literature generated from 'strong misreadings', as Harold Bloom puts it, writers have been the first to define and characterise their own works. In many cases, critics and scholars have accepted and re-drawn such writers' self-portraits. Driven by the anxiety of influence, poets construct creative interpretations of their precursors' writings.¹⁶ With misleading readings, they draw attention to their own historical efforts. We find illustrative examples of such confrontational mechanisms for marking literary territory among post-war poets, often displayed in a complex and subtle manner in which poetic positioning is disguised as a tribute to the precursors.

Ever since Jan Erik Vold became the leading editor of the literary student journal *Profil* (Profile) in December 1965, the year he made his début as a poet, he has been an active force with ambitions to influence literary history. The fact that Vold was awarded an honorary doctorate at the University of Oslo in September 2000, celebrated for his effort to draw attention to neglected poets in twentieth-century Norwegian literature, is proof of his success. Vold's 'will to power' has manifested itself as a double project where,

on the one hand, he has wanted to spread knowledge of the history of poetic modernism in Norway by placing it in an international context and, on the other hand, signalled some distance to earlier generations of modernists. This ambivalence towards the history of modernism is perhaps not striking in his Hofmo essay, but it is all the more evident in his reading of his poetic precursor and Hofmo's contemporary male colleague, Paal Brekke (1923-1993). In 'Et essay om Paal Brekke' (An Essay on Paal Brekke) Vold recognises Brekke as 'The Father of Modernism' in Norway and writes positively on Brekke's struggle for modern poetry in Norway, perceived as a European outpost. But at the same time Vold makes some conspicuously aggressive assertions about Brekke's alleged father complex. Brekke's poetry manifests itself as a continuous positional warfare between the poet and the world, according to Vold, who furthermore relates this to the lack of ritual father murder in Brekke's literary criticism. Brekke did not bother to commit the necessary 'murder', and that's why he did not manage to fulfil his poetic project, according to Vold.¹⁷ The Freudian/Bloomian way Vold analyses the poet's role indicates that he must be conscious of his own role in the drama of literary generations. Vold seems actively to seek out confrontations with his literary father, Brekke, for the purpose of defining his own poetics, characterised by a double gesture of identification and opposition *vis-à-vis* Brekke, and thereby indirectly also *vis-à-vis* Hofmo.¹⁸

In Norwegian poetry, the definitive modernist breakthrough came at the end of the 1940s when Paal Brekke and Gunvor Hofmo, in a heavily associative language inspired by T. S. Eliot and Rainer Maria Rilke, articulated the post-war feelings of disillusion, loss of meaning and anxiety at being abandoned by God. In the 1960s, Vold and others in the *Profil* generation, and most of the post-war writers themselves, reacted against the mystical and hermetic modernism of the 1950s, especially its lack of materiality. Pathos and abstractions were abandoned, the ideals were now simplicity and concreteness; the poetic subject stepped back in favour of the things *an sich*, while seriousness was replaced with humour. Vold became the major advocate of this earthly and optimistic variant of modernism, and during the 1960s and 1970s, he and other academic authors connected to the literary journal *Profil* redefined the understanding of modernist poetry in such a way that their own work became the norm for good writing. In their understanding of the history of poetic modernism, Whitman conquered Baudelaire, imagism expressionism, and the so-called *glad-modernismen* (joyful modernism) defeated post-war depression.

This evolutionary pattern is apparent in most of Vold's essays, comments and reviews concerning Norwegian modernism, and seems to have consequences for his evaluation of the writings of his parent generation of authors. According to Vold, Paal Brekke presented a disharmonious view of

the world and a poetics not brought to fruition. Thus he implies that poetic quality is dependent on the 'aesthetics of reconciliation' that Vold himself represents. It is interesting, though, that although there are elements of such a critique in his early essay on Hofmo, Vold is far more generous in his readings of Gunvor Hofmo than in his interpretation of Brekke. Here some questions arise: are Hofmo's poems so much better than Brekke's, or is Vold's generosity a manifestation of a gentleman's politeness, possibly paternal concern? Was Vold more vague in his critique of Hofmo because the woman writer was competing in another heat than his poetic father Brekke? Or was it due to the fact that Hofmo, in spite of the imagist impetus from the 1970s on, chiefly remained faithful to an expressionist poetics and therefore didn't challenge Vold on his own territory? Could his sympathetic attitude to Hofmo and other female precursors be explained by their modesty and reluctance to enter into public literary disputes?

Whatever psychological and literary motivations Vold may have had to discriminate against Brekke and in favour of Hofmo, our treatment of this matter can only be speculative. Still, when it comes to Hofmo's shyness, it seems rather obvious that Vold takes on a paternal commitment to plead the female poet's case. In contrast to Brekke and Vold, who knew how to market themselves to the literary public, Hofmo neither gave interviews nor did she participate in literary debates. With the exception of a couple of interviews right after her debut in 1946 and a few critical reviews in the early 1950s, she communicated with her readers entirely through her poems. It is on this basis that Vold justifies his biographical project.

Vold reading Hofmo – 2000

Vold's biographical approach is quite different from his imagist agenda in his 1984 essay, but nevertheless, the two perspectives seem to have a common prerequisite, namely concretisation. Vold finds it difficult to deal with Hofmo's enclosed and mystical poems unless he focuses on places, events and personal traumas in the writer's life. What is more, he assumes this to be the view of other readers as well. He suggests that Hofmo's poems will improve, at least become easier to read, if we know her life story. He writes in *Mørkets sangerske*:

Hofmos løsning, vet vi, var å ikke ha noen biografi, leve ansiktsløs. Dermed oppstod et mottagerproblem: Diktene var vanskelig tilgjengelige, for leseren hadde ofte ingen gjenkjennbar referanse å knytte sin diktforståelse opp mot.¹⁹

(Hofmo's solution, we know, was not to have any biography, to live without a face. This resulted in a problem of reception: the poems were difficult to

comprehend because the reader often had no recognizable reference to which to relate an understanding of the poem.)

Biographical information played a minor role in Vold's interpretation of Hofmo in his 1984 essay. At one point, however, Vold tended to psychologise: when it came to the religious dimension in Hofmo's work. He obviously felt uncomfortable when dealing with the frequent invocations of God and suggested that the appeal to God was a suppressed cry for the poet's deceased girlfriend, that the dialogue with the distant God was some sort of projection of her longing for Ruth Maier.²⁰ Sixteen years later it is precisely the relationship between Hofmo and Maier, along with Hofmo's hospitalisation in the mid-1950s, which guide Vold in his analysis of her work. By relating the enigmatic language to the tragic loss of Ruth Maier, Vold claims to be able to detect new qualities in Hofmo's expressionism. The close connection between life and text is especially striking when he writes about the poem 'Alle ser på denne rosen' (Everybody is Watching this Rose) – apparently Sappho-inspired – from *I en våkenatt* (1954, In the Night of Insomnia). First Hofmo:

Alle ser på denne rosen
som om den skulle
åpenbare noe.

Sollyset står
hett over den om dagen
og får dens kronblader
til å svulme,
lik et rødt fuglebryst
som spennes mot lyset –

Men skumringen
presser bladene
sammen,
fuglen
blir smal av søvn.

Alle ser på denne rosen.

Men jeg ser en mann se på sin
bortgjemte venn i denne flokken av 'alle'
og smile.

Vennens panne har større
skjønnhet enn disse menneskeøyne
kan drikke...
enn noen rose kan rumme,
sier hans blikk.²¹

(Everybody is watching this rose
as if it should
reveal something.

The sunshine stands
hot above it during the day
and makes its petals
swell,
like the chest of a red bird
that stretches towards the light –

But the twilight
crushes the petals
together,
the bird
turns small from sleep.

Everybody is watching this rose.

But I observe a man looking at his
hidden friend in this crowd of 'everybody'
and smiling.

The friend's forehead has a greater
beauty than these human eyes
can drink...
than any rose can hold,
says his gaze.)²²

Jan Erik Vold interprets the poem as follows:

For min egen del har jeg alltid forestilt meg at diktet i sin kjerne handler om Gunvor som ser på Ruth, altså Gunvor kamuflert som mann. 'Venn' i denne dikterinnes terminologi betyr ofte 'Ruth' ('I stormen skriker du, døde døde venn'). Hennes panne er ofte fremhevet ('Se denne nakne panne/ som ingen har rørt'). Men gav det Gunvor trøst å skrive diktet? Ble byrden lettere? Skjønnte noen hennes sorg?

Nei. Nei. Nei.

Etter fem uker alene på hytta på Sørlandet, i en periode av rik inspirasjon, bryter Gunvor Hofimo sammen.²³

(For my own part I have always imagined that the poem in its very core is about Gunvor looking at Ruth, that is Gunvor disguised as a man. 'Friend' in the terminology of this poetess often means 'Ruth' ('In the storm you scream, dead dead friend'). Her forehead is often emphasised ('See this naked forehead/ which no one has touched'). But did it give comfort to Gunvor to write this poem? Was the burden eased? Did anyone understand her grief?

No. No. No.

After five weeks alone in the cabin in southern Norway, in a period of inspiration, Gunvor Hofmo has a break-down.)

Vold the biographer tries to decipher the poetic process behind the actual poem, and at the same time describe Hofmo's psychological drama. The biographer approaches the biographee as closely as possible, first by using her first name, 'Gunvor', and then by turning to the present tense in simultaneous narration. One may sympathise with Vold's efforts to try to understand Hofmo's agonies, but what is really happening in this passage? Isn't Vold doing Hofmo and her poetry a disservice with his exaggerated compassion and unintended comicalness?

This question becomes even more urgent some pages later in the book when Vold tries to explain the muted diction in Hofmo's later poems. While Vold's 1984 essay relates Hofmo's stylistic changes to the imagist tendencies in Norwegian poetry, the same softening of tone is related to medication and hormonal changes in the biography. In 1971, Gunvor Hofmo turned fifty, Vold reminds us:

I 1971 runder Gunvor Hofmo de halvt hundre år. Kvinnens livsløp, kanskje i større grad enn mannens, har å gjøre med kroppens ulike oppgaver og faser. Rundt femti forlater hun sin fertilitet, hormonene velger andre veier, kroppen belager seg på alderdommen – for kvinnen på en mer uomvendelig måte enn mannen. 'Lebenswende' kaller tyskerne det, det gjelder for begge kjønn, den går både på kropp og sjel. Tid for omprogrammering, tid for reformulering, tid for – i beste fall – overblikk, balanse, likevekt. Skal noe mer sies, skal det sies nå. [...] Gunvor Hofmos skrift er mildnet, myknet, modnet, viser det seg, når de nye diktene kommer utover på 1970-tallet. Så kunne det ha noe med alder å gjøre.²⁴

(In 1971 Gunvor Hofmo turns half a century old. A woman's life, perhaps to a greater degree than a man's, is connected to the different tasks and phases of the body. Around fifty she is no longer fertile, her hormones find other directions, the body prepares for old age – for women in a more definitive way than for men. 'Lebenswende', the Germans call it, and it affects both body and soul of both sexes. Time for reprogramming, time for reformulating, time for – in the best case – overview, balance, equilibrium. If something more has to be said, it must be said now. [...] Gunvor Hofmo's writing is milder, softer, more mature, it seems, when her new poems appear during the 1970s. So, it might have something to do with age.)

It would of course be difficult to avoid psychological and even pathological approaches in the writing of Hofmo's biography, but one cannot help feeling some distaste for this kind of reductive literary interpretation in which Vold explains Hofmo's mature poems by referring to the ageing of the woman's body and soul. Should it not be a dilemma for the biographer that his earlier efforts to

interpret Hofmo in the context of post-war politics and modernist poetics now are in danger of being undermined by the biography's focus on tragic love and tragic illness? The fact that the same observations are given different explanations is at best interesting, but the question remains whether Vold in his interpretations doesn't give with one hand and take away with the other.

The biographical paradox

While Vold's aim with the biography is to render Hofmo concrete and more understandable, he appears at the same time to be afraid of breaking the spell of Hofmo's work. Writing a biography of a poet who chose to live 'without a face', is necessarily a great paradox and a challenge, and probably an impossible project. Hofmo's poems do not exactly invite to intimacy, and in a way, the solemn title of the biography, *Mørkets sangerske* (The Singer of the Dark), mirrors the biographer's distanced reverence for the poet.

The biography genre is traditionally linked to epideictic rhetoric, and in *Mørkets sangerske* Vold obviously makes use of epideictic conventions. In some paragraphs he is so stirred by the poet's destiny that his textual interpretations turn into unrestrained admiration manifested in blossoming pathos. His concept of the melancholic genius, which is also a typical cliché of the genre, seems to be part of this picture. Ever since Aristotle's *Problemata XXX.1*, Western culture has seen a linkage between melancholia, exceptionality and creativity, and this has established a pattern for the genre of biography, and especially for artists' biographies. In *Biografiens retorikk* (The Rhetoric of Biography) Marianne Egeland claims, quoting Lawrence Babb, that biographers are 'addicted to melancholy'.²⁵ Babb refers to Wordsworth and writers in the Romantic era, but after studying biographies of Sylvia Plath and others, Egeland finds this pattern to pertain to literary biographies written in the twentieth century as well. Biographers seem to be especially attracted towards madness and mental illness, and this is why so many modern biographies look like case histories. Hofmo's life was not externally eventful, but all the more dramatic on the personal and psychological level. Thus, knowing that the poet became mentally ill and lived in exile in a hospital for more than twenty years, we can say that *Mørkets sangerske* is related to a psychiatric case history in a double sense.

Vold's depiction of Hofmo incorporates many of the conventions and clichés typical of the genre of biography. In one respect he seems to be trapped by the genre and its conception of the mad genius, but he is obviously also trapped by his gender biases. In *No Man's Land* Gilbert and Gubar point to a problematic aspect of compliments which, although genuine, are formulated by 'literary men' admiring women writers. Referring to Bonnie

Costello, they say that male praise often undermines women writers by isolating these writers in conventional gender categories that diminish their power.²⁶ In Vold's case, his homage to Hofmo, when he usurps the poet's own words, is rather patronizing. It would be an exaggeration to claim that Jan Erik Vold exerts all the strategies of power Gilbert and Gubar relate to twentieth-century male writers, but he seems to have difficulty finding an adequate language to cope with a poet so different from himself. This can perhaps explain why he appropriates her words, probably not with bad intentions, but the result trivialises her language nevertheless. Those who have heard Vold read Hofmo's 'Fra en annen virkelighet' aloud would even say that he infantilises her poetic expression.²⁷

In her essay 'Forfatterens død er biografens brød' (The Dead Author Provides Sustenance for the Biographer), Ingunn Økland states that Gunvor Hofmo is now under Vold's guardianship. The poet has had her whole life and authorship laid out by a loving father who is on tour with her suffering in his suitcase.²⁸ And Økland raises an opportune question: Does Hofmo, sitting on a stone in heaven, feel comfortable about this? As strange as it sounds, the question is relevant because Vold has not been able to develop a biographical method that can stand up to the scrutiny of the poet herself. Økland claims that Vold's approach is offensive from the biographee's point of view. There is, indeed, something problematic about a biography if it is only possible after the death of the author. In different interviews Vold has claimed that he has heard 'sounds' – a kind of calling – from Gunvor Hofmo that should legitimise his biographical work. In other words, he likes to present himself as especially 'chosen' for the task, and here there seems to be a parallel between Hofmo hearing the voice of God and Vold hearing the voice of Hofmo.

The peculiar generosity in *Mørkets sangerske. En bok om Gunvor Hofmo*, in which Vold on the one hand mythologizes Hofmo as a writer and person, and on the other hand infantilises a poet nearly twenty years older than himself, implies the exertion of literary, historical and gendered power. This 'misreading' can thus be claimed to be even more serious than Vold's overt diatribe against Paal Brekke. However, it seems that Hofmo's poems have an aura of dignity that resists reductive and infantilising interpretations. Hofmo's writing about grief and loss is too pervasive and too serious to be dismissed as fruitless.

Hofmo's usefulness

In 'The Function of Criticism' T. S. Eliot writes that we have to 'admit that there remain certain books, certain essays, certain sentences, certain men' – and we would add: certain women – 'who have been "useful" to us'.²⁹ In

Norwegian literary history and criticism, Gunvor Hofmo's literary *oeuvre* has served different purposes. It has been 'useful' to those advocating poetic modernism, to both her contemporary Paal Brekke and to their successor Jan Erik Vold. Critics with religious interests have been preoccupied with mysticism and biblical allusions in her texts, whereas feminist critics have focused on the imagery of body and violence in Hofmo's poems.³⁰ Lately, lesbian critics and journalists have stressed the hidden love-relationship between Gunvor Hofmo and Ruth Maier, and thus used Hofmo's poems to help young women today become conscious of their sexual identity. As we see, different critics view literature through different lenses and meet poems with different sets of motivations and prejudices. This is a hermeneutic fact rather than a methodological problem. The 'usefulness' of poetry legitimates the importance of literary criticism. The problem occurs, though, when one single voice becomes too dominant, as in the case of Jan Erik Vold, and thus *Mørkets sangerske* actualises the problem of how one author critic can claim 'ownership' to another.

Regardless of whether a biography is written with sympathy or antipathy, the rhetorical conventions of the genre imply a danger that the book may mainly become the biographer's own showcase. What does the biographer use the biographee for? This question has to be raised when reading any biography. Why has Vold chosen to take care of Gunvor Hofmo's posthumous fame? We notice that Vold has been commended for his objective presentation of facts and for letting Hofmo herself, her friends and family members be heard in *Mørkets sangerske*. And it is perhaps right that Vold's biography of Hofmo is an ideal example of the genre in that respect. And it is perhaps right, too, that because of their differences in temperament and poetic attitude, Vold is a particularly reliable interpreter of Hofmo.³¹ In the sense that Vold appears to be a sharp observer who has the ability to free Hofmo's poems from a religious and mystical context, we can support this view. However, Vold seems to have another agenda that is not made explicit. One gets the impression that Vold may feel that he did Hofmo an injustice when he and others in the *Profil* circle rebelled against Brekke and the post-war poetics. In this perspective *Mørkets sangerske* seems to be a project of reconciliation, an effort to clear his bad conscience towards the first post-war generation, an effort to make things good again.

Vold has obviously also invested and projected some of his own experience of bitterness and misunderstanding when writing about Hofmo. Hofmo is not only Vold's stranger and 'Other'. As Elisabeth Young-Bruehl says, 'biographers are drawn to subjects who are like themselves, usually in ways that the biographer is initially not consciously aware of'.³² The biographer's idealisation of his object can be read as a narcissistic wish,

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indicating how the biographer himself wants to be idealised. Consequently, *Mørkets sangerske* does not only concern Hofmo's posthumous fame, but also that of Vold.

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GENDER - POWER - TEXT NORDIC CULTURE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Edited by Helena Forsås-Scott

The Nordic countries are often imagined by the outside world to be a land of sexual equality and exemplary gender relations. *Gender - Power - Text: Nordic Culture in the Twentieth Century* presents a more nuanced picture to the English-speaking world, interrogating the constructions, negotiations and transformations of gender and power in a diversity of texts and textual practices.

GENDER theory informs all sixteen essays in this volume, and a productive and provocative juxtaposition of disciplinary and theoretical boundaries is in evidence throughout. The contributors draw on the work of theorists in the Roland Barthes, Judith Butler, Michel de Certeau, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Donna Haraway, Julia Kristeva and Hayden White, reading this against texts by Nordic writers, filmmakers and artists such as Edith Södergran, Key, Knut Hamsun, Monika Fagerholm, Mai Zetterling, Gunvor Henn, Bergman, Lw. Ulfmanto and Vibeke Gronfeldt.

POWER and its distribution in society are analysed both as a problem central to the construction of the nation-state and welfare society, and as a dynamic underlying the cultural texts which function as sites where social practices, political engagement and aesthetic creativity meet and merge.

TEXT is understood in this volume in a wide sense, encompassing painting, handicrafts, film, photography and installations, as well as poetry, the novel and drama. The texts explored by the contributors belong to the Danish, Finnish, Finland-Swedish, Norwegian, Sami and Swedish traditions, but the cross-currents that constitute a wider 'Nordic' cultural community are also traced out by connections and continuities between the chapters.

Helena Forsås-Scott is Senior Lecturer in Swedish and Co-ordinator of Gender Studies at University College London. She has written extensively on Swedish women's writing, particularly that of Elin Wagner, Kerstin Ekman and Selma Lagerlöf. Her other publications include *Swedish Women's Writing 1850-1995*, and previous edited works include *Textual Liberation: European Feminist Writing in the Twentieth Century* and Elin Wagner's novel *Pennska*.

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