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GIRLHOOD AND GIRL FRIENDSHIP IN THE NARRATIVES OF BJØRG VIK AND KARIN SVEEN

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ABSTRACT. ***Girlhood and Girl Friendship in the Narratives of Bjørg Vik and Karin Sveen.*** The article is an account of girls growing up, based on two of Bjørg Vik's short stories and a novel by Karin Sveen. After introducing the notion of female friendship and girlhood, it places the two authors against the background of Norwegian female authors writing about women and adolescent girls. It goes on to point out the importance of the environment for the girl friendships in the chosen works, and the power hierarchies based on looks that determine the girls' allegiances. Finally, it comments on the girls' shifting beliefs in freedom and solidarity as they grow older.

Keywords: *women's literature, female friendship, girlhood, coming-of-age narrative, solidarity.*

REZUMAT. ***Adolescența și prietenia între adolescente în narațiunile scriitoarelor Bjørg Vik și Karin Sveen.*** Articolul analizează poveștile inițiatice ale eroinelor adolescente, având ca punct de pornire două nuvele de Bjørg Vik și unul dintre romanele scrise de Karin Sveen. După ce introduce ideile de prietenie feminină și adolescență feminină, articolul prezintă locul celor două autoare în peisajul literar norvegian, alături de alte autoare care scriu despre femei si adolescente. Mai departe, acesta evidențiază rolul mediului familial și social în cazul prieteniilor adolescentine din lucrările alese, precum și relațiile de putere, bazate pe aspectul exterior, ce determină loialitatea adolescentelor. La final, articolul oferă un comentariu referitor la felul în care încrederea protagonistelor în libertate și solidaritate suferă schimbări pe măsură ce acestea se maturizează.

Cuvinte-cheie: *literatura feminină, prietenia feminină, adolescența feminină, narațiune inițiatică, solidaritate.*

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Introduction

Philosophy has a long tradition of discussing the notion of friendship, albeit as an exclusively male connection. With Socrates, Cicero or Seneca, classical philosophy sees the first influential examples and ideas about friendship exposed in dialogues and letters, these personal forms of communication appropriately complementing the intimate nature of the subject. Thoughts on friendship, be it secular or inspired by religious faith, continued to be relegated to personal letters, sermons and essays right to the end of the eighteenth century. At this point, fiction seems to have taken over as the locus of more complex – and public – debates on the topic and with it, the notion of female friendship as described by female authors such as Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell and Luisa M. Alcott (Caine 2014, 215, 221)[2]. If Cicero noted that women usually seek friendship for what he identified as the wrong kind of reason,[3] the relationships among these writers' women characters dared suggest, for the first time, that women's capacity for friendship might be more robust than that of men.[4] Moreover, the idea of female friendship as a strong interpersonal bond with collective overtones („sisterhood") went on to inform the kind of political activism central to the successive waves of feminism from the nineteenth century onwards (Caine 2014, 221; Peel et al. 2014, 333) to such an extent as to be considered instrumental to it (Peel et al. 2014, 334). Consciously emphasising a kind of relationship that went beyond friendliness by evoking strong, organic kinship ties, the term "sisterhood" connotes a solidarity of feeling, of experience and of concerns that has stayed relevant to this day (Yalom 2015, 207).

Related to the subject of female friendship and equally central to the focus of the present study is also the idea of girl friendship, implying the notion of "girlhood" associated with modern female adolescence.[5] Considering the increased visibility of feminine adolescents in the western cultures of the

[2] Female friendships went mostly undocumented until the fifteenth century, when we have the first written evidence of letter exchanges between women friends recorded in the French cultural space (Yalom 2015, 12). In the English-speaking world, a significant body of letters, diaries, poetry and plays documents female friendship connections from the seventeenth century onward (Yalom 2015, 68).

[3] "[…] for the sake of assistance […] and not at all from motives of feeling and affection" (Cicero 2001, 15).

[4] The "unique […] ability to connect deeply in friendship" (Brizendine 2006, 8), which has now been shown by neuroscience to be a central feature of the female brain, and indispensable to the evolution of the species.

[5] As Driscoll points out, there are many ways to understand the term. Here I will use it in one of its more evident meanings, as "a stage to be passed through on the way to […] being a woman" (Driscoll 2002, 2).

twentieth century, it becomes important to note, in analysing the works proposed, the way in which "girls experience their own position in the world in relation to diverse ways of talking about and understanding girls" (Driscoll 2002, 4).[6] Besides the idea of female friendship mentioned above, fiction seems to have also captured the emergence of public discourses on girlhood. Thus, while previous-age novels about "young women" were predominantly romance novels, by the end of the Victorian age the conventions of the realist *bildungsroman* in the development of female adolescent characters take precedence. For the first time, female adolescents no longer appear "in many respects, never to be anything else than children" (Rousseau 1979, 211) but acquire a sense of self that is no longer exclusively "made by love" (Driscoll 2002, 51).

By considering these aspects, the article aims to shed light on the take each of the Norwegian writers in the title has on female adolescent friendship. The questions it raises and attempts to answer, by considering textual evidence, are: to what extent their environment determines the girls' experiences and choices of friends; to what extent they conform or reject the stereotypical gender roles attributed to them, and the way in which this latter aspect challenges the solidity of their connection. A discussion of girl friendship and girl solidarity in these coming-of-age narratives by Vik and Sveen points out an aspect of their work which has not been submitted to a comparative analysis before. As such, it may shed new light not only on their respective works but also on the relevance of these works today, in an age when human solidarity and gender solidarity are questioned once again.

The article provides a close analysis[7] of two of the stories in Vik's collection from 1975 *Fortellinger om frihet* (Tales of Freedom)[8] and of Sveen's novel from 1984 *Den reddende engelen* (The Saving Angel)[9], providing ample textual evidence for the claims it makes. It begins by presenting Vik's and Sveen's relevant works as far as subjects related to women and the women's cause. Subsequently it considers the living circumstances that determine the different and differentiated friendship bonds formed among the characters in the chosen works, then the essential ingredients that make or break a successful

6 Driscoll sees this as one of the functions of a "genealogy of girlhood" – an alternative history of female adolescence shaped by cultural studies, looking into the way in which each century's discourse on female adolescents has shaped the meaning of girlhood (Driscoll 2002, 3).

7 Critics have pointed out the benefits of this "lento" (Nietzche 1881, 14) kind of criticism to cognition, and implicitly to a deeper understanding of the intertextuality of literary themes and motives (Eagleton 2013; J.W. Phelan 2021).

8 *Fisken i garnet* (The Fish in the Net) and *Perleporten* (The Pearly Gates). They are the only ones in the volume that highlight the problems of female adolescent friendships we are interested in here.

9 For the purpose of this article, the original Norwegian editions have been used. The author of the article is responsible for the translated version of the quoted extracts from both works analysed.

relationship of this kind. Finally, the value of solidarity and the significant consequences of its corrosion are commented on.

Bjørg Vik, Karin Sveen and female autorship in Norway

Women figures play as prominent a role in the Norwegian cultural imaginary as they do in the public life of the country. From the *Poetic Edda*, where a sorceress reveals to Odin the origins and demise of gods and the world, to Snorri's *Prose Edda*[10] with its vast pantheon of respected goddesses,[11] giantesses, Valkyries and avenging human heroines (Jochens 1996, 132), from the medieval sagas depicting strong-willed female characters whose wrath, if provoked, can prove fatal (Ferguson 2016, 337), to Ibsen's memorable heroines such as Hedda Gabler, animated by the same haughty energy as her pagan ancestors (Ferguson 2016, 338), Norwegian literature boasts a rich legacy of powerful female figures. With the birth and growing influence of the women's movement in Norway, literature written by women about women finds its first literary expression in the works of Camilla Collett. Since her mid-nineteenth century debut, women's literature has kept growing (Amalie Skram, Nini Roll Anker), with the second wave of feminism in the 1970s marking a period of unprecedented wealth of poetry and prose written by female authors here.

Born just fourteen years apart, Bjørg Vik and Karin Sveen belong to two successive generations of Norwegian women writers who exemplify changes in attitude and writing freedom considered revolutionary at the time. Apart from the difference in the level of literary notoriety and influence attached to their names and works, especially outside Norway, the similarities between the two authors seem to reside in their personal circumstances and level of engagement with gender and social-related topics. After the success of her second story collection *Nødrop fra en myk sofa* (Cries for Help from a Soft Sofa, 1966), she was awarded a stipend that allowed her to literally abide by Virginia Woolf's advice and rent a room of her own to keep writing undisturbed. It is an evolution pattern characterised by daily struggle that seems to have become familiar in the case of women writers.[12]

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[10] The Eddas are actually part of a common Icelandic-Norwegian cultural heritage. This "cultural settlement of Iceland" seems to have begun with the real settlement of the island in the 9th and 10th centuries A.D. by some four hundred colonisers, the majority of which are identified as Norwegians from the western coast (Fetveit et al. 1972, 11).

[11] As many as twenty-seven goddesses are identified by Snorri in the Norse mythological universe (Jochens 1996, 55).

[12] Another example in Norwegian literature is that of Annie Riis, also a housewife and mother of three whose poetry was first published in the 1970s when she was forty-eight (*The History of Nordic Women's Literature*, 1998).

Sveen's choice of a writing career sees her make her debut as a poet and later on as a short-story writer, novelist and essayist. Over the years, she has become one of the most respected authority figures in the Norwegian writerly community.

The social, moral and political *Zeitgeist* of the 1960s and early 1970s allowed Vik to publish the most emblematic of her short story collections. Her very first one, *Søndag ettermiddag* (Sunday Afternoon, 1963), written while still juggling other duties at home and at work, already contained many of her staple topics, from the triviality of everyday life to tangled love affairs and the bitterness of disillusion, while the typical voices of her female characters here grew stronger with each subsequent book. It was not by chance or lack of time, but by deliberate choice that the short story form proved best-suited for her topics. By her own admission, the short story's undiluted form, linguistic rigor and narrative sharpness matched her temperament, while its characteristic tip-of-the iceberg construction, which relegated most of the meaning to the subtext, gave her a chance to skip offering an easy solution. The despair of the protagonists comes through in the details (objects sounds, smells) of their stale repetitive lives (Garton 1993, 190-91) reminiscent of those of the female characters in the short stories of Cora Sandel, the writerly forerunner whose influence on Vik was defining (Rønning 2012, 2) not only from a literary point of view but also from that of an encouraging mentor's.[13]

However, as it became increasingly clear in the author's subsequent short story collections spanning the following decade (*Nødrop fra en myk sofa* (Cries for Help from a Soft Sofa, 1966), *Kvinneakvariet* (The Aquarium of Women, 1972), *Fortellinger om frihet* (Tales of Freedom, 1975), as well as in the novel and the play she produced over the same period (*Gråt elskede mann* (Cry, Beloved Man, 1970), *To akter for fem kvinner* (Two Acts for Five Women, 1974), her female characters also break with the inexorable fate of Cora Sandel's women, seen as either unreliable or unable to act, becoming women who experience a (sometimes gradual, sometimes violent) form of personal or political awakening. Vik's unwavering engagement with the women's cause (*kvinnesaken*) is apparent not only in her journalistic work, as a co-founder and prime contributor to the women's journal *Sirene* (Siren, 1973), but throughout her fiction, her characters' thoughts about feminism actually precede by a whole decade the real, politically-engaged wave of the women's liberation movement in Norway (Garton 1993, 189).

By the time Karin Sveen made her short story debut in 1980, the Norwegian writers' interest in experimentation had moved them away from such a strong engagement with social and political topics and, once again,

[13] Having read Vik's first story collections, Sandel wrote back to acknowledge the young author's voice and talent (Vik 2018, par. 14).

towards works of the imagination, abundant in what would later be called "the decade of fantasy" (Garton 1993, 184). Following the same trend, the topics in women's literature gradually shifted to inward analyses or accounts of fantastic worlds, without entirely abandoning the politically-committed subjects of the previous years. Once again ahead of her times, Vik herself had already moved on from her works of feminist campaigning at the beginning of the seventies to a softer, more individual focus on the lives of her women figures at the end of the decade (Garton 1993, 203). In turn, Sveen's own short stories and novels of this period are typical of the co-existence of the Norwegian literary tradition of social realism with that of magical realism and oral story-telling.[14] The title of her first short story collection, *Døtre* (Daughters, 1980), clearly indicates her focus on female characters in stories otherwise entirely rooted in imagination. Her next best-known novel seems to reverse that double focus. *Utbryterdronninga* (The Queen of Escapologists, 1982) combines a realistic background with biblical references to the story of Moses, in a parable whose main character is meant to strongly remind one of a female Saviour. Her later novels and short stories also focus heavily on women characters: *Den reddende engelen* (The Saving Angel, 1984), *Kvinnen som forsvant* (The Woman Who Disappeared, 1987), *Maria Waters verden* (The World of Maria Waters, 1993), with the tone and background of the earlier works acquiring increasingly darker shades as the heroines are removed from their lively authentic village world and placed in the anonymous lonely world of the big city (Bakke, Granaas, and Rønning, 2012). At the same time, whatever literary trend her writing may follow over the years, Sveen's main focus, like that of Vik's, is also freedom, albeit understood as the freedom to embrace one's own identity.

Considered at the outset as little more than variations on the topic of women in love (Jan. I. Sjåvik 1993, 314), probably due to the characters' quiet and unassuming outer lives, Vik's stories' bold depictions of female sexuality[15] were to shock some of her readers into understanding that despite their training as little women, these characters were rebelling against a patriarchal upbringing, either individually or collectively, determined to make the women's cause into a human cause (Garton 1996, 348).[16] Vik herself wished to be identified not as a feminist writer – a reference she thought of as little more

[14] "Social modernism" was the name coined by Kjartan Fløgstad to describe the Norwegian literature of the seventies and early eighties, with its focus on social realities presented by employing modernistic means of expression (Stegane 1996, 603).

[15] Even though Scandinavian countries tend to be perceived as more open about sexuality than many others, Norway has never been part of that revolutionary trend (Ferguson 2016, 329).

[16] *Kvinnesak er menneskesak*, the title of one of the stories in her story collection *Fortellinger om frihet* (Tales of Freedom, 1975).

than a label over the years - but as one whose interest expanded beyond that topic, into the wider, fundamental subject of human freedom: "the lack of freedom, the dream of and yearning for freedom, and then the awareness of the difficulty of freedom".[17] However, when she uses the word in the title of her third story collection, *Fortellinger om frihet* (Tales of Freedom, 1975), the critics note its ambiguity, while they seem to disagree as to whether she employs it ironically or not. A comparison with the previous collection suggests that the female characters here are no longer aquarium fish on display (a reference to the title of her previous volume) but actively seeking a way out of their dire circumstances (Stegane 1996, 627). Others see the freedom of the characters as an illusion, and the title as bitterly ironic (Garton 1993, 201): no matter how much they strive, the characters remain trapped in their small pre-ordered lives, like fish in a net (the title of one of the stories here).

The world of children and adolescents features prominently in both authors' works, and it's girls in the process of growing up that the two authors specifically focus on. Already in her second collection of short stories (*Nødrop fra en myk sofa* – Cries for Help from a Soft Sofa, 1966), Vik employs the viewpoint of a young girl to describe her ambiguous relationship with her best friend, at the same time her closest confidante and her fiercest rival (*Innerst i det mørke* skapet – At the Back of the Dark Cupboard) (Garton 1993, 191), a topic she takes up again in some of the stories featured in *Fortellinger om frihet* (Tales of Freedom, 1975). Many of the themes of *Kvinneakvariet* (The Aquarium of Women) are revisited in the same later volume, among them girl friendships and teenage angst, the dawning awareness of a girl's limited life and work options, and the difficult relationships between mothers and daughters (Garton 1993, 202). Sveen also focuses at length on adolescent realities, but the universe of her young female characters, especially in her novel *Den reddende engelen* (The Saving Angel, 1984), is discernibly lighter, livelier and more sensuous than the one imagined by Vik. This may also be due to the fact that, unlike Vik, she places her girls in a small-town setting, allowing them greater freedom, including that of using their native dialect.

Girlhood and neighbourhood

There is no actual time or space setting in the two coming-of-age stories by Bjørg Vik chosen for this study. Anonymised and abstracted in this way, the neighbourhood acquires the qualities of an all-encompassing metaphor for authority. Its perimeter is so well defined that it can act as an oppressive

[17] "Mangelen på frihet, drømmen og lengselen etter frihet og etterhvert vissheten om den vanskelige friheten" (Vik 2018, par. 7).

confinement space. For instance, in *Fisken in garnet* (The Fish in the Net), the neighbourhood seems to be the net itself, keeping the girls contained inside its four corners:

> On two of the streetcorners were tram stops, one for trams going up the street to yellow barracks-like tenement buildings […], one going downtown to the cinemas, the large shopping centres, the market, the funeral parlour, the bird shop, the churches, the theatres, the lit commercials, the cafes. On the third corner was the urinal, on the fourth the [summer] kiosk.[18]

For the girl adolescents living in this world, the tram lines going both ways can be construed as either escape routes into the wide world of pleasure, of spiritual experience but also of death, or as indicative of their condition. Returning home means returning to the barracks, but also to a space of protective familiarity. The unique metaphor of the urinal indicates the cardinal paternal authority, sharply opposed to the feminine metaphor of the summer kiosk, its cheap assortments of ice cream, chocolate and hot-dogs understood as small and temporary means of escape from this authority.

Sometimes the house yard itself becomes a character in the stories, a figure of motherhood in turn warm and complicit ("The grey-green tenement building embraced us, kept our secrets in the basement storage rooms")[19], but increasingly watchful and suspicious as the girls grow up ("The house yard watched them with a thousand eyes behind the kitchen curtains. Watched their play, their hatred, their love. Watched their tears, their fights and their embraces")[20]. The fact that these circumstances are inescapable is suggested by the same statement being repeated at the end of the story. The slight change in the word order indicates that no matter what happens inside this space, the yard and the women in the yard will always remain the same, an amorphous hidden mass, perhaps an ominous sign of the girls' own future ("The house yard watched tears, fights and embraces with a thousand eyes behind kitchen windows. In dark bathroom windows stood immovable women shapes")[21]. Escape from such constant surveillance is perceived as a necessary betrayal associated with growing up. It takes an act of courage and a good friend ("The

[18] "På to av gatehjørnene var trikkeholdeplasser, en for oppadgående, oppover gaten til gule kasernegårder [...], nedgående til byen, til kinoene, de store magasinene, torget, begravelsesbyråene, fuglebutikken, kirkene, teatrene, lysreklamene, kafeene" (Vik, *Fortellinger om frihet*, 10-11).

[19] "Den grågrønne leiegården tok oss i favn, bevarte våre hemmeligheter i kjellerbodene," (Vik, 9).

[20] "Gården voktet dem med tusen øyne bak kjøkkengardiner. Voktet leken, hatet, kjærligheten. Voktet tårer, slag og kjærtegn" (Vik, 18).

[21] "Gården voktet tårer, slag og kjærtegn med tusen øyne bak kjøkkengardiner. I mørke baderomsvinduer sto urørlige kvinneskikkelser" (Vik, 41).

first time they betrayed the yard, they did it together")[22]. On the other hand, their street is something the girls know intimately, a corner of the world whose familiarity is so comforting that they sometimes do not even wish to leave. Ultimately, much like their mothers, they come to believe this is the only place they will ever know, inhabited by the only people they will ever get to know ("This is her street. She will never move away from it" […]; "She knows what the street looks like under rain and snow, under sun and wind […]"; "the people she knew anything about, all those who she could guess anything about")[23].

That freedom from this environment and their gender-conditioned upbringing is illusory and it is also hinted at in *Perleporten* (The Pearly Gates) with its ambiguous title borrowed from the eponymous song symbolic of the girls' pledge to eternal friendship. Anxiously longing for independence, the girls here find out that crossing the threshold into adulthood does not land them in heaven, as the world outside their familiar neighbourhood inevitably destroys both their naïve innocence and their adolescent friendships. By leaving behind this familiar ground, they actually leave behind their experience of a paradoxically carefree enclosure. Tightly built, barracks-looking blocks of flats with names such as The Backyard, the Red Yard, the New Buildings, mark the perimeter of this earthly heaven. In the girls' imagination, these are arranged in a hierarchy, with the New Buildings higher up that the Red Yard, so that one has to be special to be allowed to play here: ("She [Lita] was the only one of the girls in the Red Yard to advance into playing in the New Buildings, probably because she was so pretty")[24]. Besides, the girls and adults in the story all inhabit The Yard (*Gården*), a recognizable place of origin that identifies them, setting them apart from outsiders, sometimes also in a negative way, as they often find out.

By contrast, in Sveen's fictional universe the friendly pair Marje and Nina live in the actual town of Hamar on the shores of lake Mjøsa. Although there is only one direct mention of the location in the book, the setting is easy to gauge, as the novel is written in the dialect of the region. This element of stylistic idiosyncrasy contributes significantly to the authenticity of characters and setting. Dialect is part of the girls' identity and by refusing to give up speaking it at school, they set themselves apart, albeit negatively, as dialect is frowned upon by some of the teachers. So strong is this mark of linguistic solidarity that Marje urges her brother to defy the teacher's authority rather

[22] "Første gangen de sviktet gården, gjorde de det sammen" (Vik, 16).

[23] "Dette er gaten hennes. Hun vil aldri flytte fra den" [...]; "Hun vet hvordan gaten er i regn og sne, i sol og vind"; "de hun visste noe om, alle hun gjettet noe om" (Vik, 24).

[24] "Hun [Lita] var den eneste av pikene i Rødgårdene som avanserte til å leke i Nybyggene, det var nok fordi hun var så pen" (Vik, 108).

than comply with the norm ("[…] if he could not understand what my brother said, then he could just give up talking to him")[25].

Apart from this significant linguistic particularity, Sveen's girl characters share the same modest living conditions as Vik's, even though, timewise, the story is likely set no more than a decade later. There is little about Marje's multi-storied house and courtyard in Brugata that differentiates it from a shabby farmyard. In spring, the dirty melting snow floods the sloping grounds. In the sweltering summer, the rooms are filled with dust, noise and exhaust fumes from the passing trucks and heavy trailers that make the house shake. At night, drunkards returning home from the downtown restaurants raise hell outside the low windows, banging on the walls and sometimes urinating on the windowpanes. Unlike some of their colleagues at school, they have no fridge and no phone. The first time Marje gets to hold a telephone piece is an epiphany ("I had not been more nervous if I had stayed there with a pistol in my hand. […] It is exactly like being connected to the world!")[26]. However, the girls in Sveen's novel are neither brought up in isolation, nor constantly supervised, like Vik's. With parents at work and mothers either absent or too tired to care, Marje and Nina are free to roam the town, most often taking turns pushing the pram of Nina's younger sister. Holidays in the countryside or long biking trips to the coast also allow them temporary escapes from life in the shabby yard.

In the looking glass

For Vik's adolescent girl characters, appearance is all-important. The girls themselves are well aware of the fact that looks can determine their chances of marrying well. Understanding that beauty is a currency, they measure each other up, classifying each other according to this yardstick only. In fact, every girl is identified by name, clothing, living quarters, parents' status or job and physical appearance, as if to suggest that their chances in life are pre-determined and unchangeable. Physical beauty is seen as a heavenly gift, rendering beautiful girls almost angelic in their power to cleanse the world ("When Edel appeared in her yellow dress, a light illuminated the building walls, shined in the windowpanes, glowed in the polished staircase doors. Wasn't it almost as if the crass inscriptions on the walls faded?")[27]. As beauty is a natural companion of power in Vik's fiction, untainted beauty is a prerequisite for marriage to a rich

[25] "[...] hvis han ikke skjønte hva broren min sa, så kunne han bare la vara å snakke til'n" (Sveen, 13).
[26] "Jeg hadde ikke vøri mer nervøs om jeg hadde stått med en pistol i handa. […] Det er akkurat som å vara kobla inn på verden!" (Sveen, 114).
[27] "Da Edel kom i gul kjole lyste det mellom murveggene, skinte i vindusruter, glødet i blankslitte oppgangsdører. Var det nesten ikke så puleordene på veggen bleknet?" (Vik, *Fortellinger*, 9).

man and thereby a chance of escape from poverty and constant supervision ("If they are pretty enough, they can also become rich, the rich men marry the beautiful girls")[28]. That is why the event of losing one's beauty is also the first sign of having fallen from grace ("Lovely Gunvor failed […]. Gunvor was no longer lovely, Gunvor was pale and unkempt […]")[29]. It is not only age that can cause such a dangerous loss, but also failure to protect one's virginity well enough before marriage, in which case a girl is considered damaged goods ("It was especially pretty girls who had to be careful so that they wouldn't be damaged")[30]. It is a lesson they all learn both from their constantly worried mothers and from witnessing it first-hand ("The girls listened to the mothers' lamentations, they looked frightened at the young girls that failed, in this way they learned to watch out")[31].

Given its value, physical beauty is also the first and fundamental cause of jealousy and bickering between friends ("I am prettier than Edel, thought Ingvil, but Edel is beautiful, she must not find out"; "Ingvil … wishes herself inside Edel's [golden and fruit-like] skin")[32] and the yardstick by which they measure each other's worth. For instance, being invited to dance in the first round of the dancing class becomes an indicator of desirability: "Usually Torunn and Lita got to dance in the second round, Lita sometimes in the first, while Aud always sat through to the last one. That way they got to know who was the worthiest."[33] The dancing class can be a humiliating, discriminating experience in other ways, too. In *Perleporten* (The Pearly Gates), the girls constantly compare themselves, and are compared to by the boys, to their richer counterparts, learning that if one lives in the eastern part of the city, one is already discriminated and labelled ("The beautiful, cold west-side girls, they always danced, they were unhurtable, haughty." […] "East-side girls! cried the boys […]. East-side whores!")[34].

The girls are thus educated to recognise and accept the ubiquitous divisions between men and women, boys and girls, middle class and working

[28] "Hvis de er pene nok kan de også bli rike, de rike mennene gifter seg med de pene pikene" (Vik, 13).
[29] "Nydelige Gunvor gikk det galt med […]. Gunvor var ikke nydelig lenger, Gunvor var blek og pjuskete […]" (Vik, 21- 22).
[30] "Særlig måtte pene piker passe seg så de ikke ble «ødelagt»" (Vik, 22).
[31] "Pikene lyttet til mødrenes klagesang, de så skremt på de unge pikene det gikk galt med, på den måten lærte de å passe seg" (Vik, 22).
[32] "Jeg er penere enn Edel, tenkte Ingvil, men Edel er vakker, hun må ikke få vite det"; "Ingvil ... ønsker seg inn bak Edels [gyllen og fruktaktig] hud" (Vik, 9, 12).
[33] "Vannligvis fikk Torunn og Lita danse i annen runde, Lita av og til i første, mens Aud alltid ble sittende til siste. På den måten fikk de vite hvem av dem som var mest verd" (Vik, 114).
[34] "De vakre kalde vestkantpikene, de danset alltid, var usårlige, overlegne. […] Østkantjenter! Ropte guttene [...]. Østkanthorer!" (Vik, 37).

class, beautiful and less beautiful as natural. Neither in Vik's stories, nor in Sveen's novel do they oppose the idea of participating in church-organised activities teaching them meekness and gender role conformity ("[…] something called 'The little doves' […] they sing, have guessing contests, embroider doilies and a lady speaks about God […]; "[…] nuns who teach handcraft in a room behind the Catholic church, right next to the prison")[35]. School itself, in Vik's *Fisken i garnet* (The Fish in the Net), is imagined as a prison with all its classic features ("[…] a hostile fortress with gloomy towers and sharp iron fencing […], long corridors and many small windows overlooking the asphalted yard")[36], where an invisible line divides the boys' side from the girls' side. The girls who dare trespass are quickly spotted and punished by general opprobrium, meaning not only by the boys but also by the other girls and by the teachers, in a self-perpetuating system that ensures any "traitors" are psychologically coerced back into the fold ("The defectors were soon accused or punished, by their own or by the enemy, often also by the teachers")[37]. The author's barely disguised ironic social comment also comes through in *Perleporten* (The Pearly Gates), where a school banner urges adolescent girls to be true to themselves, which they are – by knowing everything there is to know about beauty products and the latest fashion.

Physical appearance and intelligence provide positions of authority that further divide the classroom girls into a four-tier hierarchy, all the more cynical as it is devised by the girls themselves: the Pretty, the Smart, the Stupid and the Ugly. The most popular are the pretty ones, who are also rich and tend to befriend members of the same exclusive group ("Elisabeth had long fairy-tale hair and a red coat with rabbit fur, Siv had both curls and dimples. […] They were Unapproachable")[38]. Their popularity is presented as self-explanatory: a pretty face trumps intelligence or excuses lack of it. By contrast therefore, the ugly find themselves hopelessly excluded, however smart they may be ("For the ugly all hope was lost, even though they were among the smartest")[39]. Moreover, good looks again prove so important that without some degree of beauty, even the girls in the smart category cannot maintain their status ("The smart had a

[35] "[…] noe som heter De små duer [...]. De synger, har gjettekonkuranser, broderer brikker og en dame snakker om Gud[...]" (Vik, 18); "[pikemøte] det er nonner som driver og lærer jenter håndarbeid i et rom bak den katolske kjerka, like ved fengslet." (Sveen, *Den reddende engelen*, 96).

[36] "[…] en fientlig festning med dystre tårn og spisst jernstakitt [...], lange korridorer og mange små vinduer mot skolegårdens asfalt" (Vik, *Fortellinger*, 25).

[37] "Overløpere ble straks tiltalt eller straffet, av sine egne eller av fienden, ofte også av lærerne" (Vik, 25).

[38] "Elisabeth hadde lang eventyrhår og rød kåpe med hvitt kaninskinn på, Siv hadde både krøller og smilehull. […] De var Uoppnåelige" (Vik, 26).

[39] "For de Stygge var alt håp ute, selv om de var blant de flinkeste" (Vik, 25).

certain position, but unless their intelligence was also supported by a certain measure of prettiness, it did not hold")[40]. With the exception of the pretty, members of the other groups can move into another, albeit only an inferior one, either because they do not live in the right neighbourhood or because they simply stand out by refusing to obey, which suddenly makes them "ugly". Consequently, despite their obvious talents, they end up completely isolated ("[Runa] got so ugly when she stood there, gradually she moved over into the Ugly category. There was a ring around Runa, a lonely circle.")[41].

The opposite is the case in Sveen's novel, where it is the pretty, rich girl that is left out. A newcomer from the capital city, she is a spectacular figure ("[Class] Five B almost fell on their butts when Cecilie Frank Glad came into the classroom […]")[42] whose miniature-lady looks, manners and behaviour set her apart in the provincial children's school community ("She stood before the class in a sort of lady's suit […] and a gold chain around her neck! In the one hand she holds what is almost a little suitcase […] and with the other she greets the teacher and curtsies both before her and before the class. Here I am!")[43]. Like the typical members of Vik's league of the Pretty, she seems unapproachable and distant ("[…] the girl looked as if she did not have any human blood in her veins at all")[44]. Taken to and from school in a car with a chauffeur, she looks down on girls like Marje and Nina with a mixture of interest and disdain ("[…] the girl […] stared steadily at the strange insect on two legs and looked as if she wanted to take me with a pair of tweezers and set me in a pin in her insect collection"; "[…] It must have looked as though she was out walking her dogs")[45]. Her superiority seems to stem from an awareness of status she has been inculcated with ("Anyway, I have money to burn"; "Mom says that people can be nice to deal with even though they are labour party")[46]. In strong contrast with the carefree, childish manner of the local girls, Cecilie already looks and

[40] "De Flinke hadde en viss posisjon, men ble ikke flinkheten samtidig styrket av en viss porsjon penhet, holdt det ikke" (Vik, 25).

[41] "[Runa] ble så stygg når hun stod der, gradvis gikk hun over i kategorien De Stygge. Det ble en ring rundt Runa, en ensom sirkel" (Vik, 27).

[42] "Fem B holdt på å detta på rævva da Cecilie Frank Glad kom inn i klasserommet [...]" (Sveen, *Den reddende engelen*, 94).

[43] "Ja, hun stod foran klassa i ei slags damedrakt […] og gullkjede rundt halsen! I den ene handa bar hu nærmest på en slags liten koffert […] og med den andre hilste hu på frøken og neide både for henner og klassa. Værsågod dån!" (Sveen, 94).

[44] "[…] jenta så jo ut som hu ikke hadde no mannsblod i årene sine i det hele tatt" (*Ibidem*).

[45] "[…] jenta [...] stirra stadig på det snodige insektet på to ben og så ut til å villa ta meg med en pinsett og setta meg på ei nål i insektsamlinga si"; "[...] Det må ha sett ut som hu var ute og lufta bikkjene sine" (Sveen, 82; 119).

[46] "Forresten har jeg penger til gorsj"; "Mamma sier at folk kan værer greie å ha med å gjøre selv om de er arbeiderpartifolk" (Sveen, 119; 118).

behaves like a much older woman ("But it was impossible to advance on the stony beach in pumps with heels"; "Then she took us by the arm as if we were a sort of old ladies from the retirement home on a visit among the youngsters")[47]. In Sveen's fictional world, as well as in Vik's, women's beauty and propriety have to match their husbands' financial power, which explains why Cecilie is presented as the younger mirror image of her mother, the pretty, bored wife of a company director. Also like her mother, she is unhappy, longing for the freedom that girls her age seem to enjoy. Being allowed to dress in jeans, to throw away her antique dolls and to speak like Marje and Nina are some of her wildest rebellion dreams. Despite her material advantages, she is portrayed as a lonely child, spoilt, cruel towards those she sees as inferiors and, despite her own and the girls' efforts, unable to relate to them.

Their experience with Cecilie, whom they don't understand and whose language (both literal and social) they do not speak, bring Marje and Nina even closer as friends. Besides sharing living quarters, they participate completely and intensely in each other's life experiences, no matter how morally questionable ("The fact that she stole apples was not so bad, but that she did it alone. It sounded nasty")[48] or intimate, such as their first period. While Marje dreams of her absent mother but gets along well with her loving twin brother and her father, Nina's only dream is to escape her own loud, bragging and swindling, careless family. Growing up parentless without being an orphan like Marje ("[Marje] You have both a mother and a father. [Nina] Yeah. But I don't really notice it"; "It's as if they weren't my mother and father")[49], the tenderness she displays towards her grandmother appears to be a sign of the love she herself is hungry for, a longing for affection she has learnt to hide for fear of appearing weak ("Nina stood there so pale you could have thought she had been announced that her mother was dead. The muscles under one of her eyes twitched intensely"; "I saw that Nina started to cry. I saw it on her belly muscles")[50]. Under the circumstances, it is she, more than Marje, who needs to grow up faster and who displays the scepticism and resistance to adult pressure Marje is spared having to learn ("[…] now and then even youngsters need a little privacy too, as Nina said when the teachers were too persistent and wanted to interrogate her about how

[47] "Men det var jo grusomt umulig å åkle seg fram på den stenete stranda med skor med snellehæl"; "Så tok'a oss under arma som vi skulle ha vøri noen slags gamlehjemsdamer som var på omvisning blant unger" (Sveen 118; 109).

[48] "At hu stal epler var ikke så fært, men at hu hadde gjort det alene. Det hørtes kjedt ut" (Sveen, 124).

[49] "[Marje] Du har både far og mor, du. [Nina] Joa. Merker ikke så mye tel det, men."; "Skulle ikke tru dom var mora og faren min" (Sveen, 116; 95).

[50] "Nina stod der så blek at en skulle tru at hu hadde fått beskjed om at mora hennes var død. Det rykka intenst i muskla under det ene øyet hennes."; "Jeg så at Nina begynte å grine. Jeg så det på magamuskla hennes" (Sveen, 35; 123).

things were at home")[51]. Her intelligence comes through in her flawless reasoning skill ("I didn't say that, and what I said was exactly the word that was appropriate. It's the right word which is appropriate, not the appropriate word which is the right one"[52]) and biting irony ("[Cecilie] What do you want to be when you grow up? A helping lady on the garbage truck, Nina grinned")[53].

Just as Vik's girls are anxious to escape their neighbourhood and its conventional constraints, Nina desperately longs to leave behind both her callous family and small-town provincialism ("I wish […] I would get to a large city")[54]. In turn, Marje's absolute loyalty to her friend proves their strong bond. Not only does she miss Nina whenever the latter is away, and is ready to accompany her in her adventurous exploits, but she is also her confidante and protector – for example by offering her a safe haven in her family's apartment, or by sparing Nina the humiliation of finding out her father is imprisoned. Despite her teenage years, Marje's way of thinking seems quite mature, not least in the profound way she understands her friendship with Nina ("I felt grateful that Nina had come into the world at the same time I did, and that she did it so close by")[55].

Female freedom and solidarity in the narratives of Vik and Sveen

In the fictional worlds drawn up by Vik and Sveen, girl characters are expected to comply with family and societal expectations, which most of them do. Lured by an idealized form of love and marriage, they shed their childhood souls way too early, only to discover that the path to freedom and adulthood they had blindly followed leads into a trap. Not that they are not forewarned – they do wonder about the lack of love they see in the adult couples surrounding them, and about the mysterious warnings of their fathers ("Let the girl dance, […] soon enough she'll dance another kind of dance")[56], but they are conditioned not to heed these warning signs. Others, however, prove wise enough to see beyond this pattern. To Marje and Nina, for instance, compliance means obedience, and obedience means having been trained to keep silent ("Compliance, said Nina. It means that there are no sounds coming from you. That you are completely silent. You could have thought it was the other way round, that you made

[51] "[…] av og til kan unger trenge litt privatliv og, som Nina sa når lærera var innpåslitne og skulle spørra henner ut om åssen det sto til hjemme" (Sveen, 107).

[52] "Ikke sa jeg det, og det jeg sa, var akkurat det ordet som passa. Det er det riktige ordet som passer, det er ikke det passelige ordet som er det riktige" (Sveen, 96).

[53] "[Cecilie] Hva skal dere bli når dere blir store? Hjelpedame på søplebil, flirte Nina" (Sveen, 119).

[54] "Skulle ønske det var meg, sa Nina. Så skulle jeg dra tel en stor by" (Sveen, 116).

[55] "Jeg følte meg takknemlig for at Nina hadde kømmi til verden i den samme tida som jeg, og at hu hadde gjort det så like ved" (Sveen, 117).

[56] "La jenta få danse […], det blir tidsnok en annen dans" (Vik, *Fortellinger*, 114).

sounds. […] Just like a dog who obeys its master. It should have been called obedience, in my opinion, […]")[57]. The girls' comments are in fact based on their speculation about the Norwegian words for "compliance" (*lydighet*) and "obedience" (*adlydighet*), both compounded from the nuclear word *lyd* (sound). Despite that, they discover that neither action implies voicing one's thoughts. That is why it is especially significant that Marje's freedom, as announced by the angel-mother mentioned in the title of Sveen's novel, is meant to mark her saving from a life of silence and passivity ("You can do anything, you know. […] You can also say anything, too. Absolutely anything")[58].

The future seems bright for Sveen's girl characters, as the author appears to underline when, at the end of the novel, even Cecilie gets her freedom wish realised. Wearing jeans and cycling wildly through the city she seems to be able to finally express her authentic, teenage-girl self ("[…] she cycled with hands off the handlebars and arms in the air and eyes fixed on the road ahead")[59]. On the other hand, in the dispirited world of Vik's stories, hope of freedom, though ardent to begin with, thins out as the girls grow older. Here, freedom comes at a price, as Ingvil and Torunn find out. By preserving her moral integrity and teaming up with like-minded people, Ingvil stays true to herself and her dreams. She is the chosen one ("My God, something is written on your forehead, little girl")[60] or, in the telling metaphor devised by Vik, the fish that gets away. The price to pay is her isolation and humiliation ("They [the boys] said that Ingvil was cold. The fish, screamed the boys after her. Fishblood, they muttered")[61]. Torunn's freedom, on the other hand, comes much later, in adulthood, with the realisation that the existence she has agreed to, apparently safe in its imposed roles and enforced rules, has been a kind of death. In her case, freedom means independence and self-awareness, and her joining the women's rights movement is an attempt to learn both, as she realises that her personal experience is shared by all women and therefore a political issue (Irigaray 1985, 164).

What all the girl characters in Vik's stories and in Sveen's novel share is some fundamental honesty: about their family environments, about their friendships, about their aspirations, about their sexuality. Vik's sparse poetic style featuring strong metaphors evokes a kind of desperate longing for the seemingly unattainable freedom in the title of her collection, while Sveen's use

[57] "Lydighet, sa Nina. Det betyr at det ikke kommer lyder fra deg. At du er helt stille. En skulle tru det var omvendt, at du lagde lyder. […] Akkurat som ei bikkje som adlyder herren sin. Det skulle hett adlydighet, synes jeg, sa jeg" (Sveen, *Den reddende*, 49).

[58] "Du kæn ælt, du vettu. […] Du kæn si ælt, og. Ælt kæn du si" (Sveen, 196).

[59] "Og ikke bare det, heller, hu sykla uten henda på styret og med arma løfta i været og blikket stivt festa på vegen foran seg" (Sveen, 193).

[60] "Mein Gott, noe står i din panne, lille pike" (Vik, *Fortellinger*, 41).

[61] "De sa at Ingvil var kald. Fisken, slengte guttene etter henne. Fishblood, mumlet de" (Vik, 40).

of dialect is in itself a measure of freedom that allows her girl characters to bond and stick together. The solidity of female friendship, and female solidarity in general, are called into question in the two authors' works. In Vik's stories, this is a childhood promise never to be fulfilled. Womanhood turns out to be a lonely, competitive experience. Girls are expected to be the passive objects in a bargaining process. In their only assigned roles as daughters and future wives, they "have value only in that they serve as the possibility of, and potential benefit in, relations among men" (Irigaray 1985, 171). By contrast, the two friends in Sveen's novel are not portrayed as helpless victims, but as astute observers with the energy to change their circumstances. Unlike Vik, Sveen does not follow their lives up into adulthood, but the optimistic dénouement of her narrative implies that, for her heroines, freedom is all the more valuable when it is shared ("But we saw her [Cecilie], and it was a beautiful and lonely sight"[62]). Either as a deeply felt absence or as an affirmed possibility, the issue of "joining together among themselves" as showcased in the works of Vik and Sveen concords and confirms Irigaray's emphasis on it as the only way for women to "escape from the spaces, roles, and gestures that they have been assigned and taught by the society of men" by "loving each other, even though men have organized a de facto rivalry among women", by "discovering a form of 'social existence' other than the one that has always been imposed upon them" (Irigaray 1985, 164). However, the girls in the works of Vik and Sveen do not yet realise the value of this cross-class and cross-age kind of bonding. The complicity they share is exclusive, rather than inclusive, and that is probably one of the causes of the fragility of their solidarity. It is a type of solidarity unlikely to withstand the conventions and choices imposed by mature age, such as marriage (Yalom 2015, 65) or a career, despite their wholehearted belief in it. That is why the girls' friendship chant at the end of Vik's *Perleporten* (The Pearly Gates) works as a disillusioned echo of connections felt to be irredeemably lost.

Conclusion

As coming-of-age narratives written by women authors about women characters, Vik and Sveen's works are part of a valuable, growing worldwide tradition. For the past century and a half, from *Little Women* (Louisa May Alcott, 1868-1869) to *How to Build a Girl* (Caitlin Moran, 2014), these works document personal experiences that are incontrovertibly feminine. Judging by the historical circumstances that allowed this kind of literature to begin and flourish, it is obvious that successive waves of feminist campaigning have played a significant role in promoting feminine voices like these onto the public,

[62] "Men vi så henner, og det var et pent og ensomt syn" (Sveen, *Den reddende engelen*, 192).

and publishing, stage. It is hardly by accident that the feminist ideas in Vik's stories at the beginning of the 1970s bear a notable resemblance to those displayed by Alice Munro in *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971). Besides, there is no denying the impact of the authors' lived experience on their character's stories. To some degree, Vik and Sveen seem to recount their own circumstances growing up, at different times and in different parts of Norway, as if affirming the urgency of disclosing such experiences, often left concealed and sometimes even considered tabu by societal norms. As we step further into the twenty-first century and the definitions of human, and gender, friendship and solidarity change with the social media and AI, this kind of girlhood genealogy[63] may become even more relevant and necessary. With its deep-rooted tradition of female presence in their public and cultural life, and given the sensitivity of their public to political, social and cultural debates, the Scandinavian countries are expected to be among the first in Europe to record and reflect these changes in their literary output.

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[63] See note 5.

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