

“... to be pulled between two such different stories”

Vigdis Hjorth’s Will and Testament (Arv og miljø 2016) as a curography

Nora Simonhjell¹

Linda Nesby²

¹Department of Nordic and Media Studies, University of Agder

nora.simonhjell@uia.no

²Department of Language and Culture, The Arctic University of Norway

linda.nesby@uit.no

Simonhjell, Nora & Nesby, Linda. 2025. “... to be pulled between two such different stories”. *Vigdis Hjorth’s Will and Testament (Arv og miljø 2016) as a curography*. *Tidsskrift for Forskning i Sygdom og Samfund*, nr. 42, 36-56. DOI: 10.7146/tfss.v24i42.143726

Indsendt 02/24, accepteret 02/25, udgivet 06/25

Vigdis Hjorth’s novel Will and Testament (Arv og miljø, 2016) is one of the most discussed Norwegian contemporary novels. The first-person narrator and main character, Bergljot, is struggling to get acknowledgement and recognition of her life story from her family. A central element in the plot is her incest accusation towards her recently deceased father. The exploration of conflicting narratives and normative expectations takes place thematically as well as through the text’s genre and form. The conflict influences the family members’ way of communication and, not least, their way of performing care and acting as next of kin. This article focuses on the novel as a curography. Curography comes from cura which means care, and graphein, meaning to write. The article argues that there is a conflict between a dominant family narrative and the main character’s counter-narrative. Reading the novel as a curography allows for an exploration into what this narrative conflict reveals about the complexities of care and kinship.

© 2025 Simonhjell & Nesby. Denne artikel udgives under licens [CC BY-NC 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

Introduction

Will and Testament (2019) was the international breakthrough for the Norwegian author Vigdis Hjorth.¹ In this article, we will focus on *Will and Testament* as a next of kin novel, or *curography*, which is a newly coined generic term. Curography comes from *cura* which means care, and *graphein*, meaning to write. Curoographies, therefore, are stories about care from a next of kin perspective (Nesby, 2023). *Will and Testament* is a story in which the first-person narrator and protagonist oppose the prevailing conventions related to the role of next of kin. The novel provides a counter-narrative to a prevailing personal, but also cultural, understanding of what a next of kin narrative should be. In a Norwegian cultural context, a next of kin is supposed to step up, take action, and provide care in situations where a relative is in need of help. The normative notions of what a relative is, what is required of a next of kin, and what a next of kin is, are thematized in the novel. Through the narrator, Bergljot, such normative understandings of the next of kin role are explored and challenged. What makes the novel particularly interesting from a next of kin perspective is how Bergljot breaks out of a normative pattern. We will discuss this thematically by looking at the various next of kin and care relationships depicted in the novel. We will also reflect upon it from a genre perspective, and narratively by studying the narrative technique, especially the importance of the narrator. Due to the discrepancy linked to the understanding of a childhood, the family narrative creates strong discord in the group of siblings. Bergljot's personal story challenges the common family story and its normative structures related to care and caregiving.

Will and Testament has sold 170,000 copies in Norway and received the Norwegian Critics Prize for Literature and the Norwegian Booksellers' Prize, as well as being nominated for the National Book Award and Nordic Council Literature Prize.² The novel has also been dramatized for the theater stage and translated into twenty-two languages.³ Hjorth (b. 1959) made her literary debut in 1983. She was already a highly acclaimed and visible contemporary Norwegian writer when this novel was published. In 2012, she received the Gyldendal prize (Gyldendal-prisen) for her *oeuvre*. In the jury speech following the presentation of the prize, Vigdis Hjorth's talent and courage in contributing to a political as well as existential agenda were emphasized:

1. The novel was originally published in Norwegian in 2016 and translated to English in 2019.
2. See the presentation of Vigdis Hjorth on <https://www.versobooks.com/>
3. The theater version was directed by Kjersti Horn, and the play had its premiere at Den Nationale Scene in Bergen, November 2018. The production, which was well received by the critics, was nominated for two categories of the Hedda Prize: "Performance of the Year", and "Best Direction".

*Perhaps like no other contemporary Norwegian writer, Vigdis Hjorth has explored, developed and challenged the role of the author. By means of stories and chronicles the prizewinner has contributed to the public dialogue about the warfare of the NATO-countries, about human rights and international politics; about existentialism, psychology, feminism, gender, and sexuality.*⁴

Will and Testament added yet more relevant topics to the list, most visibly that of suppression and abuse. The novel could be said to anticipate the global MeToo movement from 2017 where so far unknown experiences of sexual abuse and harassment were publicized. In the novel's plot, the protagonist's accusation of incest towards her father is central. Even though the story is published as a novel and the characters have fictional names, critics as well as family members publicly claimed that the novel built on Hjorth's biographical experiences. A public debate ensued, in which members of her family took part. This debate contributed to a family conflict in real life and to the publication of a counter-narrative *Free Will* (*Fri vilje*, Hjorth, 2017 *our translation*).⁵ by Vigdis Hjorth's sister, Helga Hjorth. *Will and Testament* is thereby one of the most discussed novels in Norway since the turn of the millennium.

The starting point for the novel's plot is an inheritance dispute between four siblings. While the two younger sisters, Astrid and Åsa, have a close relationship with their parents, it is different for the two eldest children, Bergljot and Bård. Bård has felt neglected throughout his upbringing, while Bergljot carries a repressed history of abuse, and her experiences are mostly silenced in the family's main narrative. In therapy, Bergljot has accessed memories revealing that she was sexually abused by her father from the time she was five until she was seven. She has made this known to her mother and siblings, but only Bård shows sympathy and understanding. The novel takes place right after the father's death, and the subsequent inheritance settlement sharpens the fault lines in the family since the two youngest daughters are being favorized. This leads to Bergljot having to re-establish contact with her family after many years of estrangement. The cabins in dispute are located at Hvaler, an attractive leisure area in Norway. This makes them presumably worth a lot – although an amount is never mentioned. The fact that the inheritance conflict takes place shortly after the father's death, but while the mother is still alive, makes the siblings perform their next of kin role in radically different manners. Åsa and Astrid provide care for their mother, while Bård withdraws, and Bergljot actively confronts her family with the reasons for her

4. See: <https://www.tv2.no/nyheter/innenriks/gyldendalprisen-2010-til-vigdis-hjorth/12998758/>

5. Our translation.

conflicted feelings towards both parents. These different interpretations of the next of kin role contribute to the affective intensity in the novel.

Critics' approaches are mixed. Most of them read *Will and Testament* as based on real events. Several critics believe that the novel is about a family in a state of internal disintegration (Mollerin, 2017, p. 172), a story of incest (Krøger, 2016; Økland, 2016), and in NRK, Anne Cathrine Straume wrote that "It is about the gaze that sees. About whom owns and defines a story. About the will to take the other truth seriously" (Straume, 2016 *o.t.*). Eirik Vassenden (2019), for his part, is concerned with the demarcation between the literary criticism of the novel and the general ethical discussions that developed as extensions. From his position, the Hjorth debate is an example of a discussion where you need the kind of resistance that criticism can offer. The critics' reflections have democratic value, he believes, since "they allow readers to meet opinions other than their own" (Vassenden, 2019, p. 115 *o.t.*). The dispute over the contents of the story and the interpretations of them is also one of the things that, from our perspective, is one of the most central elements of the novel. Our perspective offers another reading where the characters' dispute about the grand family narrative is central. Due to this, the questions of how to practice care are also prevalent.

An aspect which is, however, almost absent from the many reviews and scientific contributions about the novel⁶ is *Will and Testament* as a next of kin novel. The novel explores how a relative can be both next of kin and caregiver; the first is bound to familial relationships while the other is a term that implies practical care. The novel demonstrates how Bergljot as a next of kin refuses to take on practical care work within the family. Based on Bergljot's experiences of being silenced by the rest of her family, it becomes impossible for her to act according to the dominant, normative understanding of being a caring and supporting daughter to her elderly mother. This exploration of conflicting narratives and normative expectations takes place thematically as well as through the text's genre and form. It influences the family members' way of communication and actions towards each other – and not least, their way of performing care and acting as next of kin.

In 2020, the Norwegian conservative party under Prime Minister Erna Solberg launched a next of kin strategy entitled "We – the next of kin" which stated: "When

6. Several MA theses are interested in the novel as "reality literature" (Johannessen, 2019; Kyrkjebø, 2023; Larsen, 2019; Ramstad, 2018; Rolland, 2022; Skadberg, 2020). Sortland (2024) discusses the novel and its reception as a recurring performance made by Hjorth and involving her as an author, the text and the readers. Slotnes (2018) discusses the novel's early readings and is concerned with how the literary critics paraphrase the novel's plot. Jønsson (2023) is concerned with how Hjorth crystallizes problematic mother-daughter relationships in her novels and shows how this is linked to the novel's narrative technique.

someone you are close to becomes ill or needs help, it usually feels both good and natural to help and assist with what you can. Family care and care from close others is a significant resource from a societal perspective and a value we want to support" (2020, p. 4 o.t.). In *Will and Testament*, this cultural narrative is represented by the two youngest sisters. They enter the role of formal and informal caregivers as both parents and society expect and demand of them. Bergljot, on the other hand, opposes this next of kin role. With this, she challenges traditional care models.

Theoretically, we rely on a relational understanding of care, as understood from feminist care ethics (Førland et al., 2018; Gilligan, 1982; Wærness, 1996, 2003).⁷ The literary scholar Maurice Hamington states that care is "most adequately reflected in the stories of people's lives, where more is brought to light than the rules or outcomes of a given situation" (Hamington, 2004, p. 35). From our perspective, it is precisely how Hjorth's novel shows something more and something different than the expected, that makes it a particularly interesting next of kin novel. In this way, we are also in line with Amelia DeFalco who claims that "narrative fiction [is] an ideal form for the study of care" (DeFalco, 2011, p. 239).

Care and the next of kin role

Caring is a prominent theme in relation to next of kin and family relatives in *Will and Testament*. The theme of care in the novel is central as it appears in a series of relationships: in the siblings' relationship with their mother, in the father's relationship with his mother, and in the distribution of inheritance. It is most prominent in relation to the mother of the four siblings. As an elderly woman, the mother has become a widow, and she needs help and practical care from her children and other relatives. Yet the role of next of kin is something the four siblings practice quite differently. Åsa and Astrid practice a traditional relative's role by comforting, helping, and supporting their mother. Bård and Bergljot, on the other hand, challenge the next of kin role by distancing themselves from the mother. Bård does so because of a skewed distribution of inheritance and Bergljot because of her father's abuse which she believes her mother knew about but chose to ignore. Bård's break with the family does not represent the same threat to his mother as Bergljot's does: "Yet it was more important that Mum saw me because

7. "Caring includes values such as responsibility, belonging, loyalty, generosity, sharing joys and sorrows, values that do not belong to the area of individual freedom, but which, on the contrary, can often only be realized if one renounces something of this individual freedom" (Wærness, 2003, p. 15).

the issue with me went far deeper than the inheritance dispute with Bård" (Hjorth 2019, p. 125).⁸ This points towards an 'economy of care', where what the children have gained or lost relates to the care they owe or do not owe to their parents. Similar perspectives are discussed by Amelia DeFalco in her study *Imagining Care*, where she asks: "How to care for the one who has failed to care for you?" (2016, p. 48).

The emotional pressure in the situation is emphasized by the fact that the narrator, Bergljot, gives us an insight into how her attention is as much directed at herself as it is directed at the people she meets. She has a detailed awareness of the social situation she is going to enter, and that affects the way she presents herself to the world and the way she is presenting herself. The narrator underlines that she has dressed with "care", and "I was wearing my face for facing the world. They weren't wearing theirs" (p. 128). The metaphor of putting on the face as a mask reinforces the performative element of the novel (Sortland, 2024). Bergljot apparently gives the impression of having the upper hand in the situation as she finds weaknesses in her sister and mother's expressions and appearances. This can be read as an expression about their deep mourning, while the death of her father, from Bergljot's perspective, represents more of a liberation and relief.

In addition to the siblings' different ways of practicing next of kin roles towards the mother, it is the deceased father who is most clearly linked to a normative understanding of the way the next of kin role is supposed to be performed. Åsa, one of Bergljot's two sisters, highlights her father's care when his mother was elderly and in need of care:

Then she talked about how kind Dad had been to Granny, towards his mother, when she got ill in her old age. It was true, I had completely forgotten that, how Dad had visited his old mother when she fell ill, how Dad would drive to the care home where she lived several times a week to help care for her. Åsa went on to say that Dad had arranged for a family member to visit his mother every day. (p. 160)

From the discourse of the dominant family narrative, his caring skills had been exemplary. For Bergljot, her father's caring actions towards his mother not only reads as altruism, but more as an exercise in penance: "not for those he had failed, but for a harmless, sick old lady he no longer feared?" (Ibid.) By not mourning her father, and by being skeptical towards and questioning her mother's weakness, Bergljot represents a different view of the caring relation within the family than her sisters does. In the wake of their father's death, Bergljot experiences prejudice

8. All quotes from *Will and Testament* are from the 2019-edition and will from now on only be referred to by page numbers.

and injustice from her family. The valuable cabins are at the core of an inheritance dispute. However, the most dramatic thing for Bergljot is that she does not gain recognition for her dramatic memories and childhood experiences. "Bergljot is obsessed with getting the recognition she demands" (Hamm, 2017, p. 107 *o.t.*). In the aftermath of their father's death, the younger sisters do everything they can to ensure that their mother is well and thus provide practical care for her. Bergljot, for her part, leaves everything related to the father's deathbed and the preparation of and execution of the funeral to her two sisters.

In the same way as the father provided care for their mother, the two youngest sisters demonstrate an impeccable caring role as next of kin when the father becomes ill and eventually dies. He thus receives care similar to what he himself gave to his mother – it is an inherited form of care practice which is demonstrated – a recurring, repetitious, redoubled act of care that is passed down from generation to generation. The sisters' narrative about his deathbed is built up as a beautiful and heroic story, where the adjective "fantastic" dominates: "Åsa, Astrid, Mother, Aunt Sidsel and the health service – all are said to have been fantastic" (p. 141-143). The use of "fantastic" works as hyperbole and helps build the narrative of a beautiful deathbed. Its use, which is attributed to several of their father's relatives (the sisters), stands in sharp contrast to the perspective of Bergljot, who experiences her father's death as a "relief" (p. 188). Bergljot's relationship with her father is complicated. Marthe Ramstad writes about how the fact that the abuse "[...] happened when she was a child, and by a father who is supposed to be a protector and caregiver, means that the abuse was 'disguised' as care, and as an expression of love" (Ramstad 2018: 91 *o.t.*). Bergljot's feelings of care towards her father are ambivalent: "A deep compassion rose in me at the thought of Dad and Dad's life, poor, poor Dad, who had done some stupid things as a young man which couldn't be undone, which he couldn't fix, and he didn't know how to bear them, how to live with them" (p. 109). Bergljot's care, but also her anger and powerlessness in the face of her father's abuse, puts her in emotional cross-pressure, and that question of care often becomes central to conflicts of inheritance.

Family narratives and the question of inheritance

Will and Testament is a novel that shows how the roles of caregiving and next of kin are also pivotal regarding inheritance. The disagreement about who will take over the two cabins and at what price is important because it is based on the siblings' former and present relationship with their parents. The cabins, as an advance on

an inheritance, are not unimportant in a family novel. Inheritance is a frequent source of conflict both in real and fictional worlds – and perhaps another prosaic reason why the novel gained such a large audience. The topic of inheritance is packed with potential pitfalls. Should the inheritance be distributed purely mathematically or is there also an emotional calculation that must be considered? Is it reasonable that the child (or children) who has stood up for the parents the most, and how about those who have suffered the most, should be compensated with more of an inheritance settlement?

The topic of inheritance thus not only raises economic but also psychological and anthropological questions. Bergljot does not seem to have any material interest in the two (presumably) valuable estates. However, exclusion from them makes real the more vague and emotional feeling of exclusion from the family narrative. Bergljot's memories, feelings, and narratives, in particular that of the abuse, are excluded from the family's main narrative. In a subtle manner, Bergljot is locked out of the cabins just as her perspective on the family story is not included: "that is the emotional and emotional and moral legacy that they have left behind along with the significant personal and real property associated with family history" (Selmer, 2021, p. 156). The motivations for Bergljot and her brother's claims to the cabins are different: whereas Bård is mainly occupied with the cabin's material values, Bergljot's main concern is "the emotional estate that is materialized in the cabins" (Selmer, 2021, p. 158).

A cabin is a material, social, and emotional place that creates unity and discord across generations. The cabins play an important role in the articulation, maintenance, and confirmation of relationships, and can thus metaphorically be considered a family member and a suitable arena for investigating "how kinship and family relations (relatedness) is organized and experienced in Norway today" (Lien & Abram, 2018, p. 33). From their anthropological perspective, favoring some of the children is one of the "worst things you can do in relation to a group of siblings" (Lien & Abram, 2018, p. 37). We thus see how the concepts of material and immaterial values cannot be separated from each other. The argument about the cabins thus functions as a cover and a form of rationalization for the more emotional and deeper conflicts within the family.

Will and Testament is a novel about heredity and social environment – which is also, when directly translated, the Norwegian title of the novel. The title makes the novel connect to naturalism and thinkers and writers like Taine, Balzac, and Zola. They were influenced by Darwin's evolutionary writings proclaiming that heredity and social environment determine one's character and the way people act. In Hjorth's novel, the original title subtly creates expectations of a concrete

inheritance settlement and the social environment of a middle-class Norwegian family. Whereas Zola, Flaubert, or other naturalistic writers rarely questioned the truth claim of the individual's heritage and environment, this is the critical point here. The story of Bergljot and her siblings' social environment, their background, and upbringing turn out to be quite different experiences. The novel is thus seemingly about the ownership of the cabins, but more subtly it is about the ownership of the family narrative, and the structures, both social and familial, that led to the conflict.

Curography as an analytical approach to family narratives

In a close reading of Hanne Ørstavik's novel *ti amo*, Linda Nesby (2023) launched curography as a generic term. Here, Nesby discusses how caregiver narratives are situated in the tension between the story of the one requiring care and the story of the caregiver. A curography is an offspring to the story of the one needing care due to illness, age, drug addiction, or other issues. The relation between these stories may be complex and not always idyllic. The caregiver is often portrayed with heroic qualities. But what if the caregiver is negative, even reluctant, to the role they are given? Either way, the caregivers always find themselves carrying a story based on the story of the patient, the elderly, or the addicted person in need of care. It is a relation, no matter if it is characterized by presence or absence. Containing this multiplicity of different stories makes curography a distinctly elastic term. Curographies hold the perspective and voice of the next of kin whereas in the related genre of pathography, the patient is the center of attention. Curographies are stories rooted in someone else's history of suffering. You cannot be a caregiver without someone to care for. Curographies explore the different ways stories of the caregiver and the ones needing care may relate to one another. This understanding of curography as a genre in which the relatives' narrative is influenced by other narratives has drawn inspiration from Harold Bloom's *A Map of Misreading* (1976). Six different ways of dealing with influence are presented, representing a gradient influence of the former poet on the *ephebe*. The most important, overarching term is *clinamen* (Armstrong 2019, p. 35). Bloom defines *clinamen* as "poetic misreading or misprision proper" (Bloom 1973, p. 30). *Clinamen* captures how the poet follows his precursor up to a certain point, then radically re-orientates. In *Anxiety of Influence* (1973), the trope is substitution, in *A Map of Misreading* where Bloom elaborates on his theory of influence, substitution is

replaced by irony. Both tropes, however, point to an absence or opposition between the former and the later poets' works. *Clinamen* signals how the former poet's work is necessary for the existence of the later poet's writing, which is written in opposition to the former. Bloom's reflections on influence were originally used as an exploration on how to become a poet. The concept of influence, and of *clinamen* more precisely, point to the dialectic of presence and absence, which is also central to curography. Just as the strong poet is said to swerve away from their precursor even as they build on their work, so the next of kin must leave the patient's story behind in order to narrate a new, autonomous story, even as that story remains the premise for their role as next of kin.

Bergljot's sisters hold on to the established family story, influencing their view on their elderly parents. For Bergljot, however, this story of old age, vulnerability, and need for care is absent. The views on care and caretaking uttered by Bergljot's sisters, and represented by her father and mother, are linked to a story about familial care that does not resonate with Bergljot's story of abuse. According to the catalogue of concepts marking influence, the figure of *clinamen* captures how the protagonist's story takes another direction than the established family narrative that is being upheld by her sisters. Instead of being a story of care and caretaking, Bergljot makes it into a story of abuse: the abuse that her father put her through as a child which was the opposite of care, and which was known to her mother according to Bergljot.

The family is split by the appearance of many incompatible stories and mythologies connected with the past. The first-person narrator reflects on how it is and has been and imagines how her relatives will meet up to reinforce established family narratives and their associated roles:

I sat in the forest with no peace. I imagined them gathering in Bråteveien to continue the myth of Bård as a troublemaker and Bård's wife as a warmonger, she had been allocated the role of the woman who had seduced Bård away from his family. I knew exactly how it would play out; once I had contributed to it myself, I had been so completely enmeshed in the family's version of its own story. It wasn't until I became estranged myself, until I had distanced myself, that I started to look at things differently, but still slowly, taking baby steps, such is the power parental stories have over a child's concept of reality that it's almost impossible to free yourself.

And had I managed to free myself? Or was I still stuck, and had the name of the villain merely changed? (p. 54-55)

Hjorth's novel explores whether Bergljot has managed to break free from her family's self-narrative. It reflects how a traumatic childhood story offers little, if any, room for other stories to be heard or acknowledged. Bergljot's history of abuse leaves no room for her siblings' or her mother's story, and their story leaves no room for Bergljot's. The narratological means used to gain this effect is a first-person narrator who, with the help of indirect discourse, blurs the distinction between the different stories and narrators. An example is a telephone conversation between Bergljot and her sister Astrid: "I couldn't find Bård's number online and called Astrid. She said she didn't have it. But you talked to him yesterday, didn't you? Åsa had it, she said, I asked if she could call Åsa and call me back, it was late, she said reluctantly, but she found it after all" (p. 19-20). This use of indirect discourse illustrates the "layers of literary language" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 7) and it is a narratological device providing access to a real, or an illusory, polyphonic universe. Indirect discourse "creates the illusion of 'preserving' or 'reproducing' aspects of the style of an utterance, above and beyond the mere report of its content" (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983, p. 109) to create a dominant point of view and voice at the same time as the move promotes pluralism. Indirect discourse is a narrative device that makes it possible to make room for multiple voices, perspectives, and stories.

Interestingly, the narrator almost imperceptibly shifts from first-person to third-person narration when Bergljot describes how she has been abused. This creates an impression of neutrality and factuality:

To give his wife a break Dad would take his oldest daughter along in the car with him when he went to look at building plots for the construction company he worked for, and Dad and his oldest daughter would spend the night in a hotel and it was fun to stay in a hotel, in a hotel you were allowed to get into bed before dinner and close the curtains, that's what you do when you're in a hotel, said Dad who knew how you behaved in hotels. (p. 278-279)

The narration gives the narrator the opportunity to influence the reader's perception of a character, event, or complex case without making direct judgments or assessments. *Will and Testament* is a novel where the authority of the family narrative is directly linked to the understanding and practice of providing and performing care. There is no objective truth to this question of care. The choice of narrator and narration therefore plays a crucial part in deciding upon these questions.

The role of a friend and narrative work

Narratologically, curography is a flexible genre that can use different narrative positions, orders, durations, frequencies, and moods – to use Gerard Genette's classic categories for narrative analysis. Hjorth's novel also explores the role of the narrator themselves. Bergljot, as a first-person narrator, is seemingly a reliable and trustworthy storyteller. However, by using free indirect discourse, Bergljot tells the story of her siblings, her mother, and father in a manner that they do not recognize. Bergljot, however, sticks to her own story. In addition, the voice of her friend, Klara, who knows Bergljot's history of abuse and who supports her, is given much weight. Klara repeats and reinforces Bergljot's story, and thus increases its credibility. Klara's mirroring of Bergljot's feelings gives Bergljot's narrative additional strength and persuasiveness. It is Klara who gives Bergljot the vocabulary to present her own story. Klara's words and images are militaristic and contribute to raising the level of conflict:

It's a matter of life and death. There are no peace negotiations, it's a battle to the death for honour and legacy, she said. I had to give up thinking Mum would ever understand me. I had to give up thinking Mum would ever accept me. I would get nothing from Mum and Dad unless I gave up my truth. Mum and Dad would rather see me dead than acknowledge my truth, they would sacrifice me for their honor. This is war, she said, and I had to become a warrior. (p. 205)

Klara represents a doubling of Bergljot's story, which, in addition to Bergljot's own insistent, repetitive, exhorting style, helps to hammer home the understanding and experience of Bergljot's story as the most trustful one.

When reading the novel as a curography, Klara has a central function, both narratologically and thematically. Both Klara and Bergljot have lost their fathers. Klara's traumatic childhood mirrors Bergljot's experiences and helps Bergljot put them into words: "The street of my childhood, Klara said, quoting Tove Ditlevsen, is the root of my being" (p. 147). The reference to the Danish poet Tove Ditlevsen shows how the two friends situate themselves within a cultural and intellectual context. More subtly, it also invokes Ditlevsen's difficult childhood and tragic fate. Klara shows the severity of her own, and Bergljot's, childhood trauma. It is she who Bergljot turns to when she needs clarity in her thoughts: "I called Klara and asked her why I got so wound up, why I absolutely had to talk about it, given that nothing terrible had happened" (p. 14). In the beginning of the novel, Klara acts as an empathetic witness, who supports and reinforces Bergljot's self-narrative, and makes her realize how "deep it went, how it pushed me into the abyss, how

it weighed me down" (p. 15). Before meeting the siblings and the mother at the auditor's office after the funeral, Bergljot asks Klara to tell her what she aims at:

Justice, she said. Restoration, she said. But they can't give me justice or restoration, I said. They'll have no choice but to listen to you, she said. They shouldn't get away with their underhand behaviour. They've never supported you, never listened to you, they've silenced you for all these years, and now they want to cheat you as well whereas you should have been awarded damages, as should Bård, the neglected son, but instead you'll both get less, instead they'll profit from your misery. (p. 172)

Klara's words serve as a re-interpretation and strengthening of Bergljot's own story. Klara makes Bergljot feel safe. Talking to Klara helps her to strengthen the belief in her own narrative, and Klara also arms her with the words and metaphors she needs to confront both the family, particular her mother but also, as we shall see, the larger societal narrative of being next of kin.⁹ Klara's strengthening of Bergljot's story is crucial for Bergljot when confronting her sisters and mother at the auditor's office. It shows how difficult it is for Bergljot to write her own autonomous story based upon, but different from the dominant family narrative. Klara's presence in *Will and Testament*, often ignored and left uncommented by the critics, is crucial when the novel is read as a curography. Her addition to Bergljot's story illustrates, and perhaps even strengthens, Harold Bloom's reflections on how difficult it is to "swerve away from his precursor" (Bloom, 1997). To gain clinamen in *Will and Testament*, Bergljot as a strong poet needs the narrative help of a friend.

Bergljot's counter-narrative as opposed to dominant cultural narrative

In Norwegian society, there is a strong anticipation to the idea that family members should live in peace and tolerance (Gullestad, 1989). This ideal family constellation is, however, rarely present in Norwegian contemporary literature (Hverven, 1999) – and neither in older literature. *Will and Testament* has resemblances to Henrik

9. However, it can be objected that Bergljot was drawn into Klara's friendship in a somewhat involuntary way, and that in several places in the novel she returns to her ambivalent feelings about the friendship relationship. Before divorcing her husband, she describes visiting Klara as being "drawn to my destruction" (p. 26). It is also Klara who brings the knowledge that the man the mother had an extramarital relationship with is dead. In this way, Klara contributes not only as an emotional support for Bergljot, but also to supplement her knowledge of her mother's inner emotional life, and the conflicts between her parents. Klara is also one of the few outside the family who has met Bergljot's mother and seen how paralyzed Bergljot becomes when she meets her.

Ibsen's dramas; something Johnsson (2017) demonstrates: Bergljot's mother is criticized for not leaving her father (as Nora does in *A Doll's House*), the father resembles Peer Gynt, a character with no boundaries, while the inheritance motif is present in *Ghosts* (1881) – something Hjorth herself also highlights (Mollerin, 2017, p. 40). Another similarity to *Ghosts* has further interest from a next of kin perspective. Ibsen develops a character, namely Oswald's half-sister Regine, who disclaims kinship responsibility. When it becomes clear that she cannot use Oswald to climb socially, she abandons her seriously ill half-brother. Regine's demonstration of an alternative, and somehow brutal, next of kin who is reluctant to perform care has yet not been recognized in the many interpretations of the play. Bergljot in Hjorth's novel is also a reluctant next of kin but with a large repertoire of reflecting and performing her dilemma. While Regine is a dramatic figure, Bergljot, as a first-person narrator and by virtue of being a writer by profession, presents different narratives, not least her own counter-narrative in order to explain her own next of kin-role.

Hjorth shows a brutal family feud where the battle for the narrative is, as always, part of the war. So, what kind of narratives are at stake? McLean distinguishes between three different types of narratives, namely "master, familial and personal narratives" (McLean, 2015, p. 30). The master narrative is related to Leotard's "grand narratives", i.e., stories that are rooted in a common cultural value set. The family narrative is linked to a shared view of what constitutes a good family, good parenting, and a good childhood. The personal narrative deviates to a greater or lesser extent from the overall family narrative: "In a family context, for instance, cultural expectations exist about what constitutes a good family, parenting and childhood" (Markussen & Knutz, 2021, p. 134). When personal narratives do not match, or are in direct opposition to the family narrative, they are called counter-narratives. Bergljot has a narrative that diverges from the rest of the family's narrative(s) about how their shared childhood and adult family life has been. Read in this way, *Will and Testament* is a counter-narrative that challenges the dominant social narratives:

Being observant of narratives represented in the social world, and of the power relations they are embedded in, can contribute to the gathering of insights on marginalized positions. Stories revealing these marginalized views can be called counter-narratives (for a definition of hegemonic narratives see Lueg, Graf, & Powell, 2020). Counter-narratives resist another narrative (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004, p. 1), this one often being, or being perceived as being, more powerful. (Lueg & Lundholdt, 2021, p. 4)

The novel excels as a counter-narrative by transcending the opposition between the personal narrative and the family narrative. Bergljot's history of abuse not only questions the family narrative about family life, parenthood, and childhood taking place in the villa in Bråteveien where Bergljot and the siblings grew up. It also challenges the master narrative's societal expectations of what a good relative should be.

Astrid seems to be a gentle and careful communicator of the family narrative. Ironically, it is when Astrid, in an email, uses the tentatively mitigating phrase "everyone can make mistakes" (p. 76) that Bergljot's fighting spirit increases and her personal narrative of abuse finds its form. Triggered by Astrid's words, one evening she hammers out a letter and sends it to Astrid, with a copy to the other two siblings. Then "I drank in order to sleep and read and reread my own text over and over, I read it, and I drank myself to sleep" (p. 85). When she wakes up the next morning, no one has answered her:

If she had heard the story, as she must have done, from Mum and Dad, who needed to explain my absence, then it was their version that she would know and I had no idea what that was like, but I presumed it was about my overactive imagination, which I'd always had even as a child, how good I was at making things up and telling tales, as well as me probably wanting someone to blame for my unhappiness, my outrageous behaviour, my divorce, or it was something a therapist had planted in me, the possibilities were endless. (p. 85)

In the quote, we see how Bergljot lays bare the many different possibilities for falsification mechanisms she attributes to her parents. Bergljot as a first-person narrator utters her view of the world, and it is her perspective and premises that we gain access to; how she thinks the other family members think of her, and how she thinks they justify her choices and actions. The first-person narrator's lack of neutrality also comes to the fore when Bergljot revisits her mother after more than fifteen years of absence. Bergljot sees the sisters and her mother as "[...] three uncomfortable figures, Mum as I remembered her, only less spectacular, everyone was as I remembered to the extent that I remembered them, to the extent that I looked at them, they looked like themselves, all three of them, only less spectacular" (p. 128). The phrase "to the extent" signals to the reader that doubts can be raised about the narrator, where the modification suggests that she is not completely sure of her own remembrance. The first-person narrator insists on the truth of her story, while on the novel's semantic level some uncertainty is poked loose.

Hjorth questions a premise of the familial narrative, namely that the people involved in the next of kin relation share the same fundamentals of this relationship.

The next of kin narrative is most often based on a common perception of what the next of kin relationship is about. Curoographies reflect upon how the story of the caregiver meets the story of the cared for; should the caregiver's story annex all or part of the story of the cared for, ignore it, or write in opposition to it? And what happens if you dispute it? *Will and Testament* is a curography in which central parts of the origin story are disputed. The narrator is the daughter of an aging mother in need of help – a caring relationship she shares with her two sisters and brother. The siblings have different stories related to their relationship with their parents. Bergljot says that as a child, she was abused by her father. Bård says he has been neglected, while Åsa and Astrid tell of a good, caring upbringing. As readers, we must choose whether we perceive Bergljot as a credible narrator or not. In this way, we also see how these questions are raised on a metanarrative level. Who owns the “true” narrative? Whom can we trust: Bergljot, the other family members narratives, or the normative understandings in the society?

The novel constitutes a counter-narrative to a prevailing personal, but also cultural, understanding of what a next of kin narrative should be. The novel is only to a small extent an exploration of whether Bergljot was exposed to abuse as a child. Rather, it is a novel negotiating the role of next of kin – when the one you are expected to care for is someone you believe has inflicted abuse and neglect. Bergljot insists that her story must be heard, recognized, and accepted as a re-evaluation of the family narrative. Her two sisters and mother refuse, and this leads to radically different ways of practicing the next of kin role.

A central scene in the novel is the opening of the father's will at an auditor's office. The economic aspect is signaled through the presence of the auditor and not a solicitor as one could have expected. The will is about money and not about truth, and economy is, as we have seen, the initial core of the conflict. At the auditor's office however, Bergljot insists on the existential aspect of their father's will: at this crucial event, with her mother, brother, and sisters present, Bergljot finds the courage and the will to tell the full story of the abuse she has suffered. She bases her narrative on her own diary. Present at this event, listening to and witnessing Bergljot's narrative, is the auditor – and the readers of the novel. In the same way that the mother and siblings are forced to listen to Bergljot's story when she reads it out at the auditor's office, the reader is also forced to make up their mind: “When Bergljot confesses straight up and in a well-intelligible and coherent text that she misses recognition of the narrative about the abuses, the reader is forced to react more directly to the text. Among other things, it leaves no room for misunderstandings and wonder” writes Hamm (2017, p. 113 *o.t.*), and emphasizes that “Hjorth's readers have to face the discomfort of listening to the story of a

trauma" (ibid. *o.t.*). The novel demonstrates the consequences of the various family members' interpretation of the caregiver role, how the "traditional caregiver role" is challenged, and how the family relates to Bergljot's persistent and forceful language and behavior. Nor do we as readers go unnoticed. *Will and Testament* read as a curography, makes us reflect on how the caregiver role is practiced, and acted out when the relationship between the one needing care and the caregiver involves disagreements and disputes about disappointment and betrayal.

Final remarks from a curographical point of view

Hjorth's *Will and Testament* is a dense and complex novel based upon an incompatibility of different narratives: the master-, family-, and personal narratives do not coincide. This has tragic implications both for the extended family and not least for the narrator Bergljot, whose identity as an absent, non-participating caregiver morally depends on her story of childhood abuse being annexed by the family. The caregiver role is not something you can easily reject. Bergljot's childhood memories become central when she refrains from assisting her elderly mother and dying father. The attention the novel attracted was largely due to a present celebrity culture creating a thin line between the real-life author and the first-person narrator. Yet the novel's bestselling status may also be due to a caregiver role which most of the population would recognize in one of its many shapes.

Recognition is a central effect of reading. *Will and Testament*, which can be said to have faced and challenged the master caregiver narrative – far more recognizable than both inheritance disputes and family feuds. When the next of kin motif is not mentioned in previous readings of the novel, it may be because of recognition, not repetition, or as Rita Felski writes:

Recognition is not repetition; it denotes not just the previously known, but the becoming known. Something that may have been sensed in a vague, diffuse, or semi-conscious way now takes on a distinct shape, is amplified, heightened, or made newly visible. (Felski, 2008, p. 25)

Felski's widely acclaimed *Uses of Literature* (2008) reflects upon why we read literature. Hjorth's novel, and Hjorth as a public figure and literary celebrity, were part of a bookmarked and interpretative practice in which the borders between fact and fiction are blurred. The recognition aspect became largely a matter of living models, and psychological discussions of false memories and post-traumatic behavior. The novel's connection to real-life literature became a Damocles sword

that gave it attention and sales, but which perhaps also overshadowed some of the more intriguing aspects of the novel's universe. The next of kin perspective is one such entry.

After having scrutinized the intentions of the narrator in *Will and Testament*, and her insisting on her story, it is reasonable to ask why we as researchers decided to dwell on the next of kin perspective of this novel. It is a question which obviously has multiple answers. It may be because we both are and have been next of kin. It can be because we know Hjorth's writing and have reflected upon how several of the secondary characters (daughters in particular) find themselves in demanding relationships with mothers who drink too much, as in *What is it With Mom?* (*Hva er det med mor?* 2000), *A Norwegian House* (*Et norsk hus*, 2014) in which Norwegian stereotypes among other about parenthood is questioned, or *Is Mother Dead?* (*Er mor død?* 2022) whose female protagonist is obsessed with her old mother who she has no contact with – a plot resembling that of *Will and Testament*. Another reason why the next of kin perspective of Hjorth's novel seemed relevant was because we as researchers have worked with the questions of care and next of kin for some time. As with *Ghost's* we have noticed how this is a perspective that tends to be under communicated – perhaps because it tends to form an often-challenging counter-narrative.

Reading the novel as a curography, has, regardless of what brought us here, been an eye-opening experience. The novel's insistent way of telling, linked to the dissemination of the main character's history of abuse and trauma, led to her role as victim and then survivor far overshadowing the challenging next of kin roles in the novel. In a subtle way, this invisibility of the next of kin perspective mirrors the invisibility that next of kin also encounter outside of literature. Our reading shows how the novel also recognizes something outside itself – as only great literature can. The reading of *Will and Testament* as a next of kin novel can be said to demonstrate how the novel transcends its own fictional intention and thus reveals itself as a true literary triumph. Even though the novel insists on the truth of Bergljot's story, that story depends on the established family narratives to which it becomes a clinamen. According to Harold Bloom, to read a text in the light of clinamen, is to take also former texts into consideration. He stresses how the power and the complexity of the new story is enhanced if the former one is taken into consideration. Bloom's theoretical reflection is manifested in *Will and Testament*. However, the insistence of Bergljot's story of abuse is not only demonstrated within *Will and Testament*. The importance and strength of this story is utterly underlined as it is repeated seven years later in Hjorth's latest novel *Repetition* (*Gjentagelse* 2023). But that is yet another story.

References

- Bakhtin, Michael M., 1981. Discourse in the novel. In: M. Holquist, ed., *The dialogic imagination*, 259-422. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press
- Bloom, H. (1997). *The anxiety of influence. A theory of poetry* (2 nd. ed.). Oxford University Press (Oxford paperbacks).
- Boyd, B. (2021). Implied Authors and Implied Narrators - or Actual Authors? In S. Patron (Ed.), *Opoitional-Narrator Theory. Principles, Perspectives, Proposals*. (Frontiers of Narrative). University of Nebraska Press. 53-72.
- DeFalco, A. (2011). Moral Obligation, Disordered Care: The Ethics of Caregiving in Margaret Atwood's Moral Disorder. *Contemporary Literature*, 52(Nr. 2), 236-263.
- DeFalco, A. (2016). *Imagining Care. Responsibility, Dependency, and Canadian Literature*. University of Toronto Press. Toronto. Buffalo. London.
- Departementene.(2020). Vi-depårørende.Regjeringenspårørendestrategioghandlingsplan. Helse og omsorgsdepartementet. *Departementenes sikkerhets- og serviceorganisasjon*. <https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/08948819b8244ec893d90a66deb1aa4a/vi-deparørende.pdf>
- Egeland, M. (2021). Virkelighetslitteratur og appropriering – Robert Lowell, Vigdis Hjorth og Karl Ove Knausgård. *Nytt Norsk Tidsskrift*, 4, 275-287. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.1504-3053-2021-04-02>
- Felski, R. (2008). *Uses of Literature*. Blackwell publishing.
- Førland, O., Alvsåvåg, H. & Tranvåg, O. (2018). Perspektiver på omsorgsforskning. *Tidsskrift for omsorgsforskning*, 3, 196-214. <https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.2387-5984-2018-03-02>
- Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a Different Voice. Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Harvard University Press.
- Gullestad, M. (1989). *Kultur og hverdagsliv*. Universitetsforlaget. Oslo.
- Hamington, M. (2004). *Embodied Care. Jane Adams, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Feminist Ethics*. Universisty of Illinois Press. Urbana & Chicago.
- Hamm, C. (2017). Traume som arv. Annerkjennelsesbehovet i Vigdis Hjorths Arv og miljø. I C. Hamm, S. H. Lindøe & B. Markussen (Red.), *Lidelsens estetikk. Sår, Sorg og smerte i litteratur, film og medier*. Alvheim & Eide Akademisk Forlag. Bergen. 97-116.
- Hjorth, H. (2017). *Fri vilje*. Kagge Forlag. Oslo.
- Hjorth, V. (2016). *Arv og miljø*. CappelenDamm. Oslo.
- Hjorth, V. (2019). *Will and Testament. A novel*. Verso. London & New York.
- Hjorth, V. (2022). *Femten år. Den revolusjonære våren*. Cappelen Damm. Oslo.
- Hjorth, V. (2023). *Gjentagelsen*. Cappelen Damm. Oslo.
- Hverven, T. E. (1999). *Å lese etter familien. Essays*. Tiden Norsk Forlag. Oslo.
- Ibsen, H. (2006/1881). *Gengangere*. Gyldendal. Oslo.
- Johannessen, E. (2019). *Vigdis og Bergljot. Og Vera? – Ein studie av sjølvframstilling i Arv og miljø og Fri vilje*. [Universitetet i Stavanger]. <https://uis.brage.unit.no/uis-xmlui/handle/11250/2601322>
- Johnsson, H. (2019). Familien som perthård: Sjukdom och förbrytelse i Vigdis Hjorths Arv og miljø. *Acta Carolinae Philologica*, 3, 115-127. <https://doi.org/https://karolinum.cz/data/clanek/7530/AUC%20Philologica%203%202019%206777%20jonsson%20115-127.pdf>
- Jønsson, H. D. D. (2023). *Om å være datter: En lesning av Vigdis Hjorths romaner Tredje person entall (2008), Arv og Miljø (2016) og Er mor død (2020)* [Universitetet i Bergen]. <https://bora.uib.no/bora-xmlui/handle/11250/3000420>

- Krøger, C. (2016). Bare Vigdis Hjorth klarer å behandle et tungt tema på en så stram, intelligent og poetisk måte. *Dagbladet* 09.09.2016. <https://www.dagbladet.no/kultur/bare-vigdis-hjorth-klarar-a-behandle-et-tungt-tema-pa-en-sa-stram-intelligent-og-poetisk-mate/62472436>
- Kyrkjebø, M. (2023). "I virkeligheten finnes ikke bevis" [Universitetet i Bergen]. <https://bora.uib.no/bora-xmlui/handle/11250/3083940>
- Langås, U. (2016). *Traumets betydning i norsk samtidslitteratur*. Fagbokforlaget. Oslo.
- Larsen, L. E. (2019). *Speil eller spill: En pragmatisk lesning av Vigdis Hjorths Arv og miljø* [Universitetet i Agder]. <https://uia.brage.unit.no/uia-xmlui/handle/11250/2646774>
- Lien, M. E. & Abram, S. (2018). Hvem skal arve hytta? Slektskapsprosesser, familierelasjoner og "avslektning". *Norsk Antropologisk Tidsskrift*, 29, 26-41. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.1504-2898-2018-01-02-03>
- Lueg, K. & Lundholdt, M. W. e. (2021). *Routledge Handbook of Counter-Narratives*. Routledge. New York.
- Markussen, T. and Knutz, E. (2021). Board games as a new method for studying troubled family narratives. In *Routledge Handbook of Counter-Narratives*. 1st. edn. Routledge, New York.
- Mollerin, K. S. (2017). *Vigdis, del for del*. Gyldendal. Oslo. 132-148
- McLean, K.C. (2015). *The co-authored self: Family stories and the construction of personal identity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Nesby, L. H. (2023). Curografi. Innflytelse og løsrivelse i pårørendefortellingen som genre og i Hanne Ørstaviks ti amo (2020). I N. Simonhjell & B. Jager (Red.), *Norsk litterær årbok 2023*. Det norske samlaget. Oslo. 219-232.
- Pedersen, J. (2020). Hjorth-søstrenes romaner Arv og miljø og Fri vilje - romaner som normativ kilde i jussen. *Kritisk juss*, 46. 114-124 <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.2387-4546-2020-02-04>
- Ramstad, M. (2018). *Litteraturens virkelighet: Om Arv og miljø som virkelighetsskapende roman* [Universitetet i Bergen]. <https://bora.uib.no/bora-xmlui/handle/1956/18746>
- Rimmon-Kenan, S. (1983). *Narrative fiction: contemporary poetics*. Methuen. London
- Rolland, L.-S. B. (2022). *Når virkeligheten slår tilbake - En studie av debatten rundt virkelighetslitteratur i Norge* [Universitetet i Bergen]. <https://bora.uib.no/bora-xmlui/handle/11250/3022424>
- Selmer, B. (2021). Disputing the Emotional State. Moral and Financial Inheritance in Vigdis Hjorth's Will and Testament (2017) and Helga Hjorth's Free Will (2017). *Law & Literature*, 35, 151-168. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/1535685X.2021.1902641>
- Simonhjell, N. (2023). 'men nåken må nå gjer det'. Pårørenderollen og omsorgsetiske dilemma i Olaug Nilssens Yt etter evne, få etter behov (2020). *Nordic Journal of Arts, Culture and Health*, 5, 1-14. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.18261/njach.5.1.2>
- Skadberg, E. W. (2020). *Vigdis Hjorth og psykoanalysen. En lesning av romanene 'Om bare' (2001) og 'Arv og miljø' (2016) og utvalgte sakprosattekster* [Universitetet i Bergen]. <https://bora.uib.no/bora-xmlui/handle/1956/22867>
- Slotnes, O. (2018). *A Plea for Paraphrase. Parafrasens rolle i litteraturkritikken belyst gjennom anmeldelser av Vigdis Hjorths Arv og miljø (2016)* [MA, UiB]. <https://hdl.handle.net/1956/18005>
- Sortland, H. A. (2024). *Hvar er det Hjorth gjør? En analyse av Vigdis Hjorth sin litterære-performative praksis med utgangspunkt i Arv og miljø (2016)*. [MA, NTNU]. <https://hdl.handle.net/11250/3142267>

- Straume, A. K. (2016). Glitrende Hjorth. *NRK* 12.09.2016. https://www.nrk.no/kultur/anmeldelse-av-_arv-og-miljo_-av-vigdis-hjorth-1.13130735
- Søftestad, S. (2023). Tabukreftenes makt. Fornektelse av seksuelle overgrep mot barn. *Fokus på familien*, 3, 216-234. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.0807-7487>
- Vassenden, E. (2019). Kunsten å hate. Eller: Hvilken plass har kritikken i de nye offentlighetene? *Samtiden*, 3, 108-115. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.18261/ISSN1890-0690-2019-03-11>
- Vinterberg, T. (1998). *Festen*. Nimbus Film. Lucky Red Distribuzione.
- Wærness, K. (1996). The Rationality of Caring. In S. Gordon, P. Brenner & N. Noddings (Red.), *Caregiving. Readings in Knowledge, Practice, Ethics and Politics*. University of Philadelphia Press. 231-251.
- Wærness, K. (2003). Noen refleksjoner omkring det velgende individ, feministisk omsorgsetikk og den sosiologiske tradisjonen. *Sosiologisk tidsskrift*, 11.(11-22). <https://doi.org/10.18261/ISSN1504-2928-2003-01-02>
- Økland, I. (2016). Vigdis Hjorth med feberhet incesthistorie. *Aftenposten* 10.09.2016. <https://www.aftenposten.no/kultur/i/RQO92/vigdis-hjorth-med-feberhet-incesthistorie>