

Talking Around Things or Talking Through Them? Minimalist Explorations of a Working-Class life in Helle Helle's *Rødby-Puttgarden*

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Abstract

In the 1980s, the literary style of minimalism was a much-discussed and often frowned-upon topic of literary criticism. Many scholars worried that the spartan and externally oriented perspective of minimalist literature failed to address anything profound. At the epicentre of this debate was the short fiction of American authors such as Bobbie Ann Mason and Raymond Carver, whose works forged a strong link between the minimalist style and depictions of contemporary working-class life. Today, their amalgamation of minimalist aesthetics and working-class themes sees its continuation in contemporary Scandinavian literature, accompanied by a rich and significantly broadened scholarship on the movement. In particular, since the 1990s, Denmark has seen several prolific minimalist writers, many of them women. This article considers minimalist explorations of a working-class life in Helle Helle's 2005 novel *Rødby-Puttgarden*. Adding to the diverse readings of Scandinavian minimalism of the recent decade, it argues that the working-class protagonist in Helle's novel, Jane, constructs a 'thing language' that conflates exterior material surroundings and inner emotional experience. In so doing, the article draws on ordinary language philosophy, with an emphasis on the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Stanley Cavell.

Keywords

Working class, working-literature, minimalism, ordinary language philosophy

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Literary Minimalism in Working-Class Fiction: From North America to Scandinavia

It is true that the spartan voice of literary minimalism describes the material surfaces of a story before, if ever, overtly addressing the thoughts and feelings of a given character. In a 1985 *New York Times* article, writer Robert Dunn described minimalist writing as 'fiction that shrinks from life' (Dunn 1985). Dunn was one of several American scholars who worried that the externally oriented aesthetics of minimalism circumscribed important matters below surface level – matters of the heart and mind.¹ Must we, however, assume that minimalism's focus on what we can see, feel, and taste reflects a shallowness, either in the meaning of the story or in the inner lives of its characters? Considering the prevalence of nuanced literary research on minimalism today, the answer to this question is a resounding no. As a literary movement that continues to nurture scholarly debate, one can boldly claim that minimalism is anything but superficial. In furthering this sentiment, the emerging field of ordinary language philosophy, spearheaded by the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Stanley Cavell, offers exciting opportunities. Deconstructing the dichotomy of an inner and outer dimension, Wittgenstein and Cavell see the soul as present in the external. Inspired by their innovative approach, this article explores contemporary Danish writer Helle Helle's *Rødby-Puttgarden* (2005). Considering how the novel's protagonist Jane uses her material surroundings to communicate emotional experiences, it proposes that ordinary language philosophy emboldens the current discourse on literary minimalism in Scandinavia, particularly regarding the style's connection to working-class themes.

As the opening of this article suggests, associations with literary minimalism do not necessarily fall within the contemporary Scandinavian context. Writer Roland Sadowsky notes the movement's strong ties to North America, which saw a number of minimalist authors during the 1970s and 80s (Sadowsky 1996). Prolific among these were Bobbie Ann Mason and Raymond Carver, who with sharp precision described the lives of modern blue-collar characters. Furnishing their stories with smoking ashtrays, apple pies topped with cheddar cheese, and living rooms dimly lit by television screens, they were among the few to directly address working-class life in post-Fordist America. Mason and Carver's literary efforts have since forged a strong link between the minimalist aesthetic and working-class themes, topicalising the style not just as an exercise in experimental literary form but also as an artistic exploration of contemporary working-class politics.

Well over 40 years have passed since iconic writers like Mason and Carver produced their main body of work. If we look to present-day Scandinavia, however, contemporary writer Helle Helle offers a striking continuation of the minimalist style. In the spirit of her American predecessors, Helle has written several works, such as *BOB* (2021), *Ned til hundene* (2008), and *Rødby-Puttgarden* (2005), which all describe, with an apt attention to material detail, the everyday life of working-class subjects living in Denmark. Although her oeuvre bears the undeniable influence of American minimalism, the definition of Helle as a minimalist writer has recently been the subject of debate. Some scholars have suggested uncoupling her from the minimalist label and all its baggage. For instance, the Danish literary journal *SPRING* published a special issue on Helle in 2018 which reconsidered the stylistic placement of her work. The issue's introduction, written by literary scholars Dag Heede, Claus Elholm Andersen, and Stig Olsen, encourages new readings of Helle's work that are not bound by the constraints of minimalism (Heede, Andersen, and Olsen 2018). Along similar lines, literary scholars Katarina Müller and Stephan Michael Schröder argue for the affinities between Helle's style and that of nineteenth-century writer Herman Bang – a realist author Helle herself has noted as a source of inspiration (Müller and Schröder 2013).² These alternative approaches show the broad interpretative possibilities of Helle's narratives. In accordance with this, this article does not insist on the minimalist tradition as the only entry point into her stories – it simply underlines that it can still be a fruitful one.

There are good reasons to remain with literary minimalism when we read Helle. Not only was she a key figure in the Danish resurgence of the minimalist style during the 1990s, but she has also contributed to the inclusion of women's stories into the movement. Literary scholar Per Krogh Hansen underlines Helle's authorship as central to a 'robust renaissance' of minimalism in Scandinavia, but also suggests that the style is typically associated with a masculine imaginary (Hansen 2014). Indeed, Helle is joined by other Scandinavian writers such as Frode Grytten, Kyrre Andreassen, and the more recent Thomas Korsgaard, who continue to explore what we might call 'Carverian motifs' of disillusioned working-class men. However, when the literary scene of late twentieth-century Denmark saw the rebirth of minimalism, several women writers figured as the spearheads. Here, literary scholar Louise Mønster highlights Helle's work, but also that of Pia Juul and Naja Maria Aidt. Mønster argues that Helle, Juul, and Aidt produced a radical shift in Danish literature, as they opened up a space for the narrative exploration of everyday themes (Mønster 2012). Their contributions should, by extension, not be underestimated as a continuation to the minimalist literary tradition. The storyworlds crafted by

Helle and others, in which working-class women are prominently featured, are an important reason why a broader array of gendered experiences are included within the Scandinavian branch of literary minimalism today.

The growing choir of minimalist voices in Scandinavia poses a central question: why has American minimalism found its spiritual continuation in Nordic literature? Indeed, it seems sensational that Scandinavia, with its rich history of strong working-class representation, should become a central site for literary works which deeply resonate with Carver and Mason's depiction of an alienating working-class experience. This suggests the movement's historical trajectory as a growing, transnational, and potent form of working-class poetics. A possible explanation for this development lies in the formation of what labour economist Guy Standing calls 'the precariat', a new class taking shape in response to the increasingly temporary and uncertain nature of the global job market (Standing 2011: 1). Standing argues for the emerging precariat as an international phenomenon, suggesting, in turn, that local and diverging working-class realities are becoming a thing of the past. If the unique textures of working-class life are being smoothed out by the global forces of precariousness, this would certainly explain why literary portrayals of class are beginning to overlap in the US and Scandinavian countries. A possible link between Mason, Carver, and Helle is their depictions of a relatively uniform precariat, and the material quality of the commodification process it is undergoing. Literary scholar Peter Simonsen has already connected Helle's work to Standing's term, arguing that her style of writing reflects the fleeting experience of being a precariat worker in the neoliberal age (Simonsen 2017). The way in which the minimalist aesthetic addresses the particularities of working-class life in the twenty-first century strengthens the arguments, as seen below, for ordinary language philosophy's promising compatibility with new and broadening interpretations of the style.

Rødby-Puttgarden: Using the Material Landscape

Although not her most recent work, Helle's *Rødby-Puttgarden* (2005) is particularly interesting because it demonstrates so strongly the relationship between its working-class characters and the material world they inhabit. Two sisters, Tine and Jane, work shifts on the ferries passing between Rødby in Denmark and Puttgarden in Germany. Ditte, Tine's infant daughter, and Henriette, the family's late matriarch, also figure in the story. The small family orients itself by use of its material realities. Life is centred around their tiny apartment, the occasional outing to grocery stores and house parties, and the steadfast rhythm of the ferries passing back and forth between

Rødby and Puttgarden. Jane forms the nexus of the novel's externally oriented aesthetic as she narrates her family's everyday life through surrounding objects. Describing daily activities, favourite foods, and mundane trinkets, she constructs what we may call a 'thing language', a mode of inner, emotional communication structured around and contingent on the external world. Taking Jane's 'thing language' seriously, which means studying without hostility its form, use, and impact, allows us to better understand and empathise with her family.

How does this reading contribute to what has already been said about *Rødby-Puttgarden*? Through the premises of ordinary language philosophy, to which we will return, this article makes two important contributions to the discourse on Helle's novel. The first remains in conversation with the point made by Heede, Andersen, and Olsen, namely that readings of Helle must be attuned to the broad scope of interpretative possibilities her writing offers. In contrast to their arguments, however, I see the minimalist form as essential to the construction of a distinct open-endedness in Helle's novel. This claim brings us to a second point: when minimalist elusiveness is paired with working-class themes, it makes stories such as *Rødby-Puttgarden* susceptible to critical interpretations. Helle's novel addresses the generational reproduction of class through characters that never overtly articulate, nor try to change, their socioeconomic position. Paired with its focus on surface detail, the narrative is consequently easily read as a representation of passive and shallow working-class subjects who merely surrender to the supposed tragedy of their mundane existence. In my view, this attitude does *Rødby-Puttgarden* a great disservice.

In the context of such critical readings of Helle's novel, it is useful to refer to literary scholar Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique*, which discusses the restrictions of traditional modes of readership. Specifically, Felski notes how philosopher Paul Ricoeur's concept of 'the hermeneutics of suspicion' have become deeply entrenched within literary studies (Felski 2015: 1). She explains the hermeneutics of suspicion as a form of mistrustful readerly attitude, assuming texts conceal some deeper meaning that must be expertly teased and towed up to surface level. At one extreme, Felski sees suspicious readings rigidly applying ideological approaches to aesthetic objects, reducing them to one-dimensional representations of theoretical or political concepts. In the instance of Helle's minimalist working-class literature, a suspicious reading will quickly fixate on the structural issues that impact the subjects of her narratives. The ways characters choose to live make it easy for us to apply the conventional Marxist critique and leave it at that. Consider, for instance, how in *Rødby-Puttgarden*, Jane cradles Ditte in

a rocking chair at the outset of the narrative, only to return to the same chair in the concluding pages:

Jeg havde stadig Tines lyserøde støvler på. Jeg gængede frem og tilbage. Jeg kiggede hele tiden på støvlerne. Jeg gængede og gængede. Jo mere jeg gængede, des mere var jeg ikke længere mig.
Det var mig, der var Tine.
Det var mig, der var vores mor.
Det er rigtigt nok. Der var ikke andre. (Helle 2005: 175)

(I was still wearing
Tine's pink boots. I rocked back and forth. The whole time
I was looking at the boots. I rocked and rocked. The more
I rocked, the more I wasn't me any more.
It was I, there was Tine.
It was I, there was our mother.
That's plenty. There weren't others.)³

In Bordieuan fashion, the rocking chair brings Jane's narrative to a perfect circle. As Jane leans back, she feels the specificity of her identity give away to a collective being shared with her sister and mother. She keeps her attention steadfastly on Tine's pink boots, the borrowed item of clothing further underlining her feelings of depersonalisation. The fact that Jane is seated in a rocking chair, which will continue moving without much effort on her part, creates a perception of passivity. At the conclusion of the story, Jane is erased, becoming the very embodiment of a repetitive family pattern. We can read this as the socioeconomic burden of class travelling from mother to daughter and onwards. Jane appears to welcome this circular rhythm, not resisting but seemingly leaning into the erasure of her identity, as well as the predetermined trajectory of her life. Scholars such as Hansen have read the novel's ending along these lines, interpreting it as a final failure on Jane's part to break away from her inherited predicaments (Hansen 2014). This is not an incorrect nor an impossible reading, but it depends heavily on the external factors shaping Jane's family. What is problematic is not its recognition of class structures in the novel, for they loom large in the narrative. It is the circumscription of the personal experience *within* the matrix of class. Left unexplored are attempts to understand how, exactly, the structures and their circular reproduction are lived and felt by Jane and her family.

The structural analysis so enticing to what Felski calls the suspicious reading is egged on by the minimalist aesthetics' preoccupation with the physical world. When a work's exterior focus is read as a denial of inner life, it is only logical to turn away from attempts to understand the personal feelings of its characters. The attentive approach of ordinary language philosophy, influenced greatly by the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Stanley Cavell, offers an alternative route. Feminist thinker and literary scholar Toril Moi explains ordinary language philosophy as separate from a theoretical approach, as a 'spirit' or attitude that moves away from the general applicability and rules of the hard sciences (Moi 2017: 1). Instead, it devotes itself to the specificity, complexity, and validity of examples, encouraging flexible interpretations and understandings. Particularly important to the arguments of this article is Wittgenstein and Cavell's shared trust in present and pronounced markers of meaning as opposed to hidden or submerged messages. When we read minimalist works of fiction such as *Rødby-Puttgarden*, adopting this attitude allows us to recognise the validity of the narrative's externally oriented aesthetics and articulate readings that go beyond generalised critique.

On this note, we return to Jane's construction of a 'thing language' that, when considered seriously, allows us to better understand and empathise with her family. To understand this perspective, we must realign our view of objects in Helle's novel. As opposed to secondary elements addressed through Jane's language, we must approach objects as discourse tools: as an integral part of Jane's communication. When she underlines a particular thing, it is not to recognise its presence in a room. Instead, objects serve as markers of familiar bonds, practices, preferences, and emotional states. Under Jane's jurisdiction, things become meaningful components of a mode of expression. When she tells Tine about Abel, a man she is casually seeing, her sister's excitement incites in her an acute feeling of emptiness. Jane uses a silo to illustrate:

Af og til tænkte jeg på mig selv som en silo i udkanten af en pløjemark. Jeg vidste ikke, hvad der var indeni. Måske var der ingenting. Jeg tænkte også på, hvordan andre så på mig. De måtte gerne bemærke mig, men så heller ikke mere. Jeg sagde det til Tine:

- Jeg føler mig som en silo.

Hun rynkede på brynene:

- Har du taget på igen, da? Så må vi til at spise råkost et stykke tid. (Helle 2005: 91)

(Sometimes I thought of myself as a silo at the edge of a field. I didn't know what was inside. Maybe there was nothing. I also thought of how others saw me. They were welcome to notice me, but nothing more. I told this to Tine:

- I feel like a silo.

She furrowed her brow:

- Did you put on weight again? We'll have to eat raw vegetables for a while.)

Our initial reaction to this exchange might be that Jane's 'thing language' falls short. Trouble arises when she cannot decide what the silo contains, should it have any contents at all. Tine understands the phrase literally, suggesting a diet to remedy her sister's concerns. In the end, the silo metaphor appears as an inefficient solution to Jane's emotional turmoil. However, this claim places heavy emphasis on the deeper meaning of her comparison, as opposed to its function in the setting it is introduced into. To identify the limitations of this reading, we can turn to Wittgenstein:

The general concept of the meaning of a word surrounds the working of language with a haze which makes clear vision impossible. – It disperses the fog if we study the phenomena of language in primitive kinds of use in which one can clearly survey the purpose and functioning of the words. (Wittgenstein 2009: 7e)

An incessant focus on meaning, Wittgenstein argues, creates a metaphorical fog obscuring our interpretation. Instead, he suggests that we place emphasis on *intent*: the purpose and function of the words we choose. Returning to Jane's silo metaphor, it is indeed difficult to discern what it truly means. If the exterior of the silo hides something more profound at its core, and Jane fails to disclose what this content is, her attempt to communicate arguably breaks down. However, the haze clears if we recognise the intended use of the silo. The main point Jane tries to convey through the metaphor of the silo is that she feels isolated and struggles to articulate her feelings to others. The silo's placement at the edge of a field, together with its impenetrable exterior, communicates Jane's sense of lonely solitude perfectly well. Jane's 'thing language' is not necessarily a cryptic string of symbolic signifiers that will unlock her feelings to the reader. We can empathise with her on the premises of what is there.

This focus on use is key to understanding Jane's 'thing language'. She uses the objects furnishing her surroundings to construct what Wittgenstein calls '*language-games*' (Wittgenstein 2009, 8e). Language-games, according to Wittgenstein, refer to the ways in which language is learned and understood as part of the activities of everyday life. In a list of examples, he argues that a language-game can be embodied in acts such as telling a story, giving an order, and saliently for the arguments of this article, describing an object based on observation or measurement. If we define language-games as the way we relate to social contexts in our communicative exchanges, Jane's descriptions of objects construct a series of language games that help us understand her particular way of life.

Consider, for instance, how much we learn about Jane through her descriptions of familiar objects and the apparently mundane habits they fall into:

Men vi kunne lide de samme gode gamle retter med sovs. Vi kunne også lide at ligge i sofaen, især mig. Dertil kom vores fælles glæde ved bagerbrød og ugeblade hver torsdag. Vores mor havde givet os smag for den slags, torsdag havde altid været ugens højdepunkt. (Helle 2005: 10)

(But we liked the same good old dishes with gravy. We also liked relaxing on the couch, especially me. Then came our shared enthusiasm for danishes and magazines every Thursday. Our mother had given us the taste for that kind of thing, Thursday had been the highlight of every week.)

In this passage, and as a recurring theme in the novel, food is significant. This is true for Helle's oeuvre as a whole – literary scholar Flora Fink has argued that her stories often implement the tactile and sensual dimensions of eating to convey rich subtexts (Fink 2012). In the example above, the idiomatic phrasing of '*gode gamle retter*' makes clear there are certain dishes Jane will eat again and again. Items of food also connect Jane to her sister, creating a sense of shared comfort between the two. More broadly, the nature of Jane's lifestyle is echoed in the things she conjures in language. The couch signals not just a sedentary lifestyle but also her gravitation towards home life and the predictable framework established within her family unit. The things familiar to Jane provide a safe pattern to her existence, made particularly clear when she underlines eating and magazine browsing as the highlight of every week. Through these object-oriented language-games, Jane communicates her preferences, traditions,

and daily motions. We do not need to search for the underlying meaning to these objects; what matters is how Jane makes use of them.

Taking shape now is not only a perception of the things Jane likes, but the broader outlines of her everyday life – its form, rhythm, and limits. Wittgenstein writes: 'to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life' (Wittgenstein 2009: 11e). Indeed, a particular effect of Jane's language-games is how they pedagogically illustrate the dynamics of her family. Still, what are forms of life, exactly? In his interpretation of Wittgenstein's concept, Stanley Cavell looks to the conventions of language learning, stating that it:

...is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humor and of significance and of fulfillment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion when an appeal, when an explanation – all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls 'forms of life.' (Cavell 2015: 48)

In line with Cavell's description, we can interpret forms of life as the complex social relations, practices, and traditions that shape, support, and delimit our social interactions. As he explains, we communicate with those around us based on assumptions and common frames of experience. If language-games are the communicative tactics we employ in daily life, forms of life are the frames and limits informing us of the moves that can and cannot be executed.

Returning to Jane's family, the mechanics of her 'thing language' give us pointers to the forms of life specific to them; the rules of their communicative games so to speak. Consider, for instance, how Jane and Tine interact the day their mother is buried:

Den dag vores mors urne var blevet sat i jorden, lavede jeg stikkelsbærgrød. Jeg stod i køkkenet i Syltholmsparken og rørte og rørte i gryden. Alle bærrene gik itu. Tine sad ved vinduet og røg ... Lugten af de varme bær og cigaretrøgen blandede sig...

Jeg tog gryden af blusset. Hvis nogen spurgte vores mor, hvordan hun havde det, fortalte hun, hvad hun havde lavet. Nu havde jeg lavet stikkelsbærgrød. (Helle 2005: 139-140)

(The day our mother's urn was put in the ground, I made gooseberry-porridge. I stood in the kitchen in Syltholmsparken

stirring and stirring the pot. All the berries went in. Tine sat by the window and smoked ... The scent of the warm berries blended with the cigarette smoke ...

I removed the pot from the fire. If anyone asked our mother, how she was doing, she always announced, what she had made. Now I had made gooseberry-porridge.)

This profound moment in the kitchen poignantly demonstrates the sisters' mode of communication – what they feel cannot be said, and thus must be addressed in alternative ways. In particular, Jane's careful descriptions illustrate how painful and emotional experiences are never verbalised between the two, but rather addressed and remedied through food. She attends to the preparation of gooseberry porridge. Smoke from Tine's cigarette blends with the steam of Jane's dish, highlighting the unspoken connection between them. Jane remembers how their mother, Henriette, would always announce the dishes she had prepared if someone asked how she was. The conflation of the material, in this case food, with the immateriality of emotional language, suggests a particular form of life that has been passed on down the generations. Continuing the ways of the family's late matriarch, the communicative strategies available to Jane and Tine are distinctly object-oriented. Here, one might contend that, surely, the sisters would be better off if they actually spoke about the loss of their mother. If we readjust what we expect, or demand, from the sisters' exchange – from their form of life – we can also appreciate the text in other ways. Moi notes how the concept of forms of life 'invites us to rethink the role conventions play in our lives, and to consider afresh what we share (and do not share) with others' (Moi 2017: 54). Consequently, what matters here is perhaps not the efficiency or defects of Jane and Tine's object-oriented communication. Instead, we can lean into the value of understanding this tender moment between the sisters – of empathising with the inner workings of their family.

However, this reading depends on the mechanics of metaphor. If the things connecting Tine and Jane must be understood as symbolic signifiers, are we not quickly re-entering Wittgenstein's fog? This is a valid point, and indeed, the traces of metaphor are difficult, perhaps impossible, to abandon completely in literary analysis. If we argue for a depth to Jane's 'thing language', we also depend on its symbolic potential. Then again, the message Jane is trying to convey through the nurturing preparation of food is far from hazy. In serving the gooseberry porridge Jane channels not only her mother, but an act she associates deeply with care and emotion. What makes the scene so touching is that Jane is trying to comfort her sister, to

show her, and perhaps herself, that the family will remain, even though Henriette is gone forever. Despite the trouble of metaphor, the overarching principle of the reading above remains crucial to new interpretations of minimalist works such as *Rødby-Puttgarden*. Instead of getting lost in arguments concerning how we would *want* the sisters to deal with their mother's passing, we can allow ourselves to be moved by the way they face the loss.

Talking Around Things or Talking Through Them?

This argument calls for us to attend more closely to the emotional dimension of Jane's 'thing language' – whether it successfully conveys what she truly feels. So far, we have considered how Jane uses objects as discourse tools to let the reader understand, empathise, and relate to her family. And yet, the understanding we gain from Jane's communication can be seen as strictly external, relating not to the psychological realm but to the practical and social realms of the everyday. To understand Jane's 'thing language', we must consider it within its practical context, as a set of language-games unfolding within a form of life. In this sense, some might say that she offers a sociological account of her existence but continues to circumscribe her subjective perceptions. However, this critique assumes that Jane is hiding her inner life from the reader by diverting our attention onto the external world.

Cavell's interpretation of Wittgenstein offers an alternative reading, emphasising the radical rejection of dichotomy between the external body and inner soul. In so doing, he draws on Wittgenstein's 'parable of the boiling pot,' a metaphor used to problematise how we identify what other people feel (Cavell 1999: 332). Cavell claims that, just as we cannot definitely know if someone else is in pain (they could be hiding it or pretending), we cannot precisely know the contents of a steaming pot when we view it from the outside. As he interprets Wittgenstein's parable, the real problem is not discerning the contents of the pot, but rather the critical separation of expression and inner feeling represented by the metaphor. He writes: 'My references to my pain are exactly my expressions of pain itself; and my words refer to my pain just because, or to the extent, that they are (modified) expressions of it' (Cavell 1999: 342). Cavell's work on the parable challenges conceptions of the body as a barrier blocking our view of the soul. Instead, the body, through speech or emotive expression, communicates precisely what we feel. Accepting Cavell's conflation of the inner and outer means to trust the external communication of emotion as

emotion – not as a false, secondary, or incomplete representation of a source.

Cavell's argument for the inner and outer as complementary elements of a united soul allows us to trust Jane's 'thing language' not as a tactic to distract from emotion, but as an alternative means to convey her feelings. As mentioned earlier, Jane gravitates towards the comforts of the home, and it is here she appears the most connected to those around her:

Jeg havde smuglet en spandauer med hjem i tasken. Den var pakket ind i to servietter og krummede en del, da jeg tog den op. Tine sad ved spisebordet med Ditte på skødet og klappede kagede med de små hænder:

– En til mor og en til mor. Skal du over til Jane?

Jeg tog imod Ditte, og Tine begyndte at spise. Vi havde lavet kaffe, lejligheden duftede. (Helle 2005: 33)

(I'd smuggled a pastry home in my purse. It was wrapped in two napkins and crumbled quite a bit, when I pulled it up.

Tine sat by the table with Ditte in her lap and clapped a nursery rhyme with the tiny hands:

– One for mother and one for mother. You wanna sit with Jane? I took Ditte into my arms, and Tine started eating. We'd made coffee, the apartment was fragrant.)

The 'spandauer' Jane brings to her sister can be interpreted as a token of love and consideration. Jane's care in wrapping the pastry, as well as her concern for its appearance when she retrieves it, tells us that she wants to present her offerings nicely to Tine. The parenting role moves fluidly between the sisters, emphasised by Tine's nursery rhyme which replaces the word 'far' [father] in the original Danish version of the song with a double mention of the word for mother: 'mor.' As Ditte moves from lap to lap, the close nurturing bonds between the three are especially pronounced. The fragrant smell of coffee fills the kitchen, adding yet another layer of metaphorical unity to Jane's narration. It is fair to say from this passage that Jane appears content, even happy. Instead of suspiciously looking for some underlying problem in this scene, we can accept the external markers Jane offers to the reader as representative of her inner feelings.

The same goes for instances in the story where Jane feels unhappy. Like when she conjures the pastry and fragrant coffee to express a sense of belonging and contentedness, other objects aid her in articulating discomfort and self-criticism. Waking up one morning for an upcoming shift

on the ferries, she feels like 'en stor klods' (Helle 2005: 86, a big block). The source of Jane's uneasiness is not directly articulated but is possibly the result of her sleeping with a friend named Lauge the night before. More interesting than the underlying cause of Jane's feelings is the experience of displeasure itself, and how she describes it through the clothes she is wearing. Jane tries on a series of outfits, but nothing feels right, her inability to decide illustrates her anxiousness about the way in which others perceive her. Jane ends up donning her sister's white nylon stockings and brown flats. It is raining outside, and her stockings get dirty from the wet mud. Jane's chosen garment, bright and susceptible to stains, magnifies her vulnerability. Catching her reflection in a glass door at work, Jane describes her legs as 'to hvide stolper' (Helle 2005: 88, two white posts). Here, she makes her own body into an object, figuratively enlarging her legs into pillars. Although Jane's narrative gaze remains fixed on things rather than thought, we clearly understand that she finds herself in a vulnerable and self-critical state of mind. Firmly rooted in the external world, Jane's 'thing language' arguably wields an emotional complexity, revealing to us not only what she does, but who she is.

Conclusion

A crucial point remains on the broader significance of Jane's 'thing language'. Why argue so passionately for the empathic depth of her surface descriptions, when they are so easily read as a means to circumscribe meaningful conversations? When the latter option steers our critical attitude, characters such as Jane are quickly disregarded, misunderstood, or instrumentalised. The suspicious reader can assume that her silo is brimming full, its contents tragically hidden from the reader's view. They might view the ferries between Rødby and Puttgarden as passing souls, physically close and yet forever separated by the ocean waves. In this case, the circular connection of the novel's central women, Henriette, Tine, Jane, and Ditte, becomes a macro-level demonstration of structuralist pessimism. This is a reading attuned to Jane's sadness, and more broadly, to the ongoing oppression of the working classes. It is also a reading that transforms Jane into a martyr, for it works best if we do not understand her at all. If she is completely isolated, Jane's surrender into the repetitive modes and rhythms of working-class life is powerfully tragic.

However, if we try to understand Jane's 'thing language' as it is, her fate is perhaps not so dire. As queer theorist and writer Eve Kosofsky Sedwick argues, we need literary criticism to shift our attention from 'the nonsensical but seemingly uncircumscribable question of how people *should*

feel, to the much harder ones of how they do and how feelings change' (Sedgwick 1997: 2). As this article has shown, it can indeed be tempting to focus on how Jane should feel and act to break with the socioeconomic and emotional patterns of her family. Still, what if her silo does not conceal something within, standing instead as a clear projection of Jane's emotional state? What if the ocean does not separate the ferries between Rødby and Puttgarden but unites them? In the end, we may get further if we do not focus on what is absent in *Rødby-Puttgarden*. Reading instead in the spirit of ordinary language philosophy, we can choose to engage seriously with what is there. In the case of Jane, she creates a 'thing language' that describes, with rich and profound detail, her family's everyday life. If we accept and seriously attend to the radical conflation of inner life and the material world represented by this language, we gain the immense value of empathising with the working-class characters of Helle's novel, and more broadly, of recognising minimalism's important and ongoing contribution to working-class representation. It is in this sense we can say that Jane is talking through things, as opposed to talking around them.

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¹ As Barbara Henning notes in her article: 'Minimalism and the American Dream: 'Shiloh' by Bobbie Ann Mason and 'Preservation' by Raymond Carver,' several scholars have been devoted to the critique of minimalism. She mentions, among others, John Barth, 'A Few Words About Minimalism'; Michiko Kakutani, 'Form Over Function: Minimalism's Dead End.' Other notable critics include Cassandra Phillips and David Boxer, 'Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? Voyeurism, Dissociation, and the Art of Raymond Carver'; John W. Aldridge, *Talents and Technicians: Literary Chic and the New Assembly Line Fiction*.

² For instance, Helle elaborates on her relationship to Bang in a 2007 interview for the Danish newspaper *Information*: <https://www.information.dk/kultur/2007/04/herman-bang-150-aar>.

³ All translations of the primary text are my own.