

The Writer as Worker?

Perspectives on the Topical Question of Precarity Among Danish Writers¹

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Abstract

In light of recent public interest in working conditions among writers in Denmark, this article discusses the appropriateness of the widespread myth of the poor, suffering artist, which theories of precarity also tend to feed on when grouping the work of artists as precarious work. The ways in which Isabell Lorey, Guy Standing, and Bojana Kunst connect precarity to creative workers are compared to the ways in which Danish writers actually relate to their writing as work. It turns out that neither Standing's hopeful conception of the Progressives as a fraction of the precariat nor Lorey's and Kunst's idea of the self-precarised, but nevertheless worn-out virtuosos provide a satisfactory terminology when confronted with the concrete experiences expressed by the writers. A specifically interesting case is found in the Danish writers running the publishing house Basilisk in terms of their consistently non-profit ethos paired with an absence of precarity issues in their writings, questioning whether writing needs to be conceived of as wage labour at all.

Keywords

the precariat, Danish literature, literary sociology, the author, publishing

In recent years, there has been an increasing focus on the working conditions of artists, and a range of initiatives have been launched in order to map out writers' financial situation. According to Stevie Marsden, these surveys are attended by a noticeable critical awareness: 'economic disparity has become the leading conversation when it comes to the economies of writing in recent years' (Marsden 2018: 20). Denmark is no exception. The government, the news media and writers' communities have all paid attention to the issue. In 2016 the Book and Literature Panel, a state agency, published a report elucidating the poor financial conditions of Danish writers, and in 2017 the Danish minister of culture, Mette Bock, initiated a survey of the financial situation of musicians, forming part of a general attempt to clarify the job insecurity among Danish artists. Forfatternes Forvaltningsselskab, a management association of writers, was established in 2014 in order to improve the profit on their works. And in 2018 the newspaper *Information* published the two article series 'Forfattere og penge'² ('Writers and Money') and 'Kunstnerens andet job'³ ('The Artist's Other Job').

This concern is neither a uniquely Danish phenomenon nor confined to artists only. Rather, it is embedded in a broader, international orientation, which has been termed 'the turn to cultural work' (Banks, Gill and Taylor 2013: 1), referring to a pronounced rise in interest among social scientists and humanities researchers in the financial situation of creative workers and cultural producers.

As part of this picture, theories of precarity often have an influence on the field of aesthetics. The two leading theorists of precarity, Guy Standing and Isabell Lorey, both somehow buy into the idea of the artist as the epitome or showpiece of the precarious worker. And the present discussion of precarity, Lorey notes, has 'conspicuously taken place more often in art institutions than in social, political, or even academic contexts' (2010: 1).

This tendency among theorists to refer to the artist as their favourite representative of precarity puts the conceptualisation of precarity as such into question. It cuts into the disputed terminology (precariousness, precarity, the precariat, or precarisation?), making it clear that it is not straightforward to define what it really means to be exposed to unstable, unsettled working conditions, nor how to fight them or whether they should be fought at all.

This article examines how the writers' own attitudes to work and writing relate to the conception of cultural producers and creative workers as being precarised, bringing statements from a broad range

of low-income contemporary Danish writers into the discussion. Special attention is devoted to the writers running the small publishing house Basilisk, as their non-profit commitment to their activities specifically challenges general assumptions of writing as career-making.

Before examining the empirical material, I present the theoretical framework: theories relating precarity to creative work. This framework will form the basis of the discussion when subsequently being compared to the writers' own accounts of their work and way of life. But first, I outline the wider research field I engage with in the article.

The scope of cultural work

The 2010s opened with two significant conferences on cultural work instigating a number of new research projects on the topic.⁴ Since then cultural work has been a hot topic in academia. In the anthology *Theorizing Cultural Work* (2013), Mark Banks, Rosalind Gill and Stephanie Taylor draw attention to this emergent massive focus on cultural work and what they conceive of as an accompanying 'cult of novelty' (2013: 6). Insisting on adding a historical perspective, Banks, Gill and Taylor suspect this newness to pertain more to the hype itself than to the actual social significance of cultural work.

Another question, which has been raised in the wake of the 'turn to cultural work', is posed in the title of the article: 'Are We All Cultural Workers Now?' (2014) by Brett Neilson and Mark Coté. They point to the problem of delimiting cultural work and the current tendency to treat cultural work as an all-embracing term swallowing up many different kinds of work. Scholars in general agree that the former fixedness of working hours and workplace today has been replaced by a considerable flexibility. Thus the flexibility demanded by much cultural work – work from home, no set schedule etc. – increasingly defines the job market as a whole. But how far should this correlation be taken? Does it imply that, today, cultural work *per se* is especially significant when studying working conditions in general? Or do we lose sight of vital nuances when expanding the scope of cultural work that drastically? Those are the questions pertaining to this field of study and with which I grapple, contributing to the field with a comparison of a confined group of current cultural workers – Danish writers – to the notion of artists as the quintessence of the precarious worker, a notion common in theories of precarity.

The progressive spearhead and the precarious virtuoso

Though Standing and Lorey have quite different takes on precarity, they both assign to the artist an outstanding position in the crowd of precarious workers. What does this common ground add up to? At what point do their opposing perspectives tend to meet?

Standing defines the precariat by a non-intimate relation to work: 'For the precariat, jobs are instrumental, not life defining. The alienation from labor is taken for granted' (2015: 7). In contrast, Lorey's Foucault-inspired conception of governmental precarisation implies an extensive overlap of work with private life and personal engagement. Whereas in Standing's view, the precariat is 'less likely to suffer from false consciousness' (2015: 7), Lorey calls the seemingly free choice to work unsalaried or under poor conditions into question. This disagreement between Standing and Lorey is indicative of their different conceptions of work in the arts. Despite Lorey's insistence on the generalisation of the process of precarisation, she shows a peculiar interest in cultural producers and creative workers, whereas reflections on this particular group are scarce in Standing's work.

In *A Precariat Charter* (2014) and in the article 'The Precariat: Today's Transformative Class?' (2018), however, Standing does explicitly include the growing group of well-educated people in the precariat. He even foregrounds this particular group as the precariat's intellectual avant-garde that will form it as a new powerful class, devise its leftist politics, and act out the politics for the benefit of the whole class. Standing obviously puts his faith in this group, labelling it the Progressives – in contrast to the other two factions of the precariat, which he characterises by their lack of subversive potential: the so-called Atavists who bitterly lament the loss of the past working class communities to which they used to belong, and the Nostalgics, that is migrants and minorities, 'all those with the least secure rights anywhere' (Standing 2014: 29), the latter being politically passive while the former – because of their low level of education – are easy prey for Fascist and populist orators (Standing 2014: 28-30; Standing 2018).

As the Progressives are defined by educational background rather than artistic or cultural work, 'status frustration' being their defining feature (Standing 2014: 30), it is not obvious whether cultural producers and creative workers belong to this group or not. But Standing's hope that 'a new progressive vision' will be initiated by what he calls 'a new youthful romanticism, a flourishing artistic outbreak' (2014: 30) reveals that artists do in fact take part in and are even assigned a leading role in his grand vision.

Whereas Standing almost imperceptibly smuggles artists into his theory of the precariat, Lorey, in contrast, focuses her attention very explicitly on this particular group, terming it ‘voluntarily precarized virtuosos’ (2008). Rather than being haunted by thwarted expectations, as Standing claims about the Progressives, cultural producers and creative workers are according to Lorey fully aware of the precarity of sticking to their choice of work. This voluntariness is however questionable in her view. Despite the virtuosos’ perception of themselves as critical of society, Lorey finds their ‘interpellation to self-precarization’ caught up in tricky power relations that only ‘appear as a free decision’, eventually offering themselves to governing techniques of exploitation (2008). Still, self-precarisation also might hold a subversive potential (Lorey 2015). The governmental call to self-immunisation – to egoistically protect oneself against precarity – is met by Lorey’s concept of constituent immunisation, designating precarious initiatives directed towards communal life while eschewing governmental exploitation: ‘Although these new ways of self-organisation are precarious, they do not fit into the logic of biopolitical immunisation – one of fear, obedience and subjection’ (2015). This gleam of optimism is comparable to Kathleen Millar’s hopeful suggestion that (self-)precarisation, as token of a crisis in wage labour, might ‘open up other political possibilities’ (Millar 2017), lashing out at the underlying ideology constituting the job market: ‘the taken-for-granted valorization of waged work as an economic necessity, social duty, and moral practice’ (Millar 2017: 7), which in her view also permeates discussions of precarity.

In Lorey’s critique, the self-precarised artist is simultaneously subjugated and facilitator of alternative constellations of life, work, and community. Keeping her discussion abstract, Lorey comes up with no concrete examples of exploited versus empowered self-precarisation, leaving it unclear how to navigate this ambivalence. Inspired by Lorey, Bojana Kunst, in contrast, activates Lorey’s ideas in the concrete setting of the contemporary art institution, considering the popular participatory exhibitions that bring issues of precarity to the fore. Whereas art institutions regard these initiatives as public-spirited experiments with community formation, Kunst argues that they are in fact entrenched in governmental precarisation, unable to generate anything outside that horizon. Precarity is exhibited only within controlled institutional frames. Rather than being socially engaged, the institutions are preoccupied with self-immunisation, and in order to ‘protect their own vulnerability’ (2015: 11) they compete internally while sucking up to the foundations. ‘They should be

somehow protected from their own political consequences, from their own production of sociality in the sense that they should not endanger their status as receivers of public or private money,' Kunst concludes (2015: 11). She delivers an analysis of a specific case. But when figuring out how to overcome the impulse to self-immunisation, she resorts to a metaphorical and dim language of behaving 'like a plant, a weed, stuck in the ground but nevertheless connected with the surrounding habitat' (2015: 13), leaving concrete suggestions aside.

Suffering as bottom line

Despite the differences between Standing and the artier conception of precarity given by Lorey and Kunst, they all agree that uneasiness is key to precarity. Standing introduces *The Precariat* by stating that 'this book highlights the victim side of the precariat' (2011: vii), emphasising its sufferings, frustrations, and anxieties. In his view of the global class structure, degree of contentment follows income. His seven categories enlisted in descending order of income are the plutocracy, the elite, the salariat, the proficians (contractors, self-employed and the like, still with high income), the old proletariat, the precariat, and the lumpen-proletariat (social outcasts). The placement of the precariat just above the most disadvantaged of society indicates a great level of discontent paired with a low level of income. This predicament of the precariat, intensified by a widespread feeling of being alienated from their work and unable to manage their own time, sums up Standing's indignation.

The terms Standing uses to describe the reprehensible working conditions of the precariat – 'insecure', 'unstable', 'part-time,' and 'work-for-labor' (2015: 6) – are also emphasised by Lorey and Kunst, entailing 'the fear of the insecurity' (Kunst 2015: 7). Work in the arts is conceived as highly applicable to exactly these terms. As Lorey notes with reference to cultural producers: 'Experiences of anxiety and loss of control, feelings of insecurity as well as the fear and the actual experience of failure, a drop in social status and poverty are linked with this state of self-precariation' (2008).

According to Lorey, the self-precariated are in constant need of individual protection and therefore forced to be incessantly active, engendering serious stress: 'You have to stay "on speed" or else you could be eliminated. You always feel threatened' (2008). This logic also fully dominates the art institutions, Kunst maintains: 'To protect their own vulnerability they have to continuously reach out, [...] continuously compete in cleverness, cunningness and tactical

strength, but at the same time also nourish the values of collaboration and friendship among cultural agents' (2015: 11).

Cultural theorist Sianne Ngai relates precariousness to a specific aesthetic category. The 'zany', she argues, indexes essential aspects of work in late modern society: 'this playful, hypercharismatic aesthetic is really an aesthetic about work – and about a precariousness created specifically by the capitalist organization of work' (2012: 188). Reminiscent of the incessant activity of the precarised identified by Lorey and Kunst, the zany is restlessly on the go and hyper-flexible, desperately aiming at a real job. Despite all its hilarious tics and gestures, the zany is impelled by a deep frustration at being 'the unhappily striving wannabe' (Ngai 2012: 189).

In short, precarity entails suffering. Curiously, when precarity is then conflated with creative work, it seems to pick up the old and hackneyed idea of the suffering artist rather than offering a brand-new perspective. Both Lorey's idea of the self-precarised virtuoso and Standing's idea of the progressive intellectual continue a long tradition of viewing the artist as a poor wreck dragging along at the outskirts of society, famously depicted in Carl Spitzweg's painting *Der arme Poet* (1839), which oscillates between depicting the poet's poverty as attractively fearless, downright worrying, and simply ridiculous. This oscillation aptly sums up what is at stake in Lorey's and Standing's efforts to include artists in precarity.

Introducing the Danish case

By examining the way Danish writers actually talk about their writing activities, I now set out to test this persistent presumption of the suffering artist. The material enabling my examination has been gathered from different fields. To begin with, it includes the small amount of empirical research already carried out on the specific topic in academia. Secondly it draws from writers' statements found in newspapers and other media available to the public. And, in the third place, it includes my own interviews with a handful of Danish writers carried out in 2016 and 2018. These interviews were conducted as an open dialogue with each writer and lasted for about an hour each. The statements from both the media and the interviews all belong to contemporary Danish writers. The statements are in almost all cases no more than a couple of years old; the oldest one is from 2011.

In terms of the writers' public statements, I have not made any selection but simply used the material available. Some of these writers are engaged in labour unions, some are engaged in publishing, and some just write. The interviews, on the other hand, supplement the

other material by concentrating on the confined group of five writers running the small publishing house Basilisk.⁵ They were all educated at the Danish creative writing school around the turn of the millennium and have been active in the literary milieu ever since, as writers and as publishers. Their uncompromising attitude to writing, work and wages makes visible the challenges and choices of writers in general, adding a new perspective to the field that is not fully compatible with the theories linking precarity to creative workers.

The poverty of arts grants

In a welfare society, the state seeks to restrain its citizens' exposure to precarity, offering free social services like medical care and education. In Denmark, the government arts foundation was established as the icing on the welfare cake, enabling the state to value and support its artists financially. The Danish government arts grants, however, do not keep artists from poverty; it is rather the other way around.

It emerges from the 2016 report, *Forfatteres og oversætteres økonomiske levevilkår* (The living conditions of writers and translators), that among writers, government grant holders tend to spend most time on writing while having the lowest income (Bille et al. 2016: 86, 104). This correlation suggests that grant holders are the writers most likely to be exposed to precarity. This exposure caused by the grants is intensified by the fact that art grants do not count as paid work in the Danish system of unemployment benefits, leaving it very difficult for grant holders to earn the right to benefits.

For Stig Hjarvard, former chair of the Danish Book Panel, the report findings give an opportunity to criticise the allotted amounts of the grants: 'the grants [...] could certainly be bigger. The grant holders do not reach the average level [of income, ed.]' (Plum 2016), cited in *Ugebrevet A4*, a magazine about the Danish job market. In *Why Are Artists Poor?*, the economist and artist Hans Abbing similarly notes that arts subsidies are clearly unable to improve and safeguard artists' finances. Simply to raise the amount would however not solve the problem, Abbing warns. For example, there is no notable difference between the incomes of artists in the Netherlands compared to countries with fewer subsidies. '*More social benefits induces more people to enter the arts and as a consequence, more people earn lower incomes and poverty in the arts increases*' (2002: 141, emphasis original); '*Art subsidies based on the equity argument that are intended to raise artists' incomes, are ineffective or counterproductive*' (2002: 214, emphasis original), Abbing concludes. The income from

arts grants is by definition very insecure. The question is, however, whether the situation – as Abbing insinuates – is critical. Should the overriding purpose of government arts funding be to raise and stabilise artists' income or could it simply be to facilitate the production of art? In the latter case, the current system seems to work well (Bille et al. 2017: 374), regardless of the complicity of arts grants in the writers' exposure to precarity.

Contrary to both Abbing and Hjarvard, the poverty and insecurity accompanying arts grants do not really give offence to the writers running *Basilisk*. When asked what the ideal funding of artistic work would look like, Martin Larsen responds that he thinks the current system is fundamentally good, though does not hesitate to call it deeply insecure (Tetzlaff 2012: 22). For the last ten years he has been able to scrape through primarily on government arts grants and small earnings on the side, e.g. translations and literary events, leading a very spartan life.

Writers often state that their arts grants have been used as a welcome occasion to loosen their connection with the job market. According to an evaluation from 2018 of the much coveted three-year-grant, amounting to 855,000 DKK or around £100,000, this grant enabled 73 per cent of its holders to work less on the side or completely leave the job market (Dansk Forfatterforening 2018). When Martin Larsen got the three-year-grant, he asked his work place, a crossword press, if he could work less, but as they were unwilling, he quit. The same story goes for René Jean Jensen. Both decided to focus entirely on writing as soon as they were given the opportunity. Such behaviour indicates a preference for flexibility and for picking and choosing according to the circumstances, without any aspirations to get more money or permanent employment. Instead of offering Danish writers a social safety net, arts grants, then, seem to foster an alliance with part-time, casual, and temporary jobs.

In need of multifarious sidelines

A piecing-together of different kinds of work and different incomes – from e.g. jobs on the side, arts grants, and partners and family – is typical for the vast majority of Danish writers, the 2016 report shows (Bille et al. 2016: 59). Not all writers welcome this need to work on the side. Jakob Vedelsby, chair of the Danish writers' union, Forfatterforeningen, summarises his two main concerns: 'en ting er, at kvaliteten af ens arbejde bliver forringet, hvis man kun har tid til at skrive et par timer hist og her. En anden er, at det er utilfredsstillende for de forfattere, som brænder for deres arbejde' (Plum 2016) (Firstly,

the quality of your work is reduced if you have time to write only a couple of hours here and there. Secondly, it is unsatisfactory to the writers who are passionate about their work).

But is it true that the sidelines of contemporary Danish writers necessarily lead to discontent and are directly opposed to creative production? Martin Larsen for instance enjoyed being literary reviewer for the newspaper *Information* 2000-2004: 'It was absolutely driven by pleasure, and when it was not driven by pleasure anymore, I stopped doing it.'⁶ Reviewing is of course in itself a literary activity and therefore might not really be seen as a sideline. The crossword press offers writers another way to engage in language, though less directly affiliated with writing. Getting to work with words on the side is however not desirable for all writers. René Jean Jensen for instance did not find the mental energy to write when occupied at the crossword press: 'rent skriftligt var jeg udsolgt efter en lang arbejdsdag, hvor jeg udelukkende havde beskæftiget mig med ord' (Jensen 2018: 14) ('in terms of writing I was sold out at the end of a long work day where I had been exclusively occupied with words'). His current job therefore suits him much better: 'Jeg er havemand. [...] [Jeg slår] græs og fælder træer og den slags. Det fungerer. Jeg kan bedre koncentrere mig om at skrive, når mit bijob lægger beslag på mine hænder frem for mit hoved.' (Jensen 2018: 14) ('I am a gardener. [...] I cut grass and fell trees and the like. It works. I am better at concentrating on writing, when my sideline occupies my hands rather than my head').

The writer Jesper Brygger tells of his extra job as respirator operator, watching over ill people and fixing their machinery, that it was mentally demanding and therefore did not leave much room for writing: 'det var begrænset, hvor meget jeg kunne koncentrere mig om at skrive i min notesbog. Jeg blev så udmattet' (Brygger 2018: 14) ('it was limited how much I could concentrate on writing in my notebook. I was so exhausted'). His collection of poetry, *Transporterne* (2017), nevertheless draws on these experiences, turning the constellation of respirator, operator, and patient into a key figure. Similar to René Jean Jensen's story, the writer Maja Lee Langvad notes that among her different sidelines, her job doing a traffic census – hanging out at railway stations in overall trousers and with a Thermos – was her favourite precisely because it was so different from sitting and writing (Langvad 2018: 14).

Consequently, instead of regarding jobs on the side that are not directly relatable to arts work as a unfortunate duty, or complaining about them as a waste of time, some writers actually seem to enjoy

them, or welcome them as opportunities to release some time or save some mental energy for the act of writing – or to use them as literary material.

Bread-and-butter writing

In 2011, the Danish writer Jo Hermann published a collection of essays reflecting on Danish writers' financial working conditions in light of the government arts foundation in Denmark, noting that today more writers than ever seek to live by their writing (2011: 20-21). And quite a few contemporary Danish writers do manifest a strong awareness of their financial challenges. Emblematically, when Tine Høeg left her regular position as a high school teacher to become a full-time writer, after having received her first arts grant, her occupation with money increased considerably: 'Jeg har paradoksalt nok aldrig været så økonomisk bevidst og voksen som nu, hvor jeg har sagt det almindelige voksenjob op. [...] Jeg har meldt mig ind i en forfatterforening, og jeg har også lige holdt noget, som jeg lidt for sjov kaldte en personalefest hjemme i min lejlighed – sådan en fest for forfattere og andre skabende folk. Men egentlig er det ikke for sjov, jeg mener det jo' (Høeg 2018: 17) ('Paradoxically I have never been as financially conscious and grown-up as now when I have quit the normal adult job. [...] I have joined a writers' union and I also just threw what I in fun called a staff party in my apartment – a party for writers and other creative people. But it is not just for fun, after all, I mean it').

Among the writers interviewed by *Information*, there is a consensus that the earnings on sales when publishing a book are extremely low. In order to get at least some money out of their books, the writers turn to other significant actors within the literary institution. The writer Glenn Christian, for instance, asks the publishing industry for more responsibility: 'Jeg har en god redaktør, der formentlig tjener en rigtig løn, mens jeg sidder på den anden side af skrivebordet og nærmest ikke tjener noget. Det kan jeg godt undre mig lidt over' (Christian 2018: 15) ('I have a competent editor who presumably makes a real salary while I am sitting on the other side of the desktop and earns next to nothing. That makes me wonder a bit'). The libraries are also addressed, as Forfatterernes Forvaltningsselskab, with reference to copyright, demands that libraries pay royalties every time a writer's text is somehow performed or presented in the library space (Thielke 2017: 16).

What is common to these concerns among writers and writers' associations is a conception of the writer as a worker; a wish to equate

writers as much as possible with full-time wage earners in order to protect them from their potential precarity. The ideal is, in short, to turn writing into bread-and-butter.

Some writers take the matter more directly into their own hands in order to put this ideal into practice. The publishing house Gladiator, established by Hans Otto Jørgensen in 2013, thus presents an alternative to the leading Danish publishing houses such as Gyldendal, operating with a fair trade model ensuring the writers a fair share. Besides publishing, Gladiator runs several creative writing schools, with the object of allowing writers to live on being writers: 'Our creative writing schools seek to make it possible for our writers to make some money. We basically try to give the writers some actual work,'⁷ Hans Otto Jørgensen explains. Gladiator thus subscribes to the conception of the writer as a worker, seeking to create as much work as possible for the writers in want of full-time work and to improve their terms.

Writing for nothing

The wage-oriented statements of writers like Tine Høeg, of institutions like Forfatterforeningen, and of the publishing house Gladiator run counter to Millar's critique of the tendency to idealise wage labour when dealing with precarious working conditions. Basilisk's attitude to the book market, on the other hand, looks fairly different. Like Gladiator, Basilisk also flies in the face of the widespread disproportionality in the publishing industry, but in a way quite contrary to Gladiator – and to the assumption that publishing and writing should be equally acknowledged as wage labour. The members of Basilisk do not pay themselves, neither as editors nor as writers. They hold on tight to the principle of voluntariness enforced by the founder Per Aage Brandt shortly after Basilisk's establishment in 1983. In Brandt's view this principle is the reason for Basilisk's viability: 'The small presses basically should be free from crisis when they follow that form'.⁸ And Basilisk in fact has, contrary to many other small Danish presses, been continuously active ever since, with no dead periods, relatively independent of the ups and downs of the market.

The attitude among the writers running Basilisk discredits the conviction that the wish for a real and secure job necessarily is the guiding light for all people exposed to precarity. In that way they approach Lorey's and Millar's hopeful suggestion that (self-) precarisation, as token of a crisis in wage labour, might 'open up other political possibilities' (Millar 2017: 7). They do not criticise their own exposure to precarity, as they do not seem to consider themselves in that way – or do not care. But in creating their own space indifferent

to the ground rules of the job market, they partially manage to opt out of the draining career race, eschewing the structural vulnerability and insecurity built into the wage labour system, or what Millar designates 'the latent precarity of all workers' (2017: 6).

The cultural economist David Throsby argues that the economic conception of the worker in general does not match artists: 'The theory of labour supply is predicated on the assumption that work is simply a means to income. Workers are assumed to have a positive preference for leisure time and a negative preference or disutility for time spent working' (1994: 69). As an alternative Throsby seeks to model artists' 'labour supply behaviour as a specific case that combines both the desire to follow a particular calling and the need to earn a minimum income for survival' (1994: 69), implying that the value artists get from their work cannot be fully measured in money. This basic questioning and re-modelling are highly relevant to the writers running *Basilisk*. In their case, making money seems to serve as a means to release some time to actually work (produce literature) rather than the other way around, thoroughly belying the standard presumption about people's economic incentive to work.

The happy writer

At the beginning of the 2010s, just as the interest in cultural work began to explode, the Danish cultural economist Trine Bille carried out a large-scale study of artists in Europe in collaboration with international researchers. The results of the study, which were revealed under the title 'Happiness in the Arts. International Evidence on Artists' Job Satisfaction' (2013), have received no attention among the theorists of precarity discussed in this article, their ideas of the virtuosos and the progressives pointing in a very different direction. The 2013 study concluded that, in fact, 'artists exhibit significantly higher job satisfaction, or happiness with their work, than non-artists' (Bille et al. 2013: 16). This high degree of job satisfaction relates to the fact that 'artists pay less importance to [...] job security,' while particularly valuing 'the opportunity to use initiative in their job, [...] that they have an interesting job, [...] that they can learn new skills on the job [...] and that they can be more independent in relation to their working hours and work places' (Bille et al. 2013: 17).

When Standing proclaims that the progressives were promised good jobs on account of their education and were then disappointed, he does not seem to take into account that doing arts work has hardly ever been fuelled by the promise of financial security and success. The specific working conditions and incentives of artists do not really fit

any of Standing's seven categories. The group of artists cuts across them all, as low income and low job security do not imply any notable frustration.

The general positive working experience of artists revealed in the 2013 study, stressing personal engagement and much-appreciated self-employment and self-determination, contradicts Standing's automatic coupling of job insecurity with a loss of freedom, enthusiasm and time management. No doubt, it is hard to live by one's writing, as Jo Hermann points out. Nevertheless, she still stresses all the things that cannot be measured in financial terms: the joy of writing, the readers, travel, celebrations, attention, and freedom (Hermann 2011: 21).

By free choice only

Freedom is a key reference everywhere writers tell their stories. The way the writers running Basilisk relate to their work only consolidates the findings of the 2013 study, valuing the ability to decide for themselves what to work with and when. It is interest and the will to stay independent that drives Basilisk. 'We are not interested in thinking about profit,' Majse Aymo-Boot states, insisting on being 'free to publish what we like.'⁹ And René Jean Jensen ventures to literally relate poverty to autonomy: 'Oddly enough, sometimes there is also a big freedom in being poor.'¹⁰ Rather than conceiving of their work as something they have to do – serving society or some higher call – they do it because they like it. Martin Larsen makes it clear: 'I find it hard to say about anything that it is important. I can just relate to what I think is funny. If there is one thing I would like you to stress it is pleasure. That is really the key.'¹¹ Though running Basilisk is a lot of work, it is always based on free will, and, Majse Aymo-Boot notes, it is possible to throttle down and step up according to what else is going on in their lives: 'We screw the work load up and down, and then we work a bit in between.'¹² The work is carried out on their own terms.

As well-educated low-income artists with poor job security, the writers running Basilisk perfectly fit in the Progressive faction of Standing's precariat. But they do not behave accordingly. Their passionate and voluntary relation to their arts work seems closer to Lorey's conception of the self-precarised virtuoso. That comparison however also runs into problems. Conspicuously, the frenetic, fatiguing, networking activities of the self-precarised virtuoso assumed by Lorey do not apply to the writers running Basilisk. Their attitude towards promotion is very easy-going. For instance, Basilisk does not usually participate in the big commercial book fairs in

Denmark. Not even alternative small book fairs, such as Lille Bogdag, are on Basilisk's must-do list. Sometimes they participate with a stand, but not always, regardless of whether they might lose opportunities for sales and networking. On no account do they feel compelled to do something they do not like or do not have the time to do.

Despite the fact that the work executed by the writers running Basilisk is very much insecure, unstable, part-time, work-for-labour, temporary, unpaid etc., it is consequently up for discussion to what extent they are exposed to precarity. They do not conceive of themselves as specifically subjugated. That of course does not exempt them from precarisation in Lorey's view, since the 'left wing,' 'critical' self-perception is allegedly typical of the self-precarised and no proof of self-empowerment (2008). But the indisputable fact that these writers seem fully content and at ease with their situation pulls them away from the pressures, anxieties, and workaholic tendencies, which according to both Standing, Lorey, Kunst, and Ngai are bound up with precarisation.

Precarious aesthetics

For Ngai, aesthetics and social structures are closely interrelated. Therefore, the last move in my examination of the way Danish writers relate to theories of precarity, is to ask: What about the writing itself? Are the works of the current writers highlighted in this article in any way invested in the discussion of precarity? According to Ngai, zany characters and zany style have gained a renewed relevance in popular cultural products of late modernity, pointing to phenomena like Jim Carey. At the same time, in much contemporary Danish literature the issue of precarity is also put at stake thematically (Haarder, Simonsen and Schwartz 2018). In this regard it is striking how little the writers running Basilisk touch upon the subject in their own writings. They simply do not take up as literary material the uneasiness and anger dominating people exposed to precarity. There are however a few aspects of the writings of Majse Aymo-Boot, Pejck Malinovski, and Peter Højrup that somehow relate to precarity and zaniness and therefore need to be considered.

Much of Majse Aymo-Boot's writings are marked by a comical, exaggerated, and constantly posturing style akin to the zany, as Tue Andersen Nexø has also noticed with reference to *Ødelæggelsen 1-11* (2010) (Nexø 2016: 145). Any relation to the job market is however absent in her writings and, even more important, her preference for rapidly changing postures and showing-off denotes exultant playfulness and self-enjoyment rather than anger, anxiety, and

discontent. Her latest work, *Postkort fra Vatikanet* (Postcard from the Vatican, 2018), holds a darker note. This darkness, however, relates to the loafing and sauntering of the tourist in sharp contrast to the career pursuit of the worker.

Another case is Pejk Malinovski's podcast 'Poetry, Texas' (2013), in which he travels to an inconspicuous village called Poetry in the boondocks of Texas talking to people living there. Many of them are indeed precarious, for instance a man with incurable cancer living in a trailer. He says about the place: 'What is Poetry to me? Just a lot of hard-working people, you can see that, just driving up and down the road.' Despite this evidently precarious mixture of hard work and suffering, social indignation does not seem to be the incentive of the podcast. On the contrary, when wondering about the nature of poetry – or Poetry – Pejk Malinovski approaches an affirmative conception of precariousness: 'a way of being in the world, as an old rusty tractor, exposed to wind and weather'. Such exposure has nothing to do with historically specific working conditions. It is comparable to Judith Butler's precariousness, but rather than being an ontological condition, it seems to depend on a certain *ability* to meet the world openly, to let it in. Exposure is thus equated with a sensitive, distinctly poetic attitude.

The last example, Peter Højrup's *Island* (2014), stands out as it in fact concentrates on the writer's problematic relation to the market, culminating in a toe-curling incident at the Danish book fair Bogmessen. As the protagonist desperately tries to live up to his career ambitions, struggles with frustration, and resents being turned into a cash cow, the precarity of writers is definitely thematised in the novel, but as a laughable subject, a ridiculous subject. *Island* is a comedy. Rather than calling attention to the bad conditions of writers in society, it pokes fun at the cliché of the suffering writer. Ngai's zany category is of course also comic. But the comedy of Ngai's zany, in comparison, springs from the worker's transformation into a job-searching performer, and therefore, though the worker's manic entertainment makes us laugh, it also disturbingly conveys a burnt-out and wretched condition. In *Island*, on the other hand, the laughter is not hampered by an undertone of depression; the laughter is directed *at* the desperation.

Conclusion

Aesthetically, the writers running Basilisk differ both from that touch of socialist realism typical of the representations of precarity in contemporary literature, and from the zany cultural products of late

modernity that voice precarious working conditions. In that way their relation to precarity can be contrasted to other contemporary Danish writers, such as Yahya Hassan, whose aesthetic engagement with precarity combines precisely socialist realism with a zany style, full of capitals, exaggerations, aggressions, and face-pulling. Yahya Hassan's social background in the 'ghetto' is of course also drastically unlike the writers running Basilisk. When they finally touch on precarity in their own writings, they always somehow eschew it: Majse Aymo-Boot's zany-like style is void of anxiety and bitterness, triumphantly embracing flourishing clichés, postures, and grimaces; Pejki Malinovski turns exposure and receptivity into a question of a desirable attitude rather than approaching it as a questionable social condition; and, lastly, Peter Højrup refuses, in the name of comedy, to let the zany strivings of the wannabe writer count as a serious social problem.

It is questionable whether low-income writers as a social category should be bracketed with precarity at all, the empirical material demonstrates – at least in a Danish context. The cases brought to light in this article show that Standing's conception of the precariat is indeed not tailor-made for cultural producers and creative workers, though he envisions them as the spearhead of the precariat's fight for better conditions. In Lorey's theoretical framework, the virtuoso's self-precarisation is said to increasingly become a norm imposed on all workers rather than an actual choice, absorbing cultural producers and creative workers into contemporary working life as such. But this equalisation is no less problematic. Lorey's conception of the anxieties and frustrations of the self-precarised as an indisputable fact runs counter to actual statements of contemporary writers about their wellbeing. Similarly, the associated desperate career hunt and incessant, breakneck self-immunisation, confirmed by Kunst and Ngai, do not apply to all contemporary writers either. As soon as concrete cases are brought into the discussion, a much more mixed picture appears. Despite poverty and job insecurity, it turns out, artists are generally happy with their work in the arts. To a great extent, they manage their own time and choose for themselves what to work with.

It is necessary to take the expanding social group of creative workers more convincingly into consideration when discussing precarity. The picture needs to be refined and differentiated; theorists of precarity such as Standing and Lorey need to be more open to the findings and questions raised by cultural economists such as Throsby, Bille, and Banks. Otherwise, the tendency to incorporate artists into theories of precarity risks doing more harm than good. Is it really

advantageous to indisputably exposed social groups, such as illegal immigrants left with no other option than to do undeclared work, to be compared to artists? Or do such correlations rather indicate a lack of realism? Could it be that for instance the loosening of work time and workplace is likely to intensify reprehensible exploitations of one group while being completely fine for another? Is low income or high inequality in earnings problematic in all cases, including work solely selected and defined by the practitioner and carried out with pleasure or, at least, in response to some inner need?

Artists' specific need to balance the engagement in artistic activities on the one hand with material necessities on the other, as identified by Throsby, corresponds very well with the concerns expressed by the Danish writers examined in this article. As the writer Thomas Korsgaard points out, showing no signs of desiring a fixed and stable income: 'Problemet med penge og kunst er jo, at man et eller andet sted, gerne skriver sine bøger gratis, fordi det er så vigtigt for en. Det er ens hjerteblod. Jeg er nærmest villig til at sælge alt min inventar for at skrive, men det går jo ikke' (Korsgaard 2018: 15) ('The problem with money and art is that in a sense you are willing to write your books for nothing, because it is so important to you. It is your heart's blood. I am almost willing to sell all my furniture and equipment in order to write, but of course that won't do'). It does not seem possible to completely align arts work with the work of regular wage earners. Shortage of money does not keep people from writing. Contrary to economic theory, new aspiring artists keep flocking to the trough though well aware of the poverty of artistic life.

That being said, writers still have quite different views on how to provide their material necessities. Should writing in principle be economically valued, or not? Currently, claims for and attempts to give writers some decent working conditions comparable to those of other employees are coming to the fore, simultaneously protecting the writers from precarity and arguably – by pushing them into the clutches of the market – exposing them to precarity.

Another attitude – in this article most directly expressed by the writers running Basilisk – seeks to care as little as possible about the moneymaking potential of literature. As Peter Højrup puts it: 'Should I bike through the streets with a carrier cycle and sell my books? I am sure you could do a lot to push things, but it does not really interest me.'¹³ In the running of Basilisk, literature does not make money; rather money is spent on making literature. Grants are gratefully received, but nothing else is demanded. These writers deliberately

shut their ears to the constant demands to go sell stuff, to network, to engage and push forward – and so partly immunise themselves to the stressful bustle of the precarised. As they once put it on Basilisk's Facebook profile: 'Vi synes i øvrigt at det kan betale sig at arbejde – gratis'¹⁴ ('We think by the way that it pays to work – for free'), inverting the mantra of *quid pro quo* currently dominating unemployment policies in Denmark.

Endnotes

¹ This article was written with financial support from the Danish National Research Foundation (DNRF127).

² A series of six articles, published 11-17 April 2018.

³ A series of seven articles, published 28 September-9 November 2018.

⁴ *The Future of Cultural Work* (2010) held at the Open University London Regional Centre. Organised by King's College London, Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change, Manchester University and the Open University. *Moral Economies of Creative Labour* (2011) held at the Institute of Communications Studies, University of Leeds. Organised by The Media Industries Research Centre, ICS, University of Leeds and Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change, The Open University.

⁵ The five writers are Martin Larsen, René Jean Jensen, Pejk Malinovski, Majse Aymo-Boot, and Peter Højrup.

⁶ Interview 27 September 2018

⁷ Interview 29 April 2016

⁸ Interview 16 April 2016

⁹ Interview 10 October 2018

¹⁰ Interview 10 October 2018

¹¹ Interview 27 September 2018

¹² Interview 10 October 2018

¹³ Interview 10 September 2018

¹⁴ Basilisk's status update on Facebook, June 2015
<<https://www.facebook.com/forlagetbasilisk>>

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