

Generation(s) superfluous

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Abstract

Living precariously means to live without having control over your own life, being exposed and in the power of others (Haarder, Schwartz & Simonsen 2018: 188). In this article I compare the precarity that characterises both young and older persons, and I claim that they have in common the feeling of being superfluous. I explore short stories by Norwegian authors Jan Kristoffer Dale and Bjarte Breiteig with an emphasis on the following questions: what are the consequences of being superfluous and living precariously? And how is this challenge dealt with in literature and in life? I argue that problems connected to entering adult working life may generate the same issues as entering life as pensioner, since without a meaningful job, our prospect of a good and dignified life is weakened.

Keywords

the precariat, Norwegian literature, Jan Kristoffer Dale, Bjarte Breiteig, unemployment, ageing

‘While youths are having trouble beginning a viable life, old agers are confused, some in a pleasant way, some in a wretched one’ (Standing 2017: 92). The entrance to working life is difficult, but important, since the ability to contribute to society as well as being able to support yourself and your family affect your entire future and how your life will develop. In this article I will compare the precarity that characterises both young and older persons. I will claim that they may have in common the feeling of being superfluous. Thus, I will explore two literary works with an emphasis on the following questions: what are the consequences of this condition? And how is this challenge dealt with in literature and in life? I am especially interested in the impact of important transitions in the last phase of life, but I will also point out how entering adult working life may generate the same issues as entering life as a pensioner. The Norwegian author Jan Kristoffer Dale depicts young men who live and work precariously in the short story collection *Arbeidsnever* (Working Hands, 2016). This tendency is also represented in fiction about old agers, a phenomenon which in this article is represented by Bjarte Breiteig’s short story ‘Ingenting hendt’ (Nothing happened) from the short story collection, *Surrogater* (Surrogates, 2000). Since my material is limited to selected short stories, this article can only illuminate possible similarities between what it feels like to establish oneself in working life and to retire from the same, and the role of literature in representing these transitions.

Living precariously is defined by Jon Helt Haarder, Camilla Schwartz and Peter Simonsen as living without having control over your own life, being exposed and in the power of others (2018: 188). Living precariously may generate emotions that are especially effectively addressed in fiction; emotions about what Guy Standing calls the precariat, which may refer to a distinctive socio-economic group. The term *precariat* could then be described as ‘a neologism that combines an adjective “precarious” and a related noun “proletariat”’ (Standing 2017: 8). But according to Standing, this definition has its limitations, since the precariat is a *class in the making* (Standing 2017: 8). Standing identifies its class characteristics: the precariat consists of people who have minimal trust relationships with capital or the state. And the precariat has none of the social contract relationships of the proletariat, such as labour securities. Thus, the precariat is characterised by its so-called truncated status (Standing 2017: 9–10). The definition is not stable; it will vary with respect to time and place. For instance, the term precariat has different definitions in different countries like Japan, Italy, Germany (Standing 2017: 10).

In this article the term will be used to describe temporary workers, but also the jobless who have no hope of social integration (Standing 2017: 10) – and this category will include old agers. The precariat is not a homogenous group, but ‘they all share a sense that their labour is instrumental (to live), opportunistic (taking what comes) and precarious (insecure)’ (Standing 2017: 15). The literary characters depicted by Dale and Breiteig have in common that without a meaningful job, their prospect of a good and dignified life is weakened.

Young and superfluous

In Jan Kristoffer Dale’s short story collection *Arbeidsnever* (Working Hands) (2016) we meet several people who live and work precariously. They are characterised by frustration, hopelessness, and aggression; emotions that make humans resign or rebel. Dale’s young men are trying to become valued workers, but they are held back by short-term contracts and uncertain conditions. In addition, their work is hard and demanding because of its monotony and repetitive character. The short story ‘Working Hands’ introduces us to Trygve who is working at a brewery, where he sorts bottles, and conditions are not well organised:

Tomgodset som skulle sorteres, hadde stått ute over natta. Snøen var overalt. På flaskene og bretta. Den falt ned på golvet og smelta sammen med støvet fra pallene. Etter bare 20 minutter var Trygve klissblaut. [...] Trygve løfta ned enda et brett fra haugen med tomgods. Med en gang han hadde tømt fire paller, var truckføreren tilbake med fire nye. Beina hans verka, så han gikk inn på do, satte seg på lokket. Dassen var det eneste stedet man kunne sette seg uten å bli lagt merke til (Dale 2017: 18, 20).

(The empties that were to be sorted had been left outside overnight. There was snow everywhere. On the bottles and the tray. It fell on the floor and melted with the dust from the pallets. After only 20 minutes, Trygve was wet all over. [...] Trygve lifted another tray from the pile of empties. Once he had emptied four pallets, the truck driver was back with four new ones. He had aching legs, so he went into the bathroom, sat down on

the lid. It was the only place he could sit down without being noticed.)

(All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.)

One of the bosses watches them – she does not contribute in any way, but she often gives a sign when she thinks the workers are too slow. A good community of colleagues might have compensated and motivated each other. But they seem to lack any sense of community. This problem may be related to uncertain working conditions and the use of short-term contracts.

Health care has to some degree been industrialised in Norway. Thus, the gap between those who lead and those who work on the floor has become increasingly wide. A group of women educated in the health professions and with some finance education have made a career out of middle management jobs, and they end up being loyal upwards, according to Kari Wærness (2009). We may claim that health care has adopted the management system from the working class. The lack of loyalty towards the workers prevents building a robust and good working environment and community. Production and effectivity are more important: 'Effektivitet er det viktigste, sa Steinar, – dere er vårt ansikt utad' (Dale 2017: 21) (Efficiency is the most important thing, Steinar said, – you are our public face). Trygve notices that the man from the employment agency, Steinar, does not even look at any of the workers when he is talking. They are calling for new contracts, but they are just told that it soon will be fixed. When the working day is over, the workers are described as 'red cheeks and runny noses' (22) ('røde kinn og rennende neser'). This *pars pro toto* description highlights what dominates the situation; how they are feeling. They are not motivated; they are cold and tired and happy to escape. Dale's short stories demonstrate what it means and how it affects life when people are left with insecure forms of labour that are unlikely to assist them in building a desirable identity, a desirable career and a safe future.

'One way of depicting the precariat is as "denizens". A denizen is someone who, for one reason or another, has more limited range of rights than citizens do' (Standing 2017: 15). The temporary workers at the brewery even have to buy the equipment they need themselves, and they have only got two-week contracts. The unpredictability is stressful, and the work protection is weak. They are never praised when they work fast. Instead, one is criticised for taking a short break, because there are always new pallets to sort. Either way, they are

criticised, and their work ethic and desire to work is broken down. They become indifferent.

In 'Working Hands' several of the workers are well educated persons waiting for approval of their qualifications; an engineer from Latvia, an architect from Poland, a teacher from Romania, and so on. Thus, some of the workers are well educated, but their education is worthless before they get the approval and as long as they do not speak Norwegian. Their potential is neither recognised nor appreciated or exploited. This situation seems paradoxical, since education is normally appreciated by society.

The Norwegian workers in Dale's short stories lack education, and their lives are devalued. For instance, Tone in 'Working Hands' is unemployed; she has just lost her temporary job in a kindergarten. Her sister has chosen a different road; she is a student living in Oslo: '– Ho skjønner ikkje at e vil bli mamma, sa Tone, – ho seiar at e har heile livet foran mæ, og at æ bør få mæ ein utdanning. At e blir ein taper hvis ikkje e gjør det. Ho sa at taperforeldre får taperongar!' (Dale 2017: 23) (She doesn't realise that I want to be a mum, Tone said, – she says I have my whole life in front of me and that I should get an education. That I'm a loser if I don't. She says loser parents have loser kids.) Tone's sister considers both Trygve and Tone to be losers, but when they are not being confronted with this view of life, they consider themselves useful and worthy (cf. 'arbeidsnever', working hands) rather than losers ('arbeidstaper'). This is highlighted by the title as well as by Trygve's mother. When he last visited her, she had commented 'med stolthet i stemmen' (17) (with pride in her voice) that his hands had become working hands. Trygve's hands represent an esteemed ability to work, unlike for instance his friend Steinar's hands. The latter's hands are smooth and white, and thus of less value, according to Trygve.

Trygve lacks education, but he doesn't lack a certain pride in being a worker, although he is not very attached to his workplace. Kenneth, in the short story 'I ei grøft' (In a Ditch), never finished school, and he lacks Trygve's sense of pride:

- Assen går det på skolen, Kenneth?
- Greit nok.
- Går du på skole? sa Espen.
- E tar opp noen fag på Folkeuniversitetet, sa Kenneth.
- Espen sa ikke noe.
- E mangler studiekompetanse, sa Kenneth.

(Dale 2017: 46)

“How is school, Kenneth?”

“It’s ok.”

“Are you in school?” said Espen.

“I’m resitting some exams at Folkeuniversitetet”, Kenneth said. Espen didn’t say anything.

“I lack some A levels”, Kenneth said.)

Kenneth gets the feeling of being inferior when his friend brings along an educated friend from Oslo on their annual cabin trip: ‘Han tenkte på bøkene som lå uåpna på enden av kjøkkenbordet. Det var så mye lettere å gjøre alt anna enn å åpne dem. [...] Han likte husarbeid. Det roa han, og han kunne se at ting ble ferdig’ (Dale 2017: 47) (He thought of the books lying unopened at the end of the kitchen table. It was so much easier to do everything else than to open them. [...] He liked housework. It made him calm, and he could see that things got done). His friend Tor André was at first working in a gas station, but then he got an education, a job, a good salary and his own house. Kenneth, on the other hand, has no education and random jobs: ‘Mens Kenneth hadde gått fra jobb til jobb etter at han slutta på videregående. Den siste tida hadde han jobba på lageret på Skeidar ute på Stoa’ (Dale 2017: 48) (While Kenneth had gone from job to job after quitting high school. Lately he had been working at the warehouse at Skeidar at Stoa). Their habits when they hang out together are suddenly not good enough for their educated friends, and the feeling of falling short generates anger. Their friend Terje is provoked and offended: ‘Dei prater bare om jobb og utdanning. [...] – Når du e’ ferdi’ me’ å studere? Då holder det ikkje me’ heimelaga pizza og poker lenger?’ (49) (They talk about nothing but jobs and education. [...] – When you finish your studies, then homemade pizza and poker are no longer enough?). On the way to the cabin, their car ends up in the ditch – both literally and symbolically. They never reach the cabin. The friction between the educated and the unskilled escalates throughout the short story, and their relationship will probably never be the same again, even though they are childhood friends.

‘We all define ourselves by what we are not, as much as by what we are, by what we could not be, as much as by what we could be’ (Standing 2017: 27). Although both Tone and Kenneth may be sufficiently content with their lives, a disharmony and discontent are constructed when other people are questioning their situation; their

lives appear in a different light and become alienated and unsatisfactory due to the culture clash. At the same time, without education and without a permanent job, they will always be confronted with the frustration, anger and anxiety that accompany an uncertain future.

'The precariat experiences the four A's – anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation. The anger stems from frustration at the seemingly blocked avenues for advancing a meaningful life and from a sense of relative deprivation' (Standing 2017: 22). Both anger and alienation are represented in the short story 'I ei grøft' (In a Ditch), while anxiety and anomie, to a certain degree, are represented in 'Working Hands'. Trygve would like to stay home, but off he goes, early in the morning. Later on, we get to know that he often used to skip school. This information may be read as a warning or foreshadowing, since Trygve at the end of the short story chooses to call in sick, although he only has a sore throat. Thus, he breaks many of the rules he should not break; he shrugs the job, and he smokes despite his promise not to. He is worried, stressed and tired, everything feels difficult.

Anxiety is represented in the short story 'Working Hands': Trygve and Tone are expecting a child. Since she has lost her job, Trygve must attend work and endure his situation, but he lacks motivation, and he finds it difficult: '(A)lt hadde blitt så vanskelig. Han skulle bli pappa, men han hadde ingen utdannelse, ikke lappen, og jobben kunne ta slutt når som helst' (Dale 2017: 20) (Everything had become so difficult. He was going to be a dad, but he had no education, no driver's license, and the job could end anytime). Since they will soon need to provide for a child, a feeling of being incompetent and without prospects is aroused, even though the child represents the future. Becoming parents demands a stable economy, stable home, stable relations. They are trying; he tries to endure work, and they have both (apparently) quit smoking, but then he calls in sick, and he smokes a cigarette. This turning point signals that he will not manage to face forthcoming challenges.

'Alienation arises from knowing that what one is doing is not for one's own purpose or for what one could respect or appreciate; it is simply done for others, at their behest. This has been regarded as a defining feature of the proletariat' – but the precariat experiences the feeling of being fooled, and 'what Bryceson (2010) has called "failed occupationality", which can only have an adverse psychological effect' (Standing 2016: 24). They find themselves in circumstances which generate the experience of social disapproval and a profound lack of purpose. When a sore throat keeps him at home, his relation to the

job, to his colleagues, and to his workplace is revealed. The end is latent in the beginning; the short story begins when Trygve is wakened by the snowplough. There is a weak light in the bedroom, and Trygve doesn't want to get up. But he must (Dale 2017: 11). This opening signal is repeated at the end; but while he chooses to go to work in the opening, he chooses to shirk work and stay in bed in the end. Thus, Trygve's development is regressive; the short story does not produce much hope on behalf of young people who live precariously.

Old and superfluous

Old age brings changes which influence our quality of life and our relationships in many different ways. The transition from working life to pensioner life is depicted in Breiteig's short story 'Ingenting hendt' (Nothing happened) (see also Bjørkøy 2017 and Bjørkøy 2020). The short story starts *in medias res* when Leif, an employee at an ironworks, is about to end his last day at work by taking a shower. Leif is leaving behind the community of the workplace and starting his life as a pensioner. The insistent title 'Ingenting hendt' (Nothing happened) emphasises how this transition on the one hand is treated as if it meant nothing. But the reader learns that his retirement means everything, because it is implied that it will have a far-reaching effect on Leif's situation and quality of life. In the opening line of the short story Leif says 'Jaja' (Oh well) (Breiteig 2000: 25). Together with the title, this utterance emphasises an apparent indifference, or perhaps more precisely, a resignation about his situation. However, his 'oh well' and the title's insistence that this final day at work is of no consequence are belied by his reaction in the shower – he suffers a fall. Thus, the two words of resignation underline that Leif cannot find the words to express, or is emotionally incapable of expressing, how difficult and upsetting his retirement is for him. This is also reflected in Leif's attempt to play down and avoid more farewells by showering before the others.

Leif's helmet is covered with dried iron sludge, which Leif throws in the waste bucket (Breiteig 2000: 25). This apparently trivial action provides a parallel to Leif's situation – like the iron sludge, Leif's working life has now in a sense dried up. Like his helmet, he has symbolically ended up in the waste bucket. Leif has left the control room early tonight. 'I natt var det ikke engang nødvendig å stemple ut, hadde Taraldsen sagt. Bare den siste dusjen gjensto' (Breiteig 2000: 25) (Tonight it wasn't even necessary to clock off, Taraldsen had said. The only thing that remained was the final shower). The words 'even', 'only' and 'final' emphasise what a milestone his retirement

represents, what a dramatic transition he faces, as if retirement from working life marks the end of life itself.

When Leif is on his way into the shower, a young cleaning boy enters the changing room. He is pointing out that shower time is not until five o'clock (Breiteig 2000: 27-28). Leif stands there with a little towel that doesn't even reach around his waist and can only say yes. His nakedness emphasises his vulnerability. The boy doesn't know who Leif is or that this is his last day at work, and the boy's lack of insight and understanding only increases the sense of humiliation and loneliness in the nothingness that marks the end of his working life. Memories of what, for Leif, were the good old days resurface and stand in contrast to the present silence of the changing room: 'Det var så stille der nå. Ingen prat eller latter som gjallet mellom veggene' (29) (It was so quiet there now. No talk or laughter echoing off the walls). The collegiality between lads who can take a thing or two is gone, replaced by the chair that is waiting at home and by the cleaner who doesn't know it is Leif's last day and therefore shows no understanding for his need to shower now, earlier than usual.

The end of his working life means the end of collegiality, of the structure and commitment that have been the foundation of Leif's existence and that have given his life content and thereby also dignity and an essential self-esteem. Leif has a long working life behind him; he is familiar with every sound and every task at the ironworks. The work there is a natural part of his everyday life. As a pensioner he is withdrawing from what Michel Foucault (1966) calls 'the order of things'. The fixed points in Leif's everyday existence disappear. According to Runar Bakken, a scholar of old age, this break with the order of things is a typical problem for the old in a number of ways – both mentally and physically, older persons experience a disintegration of the familiar, a movement towards boundlessness (Bakken 2014: 27-29). Leif's pain and his loss of work entitlement lead him to lose his grip on himself, on his everyday life, on the order that apparently keeps him afloat. His new existence as a pensioner requires him to build up a new daily routine. But Leif has no plan: 'Og heretter var det bare stolen der hjemme. Sitte der og kjenne kniven. Det var det eneste som var igjen' (30) (And from now on there was nothing but the chair at home. To sit there and feel the knife. That was all that was left). It seems that Leif only functions when working at the ironworks. There he knows what to do, he is purposeful, useful, active and part of a collegium. Outside the ironworks, on the other hand, he is dysfunctional, lonely and useless. But lately his back problems have

prevented him from contributing as before, a situation that seems to be quite as degrading as having to retire.

Breiteig's short story thus illustrates the opposite development compared to Dale's short story 'Working Hands'. While Dale's young man never manages to become a permanent part of a viable fellowship as a worker, Leif has to leave a fellowship which has been crucial to his feeling of dignity. But Breiteig's short story ends here. We never get to know what happens when he is left on his own, home alone. We may argue that pensioners, like young temporary workers, also become a sort of denizen (cf. Standing 2017: 15); their rights as well as their opportunities are limited.

From dignity to humiliation

In modern society, which undergoes continual development and change, the status and prestige of the old is diminished because their knowledge, their experiences and skills quickly become obsolete (Bakken 2014: 41). The transition to retirement may trigger an existential crisis since identity, as well as the feeling of making a contribution, is first and foremost linked to work. Leif's boss confirms that Leif has played an important role: 'Det er trist å gi slipp på en som deg, hadde Taraldsen sagt. Det er vanskelig å finne arbeidsvillige folk nå for tiden (...) Du har sannelig stått på' (Breiteig 2000: 26-27) (It's sad to let someone like you go, Taraldsen had said. It's difficult to find people willing to work these days (...) You certainly have worked hard). Age researcher Donald Cowgill concludes in an international study from 1986 that older persons had relatively lower status in industrialised countries, where retirement and moving into nursing homes were seen as a social substitute for death. However, Cowgill points to a strengthening of family values as an appropriate means of counteracting this reversal of status and prestige (cf. Bakken 2014: 69). In modern society, the old can find existential meaning through other channels than work, for example, through relations with their children and grandchildren. However, it seems that Leif lacks any close relationships that might fill the function that work had. His situation demonstrates the gendered aspect of the honour code he is withdrawing from by retiring. The sense of identity and meaning that has given his life value and honour has been founded on a masculine collegiality. Domestic life offers an alternative environment that lacks what until now has given meaning to Leif's life. With reference to Bakken's research, we may suppose that Leif would have had a different network and thereby a different honour code to relate to had

he been a woman. Leif lacks a relational apparatus that can take over the role that work has played.

Leif suffers a fall in the shower (Breiteig 2000: 33). The fall can be seen as a parallel to Leif's metaphorical fall brought about by retirement. His disqualification from work due to age and health leads to a fall in dignity. Lying naked in the shower in his own vomit, under the eyes of a stranger, and having to be rescued on his last day at work, Leif's humiliation is complete. The others will soon be coming to shower, 'så måtte de vel til med avskjeden enda en gang' (34) (so they'd have to say their farewells all over again). Retirement means the end of the dignity of (working) life. But the cleaner covers him with a towel, rings for help and shows a concern that lends a certain dignity to a humiliating situation. Leif had wanted to escape from the attention and circumstances that retirement entails, but ironically ends up experiencing a more emotional, humiliating and undignified departure than the one his age and retirement had already inflicted on him. Whether his colleagues will arrive before Leif is retrieved from the changing room, where he lies naked on the floor in his own vomit, is left open, but at the end Leif realises that 'Det var bare å gi seg over' (34) (All he could do was surrender).

The resignation expressed in the conclusion of the story mirrors the resigned 'oh well' of the story's opening line, giving the impression that nothing is important, that nothing has happened. In spite of Leif's initial and final resignation it is evident that his retirement means everything. Thus, he acknowledges his hopeless situation and accepts help, which can be seen as positive, as a sign that he will also receive and accept help later on. At the end of the story, Leif is still lying in his own vomit and in pain on the shower floor. His physical position and situation illustrate and emphasise the undignified circumstances in which he finds himself. But help is on the way; he is given attention and treated as an individual with a right to assistance and care.

However, if we widen our perspective from the shower scene, where Leif out of necessity both receives and accepts help, we may have the following objection: how much help will you get if all you have to offer in your engagement with retirement and old age is an 'oh well' and evasive resignation? The way we meet the challenge of old age depends on what the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah in his book *The Ethics of Identity* calls 'parameters' and 'limits' (2005: 111). Leif seems poorly equipped, both verbally and emotionally, for the phase in life where old age becomes a 'limit' that distances him from his only 'parameter'. Dale's young men have this much in common with Leif; they are poorly equipped, if not emotionally, then verbally, like when

Trygve avoids telling Tone why he chooses to shirk work (Dale 2017: 27).

The old precariat versus the young

‘Having honor means being entitled to respect’, Appiah claims in *The Honor Code* (2010: 175). But being entitled to respect doesn’t necessarily mean one will be treated, or feel one is treated, with respect. There are many forms of respect, but one of the forms that has a bearing on honour is esteem. ‘One sort of respect that matters involves having a *positive regard* for someone because of their success in meeting certain standards. We can term this *esteem*. We esteem people who are good at all kinds of things, from skydiving to poetry’ (Appiah 2010: 175). But esteem is not necessarily linked to any form of success. Not being able to manage on one’s own can undermine a person’s self-esteem if it is experienced as degrading or as a loss of freedom. While Dale’s young men and women experience a lack of the esteem they could have achieved through work, Breiteig’s old Leif experiences a loss of the esteem he previously achieved through his work. Age is a decisive variable for whether society can or will invest in providing the best treatment. Dale’s young men are not old, but they have reached the age when it is expected that you manage on your own.

According to Appiah (2010: 175), your value is determined by your contribution. Increasing age is the crucial factor as honour and esteem are inevitably impaired and adjusted over time. As pensioners, we are in need of the services society has to offer without necessarily being able to give anything back. But that also concerns the young precariat, those who haven’t been able to establish a viable life. Appiah underlines that gender and class, too, very often matter (2010: 62). Dale and Breiteig mainly depict male characters. Gender and class, but also age and health, are variables influencing an individual’s status, and therefore the honour and respect he or she is accorded. Dale’s young woman Tone in ‘Working Hands’ is for instance not working, but she is pregnant, thus she has an excuse and she is in a way productive. She may lean on her situation – while the situation demands even more from Trygve, since he is expected to provide for his family.

Social inequality, class and gender are variables which particularly influence how old age is experienced and how it develops (Bakken 2014: 71). Leif is simply a worker and finds no meaning or other identity beyond his work, which, although he himself characterises it as a crappy job (cf. Breiteig 2000: 29), has given substance to his life.

As a pensioner he becomes an outsider, in contrast to the energetic worker he once was. Trygve, on the other hand, has not yet really entered working life; he isn't established or secure. Since he is young and expected to have a promising, productive life, supporting himself and his future family, he finds himself in a severe and precarious situation. Thus, both entering and leaving working life may lead to a precarious situation.

Leif seems affected by and trapped in a cemented view of old age. In many contexts the individual is reliant on social services that can present both possibilities and limitations. But the ageing individual also has a responsibility. Appiah points out how 'circumstances that one might assume would be merely impediments may be transformed into a positive way of being' (Appiah 2005: 112). The challenge of creating dignified and meaningful experiences in old age is relevant to both the ageing individual and the society he or she is part of. However, for some it may appear more dignified to disappear than to participate in society and force oneself to establish a new and valuable life (cf. withdrawal theory; Daatland and Solem 2011: 144-145). We don't know whether Breiteig's Leif chooses to isolate himself and stay in his chair, but resignation is highlighted as a realistic solution. This also applies to Dale's young man who chooses to call in sick; he lacks sustainable solutions. How will he be able to handle a long working life? Both Dale's young man Trygve and Breiteig's old man Leif choose a passive, regressive strategy by isolating themselves. Leif's co-workers used to be an important part of his working life. That is no longer the case; he is impaired by lack of community, age and health. Unlike Leif, Trygve has not yet managed to build a sustainable connection to his co-workers, he is not part of a community that can compensate for the workload and the lack of work desire; his job just seems meaningless. In addition, Trygve's absence prevents him from establishing the community that has been an important cornerstone in Leif's working life. Thus, Dale's young men are mentally, and in terms of status, equal to the pensioner Leif. We may assume that Trygve's working conditions, in particular, the short-term employment, and the struggle for something else, something better represented by the well-educated workers waiting for approval of their foreign education, prevent the development of a necessary and viable working mentality and working community.

Dale's story about Trygve illustrates that the young precariat is already dealing with the same fatal issues as pensioners. The community is as incapable of caring for its promising citizens as it is its outdated citizens. However, what is troubling to the young could

be the rescue of the elderly who no longer crave a career but do long to contribute and be part of a social network. According to Standing, the elderly 'do not need the promise of maternity leave, crèches, medical insurance, housing subsidies, sports club membership and so on. So, because they cost less, old agers are eroding the bargaining position of youths' (Standing 2017: 99). But the wear and tear that some young workers suffer through their repetitive work and weak social community could also affect the elderly in a negative way.

It is no coincidence that both Breiteig and Dale portray men. The problem they focus on is gendered: dignity is profoundly connected to working life, and this mainly concerns men, while women more often also find the support they need amongst family and friends. According to Bakken, women maintain their attachment to the community to a greater extent through a responsibility for children and grandchildren, while men – apart from the powerful and those who are rich in terms of property, money and knowledge – seem to lose everything as they lose their ability to work. Men become, in the radical sense, an object (Bakken 2014: 52). Breiteig's Leif illustrates this claim and shows that the concept of honour is largely gendered. His job has been the pillar of Leif's life; it has added meaning to Leif's life and thus also dignity and essential self-esteem. Leif's story illustrates how retirement may lead to both impaired social identity and an impaired sense of honour.

These stories highlight the stagnant nature of Trygve's and Leif's situations and their lack of prospects and development. The situation is particularly precarious for the young people; they expect progression, while the elderly are saved by retirement and death. The short stories also demonstrate that the neoliberal spirit lacks the ability to promote meaningful societies that may counter the vulnerable ends of isolation and loneliness. As a pensioner, Breiteig's Leif has lost what made life meaningful, while several of Dale's young men are unable to establish a sustainable life.

The status and prestige of older persons have fallen in line with the capitalist modernisation of society (Cowgill and Holmes 1972; Cowgill 1986). In modern society, which is constantly evolving and changing, knowledge, experience and skills are rapidly becoming obsolete. Older persons thus easily become passive and powerless recipients of social and economic security in the welfare state (Bakken 2014: 69). As a substitute for the extended family, the welfare state falls short in terms of emotional and social care. The elderly become 'generation superfluous'. The seriousness of the situation is made clear when young people are affected by the same issues.

What Standing calls 'a precariatized mind' contributes to short-termism, 'which could evolve into a mass incapacity to think long term' (Standing 2017: 21). Standing points out how our digitised world and our digital living are in opposition to any respect for contemplation and reflection. Our digital living 'is damaging the long-term memory consolidation process that is the basis for what generations of humans have come to regard as intelligence, the capacity to reason through complex processes and to create new ideas and ways of imagining' (Standing 2017: 21). Literature may oppose that effect, and literature offers both contemplation and reflection. As Martha Nussbaum points out in her book *Poetic Justice*, literature may 'be a bridge both to a vision of justice and to the social enactment of that vision' (1995: 12). In effect, literature 'becomes the voice of silenced people' (Nussbaum 2003: 96) and thus demonstrates the democratic strength of literature.

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