Precarious University Life in Post-Welfare Sweden

Time, Place and Identity in Isabelle Ståhl's *Just nu är jag här* (2017)

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Abstract

How are today's precarious life conditions and complex class distinctions processed in contemporary fiction? Since class has become more and more of a floating concept (Standing, 2011), the need for new approaches is imminent. In recent years, a group of Swedish novelists have described precarious life among university students, which in an age of mass education can no longer be considered a middle-class reserve. Though these depictions differ in many ways, their protagonists share similar struggles to 'pass' in the uncertain and competitive university environment, and in late-modern existence as a whole. This article deals with one of these works, Isabell Ståhl's novel *Just nu är jag här* (Right Now I am Here, 2017). The novel depicts first-person protagonist Elise's aimless drifting through urban neo-liberal reality – poor, depressed and detached. Even though class is immanently present, its nature often appears obscured in the narration, and I address how this is linked to Elise's evasive experiences of the world and apparent unwillingness to assert a specific identity or lifestyle. I also reflect on what challenges these seemingly distant, emotionally numb depictions – not conforming to the edifying, emancipatory demands usually imposed on 'political' literature – evoke for literary researchers interested in the complex dialogue between art and society.

Keywords

Swedish literature, Isabell Ståhl, precarity in literature, uses of literature, literature and society, liquid modernity

> Universiteten tillhör förra årtusendet, det kommer aldrig att löna sig med långa utbildningar, allt är nog förgäves (Ståhl 2017: 184).
>
> (Universities belong to the last millennium, a long education will never pay off, everything is probably in vain)

Behind this rather defeatist utterance stands the first-person narrator, Elise, in *Just nu är jag här* (Right Now I am Here), a novel by Swedish writer Isabelle Ståhl from 2017. This debut received a lot of attention and was quickly labelled 'a voice of the millennial generation' (see for example Björk 2018) – pointing to the first generation born and raised with access to the Internet, who form their relationships and rely heavily on social media. Elise's life is on her phone – friends, work, news, dating.

The Millennials, or Generation Y, are also exceptional from an economic-historical perspective, since they have been forecast to be the first generation in modern times who will make less money than their parents (Elliott 2017). In Scandinavia, the Millennials thus mark the definitive end of the welfare state.

Even though Ståhl's generational story was the first of its kind, literary depictions of urban life among young women have a long tradition in Sweden, stretching back at least to the early 1900s when Elin Wägner wrote novels about pioneering office girls and journalists in Stockholm, making their way through work and love in the age of The New Woman. At that time writing was of course still mostly a male business. But since the 1970s, women writers' share in publishing has grown steadily. Last year they accounted for seventy per cent of literary debuts in Sweden, and it has even been stated that women are taking over the writer's profession (Haidl and Lindkvist 2019).

Ståhl's novel was not the only one in 2017 to use the Swedish university as a backdrop. At least two other novels of the same year depicted the same environment: Martin Engberg's *En enastående karriär* (An Outstanding Career) and Elise Karlsson's *Klass* (Class). Engberg's novel is both a cautionary tall tale, mocking modern universities' blend of dusty traditions and New Public Management lingo, and a challenging depiction of class, status, insecure employment and power hierarchies (Engberg 2017). Karlsson's story is an intriguing exploration of the concept of class, both as a social condition and an identity project – as a place of origin,

upbringing and belonging. The novel outlines the complicated cultural and existential journey from the suburb to the university and contains a fundamental critique of exploiting other people's experiences.

At first glance, Ståhl's work may seem to be the least obviously 'political' of the three. The narrator and main protagonist, Elise, is a single woman of twenty-eight, living in a second-hand flat in a Stockholm suburb. She attends a part-time course in Art History at the university, works irregular staffing agency hours, dates on Tinder and uses tranquilizers and party drugs on a regular basis. The novel depicts Elise's life during a period of just over a year – her drifting through urban existence, struggling with poverty, depression, loneliness, spleen and lethargy. During this time, she oscillates in and out of a relationship, and ends her university studies, perhaps facing a brighter future.

As her utterance above reveals, the university does not appear to be anything extraordinary. On the contrary, its former status as an arena for possible journeys between social classes seems far away; to Elise, it rather reflects and reinforces general power struggles and gender inequalities. And like most aspects of her life, her studies are shown to be something temporary, almost random. Even though Elise seems talented and extremely clear-sighted, she is also portrayed as uncultivated and out of context; she does not know the name of different kinds of trees, how to master the points of the compass, and she does not seem strategic, or able to plan ahead. Nor does she appear as committed to her studies or as a person who would fight for 'a better world', even though she on a general level seems aware of economy, politics, climate change, and so on. Rather, she appears as a bystander, unwilling to adopt a specific identity, or 'witness'-position. Still, I want to argue that this story is fundamentally occupied with class and precarious life-conditions, although perhaps not in ways researchers interested in the matter tend to pay attention to, simply because the story is not pronouncedly 'emancipating'.

In today's post-industrial Scandinavia, with its rapidly changing concepts of work, identity, and the welfare state, the literary landscape is also reshaping itself, and the question arises: are recent fictional configurations of class difference and precarious life displayed in recognisable ways? Focusing on Ståhl's novel, I want to argue for renewed attention to how literature continually establishes complex and challenging relations to

society. This article will particularly concentrate on how this is established by the protagonist Elise's perception of the different places where she is usually located – with special focus on the university. I am also interested in her experiences of time and identity: in what ways are these phenomena designed in the text, and what kinds of emotions are connected to them?

Time and space in 'liquid modernity'

> The less hold one has on the present, the less of the "future" can be embraced in the design (Bauman 2012: 137).

The first part of *Just nu är jag här* depicts a lonely existence, and portrays Elise's position as a woman who is young, and yet not *that* young. She is moving towards her thirties but is far from established. No steady job, no degree, no place of her own, no boyfriend. She personifies the prolonged adolescence of today's Western societies. Still, she has a life, an existence that seems both very mobile and stationary at the same time. Elise appears as a contemporary *flâneuse*, moving all over Stockholm, scanning it, at the same time as she is stuck in precarious life and governed by her phone's GPS. She is always available for the agency's text messages about a few hours extra work at different shops all around the city. And she is constantly reachable for new matches on Tinder, which results in brief unromantic encounters that leave no lasting impressions. She is always traceable, yet nobody seems to find her.

In other words, Elise is steadily placed within the unsteady life-conditions that according to Zygmunt Bauman characterise today's global 'liquid modernity', where otherwise differing lifestyles share the same 'fragility, temporariness, vulnerability and inclination to constant change' (Bauman 2012: viii). These circumstances have also altered perceptions of fundamental phenomena such as time, space, individuality, work and identity.

Time and space are visible already in the novel's title (in English: Right Now I am Here), and their intangibility seems perfectly in line with the kind of contemporary unsteadiness that Bauman addresses. When is *right now*? And where, exactly, is *here*? These imprecise determinations strike us as momentary, ahistorical, and without future direction. In the light of Elise's everyday life – her constant availability online, and quick

adjustments of plans in accordance with notifications and messages on her smartphone – the title corresponds to a prevailing 'software' time, based on the swiftness of electronic signals. According to Bauman, the 'instantaneity' that this perception of time entails has in turn devalued space (Bauman 2012: 117). The changed strength of balance between the two is reinforced in the novel's theme of deconstructing time. While *right now* captures a steady condition of being constantly disposable and ready for changing circumstances, regardless of whereabouts, *here* can mean anywhere, or just nowhere in particular, yet certainly online. In their state of contingency, time and space are intertwined, sharing the same indefinite immediacy.

At first, Elise is habitually 'front stage', to use Ervin Goffman's performative metaphor (Goffman 1959) – she attends shopping malls, wine bars, dancing clubs. Through visiting these public yet non-civil, anonymous spaces that 'encourage action, not *inter*-action' (Bauman 2012: 97), she seeks, in vain, the comforting feeling of belonging. It is just like the text line by late DJ and producer Avicii: 'Let's be lonely together'. Elise cannot stand intimacy and does not like to take people home or to enter other people's apartments. As soon as she meets the men on Tinder in real life, they turn ugly. In her depictions of daily existence, there are constant clashes between the seemingly authentic and the unreal, artificial, fake. To Elise, the 'real world' often appears as more illusory than the actuality served on the telephone screen. With the help of different pills, she tries to master and moderate her constant emotional stress.

Precarious university life

One of the recurrent physical places in the novel is the university, more precisely 'Humanistvillan' at the Faculty of Arts, Stockholm University, where Elise takes a part-time course in Art History. As the Swedish system of higher education constitutes an important prerequisite for Elise's life conditions, a few words need to be said about it. Swedish universities are usually run and controlled by the state and government. Higher education is free for Swedish and EU/EEA citizens, and Swedish students can apply for financial aid, to a monthly total of about €1100, divided into roughly 35 per cent allowance and 65 per cent loan (CSN 2018). To be a university student implies a low standard of living, and even full-time students often have to work at least part-time to make ends meet. The right to receive student allowance is also limited, to twelve semesters

(six years), which means that the allowance can be terminated before students have finished their degrees.

Until the Second World War, higher education in Sweden was reserved for a privileged elite. A substantial reform in 1977 – with the stated purpose of offering a much larger share of the population access to higher education – brought a continuous increase in the number of students, from 100,000 to today's 400,000, which makes the label 'mass education' reasonable. In 1999, the Social Democratic government even formulated a target of 50 per cent university students in every cohort (Government Offices of Sweden 1999/2000:1, section 16:5: 89), and in later years many departments have had difficulties attracting the number of students assigned to them.

Like that of other EU member states, Sweden's higher education sector has since 2007 been part of the Bologna Process, a conforming and harmonisation of national systems, built in order to facilitate internationalisation and free movement for students, but also criticised for its instrumental and market-driven logic (Štech 2011). Several researchers have stated that the majority of today's European universities are 'governed within strictly entrepreneurial doctrines' (Lempiäinen 2015: 123), and that there has been a general shift in educational discourse, from merits and intelligence to employability (Komulainen et al. 2012).

In recent decades, higher education in Sweden has been unscrupulously used by government as a labour-market policy instrument. In times of economic recession and high unemployment, student numbers are increased, and vice versa. But the expansion is brutally underfunded. A report from the university teachers' union in 2018 shows how resources have eroded since 1994, which means that the different faculties continuously have to increase 'efficiency' in order to compensate for cost increases (SULF 2018). Education in the Humanities is an especially low priority: first cycle full-time students only get four to six weekly hours (with each hour consisting of forty-five minutes) of teaching. Many subjects are shut down by university management because of insufficient resources.

An obvious conclusion, therefore, is that student life in Sweden, particularly in the Humanities, has gone from privileged to precarious. These conditions are visible in Isabelle Ståhl's novel. Elise mentions that her part-time course is limited to four hours on campus each week, that her student allowance has run out, which for instance means that she cannot extend her monthly commuter

ticket. She also has reimbursement requirements from the Social Insurance Fund, indicating that she has been on sick leave. Elise's utterance, cited in the beginning, about the futility of comprehensive university education, seems to be in line with the prevailing view, expressed by elected officials as well as business representatives in Sweden: education should be smooth, effective and lead straight to a clear-cut profession and quick employment. Yet, Elise herself does not fit into that pattern.

On a more symbolic level, the university is treated as a site of power in the novel, where different kinds of hierarchies are negotiated. The male Art Professor, Arvid Borg, who is also a novelist, is considered almost as a legend, and some of the male students try hard to impress him. Borg, in his mid-forties and heavily built, radiates a natural authority, and stands for traditional 'Bildung'; he writes by hand on the whiteboard and declares, just as Elise is looking him up on Ratsit (an Internet site providing various personal data), that mobile phones are banned from his lectures.

Some of the male students form informal groups, where the members also socialise off-campus. Elise envies and idealises their unconstrained fellowship and compares it to separatist male book circles and 'sacred love' in ancient Greece. Through Elise's gaze the study environment is clearly gendered, as a performative marker of intellectual status, or *habitus*, to actualise Bourdieu's concept from his studies on French academia (Bourdieu 1988). Knowledge production also has clear physical implications. Through Elise's narrating voice, the young male body is displayed as the prevailing norm of an ideal Art History student – thin, edgy, without 'fat deposits' and 'cravings for drugs or sugar' (Ståhl 2017: 13). Elise obviously seeks inclusion in the leading group, at the same time as the young men make her feel old and 'shapeless'. Their appearance causes her to speculate whether they, just like her, might feel estranged in the present: 'De har dufflar, läderskor och hornbågade glasögon, vill väl se ut som intellektuella i Paris 1950 (Ståhl 2017: 13)' (They wear duffels, leather shoes and horn-rimmed glasses, they obviously want to look like Paris intellectuals in 1950).

Elise's constant *now* is thus not deliberately chosen or preferred. Rather, she often recalls her younger years, and longs for an undefined 'back then'. She claims to yearn for a sustainable truth, seriousness and sincerity instead of irony, and earnest relations with other people who really *know* her. She seeks authenticity, only to find insincerity. In this sense, Elise's emotions seem to be in tune with what Svetlana Boym has called the present-

day's 'global epidemic of nostalgia' (Boym 2001: xiv), and Bauman has recently labelled 'retrotopia' (Bauman 2017). She longs for the security, community, affinity and satisfaction which seem impossible for her to achieve in contemporary society.

Return ticket to the suburbs

To dwell even further on the question of place, it is hardly coincidental that Elise's sub-let flat is situated in Vällingby, since this suburb constitutes the very essence of the rise and fall of the Swedish welfare state, the 'Folkhem'. Vällingby was the first so-called ABC city, completed in 1954; the town planners aimed for inhabitants to work, live and shop in the same area. It received international attention, and among the most well-known early residents were former Prime Minister Olof Palme and his family. However, during the 1980s and 1990s, the city decayed. Despite extensive renovation of the timeworn city centre after the turn of the century, Vällingby has definitely lost its former status as fresh and leading edge, and was in 2017 even classified as 'utsatt område' (vulnerable area) by the national police authority (Polismyndigheten 2017: 41).

For the majority, the possibility of obtaining a permanent residence in central Stockholm remains an unattainable dream, and people who are not themselves Stockholmers are often surprised by how fast the topic of conversation among locals turn to apartments, 'residential careers', down payments and mortgage rates. The housing situation in urban parts of Scandinavia has been labelled catastrophic in numerous reports (e.g. Stockholms läns landsting 2018). Due to fast population growth, urbanisation, and heavy deregulation of the rental market, the housing shortage in Sweden is almost as severe as it was in the 1950s and 60s. The low rate of building rental apartments and the low mortgage rates have made the cost of property rocket, and hence also renting costs. The housing situation has been called a defeat for welfare and a health hazard. To actually have a permanent place to live is largely, and increasingly, a class issue.

According to her own statement, Elise has lived in Stockholm for nearly ten years and has during that time moved as many times: 'Mitt namn har aldrig stått på en dörr' (Ståhl 2017: 89) (My name has never been on a door). A simple utterance such as this holds an existential charge, containing elemental questions of identity, human dignity and self-esteem. Elise's day-to-day existence, with no clear future, is also applicable to her attitude towards money.

Here as well, her position is matter of fact, yet highly charged: 'Mina pengar är slut. Det gör ingenting, jag tanker på Grekland, i framtiden kommer alla pengar att ha förlorat sitt värde, de kommer att upplösas innan jag blir gammal och kan använda dem, det är därför jag inte sparar på någonting' (Ståhl 2017: 66) (I have no money. It doesn't matter, I think of Greece, in the future money will have lost its value, it will dissolve before I get old and can use it, that's why I don't save anything).

The reader's reaction to this statement is far from self-evident. A spontaneous response might be to consider the quote as a poor excuse not to make any conscious decisions or take responsibility. A reading focused on class and social conditions, on the other hand, may just as well perceive the utterance as a perfectly sound and rational reaction to the current economic situation and policies governed by for example the EU and the IMF. Is Elise to be considered a drop-out, or rather as a voice of resistance? The ambiguity of clear messages makes it difficult to appoint her as a any kind of spokesperson. At the same time, the novel offers the reader numerous opportunities to be affected, politically and morally.

Charged with social analysis

In her spring-term class, Elise soon notices Victor Kaldén, four years her senior and a well-presented, polite architect, with a clean, nicely decorated rental apartment in the fashionable district of Södermalm. This area is known to gather the bulk of the Swedish creative and academic class (Victor's parents – a physician and a librarian – were far-sighted enough to put him in a housing queue at the age of three).

When Victor, before they have become an item, unexpectedly attends a book event which Elise is managing as one of her many temporary odd jobs, she registers that he looks impressed:

> Det slår mig att han nog är imponerad av arbete, en sådan som alltid haft pengar från föräldrarna på sparkontot och ibland på fyllan påstår att han är arbetarklass för att det känns olidligt att aldrig ha kämpat för något' (Ståhl 2017: 83)
>
> (He looks impressed. It hits me that he is probably impressed by work, the kind of person who has always had money from his parents in his bank account and sometimes when he's

drunk claims that he is working class because it feels unbearable to never have fought for anything)

They start dating, and when Victor comes along to Elise's second-hand flat in Vällingby, the following dialogue occurs, which captures their different life-situations: [Victor] **'"**Jag gillar Vällingby. Palme bodde här.**"** Jag skrattar till. [Elise] **"**Jag får bara ha lägenheten i ett par månader till.**"'** (Ståhl 2017: 102) ("I like Vällingby. Palme lived here". I laugh briefly. "I only have the apartment for a few more months."). He seems content, and a bit nostalgic, as he looks out the window and connects with the city's glorious history, and perhaps still sees it as a part of the Swedish **'**Folkhem**'**. She, on the other hand, is forced to live for the moment, and has no clue where to go a few weeks from now. Vällingby is just another temporary residence; the place has no special value to her. No history, and definitely no future.

Things change after a few weeks, when Elise's temporary lease is about to expire, and she moves in with Victor. Soon he is supporting her, cooking healthy well-prepared meals, inviting her to his parents' summer house in the archipelago, helping her with her exam assignment, and showing her how to eat clams. Victor certainly appears to be Mr Right. He buys healthy, organic foods, pays Elise compliments and declares that he wants an equal relationship. He keeps up to date with culture and politics, is clearly anti-racist and regularly gives money to EU migrants.

Elise's depiction of their relationship holds a lot of class-related observations, from details of home décor to lifestyle markers; his specially ordered retro wallpaper, curtains made of fabric from Morocco, an exclusive coffee machine and inherited porcelain, the fact that he subscribes to a daily newspaper, always has suitable wines at home and makes plans for weekends and holidays. In Victor's apartment she feels the same way as during the few times her family were invited home to another family: **'**hemma hos dem luktade det alltid så gott och allting var så vitt, avskalat och samtidigt mysigt, tryggt**'** (Ståhl 2017: 91) (at their house it always smelled so good and everything was so white, stripped and still cozy, safe). She notices the way he eats, **'**hur han håller gaffeln och inte slamrar med besticken**'** (Ståhl 2017: 145), and talks **'**som om man känner sig hemma i alla situationer och aldrig har behövt förklara var man kommer ifrån**'** (Ståhl 2017:146) (how he holds the fork and never slams the cutlery. […] as if you

feel at home in all situations and never have had to explain where you come from).

The novel is actually charged with social analysis. Elise observes, as if from the outside, the peculiar lifestyle of well-adjusted people in central Stockholm - although she herself at least partly aspires to join the same community. Yet Elise seems rather disconnected from social context. The reader gets to know very little about her family and background, her upbringing in a small community in the region of Östergötland, and why she has no contact with her parents. Has something traumatic occurred? It doesn't say. But she has a scar on her wrist, she has never seen the ocean and she has used antidepressants. Her life in Stockholm after ten years still seems like a kind of exile. Elise's outward attitude is clearly unsentimental, anti-memory, but her thoughts reveal sad, melancholy lines. She appears to be a rootless individualist, but often expresses a longing for belonging.

Cynicism and other 'ugly' feelings

Evidently, Elise is used to managing by herself. Living with Victor, she is torn between seeking togetherness and protecting her own integrity and independence (or rather, her fairly unrealistic perception of independence). His obvious self-assurance is displayed through a steady linear perception of time, which she is fascinated by but cannot share. She has difficulties adjusting to harmonious, quiet cohabitation and well-arranged upper middle-class dinner parties. When he wants to know more about her, and to meet her parents, she pulls away. Elise insists that she can't plan ahead, because it makes her stressed. When Victor exclaims at one point that he wants to grow old with her, her answer is anything but romantic: **'**I don't want to get old**'** (Ståhl 2017: 168).

Victor blames her for being cynical. And perhaps cynicism is one of the few critical positions that Elise can actually take. The **'**affective turn**'** of recent years' humanistic research offers new understandings of emotional reactions that may seem peculiar or insignificant. Sianne Ngai argues that being able to cope with today's capitalist commodified society, with its unclear class boundaries and division of responsibilities, demands other emotional reactions than those previously stated as reasonable. Although **'**less powerful than the classical political passions**'**, what Ngai calls *ugly feelings* may be functional and critically productive (Ngai 2005: 5). These feelings – such as envy, irritation, anxiety, paranoia and disgust – work as **'**mediation between the aesthetic

and the political', and as a diagnosis of societal conditions (Ngai 2005: 3, 27). What unites them is their passive and negative nature. They are ambiguous and non-cathartic, with weak intentionality, where the object is uncertain or non-existent, and traditionally connected to inaction, rather than action (Ngai 2005: 26). And since they are all possible answers to perceived inequality, they also hold the possibility of change.

Elise appears as provokingly unenterprising, with one crucial exception – Victor. He is her only 'project': 'Om jag får honom ska jag aldrig önska mig något mer' (Ståhl 2017: 93) (If I get him, I will never wish for anything more). But even if everything seems possible after moving in with Victor – she talks about writing a novel or becoming a psychologist – Elise gradually moves 'backstage', to return to Goffman (Goffman 1959). She stays indoors, stops working and starts procrastinating. She regresses, suffers from panic attacks and longs to be back in her twenties in the Gothenburg suburb Biskopsgården with her friend Sofia, when the future seemed endless and promising, compared to the present's increasingly stressful demands to be happy and successful.

As if by chance, Elise enters into what seems to be a meaningless affair with Arvid Borg, the Art History Professor, married with children, who turns out to have sadistic inclinations. She claims that the violence makes her feel a bit better, but Victor gradually becomes suspicious, jealous and rueful. As he secretly reads the story Elise has started writing, and finds out that she considers him more a parent than a boyfriend, he throws her out. The novel ends with Elise alone again in a borrowed flat in another suburb. Still, the concise ending perhaps holds a gleam of hope and reconciliation. As we leave her, Elise has secured a temporary post at a Red Cross second-hand shop, she is spending meaningful spare time at a foundation for homework help, and finally reconnects with her old friend Sofia.

The story gives no clue as to how the chain of events should be interpreted and valued from a moral or political point of view. Should it be regarded as a failure that Elise, though perhaps only temporarily, gives up on her obvious talent, and her dream of becoming a writer? Or does her stepping back from a creative career instead offer a beneficial opportunity to get away from the individualised, commodifying pursuit of success? The answer depends on one's perspective. Both are conceivable, perhaps even at the same time.

Changing identities and class emotions

In liquid modernity, constructing a durable identity that coheres over time and space becomes increasingly impossible, states Bauman, since to be modern today means 'forever "becoming", avoiding completion, staying underdefined' (Bauman 2012: viii). Identity is not a given, but a 'task', which the individual person is responsible for performing. The side effects are obvious: 'The disintegration of the social network, the falling apart of effective agencies of collective action' (Bauman 2012: 14). In a dissolving social system where the main rule is 'every man for himself', the will to get organised and fight for common benefits is naturally weakened. And as this happens, previous ways of studying different societal phenomena are no longer applicable.

Work is a striking example of how societal changes require a new type of analysis, in recent years convincingly demonstrated by Guy Standing and his treatment of *the precariat*, as a concept that can help to describe a new *class in the making* (Standing 2011), but also a new consciousness – a short-term understanding of life whereby security must be sought outside of work (Standing 2014). Perception of work has thus gone from a prime, life-long human activity, to a temporary relation, from an identity- and society-building endeavour, to a commodified, individualised 'career', without any common interest that is able to counteract exploitation.

But there is more to it than that. In a time of grim prospects, of pandemics, climate crisis, terror threats and economic collapse, work and growth do not seem to provide the solution to future challenges. 'Progress' is no longer a sustainable route to future health and prosperity. The thought that wealth comes from work has been abandoned in favour of the knowledge that capital and labour are to a large extent separated, and that economic inequality is in fact increasing (Piketty 2014).

Elise's thoughts and reasoning are perfectly in tune with the more pessimistic current social and economic analyses, yet she is portrayed as the odd one out, partly because of her apparent inability to act, to *do* something. In fact, Elise is more easily defined according to what she is not, and on what she does not do. She is not a committed student, nor can she be connected to a professional identity. She does not fight actively against inequality, nor does she present herself as a victim (although the narrating voice seems to register all her shortcomings). She tries out different personas and lifestyles in theory, but a steady identity does not seem to be an option. Instead. she escapes or even downplays all kinds of social affiliations, except her friendship with Sofia. Thus, the novel does not comply with any readers' wishes of a clearly outlined portrait. Instead, the reader gets to know Elise by taking part in her perceptive decoding of Stockholm, as a strange and estranged place, soaked in class:

> Skockar av unga släntrar förbi, ung övre medelklass utklädd till arbetarklass: trasiga jeans, svarta munkjackor, linnen med polokrage och cornrow-flätor (Ståhl 2017: 107)
>
> (Flocks of adolescents float by, young upper middle class dressed up as working class: black hoodies, tank tops with turtleneck and cornrows)

It is through these observations that Elise herself appears, albeit as a negative, or perhaps as an opposite. Even though it is difficult to place her in a certain social class, she often defines herself by her measurements of the surrounding world. Sociologist Beverley Skeggs' explanation of the relational nature of class is illustrative in this context. In *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable*, an intersectional study of a group of young British women participating in a nursing education, Skeggs states, about her informants:

> in every judgement of themselves a measurement was made against others. In this process the designated "other" (based on representations and imaginings of the respectable and judgemental middle class) was constructed as the standard to/from which they measured themselves. (Skeggs 2002: 74)

In this process, Skeggs distinguishes a specific 'emotional politics of class', where feelings of 'insecurity, doubt, indignation and resentment' keep working-class women in place, through how they guard themselves and at the same time open up to the critical examination of others, which leads to constant uncertainty (Skeggs 2002: 90, 162). Transferred to the novel's context, what Elise keeps noticing is the prevailing (middle-class) norm, in relation to which she herself appears, but only as a deviation. Yet, the decision as to whether her seemingly non-rational behaviour and lack of well-thought-out choices should be regarded as reasonable, based on the circumstances, is again left to the reader.

Conclusion – a new take on '(a)political' literature?

Based on prevailing standards and ideals, *Just nu är jag här* may be labelled as a contemporary dystopic depiction of failed opportunities, presented with great clarity, and not without humour. Elise's lack of life-strategies, her lethargy, spleen and cynicism can also provoke. Why does she seem so uninvolved in and detached from her own life, what prevents her from making sound choices and future plans? But, considering the last decade's substantial changes, there is also a critical potential in Elise's apparent passivity – a kind of silent rebellion against the demands posed on people, to be free and active subjects in all aspects of life.

Yet, the reader's response to the novel is far from self-evident. As Rita Felski has stated, literature does not really match expectations of pure reflection and identification: 'The seemingly rationalist idea of recognition turns out to rely on an interplay of sameness and difference, familiarity and strangeness; what the mirror shows us is not always what we hoped or expected to see' (Felski 2008: 133). Literature provides constantly renewed configurations of socio-political-, cultural and economic conditions that can, at times, induce a wish on the reader's behalf to act. But this process is only possible if the reader is able and willing to invest in a kind of (inter)activity that involves personal positionings. As Peter Simonsen has argued in a study of Danish writer Helle Helle, fiction can *work* politically without openly taking a political stance, or presenting clear solutions to current societal problems (Simonsen 2018: 44). In this kind of literature, which bears political undertones without taking a clear stand, the interpretative task and its possible continuation in the form of political commitment or practical work is left to the reader. And it is only through this continuous exchange and interaction that literature can produce, transform and transcend prevailing conceptions.

But if we agree that literature operates in an ongoing dialogue with contemporary society, and thus functions as a possible agent of social, political and cultural change, this also places certain demands on researchers, to actually put texts to work. Literary analysis needs renewed approaches in order to treat literary works that do not respond to the usual edifying demands, but which offer renewed interpretations and reconfigurations of societal conditions.

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