

Escaping the urban middle-class scene of adulthood

Adulthood phobia and the precariat in the work of Hanne Viemose, Theis Ørntoft and Christina Hagen

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Abstract

Contemporary Danish literature has seen many autobiographical texts about growing up in the precariat. Some take place in what we term *Udkantsdanmark* (peripheral Denmark), others in what is termed the ghettos. Often these narratives are about climbing the social ladder and breaking out of the ghetto. This article deals with protagonists moving the other way, or who use class mobility as a marker of superior identity linked to the urban middle class. Many texts fetishise precarity and the ghetto, as well as the people living there. This can entail the sexualisation of the exotic other that we know so well from postcolonial studies, but sometimes becoming the precarious other is depicted as an attractive goal. In these texts the narrative of leaving the ghetto is reversed, producing a strange kind of *Bildungsroman*. This kind of narrative, too, deals with social mobility, but down the social ladder. This is not always a self-destructive move; in some novels of disillusion, taking the ladder downwards is an attempt to grow (emotionally) and create solidarity with the precarious other. It may seem paradoxical to claim that a text that fetishises the other at the same time tries to create solidarity with the other. This fetishisation works as a caricature of the urban middle class, a class which fears growing up and which therefore refuses to acknowledge its privileges and responsibilities.

Keywords

the precariat, Danish literature, social class, social mobility

Late modernity has often been discussed as a 'classless society', because the traditional definitions of class, and class conflict, have been wiped out as a consequence of globalisation and new technologies (Lovell 2004: 37). However, in recent years, the British economist Guy Standing has attracted much attention for his analyses of the burgeoning class that he defines as 'the precariat'. This is a class which, according to Standing, is 'in the making', and which cuts across traditional definitions of class. The precariat, thinks Standing, is the result of a pervasive neoliberal ideology which allows market principles to penetrate all aspects of life (Standing 2017: 11), that is, globalisation generally and, in the Scandinavian context, the crisis of the welfare state in particular. Concretely, the precariat encompasses a growing group of unemployed, many kinds of casual workers, and migrants. According to Judith Butler, the concept also refers to a more existential, late-modern sense of uncertainty and rootlessness, which permeates all social groups (Butler 2004). It is not just sociologists and economists who are once more turning their gaze upon social class. Contemporary Scandinavian literature, too, seems to be increasingly interested in class and class consciousness in late modernity. This has prompted the literary scholars Peter Simonsen and Jon Helt Haarder to discuss whether our readings of contemporary literature tend to focus 'bare lidt mere om klasseforskelle og bare lidt mindre om kulturforskelle' (Simonsen and Haarder 2017: 15) (just a bit more on class differences and a bit less on cultural differences).

Similarly, in the Danish literature of the last ten or fifteen years there has been a tendency to thematise a growing resistance to adulthood. This is a stylistic, affective and thematic approach to writing which has been called *voksenfobisk* or 'adulthood-phobic' (Schwartz 2017; the term is meant to cover both 'fear of adulthood' and 'fear of adults'). More and more novels and collections of poetry describe adults who do not want to be adults, and who therefore refuse either to listen to authority or to take on authoritative roles themselves — well into their twenties, thirties (or even forties). At the same time, what we find is, paradoxically enough, a longing for adulthood, but also a distinct inability to enter into what can be described as the performance society of the adult world in late modernity. In this article, I want to connect these two currents in contemporary literature: the interest in class and the tendency to adulthood phobia. I also want to build on this discussion to examine whether Standing's concept is sufficiently nuanced to enable us to understand contemporary class society.

Middle-class disguise

It transpires that the burgeoning class consciousness and class solidarity that permeate contemporary literature are often connected with an equally dominant adulthood-phobic self-obsession. This sounds like a contradiction in terms, but in the works on which I will focus in this article, adulthood phobia and political consciousness are simultaneously in play, in the form of a psychological, cultural and stylistic atmosphere of transition from child to adult. This is obviously connected to the culture of our times, which demands a *both-and*, that is, a culture which schizophrenically requires equal parts self-obsession and social, moral and environmental responsibility. Or from a psychoanalytic perspective: an oscillation between the superego and the obscene supplement of the superego (Žižek 2006: 79-81)

This doubling-up of childish narcissism and adult political positioning is very central to the work of an author such as Hanne Højgaard Viemose, one of the three writers on which this article will focus. In her novel *HHV, FRSHWN - dødsknaldet i Amazonas* (HHV FRSHWMN – Death Screw in the Amazonia, 2019), Viemose's fragmented 'I' spans the child and the adult, two voices which are decidedly not concerned with the same things. For example, Hannah, who represents the young, adulthood-phobic 'I', flies into a rage because she thinks that Hanne has 'blevet røvsyg og nederen selskab' (become boring and depressing company) and has got 'stivet i en balje socialrealistisk mørtel' (stuck in a tub of social realist mortar) (Viemose 2019: 35). As I will reveal in this article, the notion of the precariat plays a key role in this pendulum swing between the identities of child and adult. Like several other authors, Viemose draws inspiration from the cultural vanguard of the precariat (the author), which Standing would call the 'tip' of the precariat iceberg (Standing 2016: 4), and which I in my interpretation will refer to as the 'disguised middle class'. This is because the concept of the precariat alone, despite the internal conflicts inherent in it, seems to be too broad a term to identify the class mechanisms that play out in these works. The people who constitute 'the tip of the iceberg' have a foot in both camps (the precariat and the middle class), and it is thus this double position which renders visible the discursive class struggles that are fought right there, on the border between the two. As my reading will show, any allegiance to the precariat is declared with fingers crossed behind the back. Standing writes that the 'tip' of the precariat is related to the 'primitive rebel' type (Standing 2016: x-xi) and is therefore associated with a kind of Robin Hood role. This identification is prominent in Viemose's work; she sees herself as belonging to the

precariat, but also stakes out her position ‘at the tip’ with her cultural capital and good taste. In this context, the affinity with the precariat constitutes — though not exclusively — a way to dodge the adult privileges of the middle class.

The fact that we are always situated at a point of intersection between the precariat and the urban middle class means that, as suggested above, Standing’s concept of the precariat cannot stand alone in my readings. I thus combine Standing’s economic basis with Beverly Skeggs’ sociological class theory, which draws on the French theorist Pierre Bourdieu. In order to understand which class distinctions are in play in contemporary literature, it is also essential to understand what kinds of battles are being fought in the social and cultural senses, both within the precariat and between the precariat and other class groups. In this context, ‘precarious’ is thus an unwelcome social condition, but it represents, too, an attractive social lifestyle. As Standing writes:

Some try to give the precariat a positive image, typifying a romantic free spirit who rejects norms of the old working class steeped in stable labour, as well as the bourgeois materialism of those in salaried “white-collar” jobs. This free-spirited defiance and nonconformity should not be forgotten, for it does figure in the precariat. There is nothing new in youthful and not so youthful struggles against the dictates of subordinated labour. (Standing 2016: 10)

In Theis Ørntoft’s novel *Solar* (2018) and in Christina Hagen’s works *Boyfrind* [sic] (2014) and *Jungle* (2017), this romanticism takes the form of righteous solidarity with the working class or the underclass, but at a more implicit level the solidarity also emerges as fetishised, or at least ambivalent. To identify with, or to feel solidarity with, the precarious ‘other’ functions as exotic entertainment in an otherwise boring and unwished-for adult middle-class existence. In this context, adulthood phobia — avoiding and postponing stable working conditions, home ownership and obligations such as coupledness and children — is a class marker and a kind of badly-installed vulnerability. This is, as mentioned, particularly clear in the work of Hagen and Ørntoft. As my reading will show, identification with the precariat thus also very definitely becomes an escape from middle-class privileges and thus responsibility. As the sociologist Beverly Skeggs puts it: ‘to deny the existence of class, or to deny that

one is middle-class, is to abdicate responsibility for the relationship in which one is repeatedly reproducing power' (Skeggs 2004: 118)

What I want to show in this article is that late modernity in contemporary literature is not class-less. On the contrary, it is caught up in a praxis of radical class divisions, which nonetheless, seen from the summit of the precariat, are less connected to economic belonging and more related, as Skeggs argues, with cultural, moral and social competences and capital. I am interested, then, in those that populate the *habitus* of the middle class, in Bourdieu's terms (Bourdieu 1987) — but who cannot quite bring themselves to stay there, nor to abandon it. This *habitus* requires that the disguised middle class, or the 'tip' of the precariat, are in possession of a distinct class consciousness and can thus deliberately analyse, understand and perform their own practices of identity and consumption in relation to other parts of the precariat. In the same way, they also have the power to disown them: '[...] only some can utilize their culture as a property of the self: others are forced to perform it as a "natural" part of being[...]' in other words, not everyone has 'access to class as an identity, to be deployed as a resource' (Skeggs 2004: 77) I also want to show how literature addresses lifestyle and consumption as the core of how one crafts one's own class in late modernity. As the sociologist Benjamin Barber insists:

Consumerism reduces identity to its own commercial behaviors and leads to an identitarian psychology in which quite literally we "are what we buy" – we are the brands we consume. Shopping and consuming are not an aspect of behavior but define the meaning of life. (Barber 2007: 91)

It is obvious that the choice of literature, and the whys and hows of its engagement with class, determine the ways in which class is thematised. In this article I investigate what I call 'the disguised middle class'. The disguised middle class is, as mentioned, a middle class which in economic terms, and in terms of its own self-image, sees itself as the precariat, but nonetheless practices the sign systems of the middle class. The selected literature is, too, autofiction, and is concerned with the position of the author in late modernity. There seems to be an obvious relationship between autofiction as aesthetic strategy and the cultural and thematic diagnosis of adulthood phobia. This relationship has a class dimension, because the performative and self-staging aspects of autofiction point to a particular concern with the author's own life (with different degrees of distance); equally, the

genre's self-reflexive basis is especially prone to envisioning the demands and expectations of the social world and to showing how these are tackled and how they take on linguistic form in a specific social group, that is, writers. Accordingly, the genre's starting point is not only individualistic or navel-gazing; it also has the task of cultural diagnosis. Even though the author belongs to the precariat in economic terms, he or she still demonstrates a cultural superiority in terms of language, or even in terms of an education at Forfatterskolen, the Danish Writers' School. These characteristics place the author in a visible and powerful middle-class position, in cultural terms. Several writers try to avoid or resist this by writing in notably uneducated or unschooled ways (for example Christina Hagen, Hanne Viemose and Asta Olivia Nordenhof). Christina Hagen often switches, for example, between, on the one hand, expressing herself in an incorrect and colloquial schoolgirl English, with childish, pink, shaky handwriting, and, on the other hand, adopting a tone of superior elegance and manifest literary training. In this way, the paradox is rendered visible. This kind of literature plays with the unrefined, the uneducated, the not-adult, but at the same time it wields a cultural power which is able to examine various forms of class belonging internally and externally, to negotiate and affirm them performatively. This paradox also applies to channels of publication. Hagen, Ørntoft and Viemose publish with Gyldendal, and are thus signed up to the largest and historically most influential press in Denmark. Viemose and Hagen also publish with Basilisk, a press which makes a virtue out of being in it for fun and not for profit, but which also enjoys a kind of sub-cultural power (Smith 2019) see also Johanne Gormsen Schmidt's article in this theme issue).

The rules regarding how class is crafted and thought are drafted by those in power. As Skeggs writes:

[...] class is always made by and in the interest of those who have access to power and the circuit of symbolic distribution [...] some people can use the classification and characteristics of race, class or femininity as a resource whilst others cannot because they are positioned as them (Skeggs 2004: 3)

The 'I's that we meet in the work of Hagen, Ørntoft and Viemose both have power, and do not. They are socially and economically vulnerable, but they are nonetheless powerful *qua* their cultural habitus and cultural capital. In other words, they have a foot in both camps and it is difficult for them to find and accept their place in the class system of the welfare state. In this way, the affinity for the

precariat functions as an attractive way out of this water-treading, but also as a way to avoid the responsibility that comes with power. In turn, this means that adult-phobic literature's thematising of the precariat concept emerges as an unavoidable, externally determined condition in the form of a peculiarly situated vulnerability, and, moreover, as something that is more or less consciously chosen and performed as part of an adult-phobic strategy. In line with Skeggs' point about classification serving as a resource, the affinity with the precariat in some of this autofictive literature is exploited as a more or less voluntarily chosen resource, with the aim of camouflaging the responsibility that goes hand-in-hand with middle-class power and privilege. This is markedly so in the work of Christina Hagen, whose staged, English-speaking 'I' in *Boyfrind* (2014) tries to show solidarity with the underclass: 'I like people who smoke cigarettes and drink too much [...] I like women who undress and turn out to be way too fat to get any noble guy's attention. I like their fat and their tacky underwear' (Hagen 2014: n.pag.). At the same time, she is angry at the cultural elite and thus '[...] didn't expect to write anything in a perfect Danish language again' (n.pag.). What is paradoxical, though, is that the autofictive 'I' wields its power via its linguistic ability and its cultural capital, regardless of whether it is correct in modernist terms or not. This inconsistency is part of Hagen's literary strategy, just as it is in the work of Ørntoft and Viemose, and Hagen pokes keenly and teasingly at the middle class's own potential 'classism' (class chauvinism) when she probes her (and our) attempts to show solidarity with what she refers to as 'uneducated, unintelligent people who has no ressources [sic]'. And she asks: 'Is that just a shameless romantic dream?' (Hagen 2014: n.pag.).

The precarious other as fetish

In Ørntoft's *Solar*, the West is in slow decline amid a decadent identity circus of rotating mirrors, in which the visa credit card constitutes 'selve hjertet af det kulturelle cirkus' (Ørntoft 2018: 28-29) (the very heart of the cultural circus), and in which middle-class urbanity emerges as the central stage or cycle. Like primeval algae, humankind is on the verge of rendering itself extinct through its own efforts to create growth (and technological development, in the case of humans). The urban 'circus' consists, according to the novel's 'I', not of a fragile precariat but of 'senmoderne, forkælede velfærdsvæsener fyldt til randen med privilegier, de ikke kan administrere' (Ørntoft 2018: 20) (late-modern, spoilt welfare creatures full to the brim with privileges they cannot manage). If we follow Standing's line of thought, Theis

himself belongs to the precariat, since as a writer and a substitute high school teacher he lives an economically uncertain life. At the same time, he stands in a fluctuating adulthood-phobic position somewhere between being young and being adult. The novel *Solar* is divided into three parts. In the introductory section, Theis sets off on a two-day hike along a military road in Jutland, where he expressively performs the role of the young, left-wing, middle-class wanderer, who, much like the Norwegian writer Tomas Espedal, seeks a wild and poetic life in harmony with nature. After the middle section (part two), which takes place in Copenhagen and in Albertslund to the west of the city (I shall return to this detail presently), this hypostatized figure manifests in a rather more diabolical, criminal and extreme edition, as a computer graphic. Here, we meet a full-blooded Robinson Crusoe fantasy (198), in which Theis reflects his way to a slightly constructed *hyggelig* (cosy) authenticity in nature, but where he must — without the ‘very heart of the cultural circus’, that is, his visa card — experience a proper fight for survival in a Portuguese forest. Throughout, it is unclear when we are witnessing a dream or fantasy, and when we are witnessing reality, and the novel thus encompasses a kind of perverse home-away-home structure. We actually (or possibly) end up back amongst the young, left-wing hipster middle class, who listen to Indian music, attend literary events, practice veganism, dream of authenticity and, as he himself describes it, ‘er øjeblikkelig afkodet for andre mennesker’ (16) (can be instantly decoded by other people).

That these identities are so easily decoded lies in the dream of avoiding the adult family project, permanent stable work (thus the precariat as a deliberate choice), urbane Copenhagen life and not least an affinity with the notion of the conformist, adult middle class. A love for nature, too, is a clear middle-class marker, a love which restricts itself to the ‘scenic’ or to a ‘soundscape’ and is thus just another variety of urban theatre. In the same way, the ‘tip of the precariat’ can be seen to behave in a way which is markedly classist. As we shall see, the ‘I’ does not encounter other groups within the precariat with solidarity, but with a middle-class distance. On the other hand, Theis is at least aware of his class prejudice, and tries to break out of his middle-class consciousness by allowing himself to descend through the class system, not just economically but also culturally. As a stage in this escape from his class, in part two of the novel he embarks on a relationship with a working-class woman, Nadja, and fantasises about life in the ghetto.

As is the case in the work of Viemose and Hagen, Ørntoft associates the production of class with inhabiting certain spaces, and

with buying and consuming certain artefacts, which means that if one wants to change class, one has to seek out and imitate the appropriate consumerist markers. For Ørntoft, this is a matter of swapping middle-class organic vegetarian food for a cheap steak house, yoga for weightlifting, and cultural events with visits to the Cinemaxx, Sunday television matinées and football matches. The most important location in the novel is, though, the gym, which is clearly distinguishable from middle-class pursuits like yoga and mindfulness. At the gym, the aim is typically to shape and alter one's body in obvious and visibly sexualised ways, whereas yoga is about nurturing the natural body and perfecting one's inner balance and psychological strength. As the 'I' tells us: 'Jeg havde længe gået med ideen om at starte til yoga eller mindfulness, ligesom mange i min omgangskreds, de psykologiske affekter man berettede om lød tiltalende. Alligevel endte valget på styrketræning' (Ørntoft 2018: 90) (I had had the idea for a while that I should start going to yoga or mindfulness, like many in my circle of acquaintances did; the psychological effects they told me about sounded tempting. But I ended up choosing weightlifting). It is these class-specific signs that cannot be determined by the concept of the precariat alone. Theis tries to break with his class by adopting the habits of the Fitness World gym: 'forsøgte at se hjemmevant ud' (91) (tried to look as if he was used to it), as he puts it. But because of his double exposure and his role as a class tourist, he seems, at least at first, distanced and judgemental, and expresses a superior, class-based hostility. For example, he comments thus on the bodies at the gym:

[...] mekaniske arbejdsmyrer der hver især gjorde sit for at optimere den sagesløse krop og det fortvivlede sind [...] stempler og tandhjul i en stor tragisk fabrik (97)

et terrarium [. . .] de lignede en blanding af nynazister og aber (144)

([...] mechanical worker ants, each of them doing what they could to optimise their blameless bodies and their confused minds [...] gears and pistons in a great, tragic factory)

(a terrarium [...] they looked like a mixture of Neo-nazis and apes)

At the same time, he finds it hard to accustom himself to the social milieu, especially because his ironic attitude does not work here. As he formulates it, with a touch of arrogance, '[...] ironien var vist ikke blevet opfundet her' (92) (this is probably not where irony was invented). Here, he draws attention to this intellectual superiority, a linguistic, cultural and thus false superiority. Class is rendered visible and negotiated not just through language but also in body language and in the gaze directed at other bodies. This is the case particularly with regard to the sexualisation of other bodies. Theis notices that at Fitness World, both men and women look different than they do in the environment from which he came. He notes that the sexualisation of women is more normal here, and that the women all look like each other, with platinum blonde hair and sunbed-tanned skin. It need hardly be said that women of the middle class also tend to resemble each other, but make use of other signs. The women in Fitness World are very attractive to Theis precisely because they represent a break with the cultural and moral order that he knows from the middle class, and because they imitate the narrow pornographic fantasy that he can now legitimise, thanks to his 'fall' into the working class. It is in Fitness World that he meets Nadja. As he tells us, she is '[e]n attraktiv kvinde fra et fremmed miljø [...] ikke en af de her tørre kiks fra kunstakademiet med kort hår og kondisko, hende her var hot' (106) (an attractive woman from a foreign culture [...] not one of those dry crackers from the Art Academy with short hair and sneakers. This woman was hot). Nadja is from the old working class, from Vestegnen, to the west of Copenhagen, more precisely the district of Albertslund; she has a tongue piercing, is sunbed-brown, has platinum blonde hair, false nails and wears high stilettos. She is also animal, or 'løveagtig' (104) (lion-like). As Theis points out, 'Det var ganske enkelt umuligt ikke at få associationen. Og hvorfor skulle man undgå den?' (104) (It was quite impossible not to catch the association. And why should one avoid it?). He also emphasises that 'Hun var et niveau eller to over min liga' (110) (She was a level or two out of my league). Timothy Morton, who obviously inspired Ørntoft, writes in his book *Ecology without Nature*: 'Putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration' (Morton 2007: 5). Morton is suggesting that nature fulfils a similarly aestheticised role to the one that woman has traditionally fulfilled for man. For Ørntoft, this is also a question of class, in that the working-class woman appears closer to nature than the middle-class woman. In the quotation above, Nadja's erotic capital is highlighted. She

embodies the original fantasy of the vulgar but authentic worker-woman: 'Hun lyste som en stjerne, klart og blinkende, men ikke på himlen over København, det var på forstædernes himmel hun lyste, ude på vestegnen et sted' (Ørntoft 2018: 111) (She shone like a star, clear and sparkling, but not in the sky over Copenhagen; it was over the sky of the suburbs that she shone, somewhere out there above Vestegnen). By calling her erotic kingdom a 'queendom', he can repress his own superiority, which now takes a back seat in relation to biological and erotic superiority. The same applies to Theis's relationship to nature. As he ponders: 'Nådesløs er biologien. Nådesløs er kulturen' (111) (Merciless is biology. Merciless is culture.) The working-class woman becomes a fetish object for Theis, which he objectifies partly by regarding her as a mystically speechless animal, over which he gleefully elevates himself by constantly highlighting his own cultural superiority. She is constantly highlighted, cultivated and labelled as 'a class-based property' (Skeggs 2004: 100) not directly, but via the signs given to the reader. As Steph Lawler writes, it is forbidden today to speak directly of class divisions, and they must therefore be indicated by signs:

In a kind of join-the dots pathologization, the reader (or viewer) is left to fill in the picture by understanding that certain kinds of clothing, location and bodily appearance indicate not only a despised class position but an underlying pathology. (Lawler 2004: 149)

On the other hand, Nadja cannot place or decode the otherness which Theis represents for her. Whereas Theis fetishises her working-class background, Nadja just thinks it is interesting and funny that Theis is from Jutland, but she is not aware of the class difference between them, nor how this affects the power relations between them. In the glimpses of fantasy that Theis offers the reader, Nadja is more authentic and original, like the noble savage, and therefore in his optics she must be less conscious of her own class.

This fetishisation or exoticisation of the working-class woman finds its counterpart, though with genders reversed, in the work of Christina Hagen. In her hybrid text *Jungle* (2018), she proclaims — in much the same way as Ørntoft scorns 'dry crackers from the Art Academy with short hair and sneakers' — that she doesn't sleep with men from her own cultural class. That she keeps herself fit:

for at forbeholde mig retten til at gå i seng med mænd, der også dyrker fitness [...] De mænd, jeg går i seng med, de er lige kommet ud af badet. De ved, at det at tilfredsstille en kvinde seksuelt, det er ikke noget, man kommer sovende til. Det er heller ikke noget, man kommer piberygende til eller læsende til, for den sags skyld. (Hagen 2017: n.pag.)

(in order to reserve the right to go to bed with men who also keep themselves fit [...] The men I sleep with have just got out of the shower. They know that satisfying a woman sexually is not something you can do half-asleep. It's not something you can do while smoking a pipe or reading a book, for that matter.)

For both Hagen and Ørntoft, what is crucial is that performing and playing at another class, being a class tourist, becomes a fetish, a stage play, a game, a computer game, but also a privilege which is only available to those who have enough cultural and social capital to read the various codes and signs and can act and create themselves in relation to them. Theis tells Nadja that when he was in high school, he changed his identity for fun and played at being upper-class, in the same way as he is now pretending to be working-class. Nadja does not understand or recognise this odd game. As she says: 'jeg elsker at være den jeg er, jeg føler da jeg kender mig selv [...] jeg tænker nok bare ikke så meget over det' (Ørntoft 2018: 114, 132) (I love being who I am, I feel as if I know myself [...] I just don't think that much about it). Thus Nadja — at least in the version of her that Theis offers us — does not have access to the late-modern middle-class notion and praxis of oneself as project.

Whereas Theis, in an almost obsessive and hyper-reflective mode, incessantly performs and contemplates himself through choices, games and endless mirrorings in others, Nadja sees herself as who she is. As Theis tells Nadja: 'Jeg tror jeg kunne have tilpasset mig mange forskellige miljøer. Det er virkelig noget jeg kan finde ud af' (129) (I think I could have adjusted to a lot of different environments. It's something I'm really good at). In contrast, Nadja understands herself as fixed and stable in terms of her feeling of identity, and she just wants to live in Albertslund, because 'det er der jeg er fra' (133) (that's where I'm from), as she explains to Theis. Being comfortable with one's identity and feeling connected to one place sounds like a privilege; in earlier times, according to Skeggs, it was actually a middle-class privilege to be stable and rooted in terms of both geography and identity (Skeggs 2004: 50). His identity-related

paradox between class solidarity and a concealed, fetishising exercise of power, as part of the expression of adulthood phobia, is very significant in the work of Hagen and Ørntoft. In contrast, for Viemose, solidarity is a way to grow up.

‘I am a passionate woman’

The title of Hanne Højgaard Viemose’s novel *HHV, FRSHWN. Dødsknaldet i Amazonas* gestures both to the author’s initials (HHV) and to her upbringing in the Danish provinces, specifically in the town of Frederikshavn (FRSHWN). In this novel, the relationship between adulthood phobia and class belonging becomes a central aspect of the autofictional game with identity. The female, autofictive ‘I’ does not constitute a fixed textual or existential hook, but emerges in fragments and in voices, constantly split from itself. As in the earlier novels *Hannah* (2011) and *Mado* (2015), in concrete terms, the ‘I’ shifts between different names and thus between different identities that are determined by age and by context (e.g. Hanne, Hannah and Anita); all of these are given voice in turn by the central narrator, Hanne. In many ways, this makes the text a schizophrenic cacophony of voice, feelings and affects, which criss-cross and supplement each other. Hanne herself perhaps alludes to this tone when she playfully points out that ‘musikken i det her tivoli er for høj’ (Viemose 2019: 53) (the music in this fairground is too loud). Viemose’s ‘I’ is foaming with rage and up for a fight. From a feminist perspective, we are dragged into what Jack Halberstam calls *gagafeminism*, a feminist strategy which, just like the pop phenomenon Lady Gaga, childishly insists on breaching all (gender) norms and constantly switching identities in a carnivalesque way. As Halberstam writes:

“Gaga”, a term newly popularized by the American singer born Stefani Germanotta, is a child word, a word that stands in for whatever the child cannot pronounce. It is also a word associated with nonsense, madness (going gaga), surrealism (Dada), the avant-garde, pop, SpongeBob; it means foolish or naive enthusiasm, going crazy, being dotty; it sounds like babbling or idle chatter [...] Gaga feminism grapples with what cannot yet be pronounced and what still takes the form of gibberish, as we wait for new social forms to give our gaga babbling meaning (Halberstam 2012: xxv)

As previously mentioned, we are thus faced with the adulthood-phobic ‘pre-socialized, pre-disciplined, pre-restrained anarchic

(Halberstam 2012: xxiv) gaga child's voice, which wants to overturn every system (as long as it is fun), but which also longs to be seen and appreciated by those very same authorities. But we also encounter the more adult version, who in an angry or serious setting struggles for her children, for class solidarity and for women's rights. In particular, a battle seems to rage between the adulthood-phobic voice that enjoys living a 'planløs backpackeradfærd på flugt fra mig selv/ for min egen skyld' (unplanned backpacker existence, running away from myself / for my own sake), and the more adult voice, who longs to 'komme ud af mig selv [og at gøre] noget der kunne gøre en forskel for nogen eller noget i verden' (Viemose 2019: 58-59) (come out of myself [and to do] something that could make a difference for someone or something in the world). This schism has a thematic (parenting) function of the writing 'I', but as previously mentioned it also points to a change of direction in contemporary literature, specifically a more explicitly political agenda. The 'I' is still (as it is in the novels *Hannah* and *Mado*, which constitute parts 1 and 2 of a trilogy) adult-phobic and hysterical and moves around exhaustedly in a late-modern state of competition, which actually motivates and strengthens this identity. In *HHV FRSHWN*, it is never possible to determine whether it is society that creates the adult, or if it is society that creates the adulthood-phobe. Similarly, it is impossible to judge whether the child (and the invalid) potentially represent a model way to re-think the patriarchal class society (like a kind of gaga feminism). It is thus unclear whether the child-adult is a construction, fundamentally self-obsessed and navel-gazing, and perhaps incapable of thinking about anyone else but itself. Being adulthood-phobic and living in the competition state that promotes this phobia is in *HHV FRSHWN* actually not only a choice, but also hard work that everyone needs a holiday from. As the 'I' (Hanne) writes:

nogle gange får jeg fornemmelsen af
at vi alle sammen går rundt i en eller anden for menneske-
øjne usynlig børnehave [...]
jeg gider ikke mere
er så træt, vil gerne ha sommerferie
jeg vil gerne vide, hvordan man melder sig ud af den
her institution, kan man opsig sit abonnement [. . .]
(Viemose 2019: 18)

(Sometimes I get the feeling

that we're all in some kind of nursery invisible to the human eye
[...]
I can't be bothered any more
am so tired, want a summer holiday,
I would like to know how to sign myself out of this
institution, can I cancel my subscription...)

The association of the 'I' with the nursery school draws on adulthood-phobic vocabulary, but also gestures to society's infantile ideology of the sibling, which is actually a consequence of neoliberal ideology. The competition state does not protect the vulnerable or encourage community or solidarity; it has become a 'nursery' in which everyone competes against everyone else in an invisible network of exclusionary mechanisms. Or as Standing writes: 'Feelings of empathy and competition are in constant tension' (Standing 2016: 26). Being like a child amongst other children is a behaviour which is desired and sought-after and thus fostered by others. As the married lover says to the 'I': 'Vi er barnlige sammen, ikke forelskede' (Viemose 2019: 100) (We are childish together, not in love); 'vi er så barnlige, siger du, det er dejligt, siger du [...] Jeg, en boblende fryd, henrykt over min *succes*, du kan ikke få nok af mit pjat' (133, my emphasis) (we are so childish, you say, it's lovely, you say [...] I, an effervescent thrill, delighted by my *success*, you can't get enough of my nonsense). At the same time, the child's position is wild and 'GAGA', that is, a basis on which to play and fantasise, and not least a basis on which to break down systems, a position from which one can shout: 'fuck the world! fuck the system!'. Even the writing style, with its line breaks at odd moments and colloquial constructions, both of which permeate the novel, creates a hectic and out-of-breath tempo. As Lilian Munk Rösing writes in her review in the newspaper *Politiken*: der er en puls, en nerve, et drive i Viemoses prosa, så man bare hopper på og holder fast og lader sig rive med, grinende, gysende, gispende, jamrende' (Rösing 2019) (there is a pulse, a nerve, a drive in Viemose's prose, so you just have to jump on and hold tight and let yourself be carried along, laughing, shivering, gasping, gabbling). The narrator, Hanne, describes the writing process in the same way. Her intention was actually to write a story about Anita and her (adult) sociocultural mission, but the other children interrupt all the time with other stories: 'Anita gjorde knuder, nægtede at stå alene i historien' (Viemose 2019: 8) (Anita tied knots, refused to stand alone in the story). Therefore Hanne can 'bare forsøge at hænge på, følge med i det liv der pludselig opførte sig som en flok islandske heste på vej over det sorte stenede højland' (9) (only try to

hang on, keep up with the life that suddenly started to behave like a herd of Icelandic ponies crossing the great, stony heartland). This also means that younger versions of Hanne often break into the story and actually often break into song — whether typical children's songs or songs revised for the moment with new, more infantile, lyrics, for example: '**Tissekone og en spand** (melodi: vi vil se forfatteren)' (138, emphasis original) (Front Bottom and a Bucket, melody: we want to see the author), or 'Dørene på psyken siger åbne og lukke, åbne og lukke [...]' (32) (The doors to the psyche open and close, open and close [...]). The style can also suddenly shift from children's songs to noise-punk.

Simultaneously, we find ourselves on the threshold of negative feelings, in that there is plenty of envy, paranoia, sarcasm, anger, hysteria and irony. The 'I' is 'træt, ulykkelig, hænger ikke længere sammen' (28) (tired, unhappy, no longer coherent). And in particular, rage crops up a lot, as an affect she cannot control, and which can bring other affects with it. This unpredictable, affective changeability is connected to the punkish air of the language and also functions as a youthful trait: '[...] dengang i ungdommen, da alt var frit og benhårdt og fortvivlende og flagrende, og og og og' (93) ([...] back when I was young, when everything was free and rock-hard and doubtful and fluttering, and and and and).

The affective unpredictability also functions as a revolt against the late-modern demand for pure feelings, especially happiness. She does not know how to 'sidde og grine lykkeligt i familiens skød med flødeskum i skægget' (145) (sit and laugh happily in the bosom of the family with cream stuck on my face). The 'I' is confronted several times with the idea that she is not happy enough: "Kan du ikke være lidt glad?" (130) ("can't you be a little bit happy?") asks the married lover and the 'I' bursts out: "nu også dig" (you too, huh!). But the need for happiness is also internalised, in that her old 'I' calls her 'snerpet' (53) (prudish) and claims that she's only weeping to get attention. She is equally self-critical about not being inventive and bubbly enough in her outbursts: 'jeg plejer at finde mere farverige reaktioner på mine sammenbrud' (35) (I usually find more colourful ways to express my breakdowns). The negative feelings are bound up here with the 'I's ironic attitude — not least in relation to herself. But the wild writing style functions, as mentioned earlier, also as a salient rebellion against a middle-class, patronising, modernistic and adult (linguistic) correctness.

Hanne stands, as mentioned, with a foot in both camps. She is adult and not adult, precariat and non-precariat, exhausted but not mad, and so on. Her inner dialogue reflects these negotiations, which

for instance concern the question of adult versus not adult. The young Hannah thinks that Hanne has become boring and not least prudish (53). Hanne defends herself by saying that she has children and thus needs 'en indtægt, et sted at bo' (35) (an income, a place to live). But Hannah prefers to live out a more nomadic fantasy and never settle anywhere permanently. Hanne also has to admit that adulthood has resulted in a vacuum: 'det forfærdelige tomrum, der havde været i mit liv siden jeg lagde buen og pilen fra mig' (45) (the terrible emptiness that had been in my life since I laid down my bow and arrow). She can no longer manage the presence of teenagers (151) in public space; in fact, she gets irritated by their noisy innocence. The irritation is directed at the young. She indicates that she does not 'misunder dem [...] deres ungdom, jeg ønsker mig ikke i deres sted, jeg ville for intet i verden bytte eller skruet tiden tilbage' (163) (envy them [...] their youth, I don't wish to be in their place, I wouldn't swap or turn back time for anything). Elsewhere, she finds herself irritated by the vegan middle-class woman who moves into the collective in the Copenhagen district of Østerbro where she has moved with her children (and which actually has as much tolerance for children as it does for lice). Or she gets annoyed and sickened by 'Indre Bys damer med små pusselamsepuddehunde på snor' (130) (city-centre ladies with little cutie-pie poodle doggies on leashes). Overall, the 'I' is often gripped by envy, irritation and anger. Ngai points out by way of Aristotle that 'the people we call irritable are those who are irritated by the wrong things, *more severely and for longer* than is right' (Ngai 2005: 182, emphasis original). This statement in many ways describes the 'I's' flighty feelings and affects, which are often characterised by projections and feelings that cover up other feelings, and often related to manifestations of class. In that connection, Standing emphasises that the precariat is marked by negative feelings such as anomie, worry and alienation, and sees this as 'the inevitable flip side of a society that has made "flexibility" and insecurity cornerstones of the economic system' (Standing 2016: 27). I will return to this point in a moment. First, something a bit more concrete.

Hanne is an author, divorced, around forty years old, receives state support (as a sole parent), and she has just moved from the ghetto Gellerupparken to a collective in Østerbro with her children. She feels like 'en snylter på dette ressourcestærke middelklassefamilieselement, som jeg med en demografisk manøvre havde tiltusket min søn i indre by' (Viemose 2019: 31) (a parasite on the well-resourced middle-class family sector, into which I had sneaked my son with a demographic manoeuvre). Standing (2016: 40) writes

that members of the precariat feel themselves to be second-class citizens, which is reflected here by the 'I's feeling of being a parasite. Hanne feels homeless, that she does not belong on Østerbro with the middle-class vegans and the rich ladies, but neither does she regard herself as quite part of the precariat or working class (the precariat concept is not directly mentioned). But in any case, her everyday life is shaped by uncertainty, because as an author she never quite knows where the next penny is coming from. She has to 'tigge om job, søge penge, skrive, skrive og skrive, hele tiden rydde op og ta mig sammen for ikke at blive vanvittig' (Viewmose 2019: 127) (beg for jobs, look for money, write, write and write, tidy up all the time and keep myself together so I don't go mad). She is also diagnosed with bipolar disorder and as psychologically fragile. She herself comes from a working-class family that worked the night shift on the wharf in Frederikshavn; she smokes the cheap Blå Corner brand cigarettes favoured by the working class, only just passed her high school certificate and dropped out of her Anthropology degree after two years. She couldn't be bothered to read all the elitist texts on the course, which the 'I' thinks lack juice and power and personal nerve. At the same time, she is careful not to talk down to the working class; she sympathises with the marginalised: refugees, lorry drivers, the mentally ill and other peripheral existences. On the other hand, she regularly comments ironically about the privileged middle-class sector to which she, with her precarious existence as an author, both belongs and does not. Thus she feels that she falls between two stools, sick and mad (marginalised) and nevertheless clever (privileged). Despite the fact that she uses a colloquial and flighty writing style to work against middle-class readers and arbiters of taste, she constantly underlines and highlights her cultural capital. In contrast to Ørntoft, who tries to consume his way out of the middle class, Hanne listens to David Bowie, reads Inger Christensen, Kierkegaard and Selma Lagerlöf, goes to literary festivals and bars, frequents the hipster bars of the city centre like Harbo Bar and Palæ Bar, where she drinks the middle-class coffee variant Cortado (perhaps alongside the middle-class vegans from whom she maintains an ironic distance throughout the novel). She also feels superior to and more 'literary' than the crime fiction author with whom she embarks on an erotic affair. In this way, the cultural signs that she presents and through which she negotiates her identity become expressions of the middle-class privileges that she still will not identify with or acknowledge. As Skeggs emphasises: 'Culture, as an exchange-value in self-formation, becomes a resource, a form of property and therefore, propertizable' (Skeggs 2004: 153)

This multiplicity of identity is, as discussed earlier, connected to the novel's schizophrenic tone, which is both testy and confused, teasing, playful, plaintive and angry.

On the one hand, Hanne identifies with and feels solidarity with the uncertain conditions of the precariat in late modernity, and on the other hand she practices the elitist literary x-ray vision of the urban middle class. She uses this vision to form impressions of others, for example by decoding bookshelves and consumption patterns. The same ambivalence defines her relationship to ageing. This is something she both wants and does not want. Being a house divided against itself produces a terrible level of noise in the rafters, illustrated in the external world by a cacophony of sounds in a cabin where the 'I' is holidaying:

Der er ingen gardiner, og om natten stråler lyset indefra hytten ud som en stjerne i den mørke skov. Om aftenen søger skovens dyr indendørs i hytten: Musene i skabet støjer som en hær, måren på loftet spiller curling med agern og stumper af træ, ugleen i gavlen går i hak i et a. Kun spøgelserne siger ikke en lyd. (Viemose 2019: 83)

There are no curtains, and at night light streams out of the cabin like a star in the dark woods. In the evening, the woodland creatures try to get into the cabin: the mice in the cupboard make a racket like an army, the housemartin in the attic plays curling with acorns and twigs, the owl on the roof is like a stuck record player in the key of A. Only the ghosts don't make a sound.)

Another way in which Hanne effectively counteracts the signs of middle-class culture is in regard to her body and her sexuality. As in Hagen's work, discussed earlier, Hanne challenges notions of the middle-class woman's body as cultivated, closed, clean and elegant, while also desireless and intellectualised. For Viemose, the body is markedly open and biological and not least fertile, motherly, vulgar and lusty. She works against the notion of woman as a 'victim' of the male gaze, and insists on taking action and being active, but also insists on her right to fantasise about, for example, rape. She does not want to be a male/masculine staged flâneur, nor a decent, delightful middle-class woman. She thus wants to delve into the body, to be, without shame, a passionate woman. Her psychologist, in tune with her middle-class status, has works by Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Lacan

and Foucault on her bookcase (69), and considers Hanne's active sexuality to be either an artificial performance or a working-class means of survival (and thus something she can and should alter about her behaviour). Hanne says to the psychologist:

jeg er et menneske med en krop
et begær
en seksualitet
jeg er en liderlig kvinde, siger jeg
jeg tager mine egne skridt
i denne voldlige verden
jeg gider ikke høre på dit pis
jeg er ikke en engel
et offer
et handikappet dyr (79-80)

(I am a person with a body
desire
sexuality
I am a passionate woman, I say
I take my own steps
in this violent world
I can't be bothered listening to your shit
I am not an angel
not a victim
not a handicapped animal)

The 'I' identifies herself, like many other contemporary women authors, with the figure of the witch (examples include Olga Ravn and Mette Moestrup). The witch figure has historically been associated with the hysterical. Like the hysteric and the child, the witch is in an ambivalent position in relation to society, in that she resists interpellation. She is precarious, poor and rejected and at the same time wise and knowing. The witch can see, and see through, things that others cannot. Moreover, she is undefinable, both evil and good. The witch is often represented as ugly, old and disgusting. She awakens disgust rather than desire, and she is thus subversive in terms of her presentation of the female body. In other words, the witch breaks with the notion of the sterile and instagram-ready middle-class body. At the same time, she reclaims the way in which women and animals/nature have been associated with the patriarchal gaze (as we witnessed in Ørntoft's work): 'jeg kan godt lide natur, jeg er en abe, se

jeg kan svinge med halen, har fregner og krøller, to til fire børn, en velfungerende livmoder' (Viemose 2019: 156) (I like nature, I am an ape, look, I can dangle from my tail, I have freckles and curls, two-to-four children, a fully-functional womb). Hanne is thus also very concerned with identifying with the womanly body and with a biology that is in living transformation. As she underlines:

Hej, jeg hedder Hanne, jeg er kvinde og forfatter, 172 cm høj, 62 kg [...] to til fire børn, en velfungerende livmoder, stærk pms, uregelmæssig cyklus, imponerende mælkeproduktion som stadig i dag tre år efter seneste ammestop kan gå i gang ved lyden af et spædbarn [...] (156)

(Hi, my name is Hanne, I am a woman and an author, 5 feet 8 inches tall, 9-and-a-half stone, two-to-four children, a fully-functioning womb, terrible PMS, irregular menstrual cycle, impressive milk production that even today, three years after I stopped breast-feeding for the last time, can be triggered by the sound of a baby crying)

Exit

Hanne is constantly in, as she describes it, 'en kronisk tilstand af pakken-ud og pakken-ned' (192) (a chronic state of unpacking and packing up). This state is a condition of existence for the urban precariat, but also an internalised need for anyone who because of adulthood phobia cannot or will not find rest, peace and stability. She points out several times that she is not ill, but exhausted, and that she needs rest and quiet, and the reader understands that exhaustion, because she or he also feels it after reading the novel. Hanne is in that sense a victim of her own psyche, but a victim, too, of the conditions associated with the late-modern precariat, in several respects. She is subject to current urban housing issues, while her restless longing for the chameleon-like gaga-life and the flickering experience of youth drives her around the world on road trips from the Amazon to Iceland. All the while, she carries a cultural capital that she cannot avoid putting into practice, but which she is often less than keen on admitting she possesses. This is a kind of capital that renders her foreign and homeless in all sectors of society — both in the prison of Gellerupparken, and middle-class Østerbro.

In many ways, Viemose, Hagen and Ørntoft problematise the existence of the precariat as a class, or the recognition of such a class. As Bourdieu writes, 'A "class" [...] exists when there are agents capable

of imposing themselves as authorized to speak and to act officially in its place and in its name' (Bourdieu 1987: 15). There is, then, according to Bourdieu, no 'pre-given' class 'in social space', before it is acknowledged and authorised as such. The readings in this article show without a doubt that the same applies to the recognition of the precariat, but they also show the impossibility of this class commonality, because the social and cultural distinctions and conditions of belonging that create the self in late modernity simply trump the meaning of the economic conditions. Standing himself argues the same: 'The precariat is not a class-for-itself, partly because it is at war with itself' (Standing 2016: 28). However, in his book he undermines this principle, because he is mostly focused on economic conditions, much more so than on cultural distinctions.

It is not so much the respective voices in the works discussed here that point towards possible, as well as lost, communities, but rather the implicit authors of the texts; in their display of vulnerability and anger, but also in their exploration of classism amongst the protagonists, they render visible our own lack of solidarity. What we must perhaps consider is whether our precarious conditions in late modernity are really as similar as Standing wants to make them, or whether the interpretations presented here actually show that the precariat is too loose and homogenising a term to describe large and growing groupings in late-modern class society. In any case, what Viemose, Hagen and Ørntoft make visible for us is that the notion of a new common class — the precariat — seems rather hard to practise as class solidarity because cultural inequality within the precariat gets in the way of solidarity.

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