



*Magnus Nilsson*

## **Writing Class**

Precarious Labour in Contemporary Swedish Literature



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*Magnus Nilsson*

Malmö University  
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# Introduction

*Det du har lämnat bakom dig är kvar.*

*[...]*

*Du ser dig om när sikten klarnar,  
erfarenheterna snor runt i blodomloppet,  
försöker hindra att förkalkningen tar över,  
att venerna förlorar sin kontakt med hjärtat.*

*[What you have left behind is still there.*

*(...)*

*You look around when the view clears,  
experiences are coursing through the bloodstream,  
trying to prevent calcification from taking over,  
the veins from losing their connection to the heart.]*

*Jonas Modig*

*Writing Class* analyses how precarious labour is represented in contemporary Swedish literature. It explores how this literature can deepen our understanding of such labour and contribute to struggles against the injustices it entails. The book also examines how the rise of labour-market insecurity in Sweden in recent years has lead authors writing about class and labour to develop new literary-political strategies.

Thus, *Writing Class* engages with significant trends in literary scholarship about *the precariat*, *precarity*, and *precariousness*. Several scholars have emphasised that literature can function both as a source of knowledge about these phenomena and as something that can inspire political action. Literary scholars Michiel Rys and Bart Philipsen (2021, p. 3) argue, in their introduction to the edited collection *Literary Representations of Precarious Work, 1840 to the Present*, that literature is “co-

constitutive of a shared socioeconomic imaginary” which conditions how we understand and fight precarity. A similar perspective is expressed by literary scholar Ulrich Plass (2024, p. 9), in his introduction to another edited collection—*Representing Social Precarity in German Literature and Film*—where artistic representations of precarity are described “not only as aesthetic reflections of social tensions and contradictions but also as deliberate interventions in the social discourse on marginality, poverty, and dispossession”. The idea that analyses of literary representations of the precariat, precarity, and precariousness can enhance our understanding of contemporary literature and its functions is stressed by literary scholar Emily Hogg (2021, p. 2) in her introduction to yet another edited collection—*Precarity in Contemporary Literature and Culture*—where she asserts that “culture and the precarity concept can elucidate each other” and that reading notions of precarity through contemporary cultural forms can generate new insights into both.

The concepts and phenomena of *precariat*, *precarity*, and *precariousness* have not only garnered significant attention in literary scholarship in recent years, but also in other academic disciplines as well as in political and public discourse. However, their interpretations vary widely. This can be illustrated with two influential theorists: Judith Butler and Guy Standing. Butler considers precariousness a fundamental aspect of the human condition—a product of the inherent vulnerability and dependency of human life—albeit articulated in specific ways in our historical epoch and affecting different groups in different ways (Butler, 2004; see also Lorey, 2015). In contrast, Standing defines the precariat as a new class-in-the-making characterised by a lack of specific labour-market securities in post-Fordist capitalism (Standing, 2014b, p. 10).

*Writing Class* does not analyse literature about the precariat, precarity, and precariousness in general, but focuses specifically on *literary representations of labour-market precarity in contemporary Sweden*. More precisely, it centres on works describing precarity emanating from work done outside of the “standard employment relationship”—typically defined in Sweden as full-time and open-ended employment (Ilsoe and Larsen, 2021, p. 9). Thus, the book’s primary concern is *employment insecurity* (see Paugam, 2009, p. 176; Reichwein, 2013, pp. 196–197; Standing, 2014b, p. 24), a form of precarity associated with “casualization, informalisation, agency labour, part-time labour, phoney self-employment and [...]

crowd-labour” (Standing, 2015, p. 6), “flexploitation” (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 85), “zero-hour contracts, platform work, on-call work, and distinct forms of solo self-employment” (Ilsøe and Larsen, 2021, p. 17). However, this does not mean that *Writing Class* ignores representations of other kinds of labour-related insecurity. Those who lack employment security often also lack other kinds of labour-related security—such as *labour-market security* (adequate income-earning opportunities), *work security* (protection against accidents and illness), and *representation security* (possession of a collective voice in the labour market) (see Standing 2014b, 10)—and this is, as will be demonstrated in this book, thematized in contemporary Swedish literature.

Furthermore, *Writing Class* does not analyse representations of all forms of precarious employment, but focuses specifically on literature about *working-class* labour-market precarity. One reason for this focus is that, in Sweden—as well as in the other Scandinavian countries and, probably, in most other parts of the world—the majority of those who are precariously employed are workers. Sociologist Johan Alfnsson (2022, p. 85), notes that 68% of those with temporary work contracts—the most common form of precarious employment in today’s Sweden—have working-class jobs.

A second reason is that most literary works addressing labour-market precarity in contemporary Sweden focus on the working class. This is not to say that there are no works about middle-class labour-market precarity (see Landström, 2020, pp. 113–115). One important example is Elise Karlsson’s *Linjen* [The Line] (2015), a novel about a young woman working on a temporary contract at a publishing company. As literary critic Rasmus Landström (2020, p. 110) has observed, it was read by many critics as a literary portrayal of the precariat. For example, literary critic and scholar Stefan Jonsson (2015) argued that Karlsson’s novel illustrates “vad sociologerna menar när de talar om ‘prekariatet’” [what sociologists mean when they speak of “the precariat”].<sup>1</sup> Other examples include Johan Kling’s novel *Människor helt utan betydelse* [People of no importance at all] (2009), which follows a freelancing editor in film and TV living from hand to mouth, and Jenny Andreasson’s autobiographical novel *Teatern* (2022), which, as literary scholar Per Sivefors (2023, p. 42) notes, portrays a young female theatre director experiencing

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

a “precarious work situation”. Nevertheless, the majority of contemporary Swedish literary works on labour-related precarity focus on unskilled labour and manual work.

A third reason for the focus in *Writing Class* on representations of working-class labour-market precarity is that it makes it possible to highlight a central question in discussions—both scholarly and political—about precarity, namely the relationship between the so-called precariat and the working class. And this, in turn, allows for comparisons between literature about contemporary precarious labour and the tradition of working-class literature, which is an important context for understanding literature about class and labour in Sweden.

The analyses in *Writing Class* begin from the premise that attention to specific cases is essential. Following literary scholar Toril Moi’s (2017, p. 1) advice in *Revolution of the Ordinary*, the book seeks to resist “theory’s craving for generality” by focusing on concrete examples in specific contexts.

The concepts of precariat, precarity and precariousness are often used in very general or even universalising ways. That Butler views precariousness as fundamental aspect of all human life has already been mentioned. And even if Standing, as has also been noted, connects his description of the so-called precariat to a specific moment in the history of capitalism, he nevertheless claims that it constitutes a “global” class (Standing, 2014b, p. 12), encompassing migrant workers in China as well as gig workers in the USA, freelance journalists in Sweden and interns in Spain. The tendency to universalise precarity can also be illustrated with Pierre Bourdieu’s (2004, p. 107) famous statement that it can be found *everywhere*.

Several scholars have challenged these generalisations. Cultural theorist Brett Neilson and media theorist Ned Rossiter (2008, p. 54) stress that “precarity”—understood as “both ontological experience and labour condition”—is “intimately connected” to variations shaped by “national, geocultural and historical contexts as well as institutional practices” (see also Berman and van der Linden, 2014). Therefore, they argue, “the discourse of precarity does not translate on a global scale” (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008, p. 54). This critique is particularly relevant in the Scandinavian context (see e.g. Simonsen and Haarder, 2020, p. 4). Despite the erosion of welfare-state institutions in recent decades, the region still retains economic, cultural, legal,

political etc. characteristics that distinguish it from other parts of the world—including a relatively low level of labour-market precarity.

Questions about literature's ability to help us understand or change the world are also often discussed in general or universal terms, with the point of departure in rather rigid ideas about what literature, in the singular, *is* (or, sometimes, *does*). This too has been criticised. For example, in their introduction to the edited collection *The Political Uses of Literature*, literary scholars Benjamin Kohlmann and Ivana Perica (2024, p. 3) argue that “literary-political constellations”—and, thus, literature's political uses and functions, *in the plural*—“cannot be understood without taking into account their immediate (historical, geographical, social, political, but also aesthetic) contexts”.

As has already been underlined, *Writing Class* has a highly specific focus. It does not deal with literature about the precariat, precarity or precariousness in general, but concentrates on literary representations of working-class labour-market precarity in contemporary Sweden. It also places these representations in concrete social, political, literary etc. contexts—such as the histories of the welfare state, the labour movement and working-class literature in Sweden. Furthermore, it approaches the analysed works in an open, dialogic manner; the analyses are not founded in any strong theory about how literature relates to precarious labour or struggles against it, but seeks to uncover this relationship through close attention to the texts themselves, treating them not only as “objects of knowledge” but also as “sources of knowledge” (Felski, 2008, p. 7), and as speech acts intended to produce change in specific contexts.

## **Literature, class and precarious labour in contemporary Sweden**

Precarious labour has received a lot of attention in both political and literary discourse in Sweden in recent years (see Landström, 2020, pp. 106–107; Ilsøe and Larsen, 2021). This is hardly surprising, given the country's political, economic and social development during the last decades.

Several scholars—such as political economist Joseph Choonara (2019; 2020) and political scientist Kevin Doogan (2009)—have argued, not unconvincingly, that the spread of labour-market precarity in recent years is often exaggerated. Furthermore, sociologist Edvin Syk (2025, p. 3) has demonstrated that, over the last half-century,

“job quality” (defined as “working conditions related to individual well-being”) has been rising in Sweden. Nevertheless, non-standard forms of employment have become increasingly prevalent in the Swedish labour market, with approximately one quarter of all employees working under such arrangements (Ilsøe and Larsen, 2021, p. 11). In addition to this, there are factors that make it likely that labour-market precarity is *experienced* as an especially pressing problem in Sweden.

As Neilson and Rossiter (2008, p. 54) have pointed out, “[p]recarity appears as an irregular phenomenon only when set against a Fordist or Keynesian norm”, while in “regulatory contexts where the social state has maintained less grip”, it is not viewed as “an exceptional condition”. This can help explain why precarious labour receives so much attention in today’s Sweden.

During the second half of the twentieth century, Sweden had one of the strongest welfare states in the world. This resulted—as Alfonsson (2022, p. 19) has emphasised—in a very high degree of labour-market security: employees enjoyed strong employment security, unemployment was low, and there was a generous unemployment insurance that guaranteed economic protection for those who nevertheless could not find employment. Sociologists Anna Ilsøe and Trine Pernille Larsson (2021, p. 9), even argue that the Nordic welfare states were “built and shaped around the notion of the standard employment relationship, i.e. full-time, open-ended jobs”, and the labour-market security it guaranteed in combination with various welfare-state institutions. However, in recent decades, the (neo-) liberalisation of the Swedish economy has been quite extreme. Sociologist Göran Therborn (2018a, p. 15) has described the development as a massive “neoliberal counter revolution”, resulting in, among other things, increased labour-market insecurity. Even if this counter revolution has also had many other consequences—increased economic inequality, growing poverty, rising unemployment, the dismantling of welfare services etc.—the increase in employment insecurity has garnered specific attention. The reason for this is that it has been perceived of as a major departure from, or even a break with, a central aspect of the welfare state (see Nilsson, 2014b, p. 144). Ilsøe and Larsson (2021, p. 9) highlight this when arguing that “the development of non-standard work (NSW) and emerging practices of new contractual employment forms” in Sweden and the other Nordic countries challenge not only the hitherto dominant models of labour market regulation in these countries, but also the very institution of the Nordic welfare state model.

Thus, although precarious labour may be less prevalent in Sweden than in many other countries, and its consequences less severe, it is nonetheless perceived as an especially pressing problem and thus receives much attention, as a symbol for a major transformation within Swedish society. A good illustration of this can be found in a book by historian Henrik Arnstad about former Swedish finance minister Ernst Wigforss, who is often viewed as the ideological father of the Swedish welfare state: when describing the dismantling in recent years of this welfare state, Arnstad (2023, p. 473) symbolises the development with the emergence of a new proletariat, in the form of non-white gig-workers delivering takeout on e-scooters for starvation wages. In other words: after the welfare state comes precarious labour.

As already mentioned, in Sweden, the tradition of working-class literature constitutes an important context for discussion of questions about literature, class, and labour. As in many other European countries, this literature first emerged in Sweden during the nineteenth century, mainly as *labour-movement literature* in the form of agitational poetry and songs. However, unlike in most (if not all) other Western countries, it then developed into an important strand in national literature. A good symbol for this is that in 1974, the working-class writers Eyvind Johnson (1900–1976) and Harry Martinson (1904–1978) were awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature as representatives of “the many proletarian writers or working-class poets” who, on a wide front, “broke into” Swedish literature in the 1930s, as Karl Ragnar Gierow of the Swedish Academy put it in the award ceremony speech (Gierow 1974). In the 1970s, there was a major revival for working-class literature in, which resulted in both an increased interest in older works and authors from scholars, critics and readers, and in the emergence of a new generation of working-class writers. During the last twenty years, a *new wave of Swedish working-class literature* has emerged. Due to its strong presence in Swedish literature, working-class literature has become a key reference point in both scholarly and critical discussions of contemporary portrayals of precarious labour—as well as in the literary works themselves.

## About this book

Chapter One, “Representations of Precarious Labour”, introduces the literary works discussed throughout *Writing Class*—primarily novels, but also poetry, drama, literary reportage and graphic novels. It examines how these texts depict and criticise

precarious labour, identifying the problems they highlight and the strategies they use to do so.

Chapter Two, “Writers and Classes”, explores the relationship between authors writing about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden and the workers they portray. The chapter argues that these authors are less concerned with representing existing worker collectives than with *contributing to workers' formation as a class*.

Chapter Three, “How to Fight Precarious Labour”, investigates the ideas proposed in contemporary Swedish literature for addressing labour-market precarity. It considers which solutions are put forward and how they are articulated.

Chapter Four, “Precarious Labour and Working-Class Literature”, revisits the relationship between writers and workers and proposes a rethinking of how it is typically conceptualised in Swedish literary criticism. Building on this reconceptualisation, the chapter compares literature about contemporary precarious labour with older working-class literature.

The book ends with a short conclusion in which the answers to the main research questions are presented and discussed. To assist readers unfamiliar with Swedish, and who may find it difficult to follow references to literary works cited by their Swedish titles, an appendix with short summaries of the most important literary works discussed in *Writing Class* has been included.

Several themes and questions will be discussed in more than one chapter. Each time, new historical and theoretical perspectives will be added, thereby (it is hoped) providing greater depth. For example, comparisons between literature about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden and traditional working-class literature will recur throughout the book. Initially, these comparisons will be framed by dominant understandings among scholars, critics, authors and readers of these literatures. Later, however, these understandings will be challenged—both theoretically and historically—opening up new perspectives on the tradition of working-class literature, contemporary literature about labour-market precarity, and the broader historical and theoretical questions that their study bring to the fore. Therefore, it is necessary to read the whole of *Writing Class* to understand how it answers the research questions posed in the introduction.

*Writing Class* has been written within the research environment “Precariat, Precarity and Precariousness in (Post-) Welfare-State Scandinavian Literatures”, which is

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*Writing Class* is dedicated to Åsa.



# 1. Representations of Precarious Labour

This chapter presents readings of literary works across different genres—novels, graphic novels, poetry, reportage etc.—about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden.<sup>2</sup> According to Toril Moi (2017, p. 178), to read is to “pay attention to the particular text, to look and think in response to particular questions”. Here, these questions concern labour-market precarity. The readings begin from the premise—outlined by Moi (2017, pp. 195–221)—that literary texts function as (among other things) speech acts. The works analysed in *Writing Class* are approached as such acts, aiming to draw attention to and critique precarious labour. The chapter explores both the content of these critiques and the literary strategies through which they are articulated.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Including reportages in a study of literary representations of precarious labour warrants explanation, given that reportage is typically classified as a non-fiction genre. However, as will be demonstrated below, the reportages discussed in *Writing Class*—Kerstin Fredholm’s *Fint hemma* [Nice Home] (2005) and Elinor Torp’s *Rent åt helvete* (2023) [roughly: *Way Off*]—are notably literary in style, employing narrative techniques and rhetorical devices more commonly associated with fiction. Furthermore, as Toril Moi (2017, p. 198) argues, “[a]fter the French autofiction of the 1960s and 1970s, the explosion of the memoir genre, and Karl Ove Knausgård’s *My Struggle*, it seems futile to try to draw some fundamental boundary line between fiction and nonfiction”. This observation is particularly relevant to the kind of literature analysed in *Writing Class*. In Sweden, literary authors writing about class and labour have frequently employed reportage alongside more traditional genres such as the novel. For instance, one of Sweden’s most prominent working-class writers, Ivar Lo-Johansson (1901–1990), published both novels and reportages.

<sup>3</sup> Given the interpretive framework outlined above, the readings in this chapter are not examples of *critique* in the traditional sense—that is, a reading practice founded in a *hermeneutics of suspicion*, which seeks to uncover hidden ideological or psychological meanings beneath the text’s surface (see Felski, 2015; Moi, 2017). This does not mean, however, that *Writing Class* adopts an uncritical stance. While this chapter emphasizes descriptive and interpretive engagement, later chapters will approach the texts

The literary works analysed in this chapter are grouped according to the types of labour they depict: temporary and gig work, work in the unregulated labour market, and migrant labour (primarily within the unregulated sector). Obviously, these categories are not mutually exclusive, and several works address multiple forms of labour-market precarity. Nonetheless, each category highlights distinct facets of precarious labour that have garnered significant attention in Swedish political discourse and media, and have been prominently thematised in contemporary literature.

## Temporary and gig work

According to Guy Standing (2014b, p. 21 ), “temporary labouring status comprises a central aspect of the precariat”. If so, then the precariat has indeed gained a foothold in Sweden, where temporary employment—as has been pointed out by sociologists Anna Ilsøe and Trine Pernille Larsson (2021, p. 11)—has increased in recent years and currently makes up 15 percent of all employment. Thus, it is not surprising that in Sweden the concepts of *the precariat*, *labour-market precarity* and *precarious labour* are most often used in discussions of temporary employments, including *agency labour* and so-called *gig work*. Below, representations of such labour in contemporary Swedish literature will be analysed, with a focus mainly on two autobiographical works: Kristian Lundberg’s poetic prose narrative *Yarden* [The Yard] from 2009 and Anders Teglund’s diary novel *Cykelbudet* [The Bicycle Courier] from 2021.

Kristian Lundberg (1966–2022) was a highly productive author. He began his literary career in the late 1980s as a member of the poetry group Malmöligan [the Malmö gang] and published his first book—the poetry collection *Genom september* [Through September]—in 1991. This was followed by some 40 works in different genres, mainly poetry but also novels, including crime fiction.

Lundberg’s episodic, poetic and highly self-reflexive autobiographical prose narrative *Yarden* is generally considered to be the most important literary work about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden. It is part of an autobiographical trilogy—together with *Och allt ska vara kärlek* [And All Shall Be Love] from 2011

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more critically. In particular, they will assess the works’ effectiveness as speech acts—especially their capacity to draw attention to and critique labour-market conditions in contemporary Sweden.

and *En hemstad* [A Hometown] from 2013—and describes the protagonist’s experiences of returning to the world of poverty and manual labour in which he grew up, after having worked as an author and literary critic for several years.<sup>4</sup> Recollections of his childhood, and especially of growing up with an absent father and a mother suffering from mental illness, also play an important role in the narrative.

*Yarden* was a major success with readers as well as critics. It has been turned into both a play and a feature film and translated into several languages (Norwegian, Danish, Russian, Esperanto and the Central-Asian language Chuvash). Lundberg was also awarded several literary prizes for *Yarden*, including Ivar Lo-Johansson’s personal prize, which is named after the important Swedish working-class writer and sometimes referred to as the Nobel Prize in working-class literature. Furthermore, *Yarden* has been the object of quite a few scholarly analyses (see e.g. Agrell, 2016; Arping, 2011; Forssberg Malm, 2011; Hamm, 2014; Mathisen, 2014; Nilsson, 2014b; Nilsson, 2016b; Sjöberg, 2016; Tischmann, 2020; Wahlström, 2020).

Precarious labour is a central theme in *Yarden*. After writing a review of a novel that had never been published—thus revealing that he passed judgement on a book without reading it—the protagonist can no longer find work as a literary critic. Nor can he find permanent employment of any other kind. Since he has a substantial tax debt and cannot live off his literary writing (the Swedish book market is small, and even successful authors usually need additional sources of income), this means that he has to settle for temporary work, mainly at a transshipment hub for cars—the yard of the book’s title—in the harbour in Sweden’s third-largest city, Malmö.

The reception of *Yarden* has focused quite heavily on Lundberg’s description and criticism of temporary work. In the introduction to an edited collection of research essays about working-class literature, *Yarden* is referred to as Lundberg’s “uppmärksammade roman om bemanningsarbete” [acclaimed novel about agency work] (Agrell *et al.*, 2016, p. 7). This is not surprising, given that temporary work has increased dramatically—from 10% to 16% of all work—in Sweden, following a series of changes to labour-market legislation around the turn of the century 2000 (Alfonsson, 2022, pp. 53–55, 63), changes which also led to erosion of the

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<sup>4</sup> *Yarden* is an autobiographical work. I will, however, make a distinction between its author (Kristian Lundberg) and its protagonist/narrator (bearing the same name).

employment security for temporary workers (Alfonsson, 2022, p. 19). Furthermore, several commentators have explicitly connected Lundberg's description of temporary work to academic and political discussions about precarious labour, in particular Guy Standing's theories about the so-called precariat. For example, in an essay about class perspectives in Swedish working-class literature, literary scholar Beata Agrell (2016, p. 33) describes *Yarden* as a "prekariatsroman" [novel of the precariat].

As was pointed out in the introduction, the rise of precarious labour has gained great visibility in Sweden as a symbol for the demise of the Swedish labour-market model and welfare state. This makes it possible to read the description in *Yarden* of temporary work as a metonym for important and controversial economic and political changes in Sweden in recent years. The work also invites such a reading.

Its narrative about the protagonist's return to a world of poverty and manual labour resembles the ones told in so-called autosociobiographies—narratives about people of working-class background who have moved up in society, primarily through education, and then return to and reflect on, often with the point of departure in sociological theory, their childhood environments (see Blome, Lammers and Seidel, 2022)—that recently have attracted much attention from readers, critics and scholars. Well-known examples of autosociobiographies include *Les Années* [*The Years*] (2008) by Annie Ernaux—who coined the term—Didier Eribon's *Retour à Reims* [*Returning to Reims*] (2009) and Édouard Louis' *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* [*The End of Eddy*] (2014). As sociologist and literary scholar Caroline Amlinger puts it: "In Rückblenden auf die eigene Kindheit [...] sollen die Reproduktionsmechanismen sozialer Herrschaft sichtbar gemacht werden" [In flashbacks to their own childhood, the mechanisms for reproduction of social dominance are to be made visible] (Amlinger, 2022, p. 46). Although *Yarden* shares many features with autosociobiography, it also differs in key ways from the genre's most well-known examples.

As indicated by the genre's name, autosociobiographies thematise social conditions. In particular, they do so through descriptions of how characters are affected by their upward social mobility, which is why the scholarship boy or girl is a prominent figure in the genre (Blome, Lammers and Seidel, 2022, p. 8). This means that when the protagonists return to the worlds in which they grew up, they do so *as visitors*; "ihr Aufenthalt bleibt eine Episode, der, ob miterzählt oder nicht, die Rückfahrt zum eigenen Wohnort und damit die Bestätigung der erworbenen sozialen Position

folgen wird” [their stay remains an episode, which, whether recounted or not, will be followed by the return to their own place of residence and thus the confirmation of the social position they have acquired], as literary scholar Eva Eßlinger (2022, p. 198) puts it. *Yarden* does tell a story about upward social mobility that alienates the protagonist from the working-class world in which he grew up. For example, he describes how already his first encounters with literature represent a break with that world: “Att skriva och läsa var sådant som andra gjorde. Att arbeta med byggnadsställningar och samtidigt förundras över rytmen i Stagnelius dikter; hänföras över Almqvists varsamma handlag med nyanserna—nej det gick då verkligen inte an” [Writing and reading were things that other people did. To work with scaffolding and at the same time marvel at the rhythm in Stagnelius’s poems; being enraptured by Almqvist’s careful handling of nuances—no, that really did not work] (Lundberg, 2009).<sup>5</sup> He also describes how the fact that he has become a reading and writing person means that he is no longer fully present in the world of manual labour: “Nej, jag är inte här, jag rör mig mellan diktraderna som jag mer eller mindre förgäves försöker få grepp om” [No, I am not here, I move between the verses that I, more or less in vain, try to get a grip on] (Lundberg, 2009, p. 30).

Nevertheless, the protagonist in *Yarden* has never really succeeded in breaking free from the working class. This can be illustrated with his description of the years during which he worked as an author and a critic as a mere parenthesis:

Det var ändå aldrig på riktigt; det jag skrev, det jag sade, inte skulle jag få stanna. Det syns alltid på oss. Vi kommer ändå inte att stanna kvar, eller hur? Vi kommer ändå aldrig att få tillhöra det som vi strävar efter. Klasskampen förs hela tiden; det är en annan klass som långsamt och ibland snabbt tvingar oss längre bort. (Lundberg, 2009, p. 35)

[It was never real anyway; what I wrote, what I said, I would never be allowed to stay. It always shows on us. We are not going to stay there anyway, are we? We will never get to belong to that which we are striving for. Class struggle is waged all the time; it is another class that slowly, and sometimes quickly forces us further away.]

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<sup>5</sup> Erik Johan Stagnelius (1793–1823) and Carl Jonas Love Almqvist (1793–1866) are important Swedish authors. Lundberg’s formulation “det gick då verkligen inte an” [that really did not work] is an allusion on Almqvist’s famous novel *Det går an* (1839, published in English as *Sara Widebeck and the Chapel* in 1919 and as *Why not!* in 2014).

Here, cross-class mobility is declared to be impossible. Therefore, unlike the protagonists in canonised autosociobiographies, the protagonist in *Yarden* does not return to the working class as a visitor. Instead, he understands his returning to the world of manual labour as a homecoming: “Jag är inte bara en besökare från en skyddad plats. Jag är tillbaka där allt började för mig. Kroppsarbetet. Att hyra ut sina muskler” [I am not just a visitor from a protected place. I am back where it all started for me. Manual labour. Renting out one’s muscles] (Lundberg, 2009, p. 52).

At the same time, however, he soon discovers that he no longer fully understands the world of poverty and manual labour. Above all, he cannot find his way in the labour market:

Under de femton år som förflutit sedan jag senast arbetade med kroppen har förutsättningarna förändrats avsevärt. Om jag i min ungdom kunde studsas fram och tillbaka som en flipperkula, på jakt efter jobb som alltid infann sig, så var jag nu som en rund boll som försökte trycka sig igenom ett fyrkantigt hål. Det fanns ingen plats för mig; jag var som en livstidsfånge som plötsligt släppts ur sin cell och nu inte längre kunde tolka omvärlden. (Lundberg, 2009, pp. 85–86)

[During the fifteen years that have passed since I last did manual labour, the conditions have changed considerably. In my youth, I could bounce back and forth like a pinball in search of jobs that always materialised, now I was like a round ball trying to squeeze through a square hole. There was no place for me; I was like a prisoner for life who had just been released from his cell and now could no longer interpret the world.]

Thus, the focus in *Yarden* does not lie mainly on the protagonist’s change—his becoming someone else when leaving his class—but on *changes in the world that he has left and to which he now returns*.<sup>6</sup> In particular, the narrative highlights changes in the labour market, thereby directing the reader’s attention toward the changes there following the neoliberal reforms in recent years.

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<sup>6</sup> Changes in the working-class worlds to which the protagonists return are highlighted in many canonised autosociobiographies. For example, Eribon’s *Retour à Reims* describes how many workers in France have abandoned their political allegiance to the communist party and turned to the extreme right. However, this has not been given much attention in research on the genre, where focus in general lies more on the protagonists than on the working-class worlds they have left.

*Yarden* is characterised—like many autosociobiographies—by a very high degree of reflectiveness. Its protagonist, who is also its first-person narrator, mainly relates his own experiences of being temporarily employed, but also things that he has observed or what others have told him about precarious labour. Above all, however, he *reflects* on what it means, mainly for himself, but also for others, to work under precarious conditions. Agrell (2016, p. 49) has even characterised the narrator-protagonist's discourse as “ett oändligt *reflekterande*” [infinite *reflection*; emphasis in the original].

The reflections on precarious labour in *Yarden* certainly highlight problems. In fact, they often lead to the formulation of a very explicit critique of such labour. For example, the protagonist complains about temporary employment making it difficult to plan ahead: “Det som gör det hela orimligt är att du aldrig kan vara säker på din inkomst. Du kan aldrig planera din inkomst eller din framtid” [What makes the whole thing unreasonable is that you can never be sure regarding your income. You can never plan your income or your future] (Lundberg, 2009, p. 71). This critique addresses how the lack of what Standing (2014b, p. 24) calls *employment security* leads to a lack of other kinds of labour-related security, such as *income security*. The same critique is also expressed in the protagonist's repeated complaint of having been accused (unjustly) of having caused an accident, for which the punishment is that for three weeks he is given no work, which, in turn, forces him to sell his home library (Lundberg, 2009, pp. 26, 115, 125).

The protagonist in *Yarden* observes that employers use the threat of dismissal to exert control by making workers control themselves. This is exemplified in the following passage, which illustrates the reflective narrative mode that characterizes Lundberg's work.

Jag har kunnat se att det finns ett system, en planering som går ut på att härska genom rädsla. Varför hota när vi själva ställer oss på undantag? Varför ställa krav när vi redan anger varandra? Vi är de som växer genom att göra andra mindre. Vi blir systemets väktare. Jag ser att den som på måndagen tackar nej till arbete på tisdagen inte kommer tillbaka på en vecka—även om vi fattas folk. (Lundberg, 2009, p. 47)

I have been able to see that there is a system, a planning that involves ruling through fear. Why threaten when we ourselves make exceptions? Why make demands when we already ignore our own needs? We are the ones who grow by

making others smaller. We become the guardians of the system. I see that whoever on Monday turns down work on Tuesday will not come back for a week—even if we are short of people.

*Yarden* furthermore describes how the lack of *employment security* and *income security* causes a lack also of what Standing calls *job*, *work* and *skill reproduction security*. The protagonist notes that everyone working at the yard has two or more jobs, generally of the sort that “ingen vill utföra” [nobody wants to do] such as telemarketer, cleaner, taxi driver, newspaper deliverer etc. (Lundberg, 2009, p. 70). Thus, the inability for temporarily employed workers to plan their income decreases their opportunities to “retain a niche in employment”, move “‘upward’ [...] in terms of status and income”, “gain skills”, “make use of competencies” and limit their working time (Standing, 2014b, p. 23). Instead, they end up working multiple dead-end jobs.

Lundberg’s narrative also emphasises that temporary workers and their plights have no visibility in the public sphere. The protagonist describes his work-life experiences as taking place “i radioskugga” [in radio shadow], on “[m]ånens baksida” [the dark side of the moon], or “i underjorden” [in the underworld] (Lundberg, 2009, pp. 13, 52). This can be read as a description of what Standing (2014b, p. 23) calls a lack of *representation security*. So too can the protagonist’s description of how temporary workers are uncertain of their rights and of how the fact that they desperately need more working hours make them accept terrible conditions: “Jag klarar inte av att se till mina rättigheter, eftersom jag inte vet vilka de är; borde det exempelvis inte finnas ett förbud mot att handtvätta bilar i nollgradigt väder? Jag vet inte. Ahmed vet inte” [I cannot demand my rights, because I do not know what they are. For example, should there not be a ban on handwashing cars in freezing weather? I do not know. Ahmed does not know] (Lundberg, 2009, p. 28). Being temporarily employed also means that the protagonist does not dare stay home when he is sick for fear of not being given more work: “Om man tackar nej till arbete hamnar man längst ner på listan” [If you turn down work, you land up at the bottom of the list] (Lundberg, 2009, p. 47). Here, workers on temporary contracts are positioned outside of the normal labour-market conditions. And they accept their fate because they cannot afford not to: “Vi behöver tiden: tid är pengar” [We need the time; time is money] (Lundberg, 2009, p. 27).

Thus, the critique in *Yarden* of precarious working-condition follows, to a large extent, the one put forward in scholarly and political discourse by commentators

such as Standing. In some cases, Lundberg's text can even serve as an illustration of the different kinds of insecurity that Standing associates with precarious employment (even if it was published before *The Precariat*). However, in *Yarden*, more emphasis is put on *emotional* and *existential* aspects of labour-market precarity than is usually the case in scholarly and political texts.

According to the protagonist, working at the yard means being stripped of one's individual identity: "Jag är inte ens ett namn; bara ett nummer som har kvitterat ut arbetskläder" [I am not even a name; just a number that has requisitioned work clothes]; "Här är ingen unik. Vi är bara kuggar" [Here, nobody is unique. We are just cogs] (Lundberg, 2009, pp. 27, 33). This could be read as a rather stereotypical critique of capitalist wage labour, inspired by Marxist ideas about alienation, but the protagonist connects it specifically to *temporary* employment, describing himself as one "som kommer och går och som man aldrig behöver lära sig namnet på—en spöklik vålnad, en utbytbar kugge" [one who comes and goes, whose name you never have to learn—a ghostly apparition, an exchangeable cog] (Lundberg, 2009, p. 49). Here, the loss of individuality/humanity, for which the loss of a name functions as a metonym, is a result of not belonging permanently to the collective of workers. No one needs to learn the protagonist's name, since he is only there temporarily.<sup>7</sup>

The existential critique of temporary work in *Yarden* culminates in the idea that it denies workers their humanity. According to the narrator, being human necessitates the possibility to make moral decisions: "Allt mer tror jag att det som krävs av oss är att skapa förutsättningarna så att vi kan välja det goda, om vi vill. En utsulten har inte de förutsättningarna, en som räds för att bli skild från sitt arbete har inte heller

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<sup>7</sup> A similar description of temporary work is given in Maria Hamberg's (b. 1954) *Drömfabriken* [The Dream Factory] (2010). It is a collective novel about workers in a car factory. However, some of the workers are not part of the collective: those who are employed by a temporary work agency. "[D]em orkar hon inte lära sig namnet på, de kommer och går, byts ut allt eftersom" [She couldn't be bothered to learn their names, they come and go, are continually replaced], thinks Gunilla, a worker with a permanent contract (Hamberg, 2010, p. 254). The poet Anna Arvidsdotter (b. 1992) also describes her experiences of temporary work (as a postman) in a similar way in *Händer att hålla i* [Hands to Hold] (2022): "ingen hälsar på mig / är ung anonym som säkert försvinner / jag hinna inte hälsa på någon / är ung anonym som säkert försvinner/ efter sommaren" [nobody greets me / I am young anonymous who will surely disappear / I do not have time to greet anyone / I am young anonymous who will surely disappear / after the summer] (Arvidsdotter, 2022, p. 9). This has similarities with sociologist Robert Castel's (2003, pp. 389–390) thesis that precarisation has resulted in a social and cultural crisis of work. When work becomes insecure and unstable, he argues, it can no longer provide a sense of identity.

de förutsättningarna. Det gör oss omänskliga” [More and more, I think that what is demanded by us is to create conditions in which we can choose what is good, if we want to. A starving person cannot do that, nor can someone who is afraid of losing his job. That makes us inhuman] (Lundberg, 2009, p. 50). The protagonist even describes temporary workers as animals, claiming that work insecurity turns them into *vermin* (Lundberg, 2009, p. 41). He also relates how permanently employed workers look down on and dehumanise those with temporary contracts: “Jag är en hund. Om mig kan man säga: ‘Låt honom göra det! Vi ska fan inte behöva städa!’ och så gör jag allt det som alla andra inte vill kännas vid” [I am a dog. They can say about me: “Let him do it! We shouldn’t have to clean up, for fuck’s sake!” and then I do everything that the others don’t want to think about] (Lundberg, 2009, p. 43).

One kind of precarious labour that has received considerable attention in Sweden in recent years is so-called gig work. Public discussions have often focused on the perhaps most visible gig workers: the brightly dressed bicycle couriers delivering restaurant food that can be seen in most Swedish cities today. This type of work is described and critiqued in Anders Teglund’s (b. 1983) autobiographical diary novel *Cykelbudet* [The Bicycle Courier] from 2021, which relates the author’s experiences of working as a bicycle courier in Gothenburg during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Teglund is a pianist, runs a small publishing house, and works in various cultural and artistic projects. When the pandemic hit Sweden and concerts and other cultural activities were cancelled, it became increasingly difficult for him to make ends meet. Therefore, he began working extra as a bicycle courier for the platform company Foodora. He held this job for about a year and a half. Since *Cykelbudet* is a diary novel, the protagonist is also the narrator, just like in *Yarden*. Also just like in *Yarden*, the protagonist’s discourse is—as will be demonstrated below—characterised by a high degree of reflectiveness. In his diary entries, he describes his experiences of precarious labour but also reflects on and tries to analyse them. Nevertheless, the narration is rather different from that in *Yarden*. Whereas in Lundberg’s text the narrator mainly gives a decidedly subjective account of his own experiences, the narration in *Cykelbudet* is often—despite its diary-form—more objective and reportage-like, and the narrator/protagonist very often reports not only his own experiences and thoughts, but also what other people say and think. This is probably a result of the fact that Teglund originally planned to write a reportage about his

experiences as a gig worker, something that is disclosed in *Cykelbudet* (Teglund, 2021a, p. 31).

Despite the high degree of reflectiveness, the critique of precarious labour in *Cykelbudet* is—much like in *Yarden*—often quite straightforward. The protagonist explicitly describes the bicycle couriers' experiences in terms of precarity, speaking about “prekära cykelbud” [precarious bicycle couriers] and arguing that they belong to “prekariatet” [the precariat] (Teglund, 2021a, pp. 197, 293). Many of the problems with gig work that are highlighted also resemble those described by Standing, and it is not at all unlikely that Teglund is inspired by, and wants to illustrate, his theories.

A key aspect of the precarious labour described in *Cykelbudet* is that the gig workers fear losing their jobs if they do not perform well enough (Teglund, 2021a, pp. 49–50, 142–143, 176). This fear is present almost constantly, since the couriers are subjected to so-called “algorithmic management” (Mateescu and Nguyen, 2019; Baiocco *et al.*, 2022), in the form of surveillance of their work via an app on their smartphones that constantly measures their performances: the time it takes them to accept a new order, how quickly they get from the restaurants to the customers, how many orders they execute per hour, etc. If their performance is not considered good enough, the couriers risk losing their jobs (Teglund, 2021a, p. 50).

Much like Lundberg (and Standing), Teglund describes how employment insecurity generates a range of secondary problems. Many couriers, for instance, are forced to work multiple jobs to earn a living wage—an effort that does not always succeed—and they experience great difficulties when it comes to planning their (work-) lives (Teglund, 2021a, pp. 142–143, 176). Teglund (2021a, pp. 128, 268) further emphasises that the work is physically demanding and that couriers are frequently involved in traffic accidents (although he also states several times that he enjoys cycling very much, and that this is something that makes working as a courier attractive to him). The text also underscores that some kinds of social security and legal protection—for example unemployment insurance and protection against arbitrary dismissal—are connected to permanent employment contracts, and that gig workers have no access to them. Notably, the couriers have to pay for their own work equipment: bikes, mobile phones, work clothes etc. (Teglund, 2021a, pp. 62, 76, 86, 114, 174, 294, 372).

In addition to these rather concrete problems, Teglund—again, just like Lundberg—describes negative psychological, or even existential, effects of precarious labour. In particular, he portrays how gig workers are ashamed of their work. The protagonist does not want his colleagues at another workplace to find out that he also works as a bicycle courier, and when he meets people he knows while working, he tries to avoid getting recognised (Teglund, 2021a, pp. 58, 62). He also relates that other couriers are so ashamed of being gig workers that they do not tell friends and relatives about it (Teglund, 2021a, p. 177).

*Yarden* and *Cykelbudet* are the most well-known and discussed works in contemporary Swedish literature about temporary and gig work. However, such work is portrayed in several other works in different genres. One important example is *Svarta bär* [Black Berries] (2021), a novel about a group of Eastern-Europeans who have come to Northern Sweden to work as berry pickers. It is inspired by its author's—the writer and trade-union organiser Pelle Sunvisson (b. 1980)—experiences of doing such work undercover. It is narrated by a hetero-diegetic narrator and focalisation shifts from chapter to chapter between different characters; it can thus be characterised as a collective novel.

*Svarta bär* describes the berry pickers working under very tough conditions. Their main problem is that they have no income security. However, unlike in *Yarden* and *Cykelbudet*, this is not a result of them not getting enough work, but of the fact that they only get paid for the berries that they manage to find and pick. If they do not find enough berries, they actually risk losing money, since they have many expenses: in addition to having to pay intermediaries to get work in the first place they also have to pay for travel and accommodation; moreover, they use their own cars to find and transport the berries and pay for petrol themselves. Furthermore, their work is physically demanding and their working days very long. In addition, they have to live together at close quarters and with limited possibilities to do laundry and take care of personal hygiene. The novel also highlights that it is difficult for the berry pickers to stay in touch with friends and family in the homeland. Yet another problem is that they are met with suspicion and hostility from the locals. For example, they are demonised on Facebook: “Slocknade lampor, försvunna cyklar och välta utemöbler var liksom själva närvaron av ukrainska bilar tecken på förestående brott, och kastade någon ukrainare i enlighet med sin nationella ovana ut skräp genom bilfönstret så var det inte alls skräp, utan bevis som skulle förstöras” [Lights

that went out, missing bicycles and overturned garden furniture were, like the very presence of Ukrainian cars, indications of impending crime, and if some Ukrainian, in accordance with national habit, threw garbage out the car window, it was not garbage at all, but evidence that they needed to destroy] (Sunvisson, 2021a, p. 11).

Other works about temporary and gig work in contemporary Sweden that will be discussed in the following chapters are Tommy Sundvall's (b. 1988) *På äventyr i senkapitalismen* [On an Adventure in Late Capitalism] (2021)—a collection of comics that gives a satirical account of the gig economy; the play *Prekariatet* [The Precariat] (2019) by Liv Helm (b. 1985) and Felicia Ohly (b. 1989) (with music by Matilde Böcher [b. 1983]), which is based on interviews with people working under precarious conditions; Hanna Petersson's (b. 1985) graphic short story *Pigan* [The Maid] (2012)—which has also been turned into a feminist musical—about working as a cleaner in private homes; and Anna Arvidsdotter's (b. 1992) poetry collection *Händer att hålla i* [Hands to Hold] (2022), which describes the author's experiences of working as a mailman on a temporary contract.

Precarious labour is also described in works where it is not the central theme. Examples that will be discussed later include Johan Jönson's (b. 1966) almost 800 pages-long volume of poetry *Efter arbetsschema* [According to Work Schedule] from 2006, in which temporary (and unregulated) labour is an important motif; Jenny Wrangborg's (b. 1984) poetry collections *Kallskänken* [The Garde Manger] (2010) and *Vad ska vi göra med varandra* [What Shall We Do With Each Other] (2014), which both describe precarious labour, mainly in restaurants, where many work "utan övertidsersättning och anställningsbevis" [without overtime pay and proof of employment] (Wrangborg, 2013, p. 17); the poetry collection *Natt* [Night] (2023) by Birk Andersson (b. 1987), which depicts night-time work, including temporary employment as a newspaper deliverer; *Sjutton dikter från sista året med försörjningsstöd* [Seventeen Poems From the Last Year on Subsistence Allowance] (2023) by Linus Nordmark (b. 1990)—a self-published poetry collection, describing a young man suffering from mental health issues who has become marginalised in the labour market (temporary jobs were followed by unpaid training activities, which were followed by subsistence allowance) and now applies for a disability pension; and Karin Hallberg's (b. 1989) novel *På andra sidan Älvsborgsbron: En kärleksroman om facklig kamp* [On the Other Side of the Älvsborg Bridge: A Love Story About Trade-

Union Struggle] (2024), which describes a strike in Gothenburg docks and discusses the relationship between workers with permanent and temporary contracts.

## Work in the unregulated labour market

According to Standing (2014b, p. 56), the growth of the “shadow, gray or black economy” has been one of the key factors behind the emergence of the so-called precariat. Prior to the slackening of labour market regulations in Sweden around the turn of the century, that led to increases in short-term employment deals, work in the unregulated labour market was also the kind of labour that attracted the most attention in debates about precarious work in Sweden. Below, two texts about such work will be presented and discussed: Kerstin Fredholm’s reportage *Fint hemma* [Nice Home] (2005) and Rolf Almström’s novel *Svart arbete* [Black-Market Labour] (2009).

*Fint hemma* documents Fredholm’s (b. 1944) experiences of working undercover as a cleaner in private homes for about six months in 2004. Her narrative about these experiences is interspersed with excerpts from another text, the journalist Ester Blenda Nordström’s (1891–1948) reportage about working undercover as a maid at a farm in the early twentieth century, *En piga bland pigor* [A Maid Among Maids] (1914). *Fint hemma* is presented as a reportage—its subtitle is “Reportern förklädd till piga” [The Reporter Disguised as a Maid]—but the text also displays features usually associated with fiction. For example, since Fredholm did not use a recording device, it is unlikely that she was able to recall the often very long conversations with employers that constitute the main part of the book. As a result, these accounts are probably not as accurate as one would normally expect from a reportage. Like many of the other works analysed in *Writing Class*, *Fint hemma* is characterised by a high degree of reflectiveness; in Fredholm’s discourse, reflections on her experiences are at least as important as the narration of events.

In her foreword, Fredholm (2005, p. 5) states that one of the questions she wanted to answer by working undercover as a cleaner was whether her employers would want to pay her under the table. It turns out that almost all of them wanted to: “Alla som var intresserade av mina tjänster, förutom ett enda undantag, utgick från att de skulle betala svart” [Everyone who was interested in my services, with only one exception, took it for granted that they would pay me under the table] (Fredholm, 2005, p. 5). Fredholm is very critical of this and states, both in the foreword and in the reportage,

that it is immoral to buy services in the unregulated labour market (Fredholm, 2005, pp. 5–6, 228). She also underlines that it is a crime (Fredholm, 2005, p. 159). Furthermore, in a conversation with one of her employers she points out that her working without a contract means that she has no insurance and no pension rights (Fredholm, 2005, p. 144, see also p. 191).

Fredholm also—in a comment addressed directly to the reader—describes work in the unregulated labour market as characterised by an asymmetric relationship between employer and worker which results in precarity for the latter: “I samma ögonblick som jag, förklädd till piga, steg över tröskeln till arbetsgivarnas hem tog jag steget in i en relation byggd på makt och ojämlikhet” [The moment when I, disguised as a maid, crossed the threshold to the employers’ home, I entered into a relationship built on power and inequality] (Fredholm, 2005, p. 5). This asymmetry is illustrated in several ways in *Fint hemma*. The employers can change their mind regarding how much cleaning they want, and when they want it, which makes it difficult for Fredholm to plan ahead, and to know how much money she will make (see e.g. Fredholm, 2005, pp. 105, 132, 147, 163). Also, employers do not treat her respectfully. One of them even explicitly demands that she be “undergiven” [submissive] (Fredholm, 2005, p. 142). Others view her as “en så obetydlig person att det inte spelade någon roll vad jag såg eller tvingades ta hand om” [so insignificant a person that it did not matter what I saw or what I had to take care of] (Fredholm, 2005, p. 184). Thus, Fredholm—just like the protagonists in *Yarden* and *Cykelbudet*—stresses that her precarious employment results in a loss of human worth and dignity.

According to Fredholm, some of her employers were not primarily interested in hiring a cleaner. Instead, they wanted to be able to contrast themselves with someone they could feel superior to: “Jag vågar påstå att en del av mina arbetsgivare kände tillfredsställelse när de kunde spegla sig i svettig underklass, personifierad i städerskan. Det var ett kvitto på att de själva hade en annan position och hade lyckats” [I dare say that some of my employers felt satisfied when they could compare themselves with the sweaty underclass personified by the cleaning lady. It was a confirmation that they had a different position and that they were successful] (Fredholm, 2005, p. 196). About one employer, Fredholm (2005, p. 205) says that he “gillar att ge order och vara boss” [likes giving orders and being the boss]. That this is a central aspect of the criticism of precarious labour in *Fint hemma* was noted

by the critic Caroline Runesdotter (2004, p. 30), who stated in a review that what is upsetting in Fredholm's narrative is not only that she is badly paid, but also her description of how employers view cleaners. Furthermore, Fredholm describes how she several times fears that she will be sexually assaulted (see e.g. Fredholm, 2005, pp. 158, 193, 208). One of her employers also explicitly asks her if she is interested in selling sex (Fredholm, 2005, p. 210).

The fact that Fredholm works as a cleaner in private homes makes her relationship to the employers more intimate than, for example, that between a factory worker and his boss (or the owner of the factory). This intimacy is further intensified by her position in the unregulated labour market, where the absence of formal contracts and legal protections leaves her reliant on the employer's discretion and goodwill.

Rolf Almström's (b. 1961) novel *Svart arbete* [Black-Market Labour] (2009) is based—at least in part—on the author's own experiences of working in the unregulated labour market (Ullsjö, 2010). Its protagonist, Danny (who is also the novel's narrator), is a man in his early twenties from Frölunda, a working-class suburb of Gothenburg. Unable to find regular work, he and his friends end up in the informal economy, working as day labourers without contracts in construction, mainly with demolition. Eventually, Danny gets other assignments, such as driving workers to construction sites, paying their salaries and running errands for his bosses. Besides describing Danny's work-life experiences, *Svart arbete* also tells a love story about him and Janna, a woman he meets at one of the constructions sites where she works as a cleaner. When Danny loses a bag full of money belonging to his employers, the story turns into a thriller. Thus, *Svart arbete* is a more plot-driven work than the ones hitherto discussed. However, it also has reflective features.

Danny's work life is described as very precarious. In the mornings, he gathers with other men in a parking lot by a petrol station, waiting to be picked up by men who provide black-market labour to construction sites: "Ibland var det inget jobb alls och ibland över dagen och ibland kunde jobben vara några veckor" [Sometimes there was no work at all, sometimes there was some for the day, and sometimes you could get a job that lasted a couple of weeks] (Almström, 2009, p. 63). Like in *Yarden*, *Cykelbudet* and *Fint hemma*, the protagonist's employment insecurity goes hand in hand with other kinds of precarity. As Danny puts it, to him and his workmates, "avtalsenliga löner" [negotiated salaries] and "sociala förmåner" [social benefits] are "ouppnåeligt" [unattainable] (Almström, 2009, p. 65). Furthermore, they are caught

in a constant struggle to make ends meet and thus cannot make plans for the future. This can be illustrated with the following passage, in which Danny reflects on his and his workmates' situation: "Alla svartgubbarna levde ur hand i mun. Det var den här månadens hyra som gällde, mat den här veckan. Svart arbete är inte förenligt med långsiktiga planer" [Everyone doing black-market labour lived from hand to mouth. It was all about this month's rent, this week's food. Black-market labour does not allow for long-term planning] (Almström, 2009, p. 68).

However, Danny's—and the novel's—main focus lies on how workers in the informal economy lack what Standing (2014b, p. 23) calls work security: "Protection against accidents and illness at work, through, for example, safety and health regulations, limits on working time, [...] as well as compensation for mishaps". Such security does not exist for Danny and the other day labourers, as is highlighted in the following passage:

Om man vistas på ett ställe där folk inte bär strumpor och skor är det lätt att se vilka som jobbar svart på bygge. Såren och ärrn under fotsulorna. River man i en kåk trampar man på spik som står rätt upp. Det går inte att undvika. Det är därför det finns skyddsskor. Men stålexdojor tillhandahålles inte på svartbyggen. Och det är knappast en investering som svartgubbarna själva gör. Alltså hamnar spiken i foten. [...] Är spikarna rena och fina klarar man sig med ett sår och litet ont men är de skitiga—och det är de allt som oftast—blir såret infekterat. Eftersom det inte finns någon sjukförsäkring för svartjobbare går man ändå till jobbet dagen därpå och infektionerna blir värre. Så man tvättar med sprit och smörjer med sårsalvor och hoppas hålla jämna steg med infektionerna. Vilka sårsalvor som funkade bäst var ett samtalsämne. (Almström, 2009, p. 68)

[If you are in a place where people do not wear socks and shoes, it is easy to spot those who do unlicensed construction work. The wounds and the scars under the soles of the feet. If you do demolition in a house, you will step on nails that stand up. It cannot be avoided. That is why there are protective shoes. But they are not provided on construction sites with unlicensed workers. And it is not an investment that those working there will make. Thus, the nail ends up in the foot. (...) If the nails are clean, you will get away with a wound and some pain, but, if they are dirty—and most of the time, they are—the wound will get infected. Because there is no medical insurance for unlicensed labour you still go to work the next day, and the infection gets worse. So, you wash with alcohol and rub with ointment. Which ointments worked best was a conversation topic.]

The most important example of the critique in *Svart arbete* of this kind of labour precarity can be found in the storyline about Danny's best friend, Mikko. While working, a wall collapses and falls over him, injuring his legs. Because he is working in the informal labour market, he is not insured. Thus, he is not just injured physically, but also suffers financially, since he can no longer work. Eventually, his situation becomes unbearable, and he starts using drugs. In addition to this, *Svart arbete* highlights that the informal labour market is lawless and run by criminals. For example, one of Danny's friends gets suspected of having stolen money from his employer and ends up dead.

## Migrant labour

According to Standing (2014b, p. 113), migrants not only “make up a large share of the world's precariat” but are also “a cause of its growth and in danger of becoming its primary victims”. Thus, it is hardly surprising that “migration narratives”—as literary scholar Joseph B. Entin (2023, p. 51) has pointed out—have “become a primary genre of working-class literature in the emergent post-Fordist era”. This is particularly true in Sweden, where, in recent years, literary works about migrants working in the unregulated labour market have received much attention from readers and critics. Below, some such works will be presented and discussed: David Ericsson's novel *Taxfree* (2004); Amalia Alvarez's graphic short story “Arbetare utan papper” [Undocumented Workers] (2013); Daria Bogdanska's graphic novel *Wage slaves* (2016, two English translations: 2019a and 2019b); Pelle Sunvisson's novel *Svenska palmen* [The Swedish Palm Tree] (2021); Emil Boss's poetry collection *Kompression* [Compression] (2023); *Något har hänt: 100 berättelser från den nya arbetsmarknaden* [Something Has Happened: 100 Stories From the New Labour Market] (2023), which is a collection of testimonies from migrant workers, put together by union activists (including Boss and Sunvisson); and Elinor Torp's reportage *Rent åt helvete* [roughly: Way Off] (2023).<sup>8</sup>

Truck driver and author David Ericsson (b. 1958) published his first book—the critically acclaimed collection of short stories *Truck stop*—in 1999. Thereafter, he

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<sup>8</sup> The title *Rent åt helvete* is virtually untranslatable; “rent åt helvete” is a colloquial expression meaning that things are “way off”, but it also contains an allusion on cleaning, since the word “rent” means “clean”.

has written one more collection of short stories and six novels. In his works, Ericsson often describes experiences from his work life, and he is generally viewed as a working-class writer: in 2023, he received the Ivar Lo Prize, awarded to a prominent working-class writer by the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (not to be conflated with Ivar Lo-Johansson's personal prize, mentioned above).

*Taxfree* can be described as a thriller about union work. It tells a story about how the working conditions in the transport sector in Sweden, as well as in other Western-European countries, deteriorate due to an influx of cheap migrant labour from Eastern Europe. The novel is narrated in the third person by an all-knowing narrator. It is mainly plot-driven but also contains—as will be shown in later chapters—reflective passages.

The protagonist in *Taxfree*, the truck driver Jack, works for a small Swedish forwarding company that is taken over by a big Austrian firm, Eddie Herz.<sup>9</sup> In the story about this take over, the notion of security plays an important role. The company's new CEO talks to the Swedish workers about “tryggheten med att jobba för ett stort åkeri” [the security that comes with working for a big forwarding company] (Ericsson, 2004, p. 19). However, the working conditions at the company soon prove to be anything but secure.

Initially, *Taxfree* focuses on the precarious working conditions experienced by foreign, mainly Eastern-European, truck drivers who work in Sweden “utan arbetstillstånd, alltså i praktiken svart” [without work permits, i.e. in practice unlicensed] (Ericsson, 2004, p. 27). These conditions are criticised quite explicitly. Early in the novel, it is said that “[c]haufförerna från öst som Jack sett i tusentals längs vägarna ute i Europa verkar leva under mycket knappa förhållanden” [The drivers from Eastern Europe that Jack had seen in their thousands along the roads in Europe seem to live under very dire conditions] (Ericsson, 2004, p. 26). These conditions are then imported to Sweden by Eddie Herz. For example, the Eastern-European drivers that they employ have to sleep in a “byggbarack med ett par tärtsängar” [construction barracks with a couple of tent beds] (Ericsson, 2004, p. 26). When they are out on the roads, they fare even worse: “Burkmaten de äter har

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<sup>9</sup> The name resembles that of Willy Betz, one of Europe's biggest forwarding companies, which, has been involved in several legal cases, and whose CEO has been sentenced to several years in prison for bribery and fraud.

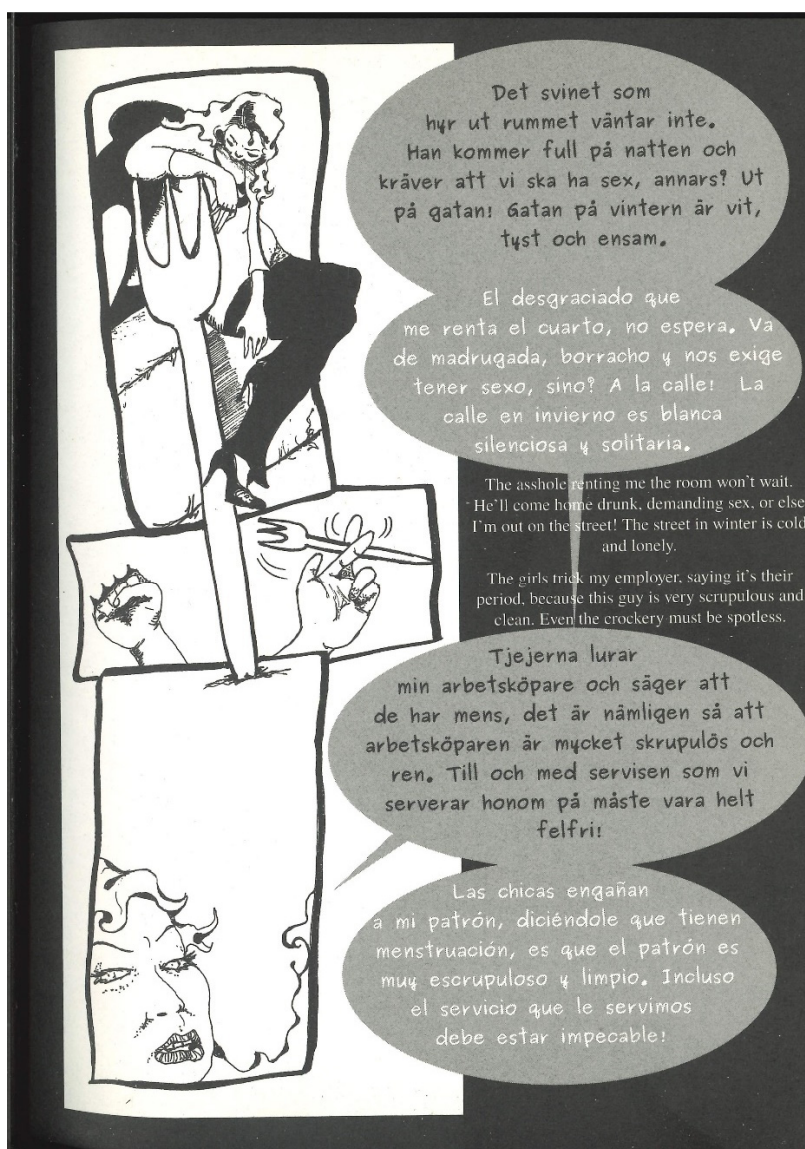
de haft med sig hemifrån och de lever tillsammans i lastbilshytten i tre månader i sträck” [The canned food they eat is brought from home and they live together in the truck three months at a time] (Ericsson, 2004, p. 27). What upsets the Swedish drivers the most, however, is that their foreign colleagues have very low wages—only a couple of hundred euros per month (Ericsson, 2004, p. 27).

After a while, the perspective is widened, and the novel describes how it is not only truck drivers that are subjected to low-wage competition from Eastern Europe. When driving in Spain, Jack meets a prostitute who tells him that “allt har blivit hårdare med åren. Unga flickor från öst väller in i landet för att jobba nästan gratis eller som rena slavar” [everything has become worse with time. Young girls from the East are flooding the country working almost for free or as pure slaves] (Ericsson, 2004, pp. 42–32). Jack realises that Eddie Herz “gör likadant när de tar in chaufförer från öst” [does the same thing when bringing in drivers from the East] (Ericsson, 2004, p. 43). “[D]et är såhär Europa ser ut nuförtiden” [This is what Europe looks like nowadays], he thinks, “[f]ullt av skojare som blåser folk, oavsett vad de har för arbete” [it’s full of jokers ripping people off, no matter what kind of work they do] (Ericsson, 2004, p. 44).

“Arbetare utan papper” [Undocumented Workers] is one of five graphic short stories in Amalia Alvarez’s (b. 1961) trilingual (Swedish, Spanish and English) book *Fem papperslösa kvinnors historier* [Five Undocumented Women’s Stories] (2013). It describes an interview with a female migrant who works, without a work permit, in “luxurious restaurants and cabarets” in Sweden (Alvarez, 2013, p. 15).<sup>10</sup> She tells the interviewer that she works twelve hours a day, seven days a week, for a very low wage: 30 krona (2.7 euros) per hour on weekdays and 50 krona (4.5 euros) on weekends (Alvarez, 2013, p. 5). As if that was not bad enough, her employer has withheld the last three months’ pay (Alvarez, 2013, p. 5). He has also threatened to kill her, and she has heard rumours that he has made another paperless worker disappear (Alvarez, 2013, pp. 5, 7). In addition, she is sexually abused, both by her employer—who has made her pregnant—and her landlord, who threatens to kick her out if she does not have sex with him (Alvarez, 2013, pp. 10, 13–14).

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<sup>10</sup> The book is not paginated. I have paginated “Arbetare utan papper” in order to be able to give references to it.



Excerpt from Amalia Alvarez's trilingual "Arbetare utan papper" [Undocumented Workers].

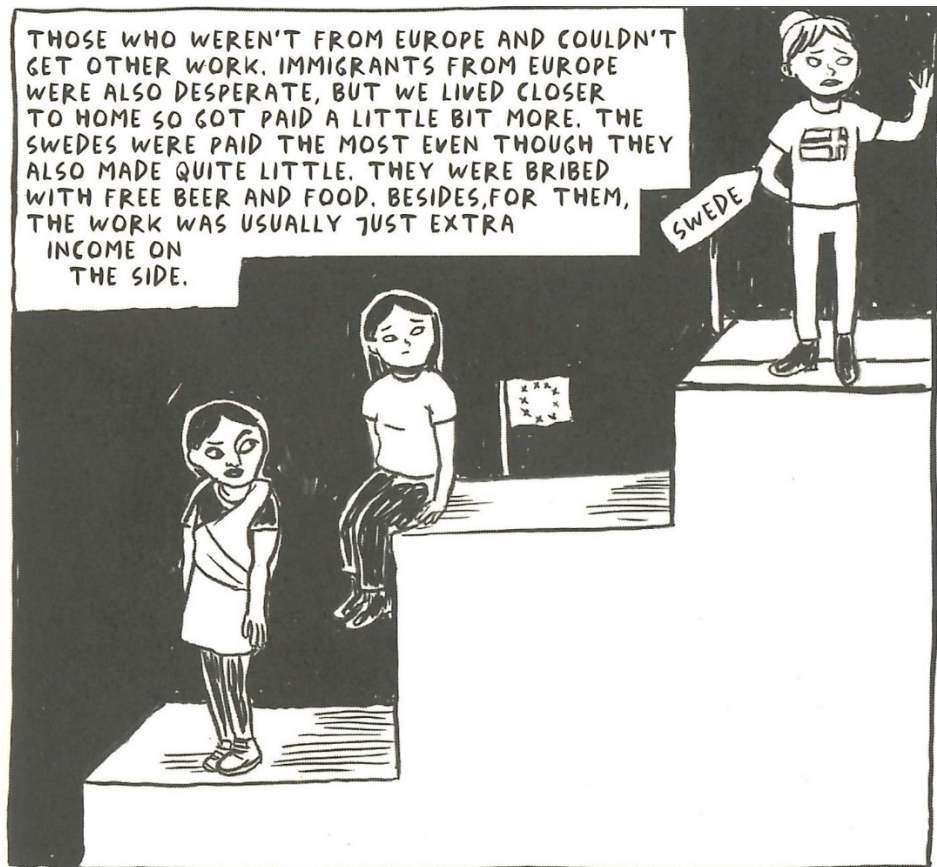
*Wage slaves* is an autobiographical graphic novel by Polish-Swedish comic artist Daria Bogdanska (b. 1988). It appeared in book form in 2016, but parts of the story had been published in fanzines in 2013 and 2014. The (homo-diegetic) narrator's discourse is in Swedish throughout the book, while some of the dialogue is in

English, especially early in the story, when the protagonist has not yet learned Swedish (however, her interior monologues are in Swedish all through the book). *Wage slaves* was well received by readers and critics and has been translated into several foreign languages (including Norwegian, French, German and Spanish), with two English-language versions appearing in 2019.

The book tells the story of a young Pole coming to Malmö to study comics drawing. Since she cannot get a work permit, she must find work in the unregulated labour market. She has several jobs but ends up working mainly as a waitress in an Indian/Pakistani restaurant in the multicultural inner-city district of Möllevången. *Wage slaves* gives a very critical account of the protagonist's work life. Her wages are low (at the restaurant, she makes 50 Swedish krona—roughly 4.50 euros—per hour) (Bogdanska, 2016, p. 37), and when she works at a festival, selling vegan hamburgers, her employer “forgets” to pay her at all (Bogdanska, 2016, p. 50). Because of the low pay, the protagonist has to work several jobs to make ends meet, which means that she has little time for anything but school, work and sleep (Bogdanska, 2016, p. 57). This situation is made worse by the fact that one of her jobs—counting cyclists for the local municipality, a job she gets by borrowing a Swedish friend's ID card—includes long un-paid breaks (Bogdanska, 2016, p. 104). At the restaurant, she is subjected to camera surveillance (Bogdanska, 2016, p. 92) and treated badly by customers (Bogdanska, 2016, pp. 32–33). She also talks to a former employee who says that he has been physically abused by the restaurant's owner (Bogdanska, 2016, p. 157), and a journalist tells her that the owner is involved with the mafia (Bogdanska, 2016, p. 116). Because she works in the unregulated labour market, the protagonist is also outside of the social security system. She has no unemployment insurance, which means that when she loses her job, she has no income at all (Bogdanska, 2016, p. 189). Thus, it is not surprising that she is convinced that she will never be able to lead a comfortable life, despite having worked—always in the unregulated labour market—since she was 17 (Bogdanska, 2016, p. 104).

The protagonist's experiences are not just reported—they are also subject to extensive reflection. This takes several forms. One of them is that the protagonist compares her situation with others', thereby gaining perspective on it, another that she reflects on her experiences in interior monologues. An interesting and highly medium-specific form of reflection that certainly invites readers to reflect on what

they read is when the protagonist's experiences are put (quite literally) in a larger context that is explicitly described in both words and images:



An excerpt from Daria Bogdanska's *Wage slaves*, showing the protagonist's position in the Swedish class society.

Here, the protagonist is placed in a hierarchy where Swedish workers occupy a higher position than migrants, and where the migrants' positions are determined by which part of the world they come from. This is based on the protagonist's experiences but presented in a way that shows that these experiences have been subjected to reflection and analysis and placed in a larger context.

Emil Boss's (b. 1979) *Kompression* [Compression] (2023) contains both text and images (photo montages). The text can be divided into three types. The first, which

dominates in the first part of the book, consist of the discourse of an anonymous speaker—cut up into short bits; usually one line, sometimes two, occasionally only a single word per page—reflecting on topics such as time, space, migration, history and writing. These topics are placed in the context of economic globalisation, which is described already in the first lines, where the concept of compression is used both literally and metaphorically in a series of suggestive repetitions: “här // i kompressionen av avstånd // i kompressionen av kostnader // i en magnetisk kapitalackumulation // en graviterande förminskning av världen” [here // in the compression of distance // in the compression of cost // in a magnetic accumulation of capital // a gravitating shrinking of the world] (Boss, 2023b, pp. 3–11). The second text-type consists of 42 poems—narrated in the first person (mainly singular, but sometimes plural), and each of ten to fifteen lines—that are best described as rather straightforward testimonies by migrant workers in Sweden about their working conditions. These poems are interspersed with both photo collages and by pages where the narrator’s discourse continues. Toward the end of the book there is also a third type of text; a list with the title “Efter samtal med” [After conversations with], containing information about 40 migrant workers—name, occupation and the place where they work—as can be seen in this short excerpt:

XAFIS Butiksstädare [Shop cleaner], Kungens Kurva  
 SERHII Snickare [Carpenter], Knivsta  
 NATALIA Lantarbetare [Farm worker], Uppsala  
 EMAD Kock [Chef], Täby  
 KHURSEJDON Plattsättare [Tiler], Stockholm

The testimony-poems describe various kinds of labour-related precarity experienced by migrants in the unregulated labour market in Sweden, such as low (or no!) pay, long working days, threats and sexual harassment from employers, bad housing conditions, and work injuries. Often the tone of the poems is rather low-key, which creates a contrast between style and content, since the events described are not seldom quite dramatic. A good example can be found in the following poem:

Efter fyra månader bad jag om att få  
ledigt. Javisst, sa han. Du får två dagar  
per månad, men då måste din fru  
också börja jobba. När jag var ledig tog  
chefen mig till sin villa i Huddinge.  
Jag målade om fasaden, jag skötte  
trädgården och serverade gäster på  
några fester. När han ville sparka mig  
böjde jag mig ner och kysste hans skor.  
Jag bönföll honom för min dotters  
skull. Hon går i skolan här och vi blir  
utvisade om jag får sparken. (Boss, 2023b, p. 127)

[After four months I asked for  
time off. Sure, he said. You get two days off  
per month, but then your wife  
also has to start working. On my time off  
the boss took me to his villa in Huddinge.  
I painted the facade, I tended  
the garden and served guests at  
a few parties. When he wanted to fire me,  
I bent down and kissed his shoes.  
I begged him for my daughter's  
sake. She goes to school here and we will be  
expelled if I get fired.]

The collages consist of six to eight vertical strips from black-and-white photographs stacked on top of each other. They mainly display workers' bodies (but never any faces) and work environments. The first one shows a construction worker on a roof, a farm worker in a field, a snow-covered roof and a basket filled with pomegranates (Boss, 2023b, p. 1). The next one shows well-manicured nails, a construction worker's feet, a wall that is being tiled, construction workers among reinforcing bars, plants growing in a field and someone cleaning a toilet (Boss, 2023b, p. 2).



A collage from Emil Boss's *Kompression*.

Some of the poems resemble collages, for example the following:

En gång när Luis hade slutat för dagen  
och bytte om sa chefen till honom:  
"Byt om igen, jag säger till när vi är  
klara." Han bytte om igen. Chefen satt  
med sin laptop i tio minuter utan att  
titta upp. Luis satt på sin stol framför  
honom. Sen sa chefen plötsligt: "Nu  
kan du byta om och gå hem." Titta,  
jag kan inte böja de här fingrarna. Jag  
hade ingen aning om att man ska bila  
max en timme per dag. De satte oss att  
handbila asfalt åtta timmar om dagen i  
fler veckor. (Boss, 2023b, p. 115)

[Once, when Luis had finished for the day  
and was changing, the boss told him:  
"Change back, I'll tell you when we're  
done." He changed again. The boss sat  
with his laptop for ten minutes without  
looking up. Luis sat on his chair in front of  
him. Then the boss suddenly said: "Now  
you can change and go home." Look,  
I can't bend these fingers. I  
had no idea that you should chisel  
no more than one hour per day. They had us  
chiselling asphalt for eight hours per day for  
several weeks.]

Here, two different problems—humiliation and physical injury—are presented after each other, just like the images in the collages. These problems are presented in different ways. The first one is illustrated with a short parable, narrated in the third person, that contains no explicit value-statements or interpretations. The second problem is addressed more directly by the poem's speaker, who accuses his employers of violating safety regulations.

In some cases, there is interplay between texts and images. For example, the speaker's formulation "kompressionen av avstånd" [the compression of distance] is illustrated in the collages, which bring together different places, and in the poems' descriptions of how workers from all over the world have come to Sweden to work.

The testimony-poems are not marked by the high degree of reflectiveness that characterises, for example, the narrators' discourses in *Yarden* and *Cykelbudet*. However, their embedment in the speaker's discourse invites reflective reading. While the poems can be read as concrete illustrations of the themes and motifs in the speaker's discourse (the compression of space in globalised capitalism etc.), this discourse also provides a context for these poems that helps the reader relate them to more general social and political processes and to more abstract thinking about the world.

Several of the poems in *Kompression* describe events that are also related in another work about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden: *Något har hänt: 100 berättelser från den nya arbetsmarknaden* [Something Has Happened: 100 Stories from the New Labour Market]. These stories—who are narrated in the third person in a matter-of-fact tone and describe (mainly undocumented) migrant workers' experiences on the unregulated labour market in contemporary Sweden—have been collected by representatives of the syndicalist trade union Sveriges Arbetares Centralorganisation [Central Organisation of the Workers of Sweden, in the following referred to by its acronym, SAC]. Two of them are Boss and Sunvisson; the others, are Nils Brandsma, David Gariga, Agnes Lansrot, Sebastian Rosengren, and Pamela Otarola. Boss states (in a personal conversation with the author) that he wrote *Kompression* while also working on *Något har hänt* and confirms that there are indeed overlaps between the two texts (Boss, 2023a).<sup>11</sup> However, while sharing motifs, *Kompression* and *Något har hänt* are quite different regarding form.

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<sup>11</sup> There are big similarities between the following poems in *Kompression* and testimonies in *Något har hänt* (the references are to pages in *Kompression* and to the numbered testimonials in *Något har hänt*): K71–N4, K89–N93, K93–N74, K107–N20, K127–N17, K131–N41, K135–N88, K141–N85, K145–N64, K153–N22, K161–N89, K169–N28, K181–N82, K205–N75, K207–N94, K209–N56, K211–N26, K213–N63, K215–N90

*Något har hänt* is a documentary work. Nevertheless, it displays some features that are quite literary. This is perhaps a result of the fact that two of the editors—Boss and Sunvisson—are not only union organisers, but also authors.

In the foreword, it is pointed out that the book is not an objective report, but a product of activism:

Det du nu har i händerna är ingen vetenskaplig studie, ingen myndighetsrapport eller projektavstämning. Texten du läser är inte resultat av ett kyligt observerande eller siffervänligt mätande. Den här redogörelsen, vi har valt att kalla den det i brist på bättre ord, har tillkommit genom en engagerad, nära och ofta kaosartad praktik, och bär därför spår av det. (Boss *et al.*, 2023, p. 7)

[What you are holding in your hands is not a scientific study, no official report from an authority or a project. The text you are reading is not the result of cool observation or an attempt to measure things objectively. This account—as we have chosen to call it, for lack of a better word—has come into existence through a committed and often chaotic process, and it is marked by it.]

In the afterword it is stated that *Något har hänt* contains no summary, since the conclusions that can be drawn “inte existerar fristående från de öden som nyss beskrivits” [do not exist in isolation from the destinies that have just been described] (Boss *et al.*, 2023, p. 69). Thus, the impossibility to separate form and content—for example through summarising the latter—is accentuated in a way that is more common in fiction than in documentary works. Some of the stories also contain formulations that are quite literary. One example can be found in the story about the Ukrainian cleaner Irina:

Till en början får hon bara ett eller två uppdrag om dagen. Sammantaget blir det en lön som inte går att leva på.  
När antalet uppdrag ökas blir det till slut ett arbete som inte går att leva med.  
(Boss *et al.*, 2023)

[At first, she only gets one or two jobs per day. All in all, that gives her a salary which she cannot live on.  
When the number of jobs goes up, it eventually becomes a job with she cannot live with.]

Here, the play on words (live on/live with) and the repetition of vowels (*uppdrag–utökas–slut*) give the text almost poetic qualities.

Nevertheless, the testimony-poems in *Kompression* are—of course—more poetic than the stories in *Något har hänt*. They also sometimes focus on other things. For example, the poem presented above about a worker who kisses his boss's shoes describes the same “case” as one of the stories in *Något har hänt* (number 18). However, in the latter, the shoe-kissing is not mentioned. Instead, we learn that the worker got fired, and later expelled, but that the union helped him get economic compensation from his employer (Boss *et al.*, 2023, p. 19). The poem is thus characterised by condensation, and a focus on pregnant events, rather than on telling a full story. Despite the differences in form, however, *Något har hänt* mainly focuses on the same problems as *Kompression*: low wages, wages that are not paid, dangerous work environments, bad living conditions, threats, violence, and harassment.

Another work that overlaps with *Något har hänt* is Elinor Torp's (b. 1977) reportage *Rent åt helvete* (2023). Torp is a journalist who works for the journal *Dagens arbete* [Today's Labour], which is published by three unions belonging to the Swedish Trade Union Confederation. She specialises in questions about work environment, labour law and work-life criminality. Since 2013 she has published four book-length reportages, of which *Vi, skuggorna: Ett Sverige du inte känner till* [We, the Shadows: A Sweden You Do Not Know] (2019) is the most well-known. Its theme is work-life criminality and the exploitation of migrant labour.

*Rent åt helvete* examines two kinds of precarious labour. Its main topic is migrant workers—mainly women working in cleaning for more or less criminal companies. In particular, Torp focuses on Chilo, a woman from Nicaragua who was arrested in December 2021 after being caught working without both work and residence permit. Her case received much attention because she was cleaning the home of then prime minister Magdalena Andersson. Chilo was eventually deported, but in 2024 the union SAC helped her take her employer to court and she was given some financial compensation for having been exploited. *Rent åt helvete* also discusses the working conditions at a state-owned company, Samhall, which sells (subsidised) cleaning by people with disabilities who cannot compete on the regular labour market. Here, focus lies on Jolyne/Laban, a young person (whose two names are a result of a changed gender identity) who committed suicide while working at Samhall.

*Rent åt helvete* is a book-length reportage, based on thorough research—including interviews—and its aim is clearly to present and discuss/analyse *facts*. Nevertheless, much like Fredholm's *Fint hemma*, it displays several features that are usually associated with fiction. For example, it contains passages that are quite lyrical, such as the following, which explains a formulation in the Swedish anti-exploitation law:

För att dömas för människoexploatering krävs att arbetsgivaren genom olaga tvång, vilseledande eller utnyttjande av någons beroendeställning, skyddslöshet eller svåra situation exploaterar en person i tvångsarbete, arbete under uppenbart orimliga villkor eller tiggeri. Men ribban för "uppenbart orimliga villkor" kan vara för högt satt, är en del inne på. Andra påpekar att den inte ens är satt. Det är ju vad som nu ska prövas.

Så.

Rättspraxis saknas.

Vägledande domar behövs.

För Sverige famlar. (Torp, 2023, pp. 122–123)

[To be convicted of exploitation, the employer must, through unlawful coercion, deception, or taking advantage of someone being in a situation of dependence, defencelessness or difficult situation, exploit a person through coerced labour, work under obviously unreasonable conditions or begging. However, according to some, the bar for "obviously unreasonable conditions" could be set too high. Others point out that it has not been set at all, and that that is what now will be tested.

So.

Case law is lacking.

Guiding sentences are needed.

Because Sweden fumbles.]

Here, a factual account of legal conditions turns into a subjective commentary, where the syntax is more poetic than journalistic.

The stories told in *Rent åt helvete* about precarious labour are at the same time—on a more general level, and much like the ones told in *Yarden*, *Cykelbudet*, *Taxfree* and *Något har hänt*—stories about changes in Swedish society. Early in the book, Sweden

is presented as “ett riktigt föregångsland” [a country that really leads the way] when it comes to workers’ rights (Torp, 2023, p. 23). But soon thereafter, it is said that some workers in Sweden live in a parallel world, where they do not enjoy these rights: “Oräkneliga är de människor som idag bygger och städar i Sverige, helt utanför den svenska modellen” [Countless are the people that today work in construction and cleaning in Sweden, totally outside the Swedish model] (Torp, 2023, p. 23).

Living outside the Swedish model means, among other things, that one lacks employment security. Chilo and other migrant workers in the unregulated labour market are not protected by the Employment Protection Act, since they are not (legally) employed. Nevertheless, Torp and her interviewees focus more on other kinds of precariousness than the risk of losing one’s job. In particular, they highlight psychic and physical abuse, low salaries (that are not always even paid at all), back-breaking toil, very long working days, sexual harassment, racist abuse, and risks of physical injury. Some of these problems are presented in a catalogue seemingly consisting of excerpts from interviews:

Du har fula byxor, femhundra kronor i avdrag på lönen.  
De hade övervakningskameror i lägenheten där vi bodde.  
Jag blev kallad hora av chefen nästan varje dag.  
Varje månad fick vi betala tillbaka lön och ge till kollegor som inte fått pengar för arbetet.  
Vi hade en tokig chef som slog sin personal.  
Min yngre kollega tvingades ha sex med chefen för att få jobba kvar.  
Jag städade varje dag i flera månader på en supermarket utan en enda dags vila.  
Jag vet inte hur många hundratusen som bolaget är skyldig mig efter sju år. (Torp, 2023)<sup>12</sup>

[You have ugly trousers, five-hundred krona deducted from your pay.  
They had surveillance cameras in the apartment where we lived.  
The boss called me a whore almost every day.  
Every month we have to pay back from our salaries, and give to colleagues who had not received any money for their work.

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<sup>12</sup> The first of these problems—that a worker gets a wage deduction for having “ugly” trousers—is also described in *Något har hänt*, which shows that Torp has talked to at least some of the workers whose stories are told there.

We had a crazy boss who beat the staff.  
My younger colleague had to have sex with the boss to keep her job.  
I was cleaning a supermarket every day for several months, without even a day off.  
I do not know how many hundred thousand krona the company owes me after seven years.]

The following excerpt from an interview with Peruvian cleaner Kiera again highlights several problems experienced by migrant workers in the unregulated labour market that are presented in *Rent åt helvete*, such as surveillance, sexual abuse and violence:

Jag kunde inte se trött ut när jag städade eller ha ett tråkigt ansikte. Chefen åkte till våra städuppdrag och övervakade oss och hetsade på. [...] Hon ville veta vad jag gjorde varje ledig stund [...] Sjuk fick jag absolut inte vara. [...] Droppen var när hennes man, en gammal gubbe, kom upp bakom mig och tog mig på bröstet. Jag vågade inte säga någonting men jag klarade inte längre av att låsas ute hos kunderna som märkte att något var fel och sa det till min chef. Då skrek hon att jag gjorde arbetsmiljön dålig med min attityd och hon tog stryptag på mig och tryckte upp mig mot entrédörren till affären där vi städade. (Torp, 2023, s. 110–111)

[I could not look tired when cleaning or have a sad face. The boss came to where we were cleaning, keeping an eye on us and inciting us. [...] She wanted to know what I was doing every moment I had time off. [...] I was absolutely not allowed to be ill. [...] The last drop was when her husband, a dirty old man, came up behind me and grabbed my breasts. I didn't dare say anything, but I could no longer keep up appearances in front of the customers, who realised that something was wrong, and told my boss. Then she yelled that I made the work environment bad with my attitude, and she grabbed me round the throat and pushed me up against the entrance door of the shop that we were cleaning.]

*Svenska palmen* is a novel by Sunvisson about migrants working in the unregulated labour market. Like his earlier work *Svarta bär*, it is based on undercover research; however, for *Svenska palmen*, Sunvisson immersed himself more deeply in the subject. While researching *Svarta bär*, he spent two brief periods—each about a week—working as a berry picker. In preparation for *Svenska palmen*, he worked as an undocumented migrant in construction for half a year and also spent some time

living with other migrant workers (Sunvisson, 2021b, p. 6). Some scenes in the novel are also inspired by testimonies in *Något har hänt*.<sup>13</sup>

*Svenska palmen*—the title comes from a Russian-language webpage advertising work for migrants in Sweden—is set during the COVID-19 pandemic, just like *Cykelbudet*. Its protagonist, Ruslan, is a young Ukrainian who comes to Sweden to work. Among other things, he works with shovelling snow from roofs, gardening, cleaning windows and painting houses. In addition to making money, he also wants to experience an adventure and—more importantly—grow as a person and become an adult.

The precarious nature of Ruslan's work is constantly highlighted. It is also something that he explicitly reflects on. He often contrasts himself and other migrant workers to what he calls "säkra arbetare" [secure workers] (Sunvisson, 2021b, pp. 82, 154, 234). The latter category—which consists mostly of Swedes, but also of migrants with work permits, mainly from EU countries—are properly employed and enjoy the safety that comes with that. Ruslan and the other migrant workers in the undocumented labour market, on the other hand, are at the mercy of their employers, and therefore must accept terrible working conditions: long shifts, low pay, dangerous work, tedious and monotonous tasks etc. Frequently they get paid late, less than what has been agreed upon, or not at all. Often, they do not manage to find enough work, which results in idleness and apathy, but also—because they have no access to social security or unemployment insurance—poverty. During one period of unemployment, Ruslan cannot even afford to buy enough food (Sunvisson, 2021b, pp. 165–166). Since they do not have work or residence permits, the migrant workers also risk being deported by the authorities.

For a time, Ruslan believes that he is on his way to fulfilling his goals. After having been cheated out of his pay several times, he finds a job as a painter and decorator, where he gets paid relatively well (at least compared to what he would make in the Ukraine) and gains new working skills. However, after a few weeks, his employer

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<sup>13</sup> The sixteenth story in *Något har hänt* describes construction workers who do not get paid and therefore vandalise the apartment they have been renovating. The same event features in *Svenska palmen* (Sunvisson 2021b, p.17). It also features in the play *Kapitalet* [Capital], by Emil Boss, Dror Feiler and Karl Marx (!) (Boss, Feiler and Marx 2025).

fails to pay him on time. Ruslan complains and is immediately sacked. Upon leaving the worksite, he is picked up by the police—probably to be deported.

## Concluding remarks

As was stated in the introduction, this book aims to explore how literature portraying precarious labour in contemporary Sweden can deepen our understanding of such labour, and to examine the literary-political strategies employed by Swedish authors in representing it. The question, then, is how the readings above take us closer to answering these questions.

In *Uses of Literature*, Rita Felski insists that literature can help readers gain knowledge about the world. Literary texts, she suggests, “expand, enlarge, or reorder our sense of how things are”, serve as “devices for articulating truth”, rework or reconfigure the “semiotic and social networks of meaning that shape and sustain our being”, “invite us to see things differently” (Felski, 2008, pp. 83–86).

Contemporary Swedish literature offers rich and varied portrayals of many kinds of precarious labour. It shows how concrete problems—such as low pay or not having access to insurance—go hand in hand with more abstract ones, such as loss of social status or feelings of being excluded from humanity. It also demonstrates how different kinds of employment insecurity (e.g. temporary employment and gig work) as well as differences among workers regarding legal status (such as access to work and residence permits, or employment in the regular or irregular labour market.) result in different kinds and degrees of precarity. These literary representations contribute to our understanding of precarious labour in the ways Felski describes: by revealing overlooked realities, reframing familiar phenomena, and challenging dominant interpretations.

Felski stresses that literature’s “repertoire of sense-making devices” is anchored in its “formal and generic properties” (Felski, 2008, p. 83), and argues that every genre “creates a range of schemata, selects, organizes, and shapes language according to given criteria, opens up certain ways of seeing and closes off others” (Felski, 2008, p. 103). Authors portraying precarious labour in contemporary Sweden use many different genres, such as poetry, prose poetry, drama, novel, graphic novel, biographical sketch, testimony and reportage. However, literary genres are also—as Agrell (2015, p. 286) has highlighted—*speech genres*, representing typified *rhetorical*

*actions*. As such, they are responses to “a more or less problematic situation—social, ideological, existential—that motivates them” and “influences the design of the text” (Agrell, 2015, p. 288). They also have *addressivity*: “the central quality of an utterance being *directed to* someone” (Agrell, 2015, p. 288).

Viewed from this perspective, many of the literary works discussed in this book share key characteristics. They respond to the “problematic situation” of precarious labour by highlighting and reflecting on the various consequences of labour-market insecurity—ranging from difficulties in planning ahead to experiences of poverty, powerlessness, and abuse. These texts also seek to engage readers by raising awareness of these conditions and encouraging specific modes of understanding and interpretation.

The high level of reflectiveness that characterises many works about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden can be seen as effect of this striving. According to Felski, the depiction in literature of “characters engaged in introspection and soul-searching” encourages readers to do the same (Felski, 2008, p. 25). This is true also for works where characters—but also narrators and speakers in poems—*reflect on precarious labour*. By not just making statements about such labour, but reflecting on it, the works invite readers to do the same thing: to not just accept what the works say about precarious labour, but to reflect on it.

## 2. Writers and Classes

In the critical reception of literature addressing precarious labour in contemporary Sweden, the tradition of working-class literature is frequently invoked. This is unsurprising, as—unlike in many other countries—working-class literature holds a prominent and recognised position within Sweden’s national literary canon, making it a natural point of reference in discussions of literature and labour. Nonetheless, scholars and critics have expressed differing views on whether literature about contemporary precarious labour should be placed in this tradition.

Kristian Lundberg has often been hailed as a working-class writer, both by critics (Andersson, 2009; Bjelvehammar, 2009; Dahlström, 2011; Eriksson, 2010; Greider, 2010; Hallgren, 2009; Swedenmark, 2009; Wiklund, 2010) and by scholars (Arping, 2011; Gustafson, 2020; Hamm, 2014; Nilsson, 2014b; Nilsson, 2021b; Sjöberg, 2016; Wahlström, 2020; Williams, 2011; Williams, 2016). Norwegian literary scholar Ingrid Nestås Mathisen (2014, p. 218) has even called him “Nordens mest markante arbeidarforfattarar idag” [the most prominent working-class writer in the Nordic countries today]. Other authors writing about precarious labour have also been placed in the tradition of working-class literature (Ekman, 2022; Grelson Almestad, 2021; Kandel, 2021; Linderborg, 2021). “Dette er først og fremst en samtidig arbeiderroman” [This is first and foremost a contemporary working-class novel], Norwegian literary critic Jonas Bals (2022) writes about Pelle Sunvisson’s *Svenska palmen*, noting similarities with a canonical work in this tradition: Robert Tressell’s (1870–1911) *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists* (1914). Another critic, Lukas de Veen (2021), compares Sunvisson’s *Svarta bär* to “USA:s stora arbetarroman” [America’s great working-class novel], *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck (1939), as well as to one of the most important and well-known Swedish working-class novels of all times, *Romanen om Olof* [The Novel About Olof] (1934–1937) by Eyvind Johnson (1901–1976). The author and critic Jack Hildén (2022) has even argued that in Sweden today, the concept of working-class literature is primarily used about works describing precarious employments and

the critic Sara Meidell (2022) suggests that a distinguishing feature of contemporary Swedish working-class literature is its thematic focus on a labour market where the proletariat has been transformed into the precariat and permanent contracts have been replaced by gig work.

However, some commentators have challenged the idea that literature portraying contemporary precarious labour belongs in the tradition of working-class literature. In the introduction to an edited collection of scholarly texts about working-class literature, the editors suggest that the increase in precarious labour in Sweden in recent years has made the country's class structure more complex, thereby making it necessary to re-think the concept of working-class literature (Agrell *et al.*, 2016, p. 8). Thus, they argue—at least implicitly—that the so-called precariat is not necessarily part of the working class, and that literary portrayals of it are not necessarily working-class literature. Others have pointed to formal and thematic differences between contemporary literature about precarious labour and earlier working-class literature, claiming—as will be discussed below—that while older working-class writers were firmly anchored through their biographies in the worker collectives they wrote about, and thus represented them *from within*, authors writing about labour-market precarity in contemporary Sweden do not themselves belong to the so-called precariat and therefore represent it *from without*.

The relationship between writers and workers has been a central concern in critical discussions of working-class literature across various national contexts since at least the early twentieth century (see e.g. Clark, 2017; Hyttinen and Launis, 2017; Lund, 2020; Nilsson, 2017). A recurring theme in these debates is the emphasis on the biographical connection between working-class writers and the class they represent. In Sweden, for example, working-class literature has generally been conceptualised as literature *by* (but also about, and for) workers, with the term *working-class writer* mostly reserved for authors who were raised in working-class environments and, ideally, have direct experience of manual labour (see Nilsson, 2014b, pp. 129–130; Nilsson, 2017).

This insistence on the importance of working-class writers being firmly anchored in the working class has often been connected to what literary scholar David Hartley (2024, pp. 121–122) describes as the “epistemological principle” that “the working class knows more about capitalist exploitation than anyone else”. The perhaps best-known advocate of this principle is Marxist literary scholar Georg Lukács, who

argued that the proletarian writer's "social being" allows him or her to "clearly see the class relationships, the development of the class struggle, that lies behind the fetishized forms of capitalist society" (Lukács, 1934). As Hartley has pointed out—in a discussion of the working-class literary genre/tradition of "worker inquiry"—this knowledge has been considered important for the *political potential* of working-class literature (Hartley, 2024, pp. 121–122).

An early and paradigmatic Swedish example of this can be found in an article from 1903 by Hjalmar Branting—who between 1907 and 1925 was the leader of the Social Democratic Party—about K. J. Gabrielsson (1861–1901, better known under his pen name "Karolus"), who was one of the most important poets in the early Swedish labour movement. Branting (1930, p. 174) stresses the importance of Gabrielsson's proletarian background and celebrates him as the first worker in Swedish literature who, "utan att lämna sin klass" [without leaving his class], managed to write works of the highest aesthetic standard. Because of his proletarian background, Branting argues, Gabrielsson could *understand* workers in a way that was impossible for bourgeois writers. Branting also suggests that Gabrielsson's biographical anchorage in the working class was of vital importance for his ability to *represent workers politically* in his poetry. For, according to Branting, the Marxist slogan that the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves—best known from the General Rules of the First International—is valid also in literature.

In discussions of literature about contemporary precarious labour, it is often argued that its authors stand in a different relationship to the workers they write about than did traditional working-class writers. Several scholars have pointed out that those writing about the so-called precariat are not always very firmly anchored in it, and some have even argued that this might be a necessary condition for their writing, since it is often difficult for those belonging to the precariat to write about their experiences (see Haarder, Simonsen and Schwartz, 2018, p. 193). Similar arguments have also been made by some authors. In an interview, Pelle Sunvisson claimed that it is "nästan omöjligt" [almost impossible] to imagine migrant workers writing about their lives in Sweden, and in another he stated that he had made more money from the berry picking he did as research for *Svarta bär* than he got in royalties for his novel and that this "säger något om vilka det är som har möjlighet att skriva och berätta" [says something about for whom it is possible to write and talk] about

precarious working conditions (i.e. those who do not live from hand to mouth) (Söderin, 2021; Hansson, 2022).

This chapter explores the relationship between authors writing about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden and the so-called precariat, comparing it to the relationship between traditional working-class writers and the working class. The central argument is that whereas working-class writers have historically spoken on behalf of an already established class, contemporary authors addressing precarious labour often aim to contribute to the formation or recognition of a class that is still emerging.

## Tourists in the precariat?

The debates about whether literature about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden should be placed in the tradition of working-class literature have been particularly lively in relation to Anders Teglund's *Cykelbudet*. Several critics have argued that it does belong in this tradition, among them Rasmus Landström, who is one of the most active contributors to contemporary discussions about working-class literature in Sweden, and the author of a critically acclaimed book about its history (Landström, 2020). He argues that Teglund and other Swedish authors portraying precarious labour are influenced by older working-class writers and write themselves into the tradition of working-class literature (Landström, 2022). Nevertheless, a recurrent theme in the critical discussions of *Cykelbudet* has been that Teglund only has limited experiences of the gig work he describes and criticises (Montelius, 2021; Pahnke, 2021; Hansson, 2024), and the critic Lars Henriksson (2021b, p. 40) has taken this as the point of departure for arguing that he is not a working-class writer, but belongs, rather, in a tradition of writers—including names such as Günter Wallraff, George Orwell and Ester Blenda Nordström—that descend into the depths of class society in order to write about it for the educated middle class.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Günter Wallraff (b. 1942) is very well-known in Sweden, and he is often referenced in discussions about literature and politics. In fact, his name has even been turned into a verb—"att wallraffa" [to Wallraff]—signifying his method of doing under-cover research. Ester Blenda Nordström (1891–1948), who was mentioned in the presentation of Kerstin Fredholm's *Fint hemma* in Chapter One, was a Swedish journalist who is often viewed as a predecessor to Wallraff.

Like Branting, Henriksson stresses the importance of authors having substantial first-hand experience of the social conditions in the classes they write about, claiming that “den speciella samhörighet som kan gro ur gemensamma erfarenheter kräver tid för att växa fram och är inget en turist blir del av” [the special community that can emerge from shared experiences takes time to materialise and is nothing that a tourist becomes part of] (Henriksson, 2021b). Like Branting, he also mobilises a Marxist understanding of (literary) class politics, arguing that the emancipation of the gig workers must be achieved by the gig workers themselves: “Även om behovet av solidaritet är starkare ju mer osäkra jobb vi har kan befrielsen bara vara vårt eget verk” [Even if the need for solidarity is stronger the more insecure our jobs are, emancipation can only be conquered by ourselves] (Henriksson, 2021a). By arguing that Teglund does not really belong to the worker collective he writes about in *Cykelbudet*—but is a tourist among the gig workers—Henriksson emphasises something that sets him apart from a traditional working-class writer. And, since he describes Teglund as a representative of a larger group of writers portraying precarious labour in today’s Sweden, he presents this difference as one between traditional working-class literature and literature about the so-called precariat.

In a reply to Henriksson, Teglund (2021c) expresses an ambivalent attitude to his criticism. On the one hand, he stresses that he does have long-term experiences of precarious work, underscoring that, working in the culture sector, he is no stranger to freelance and gig work. He also insists that he has a lot in common with other bicycle couriers, highlighting that many of them are well-educated, just like himself. On the other hand, he acknowledges that in some respects he is an outsider; for example, since most of the other couriers have a different skin colour and, unlike him, lack a voice in the public sphere. But, in an interview in the journal *Klass* [Class]—which is published by *Föreningen Arbetarskrivare* [The Association for Working-Class Writers]—he argues that having a degree of distance to precarious labour can make it easier to portray it (Hansson, 2024, p. 11).

Similar thoughts were put forward in *Cykelbudet* itself, which contains an extensive self-reflexive discussion of the protagonist’s relationship to other gig workers. In a conversation with his brother, the protagonist emphasises that his main reason for considering working as a bicycle courier is that he needs money. (He does also say that he is contemplating writing about his experiences, but underlines that this is

mainly because writing could generate additional income) (Teglund, 2021a, p. 31).<sup>15</sup> By underscoring that he became a gig worker out of economic necessity, and not because he wanted to do under-cover research for writing, he presents himself as no mere tourist in the so-called precariat, but as someone who belongs to it authentically.

The protagonist is also critical of those writing about precarious labour without having sufficient personal experience of it. When a colleague criticises a journalist who has done a short undercover stint as a courier and then written an article about it, the protagonist reacts positively:

I mean... några veckor på sommaren i Malmö? Jag vet inte. Malmö är platt. Det är sommar. Enklaste tiden att jobba.

En tillfredställande känsla sprider sig i min kropp. (Teglund, 2021a, p. 233)

[I mean... a few weeks during summer in Malmö? I don't know. Malmö is flat. It's summer. The easiest time to work.

A feeling of satisfaction spreads through my body.]

Thus, the protagonist in *Cykelbudet* seems to accept the idea that to be able to write about precarious working conditions, it is necessary to have extensive experience of them. He also argues that he has such experience, both because he has been a bicycle courier for quite some time (and worked during the cold, dark, wet, and windy winter in hilly Gothenburg) and because he has experiences of precarious working conditions in other sectors prior to becoming a courier.

Nevertheless, the protagonist in *Cykelbudet* acknowledges that there are things that do set him apart from many of the other bicycle couriers, and that they may make it difficult for him to write about gig work. Already on the day that he gets hired as a courier, he reflects on his writing plans and comes to the conclusion that it is hard to establish contact with those of his co-workers—the majority—who are foreigners:

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<sup>15</sup> Later in the novel the protagonist says that his main reason for working as a courier is that he wants to write about his experiences. However, the context of this statement is important. The protagonist is at the offices he uses when he works with culture projects and is engaged in conversation with the editor of a cultural journal. Perhaps this is why he describes his work as a courier as research for writing, rather than something he has to do because he needs money (Teglund, 2021a, p. 149).

“Om jag ska skriva något om arbetet borde jag nog dröja mig kvar, prata med någon, allra helst de utländska männen, men jag vet inte, det känns som att det är långt till dem. Bara att få ögonkontakt och hälsa på varandra hade varit att bryta en barriär. Som jag inte lyckades med” [If I am to write something about the work, I probably should linger a bit, talk to someone, preferably some of the foreign men, but I don’t know, it feels like there’s a distance. Just to make eye contact and greet would have meant breaking a barrier. Which I failed to do] (Teglund, 2021a, p. 44).

At the same time, the protagonist in *Cykelbudet* also problematises the idea that it is important that workers represent themselves. In particular, he highlights that for many gig workers, it is extremely difficult to make their voices heard in the public sphere (Teglund, 2021c). He also argues that it is often hard for them even to formulate their experiences.<sup>16</sup> The latter is emphasised when the protagonist quotes his colleague Mubarak, who reflects on his ambitions to write about his life: “Egentligen har jag en tanke om att skriva en lång berättelse utifrån mitt liv under de senaste fem–sex åren. Jag är ingen konstnär men det är som att jag har något i mig som måste ut. [...] Vi ska få ekonomin på plats först, sedan ska jag börja med det.” [Actually, I have this idea about writing a long story, based on my life during the last five, six years. I am no artist, but it is like I have something in me that needs to come out. (...) We will get our economy sorted out first, then I will begin] (Teglund, 2021a, pp. 355–356). Thus, Mubarak’s plans to write are hindered by his pressing economic situation. He also has plans to make sound recordings of his thoughts and ideas, but this too is difficult, both because he must work a lot and because he does not have access to a place where he could make the recordings (Teglund, 2021a, pp. 237–238).

This points to the need for assistance from others. The protagonist in *Cykelbudet* also makes several attempts to provide such assistance. He puts Mubarak in touch with a journalist who is interested in telling his story and also gives him access to a recording studio (Teglund, 2021a, pp. 238–239). Thus, the protagonist not only

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<sup>16</sup> A similar point is made by Sunvisson in an interview in which he comments on Henriksson’s criticism of Teglund. He points out that the linguistic situation he faces when writing about precarious labour is very different from the one in which older working-class writers wrote about the working class: “The difference is that those I write about speak a different language. It is almost impossible to imagine how they will ever find the time to write about their lives. I hope with all my heart that it will happen some day” (Söderin, 2021).

*gives a voice* to those lacking one, he also *gives them a space* from which their own voices can be heard—to use a distinction made by literary scholar Annika Olsson (2004, p. 292) in a discussion of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s famous thesis that the subaltern cannot speak. Thereby, he challenges both the idea that it is crucial that workers represent themselves (by involving journalists, but also by writing about them himself), and the idea that the so-called precariat is incapable of doing so (by helping a gig worker express himself). In fact, he even describes the latter idea as a prejudice. When an ethnic Swede turns up at the delivery company’s offices, the protagonist immediately suspects him of being a journalist, an artist or an author wanting to write “en arbetarskildring” [working-class literature] (Teglund, 2021a, p. 202). However, soon thereafter he begins reflecting on his reaction: “[V]arför har inte denna tanke slagit mig om något bud med utländsk härkomst? Är jag rasist?” [Why has this thought not occurred to me about any couriers with foreign background? Am I a racist?] (Teglund, 2021a, p. 202).

Thus, Teglund’s attitude toward the idea that it is important that workers represent themselves—which has been recurring in discussions about working-class literature in Sweden, and which played a central role in Henriksson’s criticism of *Cykelbudet*—seems to be ambivalent. While being sympathetic to the importance of writers knowing the worker collectives they write about very well, and while acknowledging that it is hard for him to write about foreign workers, he also argues that those doing precarious labour in contemporary Sweden might need assistance in their struggles to describe and critique their working conditions, but that it is not impossible for them to represent their own experiences.

Henriksson’s criticism of *Cykelbudet* and Teglund’s response to it very much resemble a discussion a decade earlier about Kristian Lundberg’s *Yarden*. After the publication of this novel and the follow-up work *Och allt ska vara kärlek* [And all shall be love] (2011), critics began referring to Lundberg as an important working-class writer (see e.g. Andersson, 2009; Bjelvehammar, 2009; Dahlström, 2011; Eriksson, 2010; Greider, 2010; Hallgren, 2009; Swedenmark, 2009; Wiklund, 2010). The fact that Lundberg—as was mentioned in Chapter One—received a prestigious literary prize named after Sweden’s most well-known working-class writer, Ivar Lo-Johansson, further contributed to his consecration as an important representative of the tradition of working-class literature, as did the interest he received in academic research about such literature (Arping, 2011; Gustafson, 2020;

Hamm, 2014; Mathisen, 2014; Nilsson, 2014b; Nilsson, 2016b; Sjöberg, 2016; Wahlström, 2020; Williams, 2011; Williams, 2016).

Hand in hand with the celebration of Lundberg as an important working-class writer has gone an insistence that even if he had had a relatively long and successful career as a poet and a literary critic, he nevertheless belonged organically to the world of precarious work that he wrote about in *Yarden*. A good example of this can be found in a review by the critic and author Jens Liljestrand:

Det är i många stycken en stark berättelse om det moderna låglöneproletariatets villkor, påminnande om Günter Wallraffs “Längst därnere”. Men Lundberg har inte dragit på sig blåstället för att wallraffa utan för att det är hans enda alternativ. Utan ens en gymnasieutbildning, djupt skuldsatt och med svag förankring i arbetsmarknaden—för den så sent som 2005 Augustnominerade författaren blir “Yarden” den enda inkomstmöjligheten. (Liljestrand, 2009)

[In many ways it is a powerful narrative about conditions in the modern low-wage proletariat, which reminds one of Günter Wallraff’s “Lowest of the Low”. But Lundberg did not put on his overalls to do what Wallraff did, he did so because it was his only option. Without even a high-school degree, heavily in debt, and with a weak position in the labour market—for the author who as recently as 2005 was nominated for the August prize “The Yard” becomes the only way to secure an income.]<sup>17</sup>

Another critic, Peter Viktorsson (2009), underlined that *Yarden* is written “inifrån” [from within] and that it “ger röst åt ett namnlöst kollektiv, en brokig samling människor med otacksamt slitgöra och låg lön som gemensam nämnare” [gives a voice to a nameless collective, a disparate group of people with low-status hard work and low pay as a common denominator]. In an article in the Swedish Trade Union Confederation’s weekly newspaper, critic and author Erik Löfvendahl, described *Yarden* and Rolf Almström’s *Svart arbete* as novels about the working class that are

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<sup>17</sup> The August Prize—named after August Strindberg—is the best-known literary prize in Sweden, after the Nobel Prize. That Liljestrand capitalises “Yarden” adds an element of ambivalence to his statement. Does he mean that it is the novel *Yarden*, rather than working at the so-called yard, that saves Lundberg’s economy?

written “nerifrån” [from below] and stated that this makes it impossible for middle-class readers to recognise themselves in them (Löfvendahl, 2010).

Other critics, however, claimed that Lundberg did not really belong to the worker collective he was writing about, and that he should therefore not be placed in the tradition of working-class literature. One of them, Marcus Larsson (2010), stated that Lundberg was a mere “tulist” [tourist] in the precariat and that he had no real understanding of it. A similar claim was made by the critic Lorena Toro Meneses. She compared Lundberg to Maja Ekelöf (1918–1989)—a cleaning lady who in 1970 became a literary sensation when she, at the age of 50, won a competition for “best political novel” with a manuscript based on her diary (Olsson, 2004, p. 241), and who has ever since occupied a central position in the history of Swedish working-class literature—and found that the two had very little in common. According to Toro Meneses, the fact that Ekelöf “själv upplevt det hon berättade” [had herself experienced what she wrote about] gave her and her book “ett enormt autentiskt kapital” [an enormous authenticity-capital] which Lundberg lacked:

Ett autentiskt tillstånd uppstår när en individ har bestående erfarenhet av ett fenomen. Läsaren förenar sig med författarens självupplevda erfarenheter. [...]

Tolv månader på Yarden eller enstaka extraknäck gör det svårt att injicera skildringen av kroppsarbetet med en dos autenticitet. (Toro Meneses, 2011)

[An authentic condition emerges when an individual has lasting experiences of a phenomenon. The reader unites with the author’s first-hand experiences. (...)]

Twelve months at The Yard or the occasional moonlighting makes it hard to inject a dosis of authenticity into the depiction of manual labour.]

Therefore, Toro Meneses (2011) argues, the term “arbetarroman” [working-class novel] should not be used about Lundberg’s works.

The discussions about Lundberg’s relationship to the tradition of working-class literature bring to the fore the same understanding of this literature as did Henriksson’s attack on Teglund. Furthermore, there are rhetorical similarities. For

example, Wallraff and the notion of tourism appear in both debates.<sup>18</sup> Also, Lundberg's response to his critics is quite similar to the one later formulated by Teglund.

Like Teglund, Lundberg emphasises that he has not taken a precarious job to do research for writing, but because he needed the money. In the foreword to the 2015 edition of *Yarden*, he states that "jag hade ingen avsikt från början om att skriva om min tid i hamnen" [I had no intention at the beginning to write about my time at the docks] (Lundberg, 2015, p. 11). The same thing is also underlined in *Yarden*, which—like *Cykelbudet*—contains an extensive self-reflexive discussion of the protagonist's relationship to other workers. "Jag är här för att jag behöver pengarna" [I am here because I need the money], he says: "Jag är pank. Fattig. Noll kronor" [I am broke. Poor. Zero krona] (Lundberg, 2009, p. 89).<sup>19</sup> Thus, he stresses that he is no tourist in the so-called precariat. As was pointed out in Chapter One, he instead argues that his job at the yard represents a *homecoming* to the world of manual labour.

But even if he denies being a tourist in the so-called precariat (and claims instead that it was during his years as a poet and literary critic that he was a tourist), the protagonist in *Yarden* nevertheless stresses—again, just like Teglund and the protagonist in *Cykelbudet*—that he is not a typical representative of it. Above all, he highlights, as has been noted by several commentators, that the fact that he is Swedish-born makes him rather unique (see Arping, 2011, p. 194; Nilsson, 2014b, p. 117). He also explicitly reflects on his possibilities to speak for the whole worker collective and comes to the conclusion that he is unable to do so: "[I]nte kan jag berätta allas historia? Nej, sannerligen inte. Jag berättar min" [I can't tell everyone's story, can I? No, in truth not. I tell mine] (Lundberg, 2009, p. 139). Thus, Lundberg expresses—much like Teglund would do later—ambivalence toward the criticism that he does not belong organically to the worker collective he describes. On the one hand, he repudiates the claim that he is a mere "tourist" in the so-called precariat;

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<sup>18</sup> Wallraff is also an important point of reference in the reception of other works about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden, in particular Sunvisson's novels (Söderin, 2021; Hansson, 2022; Mehmedagic, 2023).

<sup>19</sup> Other authors writing about the so-called precariat in contemporary Sweden also emphasise that they are not (total) outsiders in relation to the collectives they portray. For example, in *Rent åt helvete*, Ellinor Torp (2023) underscores that she comes from a working-class family, and makes comparisons between migrant workers and her grandmother, who worked as a cleaner.

on the other hand, when reflecting on his possibilities to write about it, he acknowledges that he is no typical member of it, and that this might indeed make it difficult for him to represent it in literature.

## Classes in and for themselves

As has been demonstrated above, several critics and writers have expressed doubts that Teglund and Lundberg can represent the so-called precariat in the same way as traditional working-class writers represented the working class. To at least some degree, Teglund and Lundberg have agreed. The main reason for this is that the so-called precariat—as has been emphasised by Standing (2014b)—is not *a class for itself*.

The concept of *class for itself* is used by Marx in *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847), in a description of the proletariat:

Economic conditions had first transformed the mass of the people of the country into workers. The combination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. This mass is thus already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself. In the struggle, of which we have noted only a few phases, this mass becomes united, and constitutes itself as a class for itself. The interests it defends become class interests. But the struggle of class against class is a political struggle. (Marx, 1966, p. 150)

This can be compared to Marx's analysis in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852, hereafter: *Brumaire*) of the smallholding peasants in nineteenth-century France:

The smallholding peasants form an immense mass whose members live in similar conditions but without entering into complex relationships with one another. Their mode of production isolates them from one another, instead of bringing them into complex interactions. [...] In so far as millions of families get a living under economic conditions of existence that divide their mode of life, their interests and their culture from those of other classes and counterpose them as enemies, they form a class. In so far as there is merely a local interconnection amongst peasant proprietors, the similarity of their interests produces no community, no national linkage and no political organisation, they do not form a class. They are therefore incapable of asserting their class interests in their own

name, whether through a parliament or constitutional convention. They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented. (Marx, 2002, pp. 100–101)

The peasants do, just like the proletarians, share certain economic conditions of existence as well as political interests connected to those conditions. Thus, they are a class in itself. However, since they lack community and organisation, and cannot represent themselves, they are not a class for itself.<sup>20</sup>

The so-called precariat in contemporary Sweden seems to have more in common with the smallholding peasants in mid-nineteenth century France discussed by Marx in *Brumaire* than with the proletarians he describes in *The Poverty of Philosophy*. While sharing some conditions and interests—for example the lack of different kinds of “labour-related security” that are at the heart of Guy Standing’s (2014b, pp. 10–11) definition—it also displays a high degree of heterogeneity regarding, for example, education, ethnic background, legal status, income, and kind of work. Furthermore, like the French peasants described by Marx, the precariat is often characterised by a “mode of production” that “isolates” its members “instead of bringing them into mutual intercourse”, for example since short-time and temporary employments prevent the formation of stable worker collectives. Thus, it is not surprising that the precariat has not developed any community or organisation extending beyond the local.

The fact that the so-called precariat is not a class for itself renders problematic the idea that writers writing about it must be well anchored in it. For, if it is not a class for itself, then there is—quite simply—not much for the writers to be anchored in: no identity, no community, no culture, no history, and no political organisation. However, the same fact also makes it obvious how these writers can contribute to the struggle against precarious labour: by contributing to the precariat’s transformation into a class for itself, by making its members realise that beyond their

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<sup>20</sup> Marx actually never uses the concept of a class in itself. However, in Marxist theory—especially the Hegelian tradition in which Georg Lukács is a central member, but also more generally—it is common to make a distinction between classes in and for themselves and to define the former in terms of objective economic conditions. For a contemporary example of this distinction (albeit without the use of the terms class in and for itself) see Patrick Eiden-Offe, *The Poetry of Class: Romantic Anti-Capitalism and the Invention of the Proletariat* (2023). There, the proletariat is described as a product of both economic proletarianisation (as a class in itself) and of political subjectification (as a class for itself).

differences they share certain conditions and interests. Or, to put it in simpler terms, by promoting class consciousness.

In *A Precariat Charter*, Standing (2014a, p. 105) argues that “the first struggle” that the precariat must undertake is one for “recognition”: “It is about recognizing the existence of a distinctive social group, and feeling that one can be part of it, without shame and with some pride. [...] [T]he emerging class must forge a distinctive social identity, to create the basis for collective action”. That literature can contribute to such class formation is a widespread belief in research about working-class literature. A recent and very interesting example can be found in Joseph B. Entin’s (2023, p. 8) *Living Labor: Fiction, Film and Precarious Work*, where he shows that a number of contemporary literary and cinematic works about precarious labour can be read as attempts at what Fredric Jameson has called *cognitive mapping* of contemporary class conditions and of “possibilities for class formation”. A similar argument regarding older literature has recently been put forward in another very interesting work, Patrick Eiden-Offe’s *The Poetry of Class: Romantic Anti-Capitalism and the Invention of the Proletariat* (2023), where the author demonstrates—drawing on E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963)—that literary texts have contributed to the imaginaries on the basis of which workers make sense of the world and construct class identities (see Eiden-Offe, 2023; Thompson, 1977). There is also a substantial body of research about Swedish working-class literature arguing that it can contribute to class consciousness and class formation among workers (see e.g. Agrell, 2016; Agrell, 2021; Mral, 1985; Nilsson, 2011; Nilsson, 2021c; Nilsson, 2021a; Nilsson, 2023b).

To contribute to the formation of class consciousness in the so-called precariat seems to be an explicit ambition among at least some authors writing about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden, and this is sometimes thematised in their works. For example, in Johan Jönson’s (2008, p. 506) *Efter arbetsschema* it is stated that the book is an attempt to “producera en arbetarsubjektivitet” [produce a working-class subjectivity]. In Teglund’s (2021a, p. 44) *Cykelbudet*, the protagonist argues that his goal with writing about his experiences as a bicycle courier is to contribute to a better understanding of “gig-ekonomin och vår tids klassklyftor” [the gig economy and contemporary class divides]. He also emphasises that it is important that the gig workers understand their situation in class terms. This is expressed, for example, in a scene where a union representative insists on the importance of couriers’ identifying

with their work and with their colleagues. To achieve that, he argues, it is necessary to “börja prata om klass” [start talking about class] (Teglund, 2021a, p. 354).

In *Yarden*, class is (as has been shown in Chapter One and will be further discussed below) a central concept. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to read the following paragraph as a thematization of the author’s ambition to promote class consciousness:

Och nej, jag vet—jag är inte ensam. Jag undrar bara var alla ni andra är. Jag undrar bara varför det är så tyst. Jag sänder ut detta som ett nödbloss i natten, en raket av stjärnor och färgade ljus mot den svärtade himlen för att säga att jag är här, att ni kan komma nu, att vi kan samla oss. (Lundberg, 2009, p. 54)

[And no, I know—I am not alone. I just wonder where all of you are. I just wonder why it is so quiet. I am sending out this as a flare in the night, a firework of stars and coloured lights against the blackened sky to tell you that I am here, that you can come now, that we can gather.]

Such a reading has been done by literary scholar Troels Obbekjær (2020, pp. 99–100) who argues that this passage expresses the protagonist’s will to promote solidarity “mellem og med sine klassefæller” [between and with other members of his class], and to “skabe en bevisthed om ett klassefælleskab” [create an awareness of a class community].

## Unity in diversity

The so-called precariat is often associated with heterogeneity, and this is sometimes highlighted as something that sets it apart from the working class. For example, literary scholar Sieglinde Lemke (2016, p. 15) claims that “[i]n contrast to the proletariat, which is traditionally associated with working-class males of European origin, the precariat is a heterogeneous group”. Heterogeneity is also a prominent theme in contemporary Swedish literature portraying precarious labour.

The manuscript to the play *Prekariatet* begins by defining the concept of the precariat as a group of people made up of those who are not part of the regular labour market or have insecure employment, including temporarily employed workers as well as the unemployed and people working under “slavliknande förhållanden”

[slave-like conditions] (Helm and Ohly, 2019, p. 2).<sup>21</sup> The characters in the play all belong to this group, but apart from that, they have little in common. Alexandra is a forty-four-year-old journalist who has never had a permanent work contract; Eva, aged fifty-five, is a single mother who works part-time in home care and as cleaner through an on-line platform; Göran, who is forty, is self-employed (after having lost his job as a coach for unemployed people!); twenty-five-year-old Morteza is a refugee from Afghanistan whose residence permit is about to expire and who is employed as a warehouse worker; and Linnea, aged thirty-six, works as a substitute teacher when needed (Helm and Ohly, 2019, p. 3). In fact, one of the few things that unites them—besides their insecure positions in the labour market—is an *unwillingness to identify* as members of the precariat. When reflecting on her situation, Linnéa explicitly distances herself from the concept: “Nej, alltså, jag skulle inte säga att jag är en del av prekariatet. Jag är ju inte rik, men jag har, alltså jag har ju ett skyddsnät. Jag kommer från medelklassen. Jag har studerat på universitetet” [No, I would not say that I am part of the precariat. I am not rich, but I have, well I do have a safety net. I come from the middle class. I have studied at university] (Helm and Ohly, 2019, p. 9). In particular, she points to what sets her apart from migrant workers: “[D]om har inga skyddsnät alls, dom har ingen utväg om någonting skulle gå fel. Jag menar, om jag har problem kan jag ändå ringa min mamma” [They have no safety net at all, they have no options if something goes wrong. I mean, if I have problems, I can always call my mum] (Helm and Ohly, 2019, p. 9).

Linnéa does use the safety net provided by her parents; when she cannot make ends meet, she moves in with them (Helm and Ohly, 2019, p. 18). Other characters too experience financial hardship. For example, Alexandra’s precarious existence is symbolised by her dream to own a cat—a dream that cannot be realised because she cannot afford a big enough apartment (Helm and Ohly, 2019, p. 19). For others, the situation is far worse. This is in particular true for migrant workers. In order not to lose his residence permit, Morteza is forced to take a job at a restaurant where he ends up sleeping in a dirty and stinking basement together with other workers (Helm and Ohly, 2019, p. 33). And, when Alexandra interviews construction workers she

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<sup>21</sup> This definition is also printed in the program booklet from the performance of the play at Malmö City Theatre (*Prekariatet—av Liv Helm, Felicia Ohly och Matilde Böcher*, 2020).

learns about migrant workers who work 14-hour days, without protective equipment (Helm and Ohly, 2019, p. 34).

The scene describing Alexandra trying to interview a migrant worker presents Swedes and immigrants as inhabiting different worlds and being unable—quite literally—to understand each other:

ALEXANDRA

Ja. Och du hette...

TOLKEN

Vad heter du?

KÖR (Katarina):

*mmm, va hette du, va, va hette du... (fortsätter)*

BYGGNADSARBETAREN

Mandek.

ALEXANDRA

Mandek, ja. Ursäkta. Jo. Jag ville fråga dig. Jag undrade... Jag undrade...

Jag.. Jag.. hade.. jag hade en fråga.. Hur.

*Hur. Hur. Om du. Om du. Om du Om du.*

*...en fråga.*

*om du med jobbet ... en fråga om du med jobbet ... en fråga om du med jobbet*

*om du med jobbet*

*om du med jobbet ... en fråga om du med jobbet ... en fråga om du med jobbet*

*om du med jobbet*

*vem.....när..... du... och..... du..... hur.....*

*hur..... hur... hur*

*vem.....när..... du... och..... du..... hur.....*

*hur.....hur hur*

*vem.....när..... du... och..... du..... hur.....*

*hur.....hur hur*

*hur....hur....hur....hur.... (upprepas tills det bara är andning)*

Alexandra andas in och ut flera gånger. Orden stannar i halsen. (Helm and Ohly, 2019, pp. 35–36)

[ALEXANDRA

Yes, and your name is?

THE INTERPRETER

What is your name?

THE CHORUS (Katarina)

*mmm... what was your name, what, what was your name... (continues)*

THE CONSTRUCTION WORKER

Mandek

ALEXANDRA

Mandek, yes. Sorry. Well. I wanted to ask you. I was wondering... I was wondering...

I.. I.. had.. I had a question.. How

*How. How. If you. If you. If you. If you.*

*...a question*

*if you with this job ... a question if you with this job ... a question if you with this job  
if you with this job*

*who.... ..when... .. you... and... .. you... .. how ... .. how  
... ..*

*who.....when..... you... and..... you.....*

*how.....how... how*

*who.....when..... you... and..... you.....*

*how.....how.....how how*

*how....how...how...how... (repeated until it becomes only breathing)*

Alexandra inhales and exhales several times. The words are stuck in her throat.]

This emphasis on differences between Swedes and immigrants, and especially on the difficulties for the former to understand the latter, can—as was discussed earlier in this chapter—be found also in Lundberg's *Yarden* and Teglund's *Cykelbudet*. It is a motif that appears also in many other literary works portraying precarious labour in contemporary Sweden.

In Kerstin Fredholm's *Fint hemma*, it is pointed out several times that Swedish cleaners are paid more than foreigners. While the narrator gets 125 krona per hour (roughly 12 euros), a Polish cleaner is paid 80 krona (Fredholm, 2005, p. 104) and asylum seekers only 25–30 krona (Fredholm, 2005, p. 78). The narrator also reflects—much like Linnéa in *Prekariatet*—on how her situation is radically different

from that of undocumented migrants doing the same job: “I jämförelse med en person som vistas här utan arbets- och uppehållstillstånd och städar har jag ett betydligt bättre utgångsläge. Jag har i alla fall rätt til vård och kan uppsöka ett sjukhus” [Compared to a person staying here without work and residence permits and who works as a cleaner, I am in a much better position. At least I am entitled to healthcare and can go to a hospital] (Fredholm, 2005, p. 191). That Fredholm points to the possibilities of getting support from welfare institutions while Linnéa talks about the importance of support from her family is interesting, given that the fifteen years that separate the publication of *Fint hemma* from the premiere of *Prekariatet* have been characterised by a gradual dismantling of welfare-state institutions in Sweden.

The narrator’s reflections in *Fint hemma* on the relationship between Swedish and (undocumented) migrant workers ends in the conviction that the differences between the two groups are so immense that they can hardly be grasped—she finds it difficult to even imagine “hur det är att vistas i Sverige som papperslös och tvingas städa för att överleva” [what it is like to be an undocumented migrant in Sweden and have to work as a cleaner to survive] (Fredholm, 2005, p. 211). Nevertheless, she does try to picture what it would be like:

Vad kan du inte tvingas gå med på i en så utsatt situation? I mitt arbete som journalist har jag många gånger hört berättelser om människor som jobbar för 25–30 kronor i timmen vilket inte alls verkar vara ovanligt. Ja, ännu värre. Tio kronor eller ingen lön alls när de är klara med jobbet. Men också att det ingår sexuella tjänster för att överhuvudtaget få ett skitjobb.

Vem anmäler sådana missförhållanden? Knappast den som vistas här utan tillstånd.

Det finns också en annan aspekt i detta. Jag har back-up, alltså någon som faktiskt vet var jag befinner mig och känner till att det kan finnas en viss risk i det jag håller på med. Hur vanligt är det att en papperslös städerska har back-up som kan komma till hennes undsättning? Vem vet var hon finns? (Fredholm, 2005, p. 211)

[What could you not be forced to accept in such a precarious situation. Working as a journalist, I have often heard stories about people working for 25–30 krona per hour, which does not seem to be uncommon at all. Yes, even worse. Ten krona or no pay at all when they are done with the job. But also that sexual services are necessary to even get a shitty job.

Who reports such abuse? Hardly those who are here illegally.

There is also another aspect of this. I have back-up, someone who actually knows where I am and who is aware that there can be a risk with what I do. How often does an undocumented immigrant have a back-up that can come to her rescue? Who knows where she is?]

This is one of many examples of the narrator in *Fint hemma* not just reporting her experiences but also using her imagination (as well as hearsay) to reflect on precarious labour, thereby pushing the borders between reportage and fiction.

In Bogdanska's *Wage slaves*, the protagonist's reflections on her experiences of precarious labour result—much like the narrator's in *Fint hemma*—in the realisation that native Swedish workers fare better than migrants, and that there is a hierarchy on the unregulated labour market among immigrants from different countries. When finding out that she will have little time for anything but school and work, she pities herself—but immediately realises that her colleague from Bangladesh leads an even more stressful life:

Plötsligt skämdes jag över allt mitt klagande. Min skola låg på gångavstånd och var en artsy-fartsy lekstuga för vita svenskar, utan läxor eller press. Nirja jobbade heltid och pluggade på universitet samtidigt. En utbildning som hela hennes familj i Bangladesh betalade för—med hopp om att det skulle ge henne ett bättre liv. (Bogdanska, 2016, p. 35)

[I was suddenly ashamed to be complaining. My school was within walking distance, and it was an artsy-fartsy playground for white Swedes with no homework or pressure. Nirja was working full-time while studying at university at the same time. An education paid for by her family in Bangladesh, hoping it would provide her a better life. (Bogdanska, 2019b, p. 35)]

Moreover, soon after having found out that she will only make 50 krona (4.50 euros) per hour, she realises that the people working in the restaurant where she has just paid only 15 krona for a falafel probably make even less (Bogdanska, 2016, p. 37).



An excerpt from Daria Bogdanska's *Wage slaves*. The protagonist realises that there are other workers that are probably paid even less than her.

Eventually, the protagonist's reflections on the relationship between workers of different backgrounds leads to the formulation of a theory about ethnic/national segregation among the employees in the restaurant where she works:

Jag började förstå hur min arbetsplats fungerade. Sanad [ägaren] betalade lägst lön till de som var mest desperata... de som inte var från Europa och inte kunde få annat jobb. Invandrarna från Europa var också desperata men hade närmare hem, så vi fick lite högre lön. Svenskarna fick högst lön av alla även om den också var dålig. De blev mutade med gratis öl och mat. De verkade dessutom mest se på jobbet som ett extraknäck. (Bogdanska, 2016, p. 39)

[I started to understand how this place worked. Sanad [the owner] paid the least to those who were the most desperate... those who weren't from Europe and couldn't get other work. Immigrants from Europe were also desperate, but we lived closer to home so got paid a little bit more. The Swedes were paid the most even though they also made quite little. They were bribed with free beer and food. Besides, for them the work was usually just extra income on the side. (Bogdanska, 2019b, p. 39)]

Thus, in *Wage slaves*, ethnic/national diversity is explicitly pointed out as something that stands in the way of the so-called precariat's formation as a class.

In Emil Boss's *Kompression*, several of the testimony-poems thematise an opposition between migrant workers and Swedes. In one of these poems, a cleaner who has only had two days off work in one year reflects on his relationship to Swedes: "Svenskarna såg mig i / butiken varje dag, på morgonen / och på kvällen, vardag och helg, / men ingen sa något" [The Swedes saw me / in the shop every day, in the morning / and in the evening, weekdays and on the weekend / but nobody said anything] (Boss, 2023b, p. 71). In another poem, a construction worker claims that in Sweden only Swedes have human rights: "Sverige är bland de värsta länderna / att arbeta i. Alla tror att det är bra / här, med välfärd och mänskliga / rättigheter, men det gäller bara svenskarna" [Sweden is among the worst countries / to work in. Everyone thinks that it is good / here, with welfare and human / rights, but that is only for the Swedes] (Boss, 2023b, p. 97).

In *Rent åt helvete*, Elinor Torp points to differences between migrant and native workers. She describes a segregated labour market, for example by pointing out that a major cleaning company only employs migrants (Torp, 2023, p. 112). She also describes an ethnic hierarchy in the unregulated labour market, much in the same way as Bogdanska does in *Wage slaves*. For example, when Chilo—a paperless migrant from Nicaragua—contemplates her situation, she comforts herself by remembering that her colleagues from Mongolia work under even worse conditions (Torp, 2023, p. 40).

In Rolf Almström's *Svart arbete* too, differences between workers from different countries are emphasised. Here, however, it is not differences within Sweden—between Swedes and migrants—that are highlighted, but between workers in Sweden and in other countries. When reflecting on the working conditions in the unregulated labour market in Sweden, the protagonist concludes that however bad they may be, workers in Sweden still fare better than workers in other parts of the world: "I Bangladesh är man fattig" [In Bangladesh people are poor], he tells a workmate, and then continues, "du lever en jävla lyxtillvaro ... bil och teve och varsitt sovrum och kök och bad ... det är ju för fan ouppnåeligt för de flesta i hela världen" [you lead a goddamn luxury-life ... a car and a tv-set and everyone has their own bedroom and kitchen and a bath ... that is fucking unattainable for most people in the world] (Almström, 2015, p. 169).

In *Yarden*, differences between workers—in particular, differences that relate to migration, ethnicity/nationality, religion and legal status—are highlighted and

discussed. This has been noted by literary scholar Åsa Arping (2011, p. 194) in an analysis of *Yarden* in which she argues that its protagonist situates himself in relation to undocumented migrants, Muslim workers and Philippine sailors. For example, soon after having begun working in the harbour, the protagonist realises that because he is Swedish, he belongs to “de lyckligt lottade” [the fortunate ones] (Lundberg, 2009, p. 69). Like Fredholm and the protagonist in *Wage slaves*, he also identifies a hierarchy among the non-Swedish workers, underlining that undocumented migrants often have to work for very little money and that they sometimes do not even get paid at all (Lundberg, 2009, pp. 100–101). In addition, he recognises that the Filipino sailors he meets while working at the docks lead lives that are so different that he cannot even begin to understand them (Lundberg, 2009, p. 45).

Despite this, *Yarden* can still be read as an attempt to describe a *possible* foundation for class consciousness across differences. This has been highlighted by literary critic Peter Viktorsson (2009; emphasis added), who in his review of *Yarden* argues that it gives voice to “ett namnlöst kollektiv, en *brokig* samling människor med otacksamt slitgöra och låg lön som gemensam nämnare” [a nameless collective, a *disparate* group of people united by the low-status hard work they do and the low pay they receive].

This attempt to produce a collective voice for those working under precarious conditions starts with the protagonist beginning to undermine the differences that he has just described between himself and workers from other countries. For example, soon after declaring that the Filipino sailors are so different that they are virtually incomprehensible, he says that he enjoys hanging out with them, and that linguistic and cultural differences are secondary, since “arbete förstår arbete” [work understands work] (Lundberg, 2009, p. 46). And, after having worked in the harbour for six months, he no longer focuses on what sets him apart from workers from other countries but instead views himself as “en bland alla andra. Varken mer eller mindre” [one among all the others. No more and no less] (Lundberg, 2009, p. 90). This feeling of having something in common is based on shared work experiences: “Arbetet i sig är så meningslöst och tungt att det är svårt att inte solidarisera sig med varandra. Vi är lika värda, talar samma språk, lever med samma trötthet och oro” [The work in itself is so meaningless that it is hard not to develop solidarity with each other. We have the same worth, speak the same language, live with the same fatigue and worries] (Lundberg, 2009, p. 98).

Thus, as Arping (2011, p. 194) has pointed out, *Yarden* shows that beyond all their differences, the workers share at least one thing: their powerlessness in the labour market. The perhaps most interesting expression of this is when the protagonist states that “vi anger varandra för att säkerställa våra egna platser” [we betray each other in order to secure our own positions] (Lundberg, 2009, p. 41). This can of course be read as a highly pessimistic description of a worker collective that is undermined by competition and lack of solidarity. However, it also highlights—through the use of the pronoun “we”—that labour-market precarity is something that is shared by all the workers, and thereby it accentuates this as a possible foundation for class consciousness.

A similar idea is expressed in Linus Nordmark’s (2023, p. 10) poem “Vi är där de vill ha oss” [We Are Where They Want Us] where the pronoun “vi” [we] is used to describe people that are “[u]ppdelade, utspridda / ensamma, vanmäktiga” [divided, dispersed / lonely, disempowered]. The same rhetorical figure can also be found in Anna Arvidsdotter’s poetry collection *Händer att hålla i* [Hands to Hold], which describes the author’s experiences of working as a mailman on a temporary contract. “[V]i har inget gemensamt” [We have nothing in common], it says in one poem, “vi söndrar / sparkar / trampar frenetiskt vatten” [we divide / kick / tread water frenetically] (Arvidsdotter, 2022, p. 25). Here too, the pronoun “we” emphasises that a collective marked by a lack of solidarity could still be viewed as a collective, or at least as a group that shares a common situation. The title of Arvidsdotter’s book—*Händer att hålla i* [Hands to Hold]—also describes at least a desire for collective identity and unity. Perhaps the title of *Wage slaves* points in the same direction. As has already been demonstrated, Bogdanska highlights differences between herself and other workers. Still, her autobiographical story is presented as a narrative about wage slaves in the plural.

In *Cykelbudet*, Teglund highlights and reflects on differences and similarities between migrant and native workers. When comparing himself to a co-worker from Afghanistan who is working on a rainy day without any rain clothes, the protagonist realises that he is quite privileged: “Jag påminns om hur många privilegier jag har i livet: hälsan, familjen, tak över huvudet, en ekonomi jag kan betala hyran med. En given plats i ett tryggt hemland. Regnbyxor från Helly Hansen” [I am reminded of the many privileges I have in my life—health, family, a roof over my head, an economy that allows me to pay my rent. A place in a secure homeland. Rain trousers

from Helly Hansen] (Teglund, 2021a, p. 192). But he also highlights what unites Swedish and immigrant workers. When interviewing a migrant worker, he realises that he recognises himself in the other's story, despite all the differences between them. Among other things, both have felt shame when others have found out that they work as bicycle couriers (Teglund, 2021a, p. 177). Furthermore, the protagonist stresses that, like him, several of the non-Swedish couriers are well-educated and have previously had more high-status jobs (Teglund, 2021a, p. 233). Thus, the experience of precarious labour (its low status, the fact that the pay does not match the workers' formal qualifications etc.) is something that many bicycle couriers have in common, despite the many differences between them.

In Pelle Sunvisson's *Svarta bär*, too, the so-called precariat is simultaneously described as being heterogeneous and as sharing an economic situation as well as political interests. One of the berry pickers, Alina, reads everything she can find about "utländska bärplockare i Sverige" [foreign berry pickers in Sweden] and, when reflecting on what she has read, realises that she herself belongs to this category, despite the fact that it also includes workers from far-away places such as Thailand (Sunvisson, 2021a, p. 96). Ruslan, the Ukrainian protagonist in Sunvisson's *Svenska palmen*, comes to a similar conclusion. When first arriving in Sweden he thinks—much like Alina—that he has little in common with other migrant workers, including his countrymen (Sunvisson, 2021b, p. 32, see also p. 74). However, when he starts working, and reflects on his experiences, he realises that they share a precarious situation in the labour market.

In the afterword to *Något har hänt*, it is explicitly argued that political unity in the so-called precariat is possible, despite "de stora olikheterna, i migrationsstatus (ett spektrum från papperslös till permanent uppehållstillstånd), i ursprung (med olika språk, kulturer och tro) och i erfarenhet (yrkesmässig och annan)" [the great differences regarding migration status (a spectrum ranging from undocumented migrant to holder of a permanent residence permit), origin (with different languages, cultures and beliefs) and experience (professional and other)] (Boss *et al.*, 2023, p. 71). The foundation for this unity is the organisation—"byggd på solidaritet mellan migrantarbetare" [built on solidarity between migrant workers]—that the authors of *Något har hänt* have helped create. And the next step, they say, is to build solidarity also between migrant and domestic workers. Below, I will analyse how the prospect

of taking that step—and perhaps further ones as well—is thematised and discussed in literature about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden.

## Cross-class precarity

According to Standing, the so-called precariat includes not only manual workers, but also people working in the culture sector and the creative industries without permanent contracts. This idea is discussed by Teglund (2021b, p. 16), who has stated that one of his aims in *Cykelbudet* was to make “en jämförelse mellan gigarbete för musiker och bud, och undersöka kontraster och likheter” [a comparison between gig work for musicians and couriers, and to explore contrasts and similarities].

Teglund largely focuses on similarities. When working as a temporarily employed bicycle courier, the protagonist in *Cykelbudet* comes to realise that many of the problems he encounters are well-known to him from his work in the cultural sector. Above all, he underlines that he is used to employment insecurity, describing his previous work life as a patchwork of short projects (Teglund, 2021a, pp. 11–12). This similarity is accentuated when he juxtaposes his waiting for the renewal of his contract as a courier with his waiting for the result of a grant proposal for a music project (Teglund, 2021a, pp. 211, 218). Another problem that he is used to is having to pay for his work equipment (Teglund, 2021a, p. 76). He also states that the constant monitoring of his performance that he is subjected to as a courier is not new to him, since he is used to staring at graphs describing the sales of books and records, the streaming of music etc. (Teglund, 2021a, p. 95). The protagonist’s reflections on the relationship between working in the cultural sector and as a bicycle courier culminates in a scene describing how he takes a selfie, dressed in his courier work clothes, in front of a poster advertising one of his concerts. He sends the picture to his friends, with the caption, “*Gig economics*” (Teglund, 2021a, p. 137).

The protagonist in *Cykelbudet* makes several comparisons between working for Foodora (the delivery company for which he works as a bicycle courier) and another platform company: the music-streaming service Spotify. He points out that his revenues from Spotify are extremely low, thus underscoring that musicians—just like bicycle couriers—are low-paid workers that are exploited by platform companies (Teglund, 2021a, pp. 95, 148, 186, 305). He also points to similarities between Spotify’s and Foodora’s business models (Teglund, 2021a, pp. 243–245). Furthermore, he underlines that both companies subject him to algorithmic

management, describing a day when he first tries to come up with a way to trick Spotify's algorithm to make his new album more visible, and then discusses with other couriers how one can evade low-paying orders in Foodora's app (Teglund, 2021a, pp. 213–216).<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, besides emphasising the similarities between cultural workers and bicycle couriers, the protagonist in *Cykelbudet* acknowledges that there are some rather important differences between the two groups. His comparisons result in the realisation that, in most cases, the precarity he has experienced in the cultural sector has not been as severe as the one he experiences as a bicycle courier. For example, just after having been hired as a courier he goes to a meeting with some cultural workers who plan to apply for funding for a project and immediately notices that the offices where they sit are much nicer than those where he applied to become a courier (Teglund, 2021a, p. 45). When reflecting on the precarious working conditions he has experienced as a cultural worker, he also realises that these are—at least to some extent—a product of his own choices: “Jag har fått många chanser till något slags rimlig karriär men har nog slarvat bort möjligheterna längs vägen. Nu har jag försatt mig i en ohållbar livssituation” [I have been given many chances to have some kind of reasonable career, but I think that I have squandered opportunities along the way. Now I have probably put myself in an untenable situation] (Teglund, 2021a, p. 47). Thus, a difference between self-chosen insecurity in the cultural sector and the precarity experienced in an “untenable” situation is emphasised.

At the same time, although Teglund highlights differences among gig workers and across sectors of the labour market, he frames these as *quantitative* rather than *qualitative* distinctions between working conditions. This is encapsulated in a formulation early in *Cykelbudet*, where the protagonist characterises his predicament—being a cultural worker who has had to become a bicycle courier—as

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<sup>22</sup> In some respects, the protagonist in *Cykelbudet* finds his work in the culture sector to be *more* precarious than that as a bicycle courier. For example, he highlights that musicians often make even less money than couriers (Teglund, 2021a, pp. 148–149, 186–187, 196). The fact that he started working as a courier out of economic necessity when all his gigs in the culture sector were suddenly cancelled because of the outbreak of the covid pandemic further underlines this (Teglund, 2021a, p. 31). The protagonist also points out that since he has been formally/technically self-employed when working in the culture sector, he has had—unlike when working as a courier!—no unemployment insurance (Teglund, 2021a, p. 35).

one of “falla djupare ner i prekariatet” [falling deeper into the precariat] (Teglund, 2021a, p. 46). Here, the difference between a cultural worker and a bicycle courier is presented as a one of degree rather than kind, suggesting that the boundaries within the precariat are defined by relative position rather than fundamentally different experiences.

The play *Prekariatet* engages critically with the notion that the precariat encompasses both manual and skilled workers. While the characters generally argue against it—several insisting, as discussed above, that the term precariat should be reserved for those lacking formal education, or for migrants—the play itself complicates this position. Notably, its very title frames all the characters as members of the precariat, thereby implicitly challenging the restrictive definition advanced within the dialogue.

Many authors writing about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden reflect on the relationship between the so-called precariat and the traditional working class. In *Svart arbete*, the protagonist—Danny—repeatedly compares himself to people belonging to the traditional working class. In the beginning of the novel, he is looking out from his ninth-floor apartment at workers returning home from their jobs. That he watches them from afar is symbolic, since the differences between his and their lives are indeed substantial. He describes them as “[f]olk som kan förklara för sina barn vad de har för yrke, som kommer hem till middagen” [people who can explain to their kids what their occupation is, people who come home for dinner] (Almström, 2015, p. 6). Even if the actual work that Danny does—mainly construction work—is not difficult to describe, it is carried out under conditions that, as discussed in Chapter One, are radically different than those in the regular labour market. These differences extend beyond the workplace, shaping other aspects of life: Danny has not been able to start a family or even find a place of his own to live. As a result, he has no kids to talk to about his work, and no place to come home to for dinner. Most of his colleagues are also excluded from what could be described as traditional working-class life. This can be illustrated with Danny’s reflection on his best friend and workmate Mikko: “I en normal värld skulle han ha fast jobb, tjäna bra med pengar och redan ha börjat snickra på sin första kåk. Istället hankade han sig fram här” [In a normal world he would have a steady job, make good money and already have begun building his first house. Instead, he was scratching along here] (Almström, 2015, p. 15). Mikko’s situation deteriorates further: as noted in

Chapter One, he is severely injured in a workplace accident, laid off, and ultimately becomes addicted to drugs, leading to the collapse of his family.

In *Yarden*, the protagonist highlights differences between workers with temporary and permanent contracts (Lundberg, 2009, p. 43). When working as a temp at a freight terminal, he is given work that is more tedious than that done by workers with permanent contracts: “De andra roterar, kastar paket en timme, kör sedan truck, scannar eller vad de nu gör. Så är det inte för oss inhyrda. Vi står på vår plats. Timme efter timme” [The others rotate, throw parcels for an hour, then drive a forklift, scan or whatever it is that they do. For us temps it is not like that. We remain in our place. Hour after hour] (Lundberg, 2009, p. 14). He also describes how permanently employed workers exclude those who work for temporary work agencies from the worker collective and even take advantage of them: “Om mig kan man säga: ‘låt honom göra det! Vi ska fan inte behöva städa!’ och så gör jag det som alla andra inte vill kännas vid” [About me, one can say—“Let him do it! Fuck if we should have to clean up!” and then I do all the stuff that the others don’t want to bother about].

However, the protagonist also deconstructs the opposition between the co-called precariat and the working class, for example by connecting the hostility shown to him by workers with permanent contracts to the fact that he represents a *threat* to their labour-market security:

Det är en olustig stämning i arbetslokalen. Jag vet att jag har tagit en annans plats; att jag genom mitt arbete, min beredvillighet om man så vill, har tvingar bort en anställd, en person som plötsligt har blivit överflödig. En arbetskamrat. (Lundberg, 2009, p. 14, see also pp. 52–53 and p. 118)

[The atmosphere in the workroom is uneasy. I know that I have taken another’s place; that through me work, through what you might call my flexibility, have forced out an employee, a person who has suddenly become superfluous. A workmate.] In this way, the novel presents the so-called precariat and the working class not as separate entities, but as interrelated groups—what the former is, the latter risks becoming.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> This is a key aspect of Bourdieu’s (2000) understanding of “precariousness” as something that exists when workers experience feelings of not being “irreplaceable”.

The protagonist in *Yarden* further downplays any radical distinction between the working class (to which he once belonged) and the so-called precariat (to which he now belongs): “Jag är tillbaka där allt började för mig. Kroppsarbetet. Att hyra ut sina muskler” [I am back where it all began for me. Manual labour. Renting out one’s muscles] (Lundberg, 2009, p. 52; see also Nilsson, 2014b, p. 119). Instead, he proposes a different axis of class struggle, distinguishing between “de egendomslösa” [the propertyless] and “de som äger” [those who own] (Lundberg, 2009, p. 52). In this analysis, there is little room for antagonism between the working class and the precariat; both are positioned in opposition to capital. The protagonist explicitly connects the existence of the precariat to the “the power of capital”: “Vi som kommer när det behövs och sedan skickas hem igen; ett par hundralappar rikare och ett par timmar av vårt liv fattigare. Aldrig har kapitalets makt varit så tydlig för mig” [We who show up when needed and are then sent back home again; a few hundred-kronor bills richer and a few hours of our life poorer. Never before has the power of capital been so clear to me] (Lundberg, 2009, p. 63). Thus, the so-called precariat is described as a product of capitalism, just like the working class.

Sunvisson too challenges the opposition between the precariat and the working class by highlighting the two groups’ shared fundamental conditions and interests. In *Svarta bär*, one of the berry pickers reflects on and describes her predicament in the following way:

Genom att prata om bären lyfte man på ett smidigt sätt ut arbetet och arbetarna ur ekvationen. [...] Bär kunde inte vara ovärdiga, kunde inte vara exploaterande, kunde inte innehålla risk för skador och ruin [...].

Bären var genom den svenska lagen gratis [...] och att prata om priset på det som är gratis är liksom meningslöst. Bärpriset var inte alls ett pris på bär utan ett pris på arbete, ett pris på ibland skadade kroppar och emellanåt brustna drömmar, ett pris på frånvaron av en förälder eller en älskad och mest av allt den genom erfarenheten kalibrerade ersättningen vid vilken plockarna hölls ständigt hungriga. (Sunvisson, 2021a, p. 61)

[By talking about the berries, the workers could be taken out of the equation in a convenient way. (...) Berries could not be undignified, could not be exploited, could not run the risk of injury and ruin. (...).

According to Swedish law, the berries were free (...) and speaking about the price of what is free is kind of pointless. The price of berries was not at all a price for berries, but a price for labour, a price for sometimes injured bodies and occasionally broken dreams, a price for the absence of a parent or a loved one and most of all for the experience-based calibrated remuneration at which the pickers were kept in a constant state of hunger.]

This passage is clearly influenced by Marx's theorisation of the working class as a class of people whose labour produces value, which is then appropriated by capitalists. Thus, Sunvisson, just like Lundberg, highlights that migrant workers who work under precarious conditions in contemporary Sweden stand in the same relationship to capital as does the working class.

Sunvisson gives a similar picture of the relationship between the so-called precariat and the working class in *Svenska palmen* too. The novel's protagonist, Ruslan, is very much aware of the differences between migrant workers on the unregulated labour market, and those he calls "safe" workers (i.e. domestic and migrant workers with regular employment). Nevertheless, while the novel certainly underscores the belief that migration and employment status separate the so-called precariat from the working class, it also emphasises that both groups are exploited in the same way (albeit to different degrees). In conversations with his co-workers, Ruslan comes to the conclusion that their labour creates value that is appropriated by their employers (Sunvisson, 2021b, pp. 191, 242–243). In other words, this novel too suggests a Marxist understanding of class. It also points out that exploitation is not something that is endured only by migrant workers on the unregulated labour market: "Ni glömmer bort att svenskarna också har chefer som vill ha en del av kakan" [You forget that the Swedes also have bosses that want a piece of the pie], says one of Ruslan's colleagues (Sunvisson, 2021b, pp. 155–156).

In *Cykelbudet*, differences between gig-workers and the traditional working class are highlighted, as when the protagonist states that "buden kommer aldrig att uppnå samma yrkesstolthet som exempelvis hamnarbetare eller metallare" [the couriers will never achieve the same pride in their profession as, for example, dockworkers or metalworkers] (Teglund, 2021a, p. 330). But similarities are also brought to the fore, for example when a courier tells a colleague not to view as enemies the waiters and chefs in the restaurants where they pick up their orders, urging him to remember

that “de också är arbetare på samma vis som oss” [they too are workers, in the same way that we are] (Teglund, 2021a, p. 217).

As has been described above, in Boss’s *Kompression*, differences between migrant workers and Swedes are stressed. However, the work also compares the situation for migrant workers to that of the Swedish working class in the past. The main theme in the speaker’s discourse is “kompressionen av avstånd” [the compression of distance] (Boss, 2023b, p. 5). But the work also describes a compression of time, the narrator stating that there is “en annan tid inuti tiden” [a different time inside time] (Boss, 2023b, p. 25).<sup>24</sup> This compression of time connects contemporary migrant workers to the Swedish working class of the past:

alla människor i världens städer är / migranter eller ättlingar till migranter //  
bondsöner lämnade landsbygdens fattigdom / och svaldes av Södermalms eller  
Masthuggets slum // bonddöttrar bar tegel, rodde över Riddarfjärden eller fyllde  
/ innerstadens pigkamrar // också de var inneslutna i sin nya / obegripligt moderna  
tid // det förflutna hemsöker oss // roller och relationer som uthuggna ur  
människonatten (Boss, 2023b, pp. 173–179, 183, 187)

[all people in the cities of the world / are migrants or descendants of migrants //  
sons of farmers left the poverty in the countryside / and were swallowed up by the  
slums of Södermalm or Masthugget // daughters of farmers carried bricks, rowed  
across Riddarfjärden or crammed into / the servants’ attics // they too were locked-  
up in their new / incomprehensibly modern time // the past haunts us // roles and  
relationships carved out of the human night]

Here, there is a reminder that the Swedes that in some of the testimony-poems are described in opposition to the migrant workers are themselves descendants of such workers. Thereby, the opposition between the two groups is undermined.

This connecting of the so-called precariat to the working class by way of history—the insistence that precarious working conditions experienced by migrants in contemporary Sweden resemble those under which the Swedish working class used

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<sup>24</sup> He also states that “tidskapslarna väntar i väggarna” [the time capsules wait inside the walls] (Boss, 2023b, p. 63). This could be a reference to Sunvisson’s *Svenska palmen*. The last thing the protagonist of that novel does before he is arrested (and probably deported) is to hide a time capsule—containing information about his work—in a wall in the apartment he is renovating.

to work—is very common in literature about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden. For example, the foreword to the 2015 edition of Lundberg’s *Yarden* opens with a discussion of the abolition in 1945 of the so-called *statare* system.<sup>25</sup> Lundberg emphasises the similarities between this system and the contemporary labour market, where precarious labour is becoming increasingly common: “Stataren hade varit utsatt, otrygg, på ett sätt som en vanlig arbetare inte nödvändigtvis var. [...] Idag kan vi se hur ett liknande system har skapats i och med att bemanningsföretagen vinner terräng på arbetsmarknaden” [The *statare* had been vulnerable and insecure, in a way that regular workers might not be. (...) Today we can see how a similar system has been created as temporary work agencies have gained ground in the labour market] (Lundberg, 2015, p. 9). A few pages later, the comparison continues:

En *statare* var i praktiken helt utlämnad åt sin patron. Osäkerheten var hans dagliga bröd. Hans anställningstrygghet var i det närmaste obefintlig. Ofta flyttade familjen. År efter år. Från plats till plats. Vi på Yarden flyttade istället från arbete till arbete. Alltid tog vi någon annans plats, någon annans arbete. (Lundberg, 2015, pp. 12–13)

[In practice, a *statare* was totally dependent on his squire. Insecurity was his daily bread. His employment security was virtually non-existent. The family often moved. Year after year. From one place to another. We at the Yard moved from job to job instead. We always took someone else’s place, someone else’s work.]

The protagonist in *Yarden* uses the term “[d]aglönare” [day labourer] to describe himself and his colleagues (Lundberg, 2009, p. 49). This term also appears in other works, including Arvidsdotter’s (2022, p. 40; emphasis added) *Händer att hålla i*, where it is emphasised that though it is usually used about historical, rather than contemporary, conditions, it has again become relevant: “vi är åter daglönare” [we are, *once again*, day labourers].

Sunvisson too points to similarities between the contemporary precariat and the working class a century ago. In an interview in a trade-union membership magazine, he states that today’s migrant workers are facing “samma kamp” [the same struggle] as the one fought by workers in Sweden a hundred years ago (Josefsson, 2021).

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<sup>25</sup> The *statare* were as class of estate workers that were hired on one-year contracts, paid mainly in kind and constituted the lowest stratum of the rural proletariat in Sweden.

Similar thoughts can be found in *Svarta bär*. There, the berry picker Alina discovers an abandoned mine in the forest, and on a plaque reads about how much ore it once produced. This makes her realise that workers form collectives and that she, too, belongs to one—that of “foreign berry pickers in Sweden”:

Blåbär var inte koppar, några tusen plockare från hela världen var inte tvåhundra gruvarbetare som levde ihop och siffrorna sa fortfarande inget om deras liv, men de sa något om att de ändå hörde ihop. De sa att om deras möda gick att summera, om än bara till den allra bedrägligaste av siffror, var den trots allt gemensam. (Sunvisson, 2021a, p. 96)

[Blueberries were not copper, a few thousand pickers from all over the world were not two hundred miners that lived together, and the figures did still not say anything about their lives, but they still said something about them belonging together. They said that if their toil could be summed up, if only into the most fraudulent figures, at the end of the day it was collective.]

In *Cykelbudet*, Teglund (2021a, p. 109) also makes comparisons between contemporary precarious work and the working conditions for workers a hundred years ago: “Jag pratar med pappa om arbetet som bud” [I talk to dad about working as a courier], the protagonist says, and then continues, “Vi ojar oss över att det kan vara så eländigt med arbetsvillkoren idag. Det är ju som för hundra år sedan” [We moan about today’s bad working conditions. It is like it was a century ago, isn’t it?]. In Bogdanska’s (2016, pp. 70–71) *Wage slaves*, contemporary precarious labour is also compared with working conditions in the past, when the protagonist compares her situation to that of a slave. However, more often the protagonist associates herself with the working class. For example, when she has been cheated on her pay after a stint selling vegan burgers at a city festival, she points out the irony that her bosses “make shitloads of money on ‘animal rights’ and don’t give a shit about workers’ rights” (English in the original), thereby explicitly self-identifying as a worker (Bogdanska, 2016, p. 21). She also emphasises her working-class background, by highlighting that she has no formal education and that her parents have been factory workers (Bogdanska, 2016, pp. 18, 125).

Viewing precarious working conditions as something that unites people from diverse backgrounds, sectors, and even historical periods can provide a strong foundation for the development of class consciousness. However, such consciousness is not solely

positive; it also has a negative dimension. Classes are often defined as much by their opposition to other groups as by what their members have in common. In Marxist theory, this antagonism is central: classes are constituted through their opposition to one another.

In Almström's *Svart arbete*, the so-called precariat is not only compared to the traditional working class but also to the higher classes in society. In particular, the novel often thematises conflicts between Danny and his friends and upper-class people. Danny's friend Etta has been dumped by her boyfriend, who has begun studying to become a medical doctor. His new girlfriend is a posh girl from a wealthy part of town (Almström, 2015, p. 14). To Danny and his friends, this is only natural. The girls you meet at med school are of course posh, they think, and those who study to become doctors can not very well date people who do menial jobs (Almström, 2015, p. 16). The relationship between rich and poor is also brought to the fore when Danny comments on some security guards, whose job it is to keep the addicts in the neighbourhood in place. They are hardly "villagrabbar" [boys who have grown up in grand detached houses], he thinks, but "folk som vi" [people like us] that have turned on "sina egna" [their own] (Almström, 2015, p. 57). Thus, even if *Svart arbete* might point to differences between those involved in precarious labour and the traditional working class—when the novel discusses antagonisms, it brings to the fore other class distinctions.

Something similar can be said about Hanna Petersson's comic *Pigan*. Its protagonist describes her employers as members of "överklassen" [the upper class] and jokingly calls her physically demanding work "proletär gympa" [a proletarian gym-session], thus associating herself with (perhaps an older incarnation of) the working class (Petersson, 2012, pp. 7, 9). The same opposition is presented in Fredholm's *Fint hemma*. Most of the homes that the protagonist cleans are big apartments or villas in posh neighbourhoods belonging to upper-class people with well-paid jobs, for example in IT or banking. Sometimes she explicitly describes them in class terms. For example, she says about one client that she keeps "en viss överklassig distans" [a certain distance, typical for the upper class] (Fredholm, 2005, p. 67) and states that another belongs to "en känd släkt inom överklassen" [a well-known upper-class family] (Fredholm, 2005, p. 166) and displays "alla yttre tecken på överklass" [all outward signs of being upper-class] (Fredholm, 2005, p. 71). Yet another client is

described as not being “född överklass” [born upper-class] but having climbed the social ladder (Fredholm, 2005, p. 75).

## Class and precarious labour

In David Ericsson’s *Taxfree*, the relationship between the so-called precariat and the working class is depicted in a manner typical of literature portraying precarious labour in contemporary Sweden. At the outset, the novel emphasises the differences between Swedish workers and migrants working under precarious conditions, with the former often displaying hostility toward the latter. For example, the Swedish truck drivers “retar sig på att [de utländska kollegorna] ockuperar lunchrummet nere i källaren dag och natt. Inte heller anses de tvätta sig överdrivet ofta, trots åkeriets dusch och de upptäcks med att värma kalops och koka korv i kaffebryggaren” [get annoyed with (their foreign colleagues) occupying the lunch room in the basement day and night. They are also not considered to be showering very often, despite having access to the company’s shower room, and they are caught heating casseroles and cooking sausages in the coffee machine] (Ericsson, 2004, p. 26).

The fact that this perspective is articulated by the all-knowing, extra-diegetic narrator—rather than being focalised through any particular character—suggests that all the Swedish workers in the novel, including the protagonist, Jack, share this view. When the company Jack works for begins hiring foreign drivers, he experiences a loss of status, which may explain why he is not very happy about foreign drivers coming to Sweden. The narrator’s account of this is focalised through Jack, who reflects on his situation and comes to the following conclusion: “Nu [...] tillhör han B-laget. Ingen kan ju, trots de svenska registreringsskyltarna, veta att han inte kommer från Uzbekistan eller Kosovo och har en lön som är färdig att vräka allt vad europeisk välfärd heter över ända” [Now, he belongs to the B-team. Despite his Swedish number plates, no-one can know that he is not from Uzbekistan or Kosovo, with a salary that risks destroying all that is known as European welfare] (Ericsson, 2004, p. 40).

Thus, *Taxfree* describes an antagonism between Swedish workers and migrants who work under (more) precarious conditions. However, in the description above of how Jack views low-wage migrant labour as a threat to the welfare of European workers, another perspective is hinted at. Because of the risk that precarious working conditions spread to other worker collectives, it is in all workers’ interest to fight

them. “Fattar du inte?” [Don’t you get it?], Jack asks a colleague: “Det gäller inte bara dom. Snart får du det likadant om det här fortsätter” [It is not just them. Soon you will experience the same thing, if this continues] (Ericsson, 2004, p. 28). And, in a discussion with his wife, Sanna—who questions his decision to try to do something against the deteriorating working conditions—Jack says that “det är allas frihet det handlar om” [it is everyone’s freedom that is at stake] (Ericsson, 2004, p. 159). In other words: what starts as a description of the precarious working conditions of others eventually becomes a story about how those conditions risk spilling over also to Swedish workers.

*Taxfree* ends with a reconciliation between Swedish and foreign workers. One late Friday afternoon, two Polish drivers come to a freight terminal. Since the working day is about to end, the Swedish workers are hesitant to help them unload their cargo:

– Dom vill hem, säger Jack.

– Och? säger Peter. Nu när gulasch-Stalin [den tidigare VD:n] har slutat så kan ju hans folk också fara åt helvete.

– Äh, lägg av. Vi sliter av skiten. Annars blir dom stående här hela helgen, säger Jack och nickar åt polacken som genast lyser upp. [...]

På mindre än femton minuter är hela styckegodslasset lossat. Under tiden har Laban visat de två [polska chaufförerna] var duschrum och kokplatta är. (Ericsson, 2004, p. 212)

[– They want to go home, Jack says.

And? Peter says. Now that Gulasch-Stalin (the former CEO) has left, his people can go to hell too.

– Come on. Let’s get the shit off of the trucks. If not, they will have to stay here the whole weekend, Jack says, and nods toward the polish driver, who immediately lightens up. (...)

In less than fifteen minutes all of the piece goods is offloaded. Meanwhile, Laban has showed the two (Polish drivers) where the shower and the hotplate are.]

Here, it becomes obvious that the Swedish drivers can display solidarity with their foreign colleagues. At the same time, however, there remains a hierarchy between the two groups. Early in the novel, Jack has argued for the need to help the foreigners:

“Vi lever i Sverige! Dom där stackarna måste få hjälp” (Ericsson, 2004, p. 28). This is not a call for solidarity between equals, but for the strong (the Swedes) helping the weak (the foreigners). This asymmetry has not been done away with in the novel’s final scene. Furthermore, the Swedish workers’ willingness to help seems to go hand in hand with the foreigners becoming more like them. Assisted by their Swedish colleagues, the foreigners change: instead of being dirty, and heating their food in the coffee machine (see above), they now take showers and use a hotplate.

Nevertheless, the novel highlight both the need for and the possibility of solidarity between the traditional Swedish working class and migrant workers working under (more) precarious conditions. Thus, *Taxfree* points to the possibilities of workers becoming a class for itself through political solidarity, even if they do not share a culture. And, since this solidarity is articulated through the labour movement, this class formation is described as an expansion of the working class.

This means that in *Taxfree*, like in several other works about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden, *solidarity* is given priority over *identity*. The relationship between the two approaches has been described by British writer Kenan Malik in the following way:

An important distinction historically has been that between the inward-looking “binding” politics of identity, and the outward-looking “bridging” politics of solidarity. The former mobilizes by emphasizing shared membership of a particular identity, be that gender, sexuality, race or nation. The politics of solidarity also stresses collective endeavour, but views commonality as emerging not from particular identities but out of a shared set of values and beliefs, and the struggles to win acceptance for those values and beliefs. (Malik, 2023, p. 184)

With the point of departure in a politics of solidarity, literature about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden offers a vision of the working class that includes the so-called precariat.

This perspective aligns with what U.S. writer Tamara Draut (2016, pp. 55–70) describes as *the new working class*. Draut emphasises how the composition of the working class in the USA has shifted in recent decades. The fact that more and more workers are employed in sectors such as food and retail or care means that the working class now “lacks the center of gravity” that manufacturing used to provide. Furthermore, today’s working class is increasingly made up of women and racialised

minorities. Most significantly, however, Draut argues that what defines the new working class is its exposure to labour-market precarity.

The fact that the depiction of the working class in literature about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden resembles the “new working-class” described by Draut means that is also similar to the one identified by Entin (2023, p. 8) in contemporary U.S. “labor narratives”, which, he argues,

reimagine the working class not as a discrete, stable entity, but rather as a tension-filled coming together of heterogeneous populations in which nascent and uneasy lines of class connection are produced through negotiation, conflict, and translation. These stories suggest that there is no a priori, pre-existing working-class identity waiting to be expressed, but rather a multiplication of working peoples and laboring conditions across global capitalism’s expanding horizon. These are not narratives in which tightly grounded class alliances are achieved despite or above racial, national, linguistic, and ethnic divisions, but tales in which borders become the very channels through which not-yet-fully-realized class affinities are imagined and tested. These narratives imagine possibilities for class formation and solidarity in a period when the abstract figure of the national citizen-worker, which organized both social policy and political resistance in the United States and across the Global North for much of the twentieth century, no longer prevails. [They] thus indicate that now more than ever class manifests as a matter of relation rather than identity, of crossing spatial and social boundaries.

## Writing for a class

For literature to contribute to the construction of class consciousness and class formation, it must reach those who are intended to become class-conscious and form a class. This has often been a challenge for working-class literature. For example, even during the heyday for proletarian literature in the 1930s in countries like the USA and the UK, it seldom reached any mass audience among workers. Several commentators have argued that this is a challenge also for literature about the so-called precariat. Lemke (2016, p. 19), for instance, claims in *Inequality, Poverty and Precarity in Contemporary American Culture* that reading about precarity “presupposes (in most cases) a bridging of the class divide, the symbolic encounter between the assumed middle-class reader/spectator and precarious subject/-protagonist”.

However, most cases are not all cases, and there are many examples of people working under precarious conditions both writing and reading literature about their experiences. As has been highlighted by literary scholar Luka Lei Zhang (2025, p. 357), in recent decades, migrant workers in several Asian countries—including China Singapore, Taiwan, Malaysia, South Korea, Indonesia and the Philippines—have self-organised writing communities, often using social media and communication apps. And, at least in China, migrant worker poetry has reached a mass audience among the migrant workers themselves, mainly through on-line platforms (see Xiaoyu, 2016).

In Sweden, working-class writers have traditionally managed to reach a mass readership within the working class. As noted in the introduction, during the nineteenth century, working-class literature was largely confined to the labour movement, where it was read aloud at rallies and demonstrations or published in labour newspapers. While this meant it reached workers, its circulation rarely extended beyond that group. In the twentieth century, however, working-class authors entered the commercial book market and gained recognition within national literature, thereby attracting readers from other social classes. At the same time, their works continued to circulate widely within the working class, particularly during the 1940s and 1950s. This dissemination occurred through the labour movement's literary infrastructure—especially the trade union press and the distribution of inexpensive books sold by workplace commissioners—as well as through public libraries and commercial publishers (Furuland and Svedjedal, 2006, pp. 217, 233–236, 468–515; Nilsson, 2006, pp. 75–77).

When it comes to literature about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden, there are good reasons to suspect that its readers are not mainly found in the so-called precariat. This has several reasons. The fact that few people identify with this group makes it difficult to address them in their capacity as workers with precarious positions on the labour market. Furthermore, that the precariat is not a class for itself means that it lacks organisations, including an infrastructure for the dissemination of literature. Also, its high degree of cultural and linguistic diversity adds to the difficulties.

In *Yarden*, the world of precarious labour is described as hostile to the kind of literature written by the protagonist, for example in a description of how he is

attacked by his team leader, Nordon, who drives him and his colleagues to their workplace:

– Kristian, jag har läst tusen böcker. Jag ska säga dig: svenska böcker är för bögar.

– Okej.

– Du skriver bögböcker. Eller hur?

Han skrattar. Bussen skrattar.

– Nej.

Det är en obehaglig stämning i bussen. Nordon skrattar själv. Han njuter. Han nämner ett par författarnamn. Ludlum. Sheldon. Någon bulgar.

– Vet du vilka det är?

– Nej.

– Det är för att du är en bögförfattare. Ludlum är fan i mig den bäste.

Alla passagerare i bussen nickar ivrigt. (Lundberg, 2009, pp. 114–115)

[– Kristian, I've read a thousand books. I'm telling you: Swedish books are for gays.

– OK.

– You write gay books. Don't you?

– No.

The atmosphere ni the bus is nasty. Nordon laughs. He enjoys himself. He mentions a few writers. Ludlum. Sheldon. Some Bulgarian.

– Do Lou know who they are?

– No.

– That's because you're a gay writer. Ludlum is the best, goddammit.

All the passengers in the bus nod eagerly.]

This scene casts doubts over the possibility that *Yarden* could be read by the workers it describes. However, the novel also contains another scene, which indicates that readers can be found everywhere. On his way to work, the protagonist passes a group of boozers. One of them turns out to be a childhood friend of his. And he has read the narrator's books—many of which describe their growing up in the working class. This makes the narrator puzzled:

– Skojar du? Har du läst mina böcker?

– Nej jag skämtar inte, varför skulle jag göra det?

– Jag blev bara en smula förvånad. [...]

- Trodde du inte att jag kunde läsa? [...] Dina böcker fanns på fängelsebiblioteket. I alla fall deckarna. De andra fick jag beställa. (Lundberg, 2009, p. 130)
- [– Are you kidding? Did you read my books?
- No, I'm not kidding. Why would I?
- I was just a bit surprised. (...)
- Didn't you think I could read? (...) They had your books in the prison library. At least the crime fiction. The others, I had to request.]

This scene puts the former one into perspective by showing that readers can be found everywhere. Also, the main storyline in *Yarden*—which describes the protagonist growing up in a working-class world that is hostile to literature, breaking away from this world and becoming an author and a critic, and then returning to the world of manual labour and creating literature about it—shows that those working under precarious conditions are in no way totally alienated from literature.

A very similar message is conveyed in Sunvisson's *Svarta bär*, in a scene describing how one of the berry pickers, Alina, finds out that another migrant worker, Oksana, listens to an audiobook while working—and not just any book, but a rather highbrow one: Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. This surprises Alina, who has considered herself to be much more cultured than Oksana: "Alina fick det inte alls att gå ihop. Oksana var inte en sån som läste böcker, för böcker krävde djupa tankar och såna var det bara hon själv som hade i den här gruppen" [Alina could not make sense of it. Oksana was not the kind who read books, for that required deep thought, and she was the only one in the group who thought such thoughts] (Sunvisson, 2021a, p. 112). This scene warns us against assuming that those who work under precarious conditions do not read literature. And so does a scene in *Svart arbete*, in which it is revealed that one of the characters—the drug addict Nisse Nubb—has once been an avid reader (he is the only person the protagonist knows who has read Tolstoy's *War and Peace*), and that he, after having become sober, starts reading again—in particular novels by British working-class writer Alan Sillitoe (Almström, 2009, pp. 208–210). Thus, several literary works portraying precarious labour in contemporary Sweden warn their readers against jumping to conclusions regarding who reads what.

As Rita Felski (2021, p. 112) points out in an article about literature and class, "the passage of words through the world" is not "rigidly prescribed by class divisions":

“books can escape their containers, find unanticipated audiences, and sometimes move across demographic divides”. She gives the example of French working-class writer Édouard Louis’s introduction to a new edition of philosopher Didier Eribon’s autobiographical work *Retour à Reims*, where he “recalls his experience of reading it as a queer, working-class youth. The effect was electrifying; he felt he was reading the story of his own life. Looking back, he realizes that this perception was askew, given that he still spoke to his family, did not live in Paris, was not an intellectual, and so on” (Felski, 2021, p. 112). In other words, Louis read Éribon’s book about the French working class while still being part of it.

Besides avoiding jumping to conclusions regarding who reads what, it is also important to remember that an artwork—as Felski (2020, p. 78) points out—“cannot act by itself; it needs allies, supporters, helpers”. When working-class literature gained a mass readership in the Swedish working class—thereby achieving the ability to contribute to class consciousness and class formation—it was assisted by a labour movement that promoted and disseminated it. Of course, if it were to receive the same support, literature about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden could also find readers in the so-called precariat.

Even if such support is rare, it does exist. For example, *Något har hänt*, published by a trade union, has been translated into English as well as the primary native languages of the workers whose experiences it portrays—Russian, Ukrainian, and Spanish—and made freely available online. Several of the literary works analysed in this book have also appeared in labour-movement periodicals. *Yarden* by Lundberg, *På äventyr i senkapitalismen* by Tommy Sundvall, and *Pigan* by Petersson were all published in *Arbetaren* [The Worker], a journal issued by the syndicalist trade union SAC. Similarly, Sunvisson’s *Svenska palmen* was serialized in the left-wing newspaper *Dagens ETC* [Today’s ETC], which has socialist and green affiliations.

Further examples include Bogdanska’s *Wage slaves*, which has been translated into English, Spanish, French, Italian, and Norwegian. The original fanzine version was entirely in English. Its format as a comic—with relatively little text—also makes it accessible to readers with limited literacy or proficiency in Swedish. Likewise, Alvarez’s trilingual *Arbetare utan papper* is designed to reach multilingual audiences. In addition, many works on precarious labour in contemporary Sweden are available as audiobooks. *Yarden* has also been adapted into both a feature film and a theatre production.

In addition to keeping these things in mind, it is also important not to exaggerate the difficulties involved in disseminating literature about precarious labour to the worker collectives it depicts. The vast majority of those working under precarious conditions in contemporary Sweden speak and read Swedish. Furthermore, they are generally much better educated than were the workers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that became a mass audience for working-class literature in Sweden. Many of them also belong to organisations—including unions—through which literature *could* be disseminated.

Thus, much contemporary Swedish literature about precarious labour has great *potential* to reach readers among the workers it depicts. Take, for example, Ericsson's *Taxfree*. It belongs to a decidedly popular genre: novel with thriller-features. It is published by one of Sweden's leading publishers, which has a good distribution network. Furthermore, Ericsson is active in the labour movement, and since 1996 he has been writing chronicles in *Transportarbeten* [The Transport Worker]—a magazine published by the union organising the workers described in *Taxfree*.

The potential for literature to contribute to struggles against labour-market precarity does not depend solely on its ability to reach readers within the so-called precariat. This is particularly true for the works analysed in *Writing Class*, many of which argue that those working under precarious conditions in contemporary Sweden share economic and political interests with both the traditional working class and segments of the middle class. This perspective suggests that literature aiming to foster class consciousness must reach beyond the precariat itself.

This need to engage a broader audience is emphasised by Lemke (2016), who argues that literature about precarity can “instigate an act of communication” between the precariat and middle-class readers, thereby enabling “new forms of class alignment.” As she writes:

Since precarity has begun creeping into the comfortable class, the opposition between middle-class reader/spectator and precarious subject/protagonist begins to unravel, allowing readers to approach issues they might otherwise shy away from. New forms of class alignment can be tested through acts of reading or watching those who are (slightly) worse off than oneself. (Lemke, 2016, pp. 19-20)

Lemke's analysis highlights how literature can serve as a bridge between class fractions, fostering empathy and political awareness. This bridging function is not limited to middle-class readers. As German journalist and author Christian Baron emphasizes in *Proleten Pöbel Parasiten* [Proles Rabble Parasites] (2016), literature can also reconnect the fragmented segments of the working class. Drawing on his own experience of growing up in a poor and dysfunctional working-class family, Baron critiques the alienation between the "Unterschicht" [underclass]—a category that includes the precariat—and the more stable, unionized strata of the working class. He writes:

Weil die Mittel- und die Unterschicht, diese beide Teile der Arbeiterklasse, sich in den vergangenen Jahrzehnten so weit voneinander entfernt haben, braucht es Vermittler, die den "einfachen Leuten" zeigen, dass sie gar nicht so schlimm sind, diese Akademiker; und die vor allem den Studierenden klar machen, wie viel ihnen mehr Verständnis für "die da unten" einbringen kann.

Durch ein Buch allein, da mache ich mir gar nichts vor, kann idealerweise nur der zweite Weg gelingen. (Baron, 2016, p. 11)

[Because the middle and lower classes, these two sections of the working class, have grown so far apart in recent decades, there is a need for mediators who can show the "ordinary people" that they are not so bad, those academics; and who can make it clear, especially to the learned, how much a little more understanding for "those down there" can bring them.

I'm not fooling myself. A book can, ideally, only achieve the second of these tasks.]

Many literary works about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden have the potential to function as "mediators" between class fractions, by promoting "a little more understanding" for the so-called precariat among readers who do not themselves belong to it.

The value of this becomes clear if one realises that class formation is usually a process that involves assistance from the outside. The emergence of the working class as a class for itself in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was assisted by intellectuals and agitators of various backgrounds who agitated among workers (Marx and Branting are two examples). Therefore, reaching those who do not themselves belong to the so-called precariat, but can promote class consciousness within it, could be an

important goal for literature that wants to contribute to such consciousness. In the same direction points the fact that the promotion of class consciousness in the so-called precariat is not the only way in which literature about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden can contribute to struggles against labour precarity. This will be discussed in the next chapter.

### 3. How to Fight Precarious Labour

The previous chapter argued that literature can contribute to struggles against precarious labour by promoting class consciousness among those working under precarious conditions. However, as highlighted both in the introduction and toward the end of Chapter Two, *Writing Class* is premised on the idea that literature's role in such struggles is not limited to a single approach. This chapter explores the various ways in which literature about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden seeks to intervene in, or can be mobilized for, struggles against labour-market precarity. Some of these interventions are closely tied to processes of class formation, while others point toward different forms of political or social engagement.

#### Recognition

In many works about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden, the criticism of such labour can be understood as a critique of an injustice that has received considerable attention from both scholars and political activists in recent decades—namely that of *non-* or *misrecognition* (see Taylor, 1995; Fraser, 1997; Fraser, 2000; Fraser and Honneth, 2003; Honneth, 2005). The former concept signifies a lack of recognition (being made invisible in social, political, or cultural contexts), whereas the latter refers to disrespectful recognition (stereotypical or demeaning portrayals).

One example of this theme appears in Kristian Lundberg's *Yarden*, where the protagonist argues that his precarious position in the labour market results in others failing to recognise his humanity (Lundberg, 2009, p. 50). A similar sentiment is expressed by a migrant worker in one of the testimony-poems in Emil Boss's *Kompression*, who claims that in Sweden, human rights apply only to Swedes, thereby suggesting that he is not regarded as fully human (Boss, 2023b, p. 97). In another poem from the same collection, a migrant worker states: "Vi blev behandlade som / hundar, inte som människor" [We were treated like / dogs, not like humans] (Boss, 2023b, p. 181). This critique of non- or misrecognition is also present in Pelle

Sunvisson's *Svarta bär*, where Alina, one of the berry pickers, reflects on what she has read about the treatment of migrant workers in Sweden:

– När jag läste om den där litauiska bärplockaren som blev skjuten och om den där thailändska bärplockaren som hängde sig för att de lurat honom på lönen så tänkte jag att de [svenskarna] inte ser det vi ser. De ser liksom allt uppifrån och precis som människor blir till myror när man ser på dem från trettionde våningen så är vi små jävla prickar för dem. Att däruppifrån säga att alla människor är lika mycket värda är lätt. Det kostar inget och förändrar inget och det de i själva verket säger är att vi måste lära oss att se världen så som de ser den. Om vi här nerifrån någon gång säger att alla är lika mycket värdas menar vi alltid att alla *borde vara* lika mycket värda. Vi säger det som en protest mot deras skitsnack, mot att de knallar våra tankar. (Sunvisson, 2021a, p. 146)

[– When I read about that Lithuanian berry picker who was shot and about that Thai berry picker who hanged himself because they cheated him out of his wages, I thought that they [Swedes] don't see what we see. They kind of see everything from above and just like people turn into ants when you look at them from the thirtieth floor, we are little fucking dots to them. To say from the top that all people are equally valuable is easy. It costs nothing and changes nothing and what they are really saying is that we must learn to see the world as they see it. If we ever say that everyone is worth the same, we always mean that everyone *should be* worth the same. We say it as a protest against their bullshit, against them screwing our thoughts.]

Misrecognition is also a motif in Daria Bogdanska's *Wage slaves*. It is expressed, for example, in the following scene, where the protagonist complains about being “genomskinlig” [invisible] to the guests in the restaurant where she is waiting tables:



Excerpt from Daria Bogdanska's *Wage slaves*.

Something similar is described in Anders Teglund's *Cykelbudet*, where the protagonist realises that working as a bicycle courier means being invisible to others, even if one is dressed in bright pink clothes:

Jag har haft en fåfång oro inför att cykla runt i den här klädseln. Hur synlig är man inte? Lyser i rosa med den stora kubformade väskan. Där cyklar losern, liksom. Jag har varit väldigt upptagen av denna skam. Men nu inser jag att det är tvärtom. När jag cyklar i dessa kläder och möter vanligt folk på gatorna är det som att de inte ser mig. (Teglund, 2021a, pp. 65–66)

[I have had a vain concern about cycling round in this outfit. Just how visible can a person be? Glowing pink clothes and a large cube-shaped bag. There goes the loser on his bike, like. I have been consumed by this feeling of shame. But now I realise that it is the other way around. When I am cycling in these clothes and meet ordinary people in the streets, it is like they do not see me]

In addition to this, occasionally customers he delivers food to meet him at the door in their underwear. When reflecting on this, he interprets it as a denial of his dignity, or even his humanity:

Var är värdigheten? Det är som att de manifesterar att de inte förväntar sig att möta en människa i dörren. I alla fall inte en medmänniska. [...] Det är en dubbel förnedring att vara springpojke till någon som inte aktivt ser en som människa. (Teglund, 2021a, pp. 78–79)

[Where is the dignity? It is as if they make it clear that they do not expect to meet a human being when opening the door. At least not a fellow human being. (...) It is doubly humiliating to be an errand boy to someone who does not actively view you as a human being.]

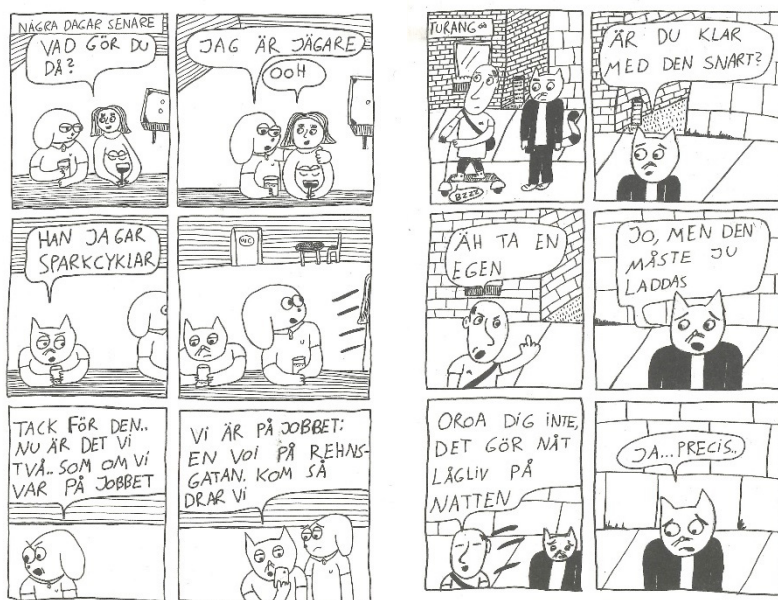
Furthermore, in an interview, Teglund has stated that one of his aims with *Cykelbudet* was to show readers that bicycle couriers are human beings (Hansson, 2024, p. 13).

Yet another example of nonrecognition can be found in Hanna Petersson's *Pigan*. There, the protagonist realises that her working as a domestic cleaner teaches the children in families whose homes she cleans that she is inferior to their parents:



Excerpt from Hanna Petersson's *Pigan*. The protagonist is upset "because this brat now knows that there is a difference between her mother and me". The "brat" asks her: "Is it fun to clean?". Her answer is "No".

In Tommy Sundvall's comic *På äventyr i senkapitalismen*, gig work is associated with low social status. One of the characters is trying to pick up a girl in a bar, but when she finds out that his job is to charge electric scooters for a platform company, she walks away (Sundvall, 2021, p. 22). Immediately afterwards his friend is told by a stranger that charging scooters is something that is done by "nåt lågliv på natten" [some lowlife at night] (Sundvall, 2021, p. 23):



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An excerpt from Tommy Sundvall's *På äventyr i senkapitalismen*, showing that gig work has low social status.

This association of precarious labour with low social status—which constitutes a kind of misrecognition—is also described in Rolf Almström's *Svart arbete*, where the protagonist defines himself and his friends in opposition to “alla de med pengarna och statusen och framgången och makten” [all those with the money and the status and the success and the power] (Almström, 2015, p. 173).

By criticising non- or misrecognition—and thereby articulating, at least implicitly, demands for recognition—authors writing about precarious labour in contemporary

Sweden intervene in struggles against that injustice. As Rita Felski (2021, p. 102) has pointed out, literature has the capacity not only to critique non- or misrecognition, but also to performatively *enact* claims for recognition. “Via a bid for understanding from readers”, she argues, “a writer may seek an acknowledgement that is being withheld elsewhere. An aesthetic tie can compensate for an absent social tie—or call it into being” (Felski, 2021, p. 102). In fact, Felski (2021, pp. 102, 104) claims that the mere fact that something or someone is represented in literature can counter non- or misrecognition, since literary representation means that what is represented becomes “legitimated as worthy of wider attention—as counting”. That this is something that at least one of the authors writing about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden wants to do is indicated in the foreword to Almström’s (2015, p. 9) *Svart arbete*, where the work is described as a “minnesmärke” [memorial] to the workers it describes.

Demands for recognition are sometimes defined in opposition to (working-) class politics, which is instead associated with claims for economic *redistribution* (see e.g. Michaels, 2006). However, many theorists argue that class politics entails demands for recognition. As has already been pointed out, Guy Standing (2014a, p. 105) claims that the precariat’s transformation into a class for itself—and, thus, its ability to fight for its class interests—presupposes the “recognition” that it constitutes “a distinctive social group” that deserves respect from others. Philosopher Axel Honneth has even argued that the formation of all political collectives—including classes—originates in struggles against non- or misrecognition. The “experience of disrespect”, he writes in *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, “represents the affective source of knowledge for social resistance and collective uprisings” (Honneth, 2005, p. 143). Therefore, “the emergence of social movements”—including the labour movement—hinges on “the existence of a shared semantics that enables personal experiences of disappointment [i.e. experiences of non- or misrecognition] to be interpreted as something affecting not just the individual himself or herself but also a circle of many other subjects” (Honneth, 2005, pp. 163–164).

However, non- or misrecognition can be understood to be not only an obstacle to class formation, but also a class injustice in itself. According to Honneth, misrecognition is at the heart of the injustices suffered by the working class, including the economic injustices usually conceptualised as injustices of distribution.

In his view, the aim of the labour movement's "distribution struggles under capitalism" is to throw "the established evaluative models into question" by fighting for "greater esteem" for workers' "social contributions, and thereby for economic redistribution" (Fraser and Honneth, 2003, p. 154). This has been criticised by philosopher Nancy Fraser, who accuses Honneth of "recognition monism" and argues that demands for recognition should be viewed (analytically) as *one specific aspect* of the struggle against class injustice (Fraser and Honneth, 2003, pp. 48–69), namely as protests against the class injustice of status subordination (Fraser and Honneth, 2003, p. 29), which is sometimes referred to as "classism" (Kemper and Weinbach, 2017).

Honneth (2005, p. 1) stresses that the struggle for recognition is "morally motivated". Despite being critical of his theory about recognition, Fraser would probably agree with this claim, since she argues that status subordination constitutes a "violation of justice" and that struggles against it aim to achieve the moral value of "participatory parity" (Fraser, 2000). Moral critique of class injustice is usually associated with early socialist thought, including the theories of the young Marx. Initially, Honneth (2005, p. 147) writes, Marx conceived of class struggle "not as a strategic battle over the acquisition of material goods or instruments of power but rather as a moral conflict in which what is at issue is the 'emancipation' of labour". Later, however, Marx moved in another theoretical direction and came to understand class struggle in terms of an "antagonism between economic interests" (Honneth, 2005, p. 149). This also became the dominant understanding of class politics within the (Marxist/socialist) labour movement.

The fact that authors writing about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden articulate demands for recognition of workers indicates that they understand class politics in moral terms. However, there are also—as has already been discussed in Chapter Two—examples of them describing class conflicts in terms of economic interests. In the following section this will be explored in greater detail.

## **The political economy of precarious labour**

A class for itself is a class that is not only conscious of its interests but also acts politically to defend them. Therefore, the analysis of economic interests and the development of political strategies is a fundamental aspect of class formation. Literary representations of precarious labour can contribute to this. One way of

doing so is, quite simply, to propose political actions. Another goes through what Marxist literary scholar Fredric Jameson (1988) calls *cognitive mapping*. By describing and analysing what one could call the political economy of precarious labour—its connections to larger political and economic contexts—literature can provide input to the development of strategies for fighting labour-market precarity, thereby fostering class consciousness and supporting class formation.

Almström's *Svart arbete* opens with a short parable—"Mäster Palms päronträd" [Master Palm's Pear Tree]—which is not part of the novel's main storyline, and not narrated by its main narrator, Danny, but by an anonymous (heterodiegetic) one. The pear tree in the parable is the one from which the socialist agitator August Palm in 1882 held a famous speech. (The reason he gave his speech from a tree was that nobody would let him rent an indoor venue for a political meeting.) A century later, the city of Malmö, which was where Palm's speech was given, decided to build a new city hall. The location chosen was where the pear tree stood. Since the tree was considered historically significant, it was decided that the city hall should be built around it. However, the contractor chose to cut it down. Although he had to pay a fee for doing so, he regarded it as a worthwhile decision, as it simplified the construction process. The parable ends as follows: "Allt som återstår är alltså ett veck i byggnaden. Och i det vecket, tomrummet efter mäster Palms päronträd, bor den här berättelsen" [All that remains is, thus, a fold in the building. And in that fold, the void left by Master Palm's pear tree, this story lives] (Almström, 2015).<sup>26</sup>

What, then, does this parable mean? What does the void left by Master Palm's pear tree symbolise? One possible answer is given in a scene in *Svart arbete* describing Danny attending a course at the employment agency. There, a lecturer delivers the following message to the unemployed workers: "Ni måste förstå att det alltid finns någon som kan göra det billigare nån annanstans, allt det där med fackföreningar och att staten ska gripa in och rädda jobben ... jag menar all sån skit är slut, borta, överspelad" [You have to understand that there is always someone who can make it cheaper somewhere else—all that stuff with unions and the state intervening and saving jobs ... I mean, all that shit is over, gone, outplayed] (Almström, 2015, p. 111). Here, the world in which the story told in *Svart arbete* is set is described as one

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<sup>26</sup> The parable is not historically accurate. The pear tree stood in what is now a courtyard in The City Hall, and it was not cut down by the building contractors.

in which the social-democratic welfare state—during which unions and state interventions in the economy secured stable jobs for workers—has collapsed and been replaced by globalised and neoliberal capitalism in which Swedish workers compete with workers all over the world. August Palm was a pioneer in the labour movement that built the welfare state. The void left when his pear tree was cut down could thus symbolise the absence of that state.

*Svart arbete* is not the only work in which contemporary precarious labour is contrasted with the welfare-state era. In *Rent åt helvete*, Elinor Torp argues—as discussed in Chapter One—that Sweden was once a “föregångsland” [leading country], where strong unions and government institutions guaranteed labour rights. The clearest example of this appears in the following passage, which is written in the historical present:

Ingen annanstans i världen har arbetande människor det bättre. Här finns en modell som är vida känd där arbetsmarknadens parter förhandlar och kommer överens. Här finns en lag som ska skydda arbetskraften och en myndighet som ska utöva tillsyn så att inte människor skadas eller dör. Här finns facket på ena sidan och arbetsgivarna på den andra.

Den svenska modellen. (Torp, 2023, p. 23)

[Nowhere else in the world are working people better off. Here, there is a widely known model where the social partners on the labour market negotiate and come to agreements. Here, there is a law to protect the workforce and an authority to exercise supervision so that people are not injured or killed. Here there is the union on one side and the employers on the other.

The Swedish model.]

However, in recent years, Torp argues, a parallel Sweden has emerged—a Sweden beyond the Swedish model, characterised by precarious working conditions (Torp, 2023, p. 23). This contrasting of contemporary labour-market precarity with the conditions during the era of the welfare state is in accordance with what one could call the standard narrative about precarious labour in the Western world. According to this narrative—the clearest version of which may be found in Standing’s *The Precariat*—the rise of precarious labour is the result of a series of economic and political transformations since the 1970s associated with concepts such as

neoliberalism, globalisation, and flexibilization, which mark the end of the era of welfare-state capitalism and the beginning of the era of globalised neoliberal capitalism.

One way in which the representation of precarious labour in contemporary Swedish literature deviates from the standard narrative described above is that it stresses that the passage from welfare-state to globalised neoliberal capitalism is a result of political decisions. One example of this can be found in a conversation between the protagonist, Danny, and his mother in Almström's (2015, p. 165) *Svart arbete*: "Dom river ner alltsamman nu, mossan ... allt det där som ni och dom före er byggt upp ... det ska väck" [They are tearing it all down now, mum ... all the stuff that you guys and those before you built up ... it is gone], Danny says. What is being torn down is the welfare state, and those tearing it down are the government that came into power after the 1991 national elections in Sweden, when the Social Democrats lost power (for only the second time since 1932) to an alliance of non-socialist parties (Almström, 2015, pp. 175, 187). This new government implemented a number of neoliberal policies; in particular, it lowered taxes, dismantled welfare-state institutions and liberalised the labour market.

In *Rent åt helvete*, Torp highlights a series of political decisions made after the 2006 national election, when the Social Democrats again lost power, and a coalition of non-socialist parties formed a government which remained in power until 2014. Torp (2023, p. 33) points out that after only ten days, this new government decided to close down *Arbetslivsinstitutet*—a national research institute focusing on work-life issues, with a special focus on questions regarding health and safety—and that soon thereafter it also cut the funding for the Swedish Work Environment Authority by 50%, which resulted in a radical decrease in its ability to supervise compliance with the occupational health legislation. She also points to a series of economic liberalisations, including changes to the regulations of labour migration. These decisions, she argues, paved the way for the so-called "skuggsamhället" [shadow society] (Torp, 2023, p. 33), a parallel society in which work-life precarity is the norm.

Another quite common feature of the descriptions of the rise of precarious labour in contemporary Swedish literature—besides the insistence that it is a result of political decisions—is an insistence that it represents a return to older conditions. In Chapter Two, this was interpreted as an attempt to deconstruct the opposition between the

precariat and the working class. However, it also connects the rise of precarious labour to the period before the labour movement's breakthrough and the emergence of the social-democratic welfare state. As has already been pointed out, Fredholm's *Fint hemma* contains excerpts from Ester Blenda Nordström's reportage *En piga bland pigor*, which details the author's experiences of working undercover as a maid on a farm in the early twentieth century. In her foreword, Fredholm (2005, p. 6) states that this is intended to make visible similarities between her experiences and those made by Nordström almost a century earlier: "När jag läser hennes texter och jämför våra erfarenheter känns det som ett stillastående samhälle i många avseenden" [When I read her texts and compare our experiences, it feels like a still-standing society, in many respects]. She also explains that her use of the old-fashioned word "piga" [maid] can be justified by the return of old-fashioned labour-market conditions: "Det är ett ord som inte hör hemma i modern svenska men jag upptäckte att verkligheten motiverar ordets existens och fyller det med innehåll än idag" [It is a word that has no place in modern Swedish, but I discovered that reality cries out its existence and fills it with meaning still today] (Fredholm, 2005, p. 6).

The description of increasing labour precarity as a return to pre-welfare-state conditions clashes with the version of the narrative about the rise of precarious labour told by Standing, in whose view the emergence of the so-called precariat represents a qualitatively *new* phase in the history of capitalism. It does, however, harmonise with another, competing idea, namely that the rise of precarious labour is indicative of a restoration of what could be called capitalist normality, through a dismantling of welfare-state institutions and labour rights. For example, Marxist sociologist Vivek Chibber (2022, p. 38; emphasis added) has argued that a "baseline level of insecurity is forced onto workers by capitalism, all the time" and that what has happened in the recent past is that "institutions that had *temporarily* acted to decrease that insecurity" have been "taken apart". A similar point is made by Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter. "If we look at capitalism in a wider historical and geographical scope", they argue, "it is precarity that is the norm and not Fordist economic organization" (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008, p. 54). Yet another version of the same argument is put forward by sociologist Jan Breman and historian Marcel van der Linden, who underline that, starting in the early twentieth century, "the assertion and consolidation of labour rights, and the growth of a public sector offering social security arrangements" have offered solutions to the poverty and bad living and working conditions brought about by the industrial revolution (Breman and van der

Linden, 2014, p. 921). In the final quarter of the twentieth century, however, the tide of progress began to turn. An important aspect of this was an informalisation of the labour market, a “diminution of steady jobs, wage payment based on quantity and quality rather than time worked, and promotion of self-employment and self-provision”, leading to a “precarization of waged work (understood as workers becoming dependent on circumstances beyond their control, uncertain, contingent, unstable, insecure)” (Breman and van der Linden, 2014, pp. 921–924).

The contrasting of contemporary precarious labour with the labour-market conditions during the welfare-state era, and the insistence that the rise of labour precarity is a result of conscious political decisions that have dismantled welfare-state institutions and weakened workers’ rights and power in the labour market can be interpreted as a plaidoyer for restoring these institutions and re-claiming these rights. This plaidoyer is mainly implicit in literature about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden, which offers few concrete political suggestions. However, when it comes to political *methods* for fighting labour-market precarity, several works are quite explicit. In particular, several of them argue that it is through labour-movement politics—especially unionisation—that precarisation should be fought.

## Workers’ struggle

When the relationship between the so-called precariat and the traditional working class is discussed, many commentators highlight that the latter often had strong unions. Furthermore, it is often argued that it is very hard to unionise those who work under precarious conditions. These ideas are discussed in literature portraying precarious labour in contemporary Sweden.

In Lundberg’s (2009, p. 53) *Yarden*, the protagonist highlights the fact that short-term contracts turn workers into competitors for work opportunities and thereby hinder worker solidarity: “Kan man då vara solidarisk?” [Is solidarity possible, then?] he asks himself, and then continues: “Det står alltid en ny person bakom den som vägrar böja sig, bocka sig” [There’s always someone new waiting in line behind the one who refuses to bend, to bow down]. Lack of solidarity is, of course, an obstacle to unionising. And so is the fact that it is easy for employers to let go of workers with temporary contracts. This is underlined by Birk Andersson (2023, p. 10) in the poetry collection *Natt* [Night]:

om ni  
går till facket  
får ni sparken  
om ni  
strejkar  
får ni sparken  
ni är  
ett sms  
från att få sparken

[if you  
go to the union  
you will be fired  
if you  
go on strike  
you will be fired.  
you are  
one text message  
from being fired]

Still, the main solution to the problem of precarious labour proposed in contemporary Swedish literature is unionisation. However, even works that explicitly argue for this solution generally also highlight and discuss the difficulties that unions face when trying to address labour-market precarity.

When the protagonist in *Yarden* reflects on his experiences of temporary work, he argues that they have taught him that worker solidarity can emerge against all odds: “Vi är fattiga. Vi nere på Yarden. Vi blir vänner med varandra. Vi trivs i varandras sällskap. Om det inte varit för Yarden skulle våra vägar aldrig ha korsats. Det är också här jag på allvar lärt mig om solidaritet” [We are poor. We, down at The Yard. We become friends with each other. We enjoy each other’s company. If it had not been for The Yard, our paths would never have crossed. This is also where I learned, for real, about solidarity] (Lundberg, 2009, p. 75). However, learning about solidarity does not turn the protagonist into a union activist. In fact, he explicitly doubts that unions can help him and other workers with temporary contracts. Reflecting on the differences between his current working conditions and those he experienced when

last working in the harbour, twenty years earlier, he highlights that in those days he was a member of a “stridbar fackförening” [belligerent union] (Lundberg, 2009, p. 65). However, that union does not represent temporary workers, who are instead organised in another, weaker union. Consequently, like most of his colleagues, the protagonist is not a union member. It is not “lönt” [worthwhile], he says (Lundberg, 2009, p. 65). The only interaction with the union representing temporary workers that the protagonist describes also suggests that it is rather toothless. A safety officer visits his workplace and demands an immediate stop to the work being carried out by the temps, as it is deemed unsafe. However, since they have already completed the task, the intervention is pointless (Lundberg, 2009, p. 46).

In Teglund’s *Cykelbudet* the idea of unionising is introduced quite early, in a conversation between the protagonist and another courier (whom he refers to as “mopedkillen” [moped guy], because they have not yet been introduced):

- De behandlar oss som skräp, säger mopedkillen. Vi borde organisera oss.
- Ja, det borde vi, svarar jag.
- Det pågår facklig organisering i många länder. I Kanada, i Frankrike, vi måste göra något i Sverige också. (Teglund, 2021a, p. 104)

- [– They treat us like rubbish, says moped guy. We should get organised.
- Yes, we should, I answer.
- There is unionising going on in many countries. In Canada, in France, we have to do something in Sweden too.]

Soon the protagonist gets involved in union work. And this work is successful: the transport workers’ union eventually signs a collective bargaining agreement with the food delivery company. But even if *Cykelbudet* tells a success story about unionising it also highlights and reflects on several problems that unions face when trying to organise gig workers. Some of these problems are related to the fact that many of the gig workers are migrants. For example, in a discussion between the protagonist and his supervisor, the latter argues that “om tillräckligt många går med i facket skulle företaget tvingas till att lyssna” [if enough people joined the union, then the company would be forced to listen] (Teglund, 2021a, p. 236). But he also claims that the fact that many of the couriers are migrants is a problem, since this means that they often do not know what a union is and what it can do for them (Teglund,

2021a, p. 236, see also p. 254). Furthermore, immediately after arguing that the couriers should unionise, “moped guy”—whose name is Mallik—states that “organiseringen måste göras av en svensk” [the organising must be done by a Swede] since the migrants are “alldeles för utsatta” [far too vulnerable] in the labour market; they simply cannot afford to lose their jobs (Teglund, 2021a, p. 104, see also p. 128).

The risk of losing one’s job is not stopping only foreigners from getting involved in union activities. One courier who is also union organiser (and an immigrant) gives the protagonist “flera exempel på bud som har blivit av med jobbet efter att ha engagerat sig fackligt” [several examples of couriers who have lost their jobs after becoming involved in union activities] (Teglund, 2021a, p. 284). In particular, he discusses a colleague by the name of Nils—which is a very Swedish name—who has been sacked because of his critique of bad working conditions (Teglund, 2021a, pp. 284–285). Thus, the gig workers’ lack of employment security makes union work problematic for both native Swedes and immigrants, even if the consequences of losing one’s job might be greater for the latter category.

These problems are highlighted also in *Prekariatet*, where one of the characters states the following about the (im-) possibility of unionising (foreign) construction workers: “Facket försöker organisera folk men dom har problem med språkskillnader, fattigdom, auktoritetsrädsla—man är i en sån beroendeställning till sin arbetsgivare så situationen känns omöjlig att förändra, man kan inte tänka sig något annat” [The union tries to organise people but they have problems with language differences, poverty, fear of authority—you are so dependent on your employer that the situation feels impossible to change, you cannot imagine anything else] (Helm and Ohly, 2019, p. 34).

Another thing that is presented as an obstacle to unionising is that gig workers do not make up stable collectives. For example, they usually carry out their work individually, rather than in teams. This is highlighted by the protagonist in *Cykelbudet* when he reflects on who his colleagues are: “Hur många kollegor har jag?” [How many colleagues do I have?], he asks himself, and then continues: “Vi jobbar knappast tillsammans även om jag ser dem över allt” [We hardly work together, even if I see them everywhere] (Teglund, 2021a, p. 96). Later, he explicitly points to this being a problem for unionising: “Den inledande meningen i Transports välkomstbrev löd: ‘All facklig organisering börjar i fikarummet.’ Men om det inte finns något fikarum?” [The first sentence in the welcome letter from the transport

workers' union read: "All union organising begins in the coffee room." But what if there is no coffee room?] (Teglund, 2021a, p. 325).

In a video meeting with a politician who shows interest in questions about labour rights, the protagonist also points out that the very fact that temporary work is temporary—in combination with its low status—makes unionising difficult:

Jobbet har så låg status att ingen riktigt vill stå för det. För att man ska orka engagera sig krävs att man identifierar sig med sitt yrke. Och buden kommer aldrig att uppnå samma yrkesstolthet som exempelvis hamnarbetare eller metallare. De flesta har något annat i sikte, detta är bara en tillfällig anhalt tills deras egentliga karriär ska ta fart. Så även om många är helt beroende av budjobbet har facket svårt att fånga upp dem. (Teglund, 2021a, pp. 330–331, see also p. 354)

[The job has such low status that nobody really wants to stand up for it. In order to find the energy necessary for engagement you must identify with your work. And, the couriers will never have the same pride in their profession as, for example, dockworkers or metalworkers. Most of them have something else in their sights, this is just a temporary thing before their real career takes off. So even if many are totally dependent on the job as a courier, it is hard for the union to catch hold of them.]

This description applies also to the protagonist himself, who hesitates to get involved in union work because he knows that he will only work as a courier for a limited time (Teglund, 2021a, p. 173). Nevertheless, eventually he does become a union organiser. And, as has already been discussed, he thereby contributes to the establishment of a collective bargaining agreement which, among other things, gives the couriers economic compensation for using private equipment at work as well as better pension rights and insurance (Teglund, 2021a, p. 342).

Thus, in *Cykelbudet*, unions are described—all in all—as a powerful weapon against labour-market precarity. But the novel also stresses that unionising might not be enough. During the video meeting described above, the politician asks the couriers if they think that unionising can fix the problems they are experiencing. The protagonist says that he is "lite skeptisk" [somewhat sceptical] and points to the need also for legislation: "Det är ett problem att lagen är för tillåtande för företagen. Anställningsvillkoren måste regleras hårdare från statligt håll" [There's the problem

that the law is too favourable to the company. The terms of employment need to be regulated more strictly at state level] (Teglund, 2021a, pp. 330–331).

In Fredholm's *Fint hemma*, unions are not discussed much, which is hardly surprising, given that the work describes work in the unregulated labour market. In fact, the only time that unions are mentioned is when Fredholm discovers that one of her employers works for one, but still pays her under the table (Fredholm, 2005, pp. 202, 219).

In Almström's *Svart arbete*—which also describes the unregulated labour market—the workers view unions as a threat, albeit not a very serious one: “Facket var lustigt nog det enda hotet. Det dök upp ombudsmän ibland. Det var lätt för dem att nosa reda på svartgubbar. Men ombudsmännen var inte så många, så även om de visste, hade de ingen möjlighet att kolla alla byggen med svartgubbar” [Funnily enough, the union was the only threat. Union representatives showed up occasionally. It was easy for them to sniff out dodgy workers. But there weren't many union representatives, so even if they knew, they had no way of checking all the building sites with undeclared workers] (Almström, 2009, p. 68). When the union representatives do show up, the workers throw down their tools and scatter—but there are no further consequences (Almström, 2009, p. 69). At the same time, however, Danny ultimately comes to the conclusion that—in the long run—only unions can help him: “Samtidigt var facket de enda som egentligen kunde erbjuda nån hjälp. På sikt hade de lösningen. Men i ett kortare perspektiv var de ett hot” [At the same time, the unions were the only ones who could really offer any help. In the long term, they did hold the solution. But in the short term, they were a threat] (Almström, 2009, p. 68).

Karin Hallberg's (b. 1989) *På andra sidan Älvsborgsbron* [On the other side of the Älvsborg bridge] is very much a novel about union work. It tells the story of a love affair between Marco, the head of the dockworkers' union in Gothenburg, and Sophie, a student who works for the union, against the backdrop of a strike. The novel, whose author—just like the main characters—works for the dockworkers' union, is published by a publishing house owned by the syndicalist trade-union SAC, and its aim is clearly to propagate unionism. It highlights how workers who do not have permanent contracts are threatened with dismissal should they join the union (Hallberg, 2025, pp. 50, 237). But Sophie argues that the only way to put an end to “gig-tyranni” [the tyranny of gig work] is to unionise all workers (Hallberg, 2025, p.

159). And, even if some workers who do not have permanent contracts leave the union when the strike eventually breaks out, others who are in the same situation choose to join (Hallberg, 2025, p. 159, pp. 197). Thus, while precarious work is presented as a barrier to unionisation, it is not insurmountable. And, more importantly, unions are described as a weapon in the struggle against precarious working conditions.

In David Ericsson's *Taxfree*, the union is mobilised, with the goal of turning a forwarding company which employs foreign workers from low-wage countries and lets them work under precarious conditions into "ett normalt företag som sköter sina åtaganden mot anställda och alla andra också" [a normal company that does right by its employees and everyone else too] (Ericsson, 2004, p. 193). The struggle is successful. Among other things, the union forces the company's CEO to resign because it has secured information about his involvement in shady businesses, and this leads to a change in the company's attitudes toward its workers.

In Amalia Alvarez's "Arbetare utan papper", unions are also shown to be a resource for those working under precarious conditions. The worker interviewed describes how her employer threatened to kill her when she mentioned the union (Alvarez, 2013, p. 5). Nevertheless, she has contacted the union, which has opened negotiations with her employer regarding her pay, and during the interview she asks the interviewer to pass on a USB stick with (probably compromising) information to her union representative (Alvarez, 2013, pp. 8–9).

In *Rent åt helvete*, Torp gives an ambivalent picture of unions' ability to help migrant workers. She describes how three construction workers wait in vain for their union to help them in a dispute with their employer (Torp, 2023, p. 102) and how cleaners in the food industry leave their union because they do not think that it can do much to improve their working conditions (Torp, 2023, p. 112). However, this criticism is directed only at unions belonging to The Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO), while the syndicalist union The Central Organisation of Swedish Workers (SAC) is described as both willing to and capable of helping migrant workers. For example, when the construction workers who did not get help from their union (which belongs to LO) eventually turned to SAC, they were helped to gain economic compensation from their employer. Torp highlights that SAC has a special focus on organising migrant workers and has developed strategies for achieving this: they communicate in several languages, take on cases as soon as workers become members

and—perhaps most importantly—allow undocumented migrants to become members (Torp, 2023, pp. 115–116).

The main theme of Bogdanska's *Wage slaves* is workers' struggles for their rights, as suggested by the subtitle on the cover of the very first fanzine edition: "Serie som handlar om arbetsrättigheter" [A comic about working-life rights]. When the protagonist tells her Swedish boyfriend about her working conditions, he recommends that she contact SAC. She is sceptical that they can do much, since she and her colleagues are immigrants, have no work contracts and, in some cases, no right to work in Sweden (Bogdanska, 2016, p. 40). However, eventually she does join the union (Bogdanska, 2016, p. 81) and attends a course where she learns about workers' rights, strategies for union work and solidarity (Bogdanska, 2016, p. 151). This makes her reflect on her earlier work-life experiences and realise that she has never even been aware that she has rights and that she has thought of unions as something belonging in the past (Bogdanska, 2016, p. 152). However, in the light of her recent experiences, and what she has learned on the course, she concludes that "facket behövs mer än nånsin i våra tider" (Bogdanska, 2016, p. 151) [the union is more needed nowadays than ever before] (Bogdanska, 2019, p. 151).

The protagonist in *Wage slaves* is aware that organising undocumented migrants in the unregulated labour market is difficult (Bogdanska, 2016, p. 81). Her own efforts to unionise her colleagues also remain unsuccessful. One of them tells her that she and the other workers who are not EU citizens dare not join the union because they are too dependent on the restaurant's owner (Bogdanska, 2016, p. 91). This is also what her other colleagues say when the protagonist and a Swedish co-worker inform them that they have become union members: "Men på allvar Daria, du vet att det kommer inte funka för oss. Vi är inte svenskar. Det är två olika världar. Det finns ingenting att göra" (Bogdanska, 2016, p. 172) [But seriously, Daria, you know it's not gonna work for us. We're not Swedish. It's two different worlds. There's nothing we can do] (Bogdanska, 2019b, p. 172).

At first it seems that joining the union has not done the protagonist much good. On the contrary, it is probably one of the reasons that she gets fired (Bogdanska, 2016, p. 185). However, the union does manage to make her employer pay economic compensation (Bogdanska, 2016, p. 195). In the epilogue, this success is highlighted through the insertion of a documentary photograph showing Bogdanska in front of

a flyer for a newspaper advertising her story. Thus, the story told about unions in *Wage slaves* is one that ends in (at least partial) success.



Excerpt from Daria Bogdanska's *Wage slaves*. The flyer says: "Daria, 25, took the fight against her employer—got 46,000 krona back".

*Något har hänt* is published by SAC. Therefore, it is not very surprising that it promotes unionising. In the foreword, the editors point out that over the last three years, SAC has educated thousands of migrant workers about their rights, solved 600 conflicts between such workers and their employers and secured a total of 17 million Swedish krona (1.5 million euros) in financial compensation (Boss *et al.*, 2023, p. 7). Several of the stories contain positive descriptions of unions. For example, one of them ends in the following way: "Fackföreningen kräver lönereglering. Jurij får ut

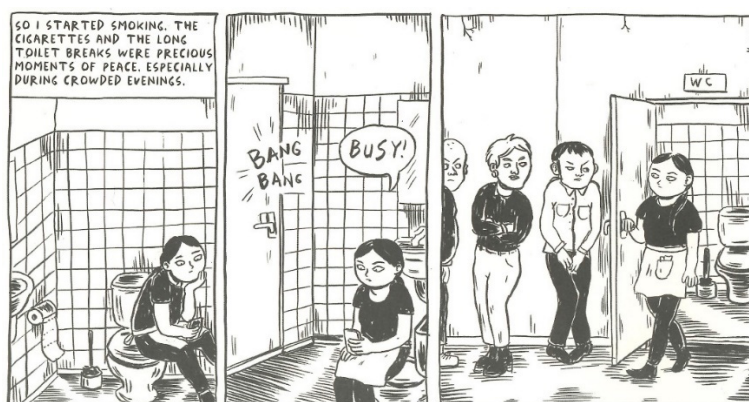
80 000 kronor och ser till att hans arbetskamrater också går med i Solidariska byggare [som är en del av SAC]” [The union demands wage regulation. Yuri receives 80,000 krona and makes sure his colleagues also join *Solidariska byggare* (an organisation within SAC)] (Boss *et al.*, 2023, p. 13). In their concluding remarks, the editors claim that “när en fackförening kliver in i ekvationen ökar riskerna för arbetsköparen att avkrävas ansvar drastiskt. Det har vi gång på gång visat” [when a trade union enters the equation, the risks for the employer to be held accountable increase dramatically. We have shown this time and again] (Boss *et al.*, 2023, p. 70).

Several of the poems in Emil Boss’s *Kompression* portray workers who are also described in *Något har hänt*. However, in this work, unions are seldom mentioned and—as will be discussed in Chapter Four—when they are mentioned, it is mainly in negative terms. In fact, resistance against precarious working conditions is only described in one poem, and then in the form of a spontaneous and violent act—workers who have not been paid smash up a bathroom they have renovated:

[...] Plötsligt  
lyfte bara en av killarna en hammare och gick  
in i badrummet han just gjort färdigt och slog  
sönder det i småbitar. En efter en följde vi hans  
exempel. (Boss, 2023b, p. 161)

[...] Suddenly,  
one of the guys just picked up a hammer and went  
into the bathroom that he had just finished and smashed  
it to pieces. One by one we followed his  
example.]

This kind of spontaneous resistance features in several other works about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden. In fact, the incident above is also described in Sunvisson’s *Svarta palmen*—which shows that he and Boss draw on the same sources (Sunvisson, 2021b, p. 242). Other works describe how workers working under precarious conditions learn to use the system as well as they can. The protagonist in *Wage slaves* learns from a colleague that the only way to get a break when working in a restaurant is to ask for a cigarette break. Therefore, she starts smoking. But she also takes long toilet breaks.



Excerpt from Daria Bogdanska's *Wage slaves*.

Other examples of hitting back at employers include that a character in *Svart arbete* pilfers goods from the petrol station she works at (on a temporary contract), to share out with her friends (Almström, 2009, p. 19); that the protagonist in *Cykelbudet* tries to trick the algorithm that assigns him gigs (Teglund, 2021a, p. 216); and that the speaker in *Natt* throws newspapers in a recycling container instead of delivering them (Andersson, 2023, pp. 13–15). In *Pigan*, a colleague teaches the protagonist to cheat at work—much like in in *Wage slaves*—by cleaning only what is visible, and chilling instead of working when no one is watching.



Excerpt from Hanna Petersson's *Pigan*. A colleague teaches the protagonist to clean only what can be seen, and to chill instead of working

The protagonist in *Pigan* also commits acts of sabotage to get back at employers that treat her badly: she spits in the scouring pail and uses the cloth intended for bathroom cleaning in the kitchen as well.



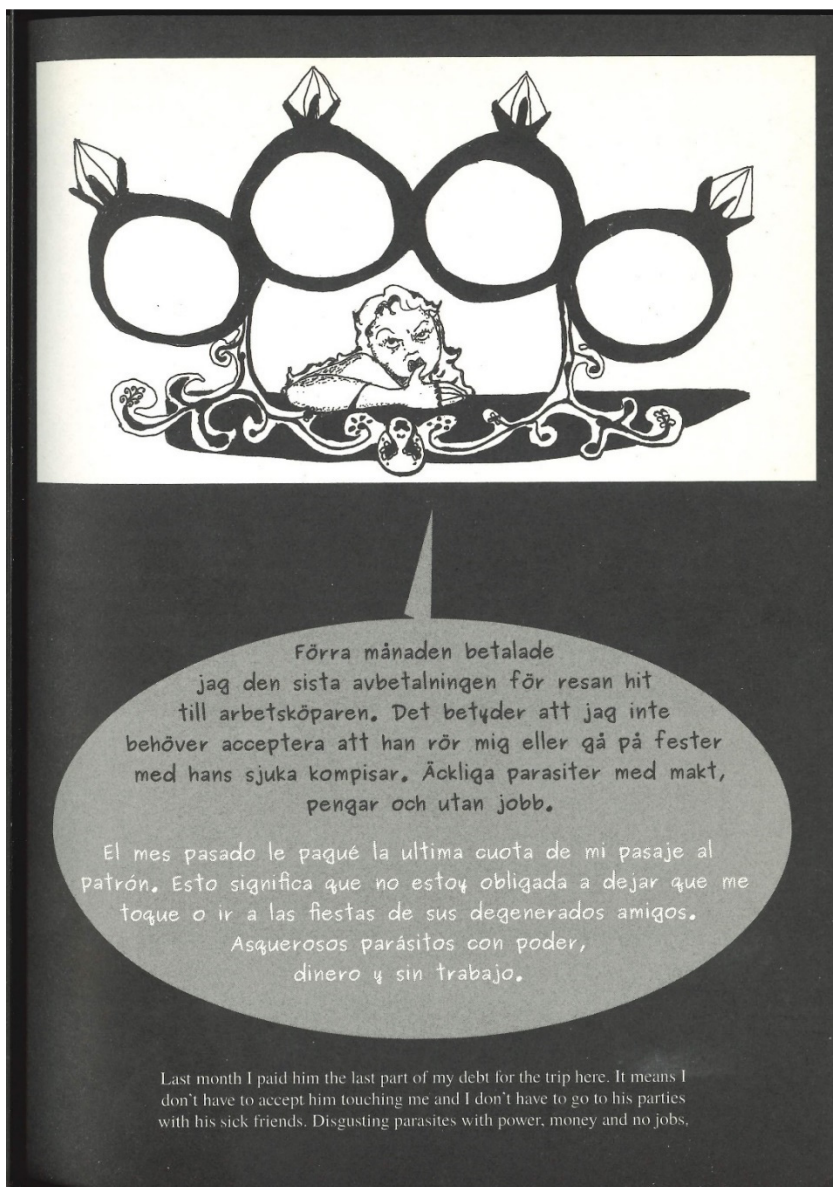
Excerpt from Hanna Petersson's *Pigan*. Acts of sabotage.

In the last panel of *Pigan*, this strategy is described as “allt jag kan göra” [all I can do], but also as a possible way out of the protagonist's precarious situation:



Excerpt from Hanna Petersson's *Pigan*. The caption reads: “All I can do is put a spanner in the works in every crappy workplace that I will be wandering around in for the rest of my life. Maybe that is a way out of the maze”.

A more radical approach is hinted at in “Arbetare utan papper”. As has already been mentioned, the protagonist has contacted a union that has started negotiations with her employer. At the same time however, she is often portrayed surrounded by various weapons, or objects that could be used as weapons—a fork, knuckle-dusters, stiletto heels—suggesting she is open to other forms of resistance:





Det svinet som  
hår ut rummet väntar inte.  
Han kommer full på natten och  
kräver att vi ska ha sex, annars? Ut  
på gatan! Gatan på vintern är vit,  
tyst och ensam.

El desgraciado que  
me renta el cuarto, no espera. Va  
de madrugada, borracho y nos exige  
tener sexo, sino? A la calle! La  
calle en invierno es blanca  
silenciosa y solitaria.

The asshole renting me the room won't wait.  
He'll come home drunk, demanding sex, or else  
I'm out on the street! The street in winter is cold  
and lonely.

The girls trick my employer, saying it's their  
period, because this guy is very scrupulous and  
clean. Even the crockery must be spotless.

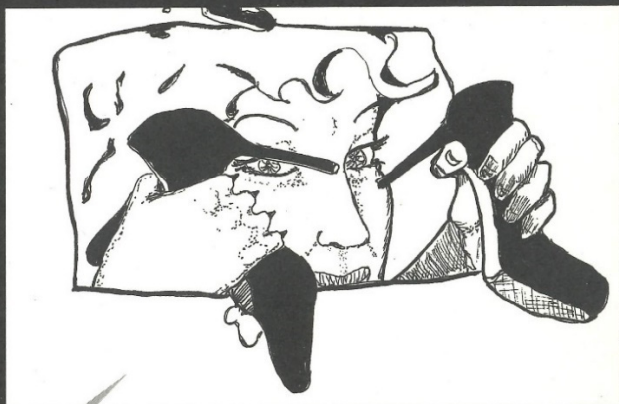
Tjejerna lurar  
min arbetsköpare och säger att  
de har mens, det är nämligen så att  
arbetsköparen är mycket skrupulös och  
ren. Till och med servisen som vi  
serverar honom på måste vara helt  
felfri!

Las chicas engañan  
a mi patrón, diciéndole que tienen  
menstruación, es que el patrón es  
muy escrupuloso y limpio. Incluso  
el servicio que le servimos  
debe estar impecable!

Kontrollerna då de letar efter  
papperslösa arbetare görs på de små  
betydelselösa restaurangerna.

Los controles en busca de  
trabajadores indocumentados se hacen  
en esos restaurantes insignificantes.

The controls when they're looking for  
undocumented workers are made in the small  
and insignificant restaurants.



Vi jobbar där miljoner och  
miljoner kronor omsätts,  
lyxrestaurangerna och -  
kabareterna.

Nosotros trabajamos  
en donde se mueven millones  
de coronas, los restaurantes,  
cabaret de lujo.

We're working where millions  
and millions of crowns are  
circulated, luxury restaurants  
and cabarets.



Excerpts from Amalia Alvarez's "Arbetare utan papper".

In Johan Jönson's *Efter arbetsschema*, violent resistance (or, rather, revenge) is also thematised. The best example of this is when the speaker relates his experiences of working (without a contract) for "en mycket motbjudande nyrik familj" [a particularly revolting nouveau-riche family], helping to build a stone wall in their garden (Jönson, 2008, p. 542). Because the family members treat him with "överlägsenhet och arrogans" [condescension and arrogance] he fantasises that he will "runka, och spruta satsen i tvättkorgen" [wank, and squirt cum in the laundry basket]. That remains a fantasy, but he does wipe his "herpesangripna kuk" [herpes-infested cock] on the family's, including the children's, towels.

## Concluding remarks

Literature portraying precarious labour in contemporary Sweden can contribute to struggles against labour precarity through its representation of, reflection on and critique of such labour. By highlighting precarious labour, it helps putting the phenomenon on the political agenda. By representing those working under precarious conditions, it can help them gain a better understanding of themselves as a collective with shared political interests, and thus contribute to the development of class consciousness, but it can also contribute to struggles against recognition injustice. By mapping the political economy of precarious labour, it can contribute to the development of strategies for fighting it. The two most important aspects of this literature's contribution to struggles against labour precarity are—as has been shown in the previous chapters—the promotion of a specific understanding of the relationship between the so-called precariat and the working class in contemporary Sweden, and the promotion of unions.

That literature about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden can contribute to struggles against labour precarity in multiple ways further complicates the question—discussed in Chapter Two—of who reads this literature. In order to promote class consciousness, it must address those who experience labour precarity (or those who try to organise them), or those with whom the so-called precariat can form political alliances. For example, if one wants to integrate the so-called precariat into the working class, then it could be a good idea to address the members of the latter class. However, if the aim is to fight workers' status subordination, then it must (also) address members of other classes (i.e. those who subject workers to non- or misrecognition in the first place). The same is true if this literature wants to put precarious labour on the political agenda—then it needs to reach the general public, journalists, politicians and others.



## 4. Precarious Labour and Working-Class Literature

As was stated in the introduction—and as the previous chapters have hopefully made clear—in Sweden, the tradition of working-class literature constitutes an important context for understanding literary representations of precarious labour. This chapter explores the relationship between these two bodies of literature in greater depth. The primary aim is not to define this relationship in absolute terms—for instance by determining whether literary representations of precarious labour in contemporary Sweden should be placed in the tradition of working-class literature (though I personally believe most of them should). Rather, the goal is to place these literatures in dialogue with one another, in order to shed new light on both and to open up new avenues for research about literature, class and precarious labour in a Swedish context.

### **A socially or politically anchored literature?**

In Chapter Two, it was mainly differences between literature about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden and older working-class literature that were discussed. Since the so-called precariat is not a class for itself, it was argued, writers cannot represent it from within in the same way that traditional working-class writers have represented the working class. Instead, they contribute to the process which will make it possible for those engaged in precarious labour to represent themselves—by promoting their formation as a class for itself. However, on closer inspection, it is far from obvious that authors writing about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden stand in a radically different relationship to the worker collectives they represent in literature than did traditional working-class writers.

Swedish working-class writers' anchorage in the working class has in fact not always been as firm as is usually assumed, or as many of these writers have claimed. K. J.

Gabrielsson—who, as was shown in Chapter Two, was hailed by Hjalmar Branting as the first genuine proletarian writer in Swedish literature—grew up in a poor working-class family and began his working life as a navvy and a stone mason. However, soon he dedicated more and more of his time to poetry and journalism, and at the age of 30 he became the editor of a socialist newspaper (Olausson, 1997, pp. 24–26). The first prominent female working-class writer in Sweden, Maria Sandel (1870–1927), also grew up in a poor working-class family but, like Gabrielsson, she was not as well-anchored in the worker collectives she depicted as most commentators tend to assume. Sandel lost her hearing at the age of 25, and a few years later also most of her eyesight. She therefore led a very secluded life and worked mainly from her home (as a tricot knitter). Thus, she was not really part of the worker collectives she portrayed in her literary works. Sandel begun her writing career by publishing poems and short stories in the labour-movement press, but after the publication of her first book—a collection of short stories—in 1908, she seems to have been able to live mainly off her writing and from stipends from literary associations, the Swedish government and her publisher.<sup>27</sup> This means that even if she never became wealthy, her economic position was different from that of other workers. Other important working-class writers from this period had even weaker ties to the working class. For example, Martin Koch (1882–1940), who is generally described as a central character in the tradition of Swedish working-class literature, grew up in a petty-bourgeois family and had extremely limited experiences of manual labour (Lo-Johansson, 1957, p. 43; Granlid, 1957, p. 59).

The working-class writers who conquered the Swedish Parnassus in the 1930s had usually grown up in the working class, often in the rural proletariat. However, most of them were very young when they became professional writers, and thus their experiences of labour, manual or other, were limited. A good illustration of this is Ivar Lo-Johansson, who—as has already been pointed out—is often considered to be the archetypical Swedish working-class writer. His breakthrough in the 1930s came with a series of novels and collections of short stories about the so-called *statare*: estate workers that constituted the lowest stratum of the rural proletariat in Sweden. But Lo-Johansson was never a *statare* himself. His parents had been, but they managed to become tenant farmers—which represented an important step on the social and economic ladder—already when he was a little child. After leaving home

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<sup>27</sup> I am grateful to Ewa Bergdahl for helping me understand Sandel's finances.

at a young age, Lo-Johansson tried his luck as, among other things, a peddler, a stone mason, and a postman, but soon journalism—and eventually literary writing—became his main occupation. One consequence of this was that when he wrote a novel about contemporary agricultural labour in the early 1940s, he had to do extensive research (Nilsson, 2003, pp. 269–270). However, unlike authors writing about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden—such as Kristian Lundberg, Anders Teglund, Karin Fredholm and Pelle Sunvisson, who all have tried the occupations they write about for at least a few months, or Emil Boss and Elinor Torp, who have interviewed workers—he limited himself to *theoretical* research.<sup>28</sup>

The new generation of working-class writers that emerged in Sweden in the 1970s was rather heterogeneous when it comes to class background, education and work experiences. Some were writing workers, at least early in their careers, for example Ove Allansson (1932–2016), Torgny Karnstedt (b. 1952), Aino Trosell (b. 1949), and Jan Fogelbäck (1943–2017). However, Trosell—who worked as a welder for ten years—also had a university degree and experience of white-collar work. And so did many other prominent representatives of Swedish working-class literature, including Göran Palm (1931–2016), who wrote two highly influential reports from a stint as a factory worker, but mainly made his living as a literary critic and a poet; and Sara Lidman (1923–2004), who wrote an influential book about miners, but had few personal experiences of manual labour. Often, Maja Ekelöf is highlighted as the most proletarian representative for this generation of working-class writers, as when Lorena Toro Meneses—as was pointed out in Chapter Two—uses her as an example of an author with “authentic” working-class experiences. However, Ekelöf was not as well-anchored in the working class as is usually assumed. It is true that she experienced poverty and that she did hard manual labour. But, in a recent biography, Finnish-Swedish journalist and author Nina van den Brink (2021) has shown that she actually had a bourgeois family background.

The writers belonging to the new wave of Swedish working-class literature in the first decades of new millennium is as heterogenous as the generation emerging in the

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<sup>28</sup> According to Sunvisson, this means that Lo-Johansson missed an opportunity to re-connect with the proletariat that he had left when becoming a professional writer. “Genom arbetet blir man arbetare, oavsett vem man var från början” [By working, you become a worker, regardless of who you were originally], he says in a discussion about Henriksson’s critique of Teglund as a tourist in the precariat (Söderin, 2021, p. 10).

1970s. Many come from working-class families, or have personal experiences of manual labour, but several also have university educations, and only a few have continued to do manual labour after beginning to publish literature. For example, Susanna Alakoski (b. 1962)—who is one of the most prominent working-class writers in contemporary Sweden—has a university degree in social work, and lives from her writing. Another important working-class writer, Henrik Johansson (b. 1973), has a background as a baker and a cook, but has also studied creative writing at university, and is now a professional author, translator and creative writing teacher. Another working-class author who has had a similar career is Jenny Wrangborg (b. 1984). When she started writing and publishing poetry, she worked in restaurants and cafés, but after having studied at university she is now employed as an analyst for a trade union.

Thus, perhaps to the surprise of some critics, the idea about Swedish working-class writers being solidly anchored in the working class through their biographies—and the idea that that this sets them apart from authors writing about contemporary precarious labour—can indeed be challenged. In fact, it could even be argued that those writing about today's so-called precariat share its economic and social situation to a higher degree than many traditional working-class writers shared that of the working class. That Gabrielsson became a newspaper editor and Lo-Johansson a professional author, for example, did indeed mean that they distanced themselves radically from the working-class worlds in which they grew up. But for Anders Teglund, being an entrepreneur in the cultural sector did not mean that he enjoyed much better economic conditions than bicycle couriers or other gig workers; during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the culture industry ground to a halt, they even turned out to be worse. Kristian Lundberg turned to temporary manual labour in order to pay the debts accrued while working as an author and critic, and Pelle Sunvisson claims that he made more money from the undercover work he did when preparing his novels about migrant workers than from his books about these workers (Hansson, 2022, p. 25).

The observation that writers central to the tradition of working-class literature are not as deeply embedded in the life worlds of the workers they depict as is generally assumed—or even demanded—invites us to reconsider how we understand the relationship between working-class writers and the workers they represent. To do so, we must return to the distinction between classes *in themselves* and *for themselves*.

In Marx's analysis, the distinction between classes *in* and *for* themselves is often somewhat blurred. As an ideal type, a class *in* itself can be viewed as being defined solely by a shared economic position and shared economic interests, without any social, cultural or ideological bonds existing between its members. According to this view, people can belong to a class without being aware of it. For example, in *Capital*, Marx demonstrates that a schoolmaster in a private school occupies the same economic position as a worker in a sausage factory, namely that of producing surplus labour that is appropriated as profit by a capitalist:

That labourer alone is productive, who produces surplus-value for the capitalist, and thus works for the self-expansion of capital. If we may take an example from outside the sphere production of material objects, a schoolmaster is a productive labourer when, in addition to belabouring the heads of his scholars, he works like a horse to enrich the school proprietor. That the latter has laid out his capital in a teaching factory, instead of in a sausage factory, does not alter the relation. Hence the notion of a productive labourer implies not merely a relation between work and useful effect, between labourer and product of labour, but also a specific, social relation of production, a relation that has sprung up historically and stamps the labourer as the direct means of creating surplus-value. (Marx, 2000, p. 730)

That the schoolmaster and the factory worker are both “productive” labourers means that they belong to the same class *in* itself, understood as a specific position in the social relations of production. A class *for* itself, in contrast, is characterised by its members being conscious of their common interests and able to represent themselves politically. It is this consciousness that the small-holding peasants in France that Marx discussed in *Brumaire* lacked, but which workers in the labour movement possess (see Chapter Two). And it is the absence of such consciousness and political self-representation that results in workers in sausage factories and teachers in private schools not belonging to the same class *for* itself, and in the so-called precariat not being a class *for* itself either.

Between the ideal types of classes *in* and *for* themselves, Marx seems to place various intermediate stages where people have common interests and share a lifeworld or culture and a sense of community but nevertheless do not constitute a class *for* itself. The smallholding peasants described in *Brumaire*, for example, are said to share a “culture”. Earlier in the work, Marx also writes about how on “the social conditions of existence” of a class, “arises an entire superstructure of different and peculiarly

formed sentiments, delusions, modes of thought and outlooks on life”, which indicates a degree of shared culture that nevertheless does not amount to the class consciousness of a class for itself (Marx, 2002, p. 43). In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels also argue that *before* becoming a class for itself, the proletariat goes through a process in which it “becomes concentrated in greater masses”, and its “conditions of life” are “more and more equalised” (Marx and Engels, 2021, pp. 29–30).

It is important to stress that Marx does not view these shared cultural, social and ideological features as something that will necessarily develop into the class consciousness of a class for itself. His description in *Brumaire* of the French peasants, for example, is a clear rebuttal of that idea. This further supports the argument put forward in Chapter Two that classes for themselves *need to be constructed*.

The working class did become a class for itself—at least in most parts of the industrialised world. However, it was constructed in different ways in different historical and geographical contexts. When it comes to the British proletariat, Marx and Engels point to the concentration of workers in factories and the homogenisation of their conditions of life as a precondition for their emergence as a class for itself. In Sweden, the emergence of the working class seems to have followed a slightly different path. As has been highlighted by historian Henrik Berggren (2010, p. 415), because Sweden’s industrialisation was relatively late, the country’s working class never developed the tight socio-cultural community that characterised it in places like England, Belgium, or northern Germany. Instead, its class consciousness emerged *within the labour movement* and thus became *political* rather than cultural. It was the trade unions and their community centres, rather than the pub and the street corner, that became the workers’ gathering points, Berggren writes.<sup>29</sup> Another way of putting this is to say that the Swedish working class was not so much a distinct social group with a common culture and way of life as a political force sharing an ideological commitment—a class for itself, organised in the labour movement.

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<sup>29</sup> This argument can be illustrated by a passage in Teglund’s *Cykelbudet*, where the protagonist describes how his grandfather’s class consciousness was rooted as much in ideology as in work: “Frälsningsarmén, fabriken och socialdemokratin var stommen i hans identitet” [The Salvation army, the factory and social democracy were the backbone of his identity] (Teglund, 2021a, p. 111).

Berggren's emphasis on political, rather than cultural, community is not only consistent with how the Swedish working class emerged, but also with how Marx describes classes for themselves in *Brumaire*. As Gayatri Chakravory Spivak has pointed out, in that work, Marx associates "[c]lass consciousness" (and, thus, classes for themselves) with "the feeling of community that belongs to national links and *political organisations*" (Spivak, 1988, pp. 277; emphasis added). In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels even write about the "organisation of the proletarians into a class, and, consequently into a political party", thereby emphasising the centrality of politics to the formation of the working class as a class for itself (Marx and Engels, 2021, p. 31).

It is reasonable to argue that this understanding of the working class—as a political force organised in the labour movement—is at the heart of the Marxist slogan that the emancipation of the working class must be achieved by the workers themselves. The First International stated that this emancipation required the abolition of capitalism. Thus, it was only the *socialist* labour movement—and not liberal reformism—that could emancipate the working class. This means that it is not the workers' social background, but their ideological orientation, that is emphasised. And thus, it is not in no way paradoxical that Marx—who was not a proletarian, but certainly a socialist—could be the leader of the International and claim that the emancipation of the working class must be achieved by itself. In fact, in *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels explicitly points to the fact that people from the bourgeoisie can *go over to the proletariat* by joining the labour movement, which underscores that they view this class primarily in political terms (Marx and Engels, 2021, p. 32). Nor is it paradoxical that Branting—who came from a wealthy upper-class family—echoed Marx's claim in his celebration of Gabrielsson as Sweden's first genuine working-class writer. The context in which he did so was one in which he was trying to distance the Swedish labour movement from liberal radicalism and consolidate it as a socialist movement. Earlier, he had promoted another writer—Viktor Rydberg (1828–1895)—as the workers' champion in Swedish literature. However, in a series of articles published in December 1891 and January 1892, Branting launched a vehement attack on Rydberg, accusing him not just of failing to understand that only socialism can rescue workers from the evils of industrial capitalism but also for being outright hostile to the labour-movement's socialist ideals (Branting, 1930, pp. 104, 119, 124). With the emergence of a socialist labour movement, Branting argued, the time had come to ask for more from authors than

general radicalism, namely that they write “[d]irekt i arbetarklassens upplysningsarbets tjänst” [*directly in support of the struggle for enlightenment in the working class*] (Branting, 1930, p. 124, emphasis in the original). This indicates that Branting’s promotion of Gabrielsson as the first genuine working-class writer has got less to do with the latter’s social background (Rydberg too grew up in poverty) than with his commitment to the socialist labour movement. And it was the same commitment that made it possible for Branting to be the leader of the Swedish labour movement while arguing that the emancipation of the working class must be achieved by itself.

Understanding classes as political communities opens up for a new way of conceptualising the relationship between writers and the classes they write for. If a class for itself is constituted politically, then a writer’s anchorage in the lifeworld of a class (the pub and the street corner, but also the workplace), might be less important than his or her engagement in the organisations trying to mobilise the class politically—organisations such as the labour movement.

Several commentators have emphasized that Swedish working-class literature has—compared to that of other countries—maintained a high degree of autonomy from the labour movement, and that Swedish working-class writers have placed relatively greater emphasis on aesthetics than on politics (Bouquet, 1980, pp. 12, 18; Bouquet, 1990, p. 13; Furuland and Svedjedal, 2006, pp. 24–25). Consequently, interpreting this literature as closely associated with socialism might seem counterintuitive. Still, many working-class writers have maintained strong ties to the labour movement, even after the breakthrough for working-class writing in national literature.

Early Swedish working-class poets such as Gabrielsson were active *solely* within the labour movement. Therefore, they can be categorised as *labour-movement writers*, and their works as *labour-movement literature* (Nilsson, 2021c, pp. 43–70). During the first decades of the twentieth century, Swedish working-class literature began receiving attention also in the site of literature and on the book market, but many working-class writers remained active (also, or solely) in the labour movement, among other things by publishing their works in labour-movement periodicals. Sandel, for example, retained a strong relationship to the labour moment after becoming a professional author. And so did Lo-Johansson who, for example, serialised his break-through novel *Godnatt, jord* (1933, published in English as *Breaking Free* in 1990) in the agricultural workers’ trade-union magazine. Stig Sjödin (1917–1993)—who is generally considered to be the most important working-class

poet in Sweden after the second world war—published numerous poems and short stories in various trade-union magazines, and also wrote a large number of works that were read at conferences and congresses in the labour-movement, in parallel with publishing books with Sweden's most prestigious publisher, Bonnier (see Nilsson, 2021c). The new generation of working-class writers emerging in the 1970s often had very close ties to the labour movement. Many of them sympathised with radical parties on the left, and several—for example Kjell Johansson (b. 1941) and Jan Fogelbäck—also published (at least some of) their works with communist publishing houses (Nilsson, 2006, pp. 85–85). Many of the writers belonging to the new wave of Swedish working-class literature in the twenty-first century have also been active in the labour movement in various ways. As noted, Jenny Wrangborg works for a trade union. Henrik Johansson has written literary criticism and columns for a trade-union periodical and worked as a writing teacher in projects organised by various labour-movement organisations. Emil Boss and Pelle Sunvisson are both union organisers.

One of the most important connections between working-class literature and the labour movement in Sweden has been that working-class authors have promoted class consciousness among workers. For example, Gabrielsson and other early working-class poets tried to win workers for the socialist labour movement by making them share its socialist ideals and adopt a proletarian identity (see Mral, 1985). This was highlighted by politician and newspaper editor C. N. Carleson in his foreword to a posthumous collection of Gabrielsson's poetry which was published by the Social Democratic Party in 1903. According to Carleson, Gabrielsson's poetry expresses "en ljus syn på möjligheterna och framtidslöftena hos den klass, hvars lidanden diktaren delat sedan barndomen" [a bright view of the possibilities and promises for the future in the class whose sufferings the poet had shared since childhood] (Carleson, 1903, p. 9). Thus, it not only expresses present conditions and experiences in the working class but also produces a picture of what this class could become in the future. In particular, Carleson highlights Gabrielsson's visions of workers uniting under the banner of socialism and transforming both themselves and the entire human civilisation—visions of workers who "samlas och ordna sig" [gather and organise] and "vidga sin ring till en mäktig faktor i en stor, omfattande, mångsidig kulturutveckling" [widen their circle to a powerful force in a large, comprehensive, many-sided cultural movement] (Carleson, 1903, p. 10). Thus, Carleson argues that the aim of Gabrielsson's poetry—or, at least, one of its possible

uses—is to contribute to workers becoming a class for itself through the labour movement.

Scholarship on prominent working-class prose writers from the first decades of the twentieth century such as Karl Östman (1876–1953) and Maria Sandel also highlights their ambitions to promote class consciousness among workers (see e.g. Agrell, 2021). Many subsequent working-class writers had similar ambitions, even if their works have often been less explicitly political. For example, during the second half of the twentieth century, when many within the Swedish labour movement argued that the welfare state had put an end to class antagonism, important working-class writers such as Folke Fridell (1904–1985) and Stig Sjödin promoted a working-class consciousness that was grounded in a Marxist understanding of the antagonistic relationship between capital and labour (Nilsson, 2014b, pp. 34–48; Nilsson, 2021c). Thus, even if the Swedish working class at this time was indeed a class for itself, working-class writers contributed to both its expansion (by trying to make more workers class-conscious) and its development (by promoting a specific kind of class consciousness). Similar attempts to promote class consciousness among workers can be found also in contemporary Swedish working-class literature (Nilsson, 2021a).

In fact, it can even be argued that the ambition to promote class consciousness among workers is one of the few things that unites most of the works and authors in the highly heterogenous tradition of Swedish working-class literature. This has been highlighted by Beata Agrell (2017, pp. 34–36), who writes that this literature is best described as an open and dynamic network of texts whose main function is to make visible society's class character. Making society's class character visible to workers *is* to promote class consciousness. It has also been proposed that Swedish working-class literature should be conceptualised as a counter-hegemonic cultural practice aiming primarily at producing class consciousness among workers (Nilsson, 2011).<sup>30</sup>

This means that many traditional Swedish working-class writers could be described as being *ideologically* or *politically* anchored in the worker collectives they describe,

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<sup>30</sup> A similar claim is made about working-class literature in general by Ben Clarke in the introduction to *The Routledge Companion to Working-Class Literature*. “Activists, intellectuals, and writers actively produce rather than passively reveal class; it is never just there”, he writes and adds that “[w]orking-class literature and its critical analysis contribute to this process” (Clarke, 2025, p. 10).

through their connections to the labour movement. This conceptualisation is more historically accurate than the hitherto dominant one—according to which these writers have been *socially* anchored in worker collectives through their biographies. However, there are not only historical, but also theoretical advantages with a shift of focus toward ideology and politics.

The idea that working-class writers can understand and speak for workers because of their biographical anchorage in the working class is based on a reductive understanding of cultural difference. In *Not So Black and White*, Kenan Malik (2023, p. 171) describes this view as “an understanding of cultures as fixed self-contained units, each separated from every other by a sharp discontinuity; of individuals as belonging to one distinct culture, within which all shared a common and unique set of references about the world; of humanity as divided into discrete groups and shaped by differences, not commonalities”. The Swedish working class has never—nor has any other working class—been culturally homogenous. Instead, it has been characterised by heterogeneity in terms of gender, ethnicity/nationality, generation, geography, education, income, sexual orientation, and other factors. What has united it, however, is a shared economic position within the capitalist economy and—more importantly—shared political interests, which have been defended through the labour movement.

Understanding working-class literature as a political phenomenon is, of course, not a very novel or original idea. For example, in the introduction to *The Routledge Companion to Working-Class Literature*—which has the title “What Is Working-Class Literature?”—its editor Ben Clarke (2025, p. 1) promotes “a political understanding” of this literature. There are also examples of commentators who, at different times and in different contexts, have promoted definitions of *Swedish* working-class literature that focus more on politics than on the authors’ biographies. For example, in his foreword to the collection of Gabrielsson’s poetry, mentioned above, Carleson (1903, pp. 8–9) stressed that what made Gabrielsson a proletarian poet was above all the fact that his works expressed the labour movement’s political ideals:

Hans diktarefysionomi bär proletariatets drag. Där är i hans skaldskap resning, uppror ej blott så där i allmänhet mot vrångt och orätt, utan medvetet, klart, distinkt rikta sig hans anklagelser mot de gamla samhällsklasser, som utnött frihetens fras, tills de glömde friheten själf, mot pänningpåsarnes välde, som innehar vårt land på själftagen entreprenad.

[His physiognomy as a poet bears the marks of the proletariat. In his writing, there is uprising, rebellion, not against wrongs and injustice in general, but accusations, directed consciously, clearly and distinctly toward the old social classes, who have exhausted the language of liberty until they have forgotten liberty itself, against the rule of money, against those who have taken it upon themselves to rule our country.]

Here, Gabrielsson's "*diktarefysionomi*" [physiognomy *as a poet*; my emphasis] is given more attention than his *biography*, and thus it is his commitment to the labour movement's socialist ideals, rather than his anchorage in the lifeworld of workers, that is highlighted.

Similar views have been put forward also by other commentators during other periods. In a book about early Swedish working-class poetry, Axel Uhlén (1885–1971)—who was himself active as a poet in the Swedish labour movement in the early years of the twentieth century—defines "arbetardiktare" [working-class writers] as "diktare, vilka obestriddligen varit engagerade i arbetarrörelsens verksamhet och av denna inspirerats till sin diktning oavsett om de varit autodidakter eller ej" [writers who undeniably have been involved in labour-movement activities and been inspired by it in their writing, regardless of whether or not they have been self-taught] (Uhlén, 1978, p. 6).<sup>31</sup>

Even the most influential scholar of Swedish working-class literature of all times—Lars Furuland—has argued that working-class writers' political affiliations may be more important than their class backgrounds. In his doctoral dissertation, he stated—with references to Örjan Lindberger's (1952, p. 9) influential anthology *Svensk arbetardikt* [Swedish working-class writing]—that (Swedish) working-class literature should be defined as "skönlitterära verk, som handlar om arbetarklassens förhållanden och är skrivna av författare som på ett eller annat sätt har varit *knutna till arbetarrörelsen*" [literary works about the conditions of the working class, written by authors who, in one way or another, have been *connected to the labour movement*] (Furuland, 1962, p. 14, emphasis added). Later, Furuland explicitly argued that the

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<sup>31</sup> The term "autodidact" [self-taught] is often used as a synonym for working-class writers in Sweden. In particular it is used about the generation of working-class writers that came to occupy central positions in Swedish literature in the 1930s.

*ideological* aspects of working-class literature were more important than the authors' class background (see e.g. Furuland, 1977, p. 4).

The most interesting example of Furuland's attempts to challenge the dominant understanding of working-class literature as a literature written from within the lifeworld of the working class can be found in his monograph about Lo-Johansson from 1976: *Statarnas ombudsman i dikten* [The statures' ombudsman in literature] (Furuland, 1976). The Swedish word *ombudsman* has entered the English language as a term signifying an independent official who investigates complaints against the state or public organisations. However, when Furuland describes Lo-Johansson as an ombudsman in literature for the rural proletariat, it is rather a trade-union ombudsman—a union representative—that he has in mind. Such an ombudsman represents union members in conflicts and negotiations with employers. But he or she is also an agitator and an organiser. Thus, a trade-union ombudsman is definitely anchored in the working class through his or her affiliation with the labour movement. At the same time, he or she also represents a kind of avant-garde in relation to the working class (in itself), trying to increase workers' class consciousness and to get them to join the labour movement.

The metaphor of the ombudsman—understood as a union representative—describes Lo-Johansson very well. As has been pointed out above, he had a background in the rural proletariat but became a professional writer at a young age. Thereafter, his main connection to the working class was through his engagement in the labour movement, particularly the agricultural workers' union. The metaphor also works well for many other twentieth-century Swedish working-class writers—and for many contemporary Swedish authors writing about precarious labour.

As has been demonstrated in Chapters Two and Three, authors writing about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden try to make workers class-conscious and encourage them to join unions. And they do this not only in their capacity as writers. As has already been mentioned, Boss works as a union organiser, as does Sunvisson, and Wrangborg works as an analyst for a trade union. As has also been pointed out, Teglund and Bogdanska have been involved in union activities, trying to organise the workers they write about. Furthermore, Torp is employed by a trade-union magazine and Ericsson regularly writes for one. Nevertheless, the metaphor of the ombudsman has only been used about these writers in a few cases. In a review of *Kompression*, Rasmus Landström (2023, p. 5), calls Boss “de papperslösas

ombudsman i litteraturen” [the ombudsman in literature for undocumented migrants], and, in an essay about contemporary Swedish working-class literature, historian Magnus Gustafson describes Wrangborg as “a union representative in literature” (Gustafson, 2020, p. 119).

## The epistemology and ethics of representing workers

What makes the concept of the union representative particularly compelling as a metaphor for authors writing about precarious labour is that it underscores that they *represent* workers in literature. As noted in Chapter Two, Teglund argues, both in *Cykelbudet* and in interviews and articles—as do Sunvisson, Ericsson and Torp—that the so-called precariat cannot speak for itself. This notion is also frequently emphasised in literary scholarship. For example, Jon Helt Haarder, Peter Simonsen and Camilla Schwartz (2018, p. 200) state that even autobiographical literary representations of this collective require authors to distance themselves from it—thus, according to them, the precariat can never be represented from the inside. That it is difficult to for the precariat to represent itself *at all*, has been argued by many commentators. Axel Honneth claims that “[t]he new ‘service proletariat’” is not “capable of articulating shared interests due to the isolated working conditions of its members and their exclusion from all forms of public will-formation” (Honneth, 2017, p. 72) and therefore does not get recognition for its concerns (Honneth, 2017, p. 65). Didier Eribon (2023, p. 323) writes in *Vie, vieillesse et mort d’une femme du peuple* [Life, old age and death of a woman of the people] that “les travailleurs précaires” [precarious workers], those “qui ne réussissent à obtenir que des emplois temporaires, à temps partiel ou aux garanties incertaines” [who only can get temporary, part-time or insecure jobs] cannot speak for themselves since labour-market insecurity constitutes “une sourde menace qui paralyse les sentiments de révolte et prive de toute capacité de résistance” [a dull threat that paralyses feelings of revolt and deprives people of any capacity to resist].

This inability to represent itself is characteristic of classes that are not classes for themselves. As Marx wrote in *Brumaire* about the French peasants: “They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented” (Marx, 2002, pp. 100–101). The one who took it upon himself to represent them was Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte. However, representing those who lack a voice is not an exclusive privilege for reactionary presidents who become emperors. When oppressed and marginalised

people lack a political voice, Eribon (2023, p. 326) writes in the final passage of *Vie, vieillesse et mort d'une femme du peuple*, “n’est-ce pas la tâche qui incombe aux écrivains, aux artistes et aux intellectuels de parler d’eux et pour eux, de les rendre visibles et de ‘faire entendre leur voix’ [...] ou, peut-être même, de leur ‘donner une voix’, cette voix qu’ils n’ont pas ou qu’ils n’ont plus [...]?” [is it not the task of writers, artists and intellectuals to speak about them and for them, to make them visible and ‘make their voice heard’ (...) or, perhaps, even to ‘give them a voice’, a voice they do not have or no longer have (...)?]. The writers discussed in *Writing Class* have—among other things—taken it upon themselves to do precisely this: to represent the so-called precariat.

This is not an uncomplicated task and, as has already been discussed, many authors writing about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden emphasise—both in interviews and in their works—that representing (other) workers is very difficult. For example, the protagonist in *Yarden* claims that he cannot “berätta allas historia” [tell everyone’s story] (Lundberg, 2009, p. 139). The main reason for this is that he has doubts that he can truly *understand* those who are different than him—particularly co-workers with a different ethnic background. Nevertheless, while he expresses doubts regarding his ability to tell others’ stories (i.e. to represent casual workers *in literature*), he does not hesitate when it comes to representing other workers—regardless of their cultural identities—in various conflicts with bosses and employers, as when he contacts an employer who has failed to pay an undocumented migrant worker that he has hired (Lundberg, 2009, pp. 100–101).<sup>32</sup>

This brings to the fore the fact that to represent—as Spivak has pointed out in her analysis of *Brumaire*—can mean two things: to represent aesthetically (in German, “darstellen”), and to represent politically (“vertreten”). Those writing about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden certainly represent workers in both ways: they both describe them and speak for them. However, they seem to be more interested in and comfortable with the second kind of representation. As was demonstrated in Chapter Two, authors such as Teglund and Fredlund emphasise—just as does Lundberg in *Yarden*—that ethnic differences create divisions within the

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<sup>32</sup> Thus, the claim by some of Sweden’s most prominent scholars of working-class literature—in their forward to an edited collection of scholarship about this literature—that the narrator in *Yarden* argues that “ingen kan tala för någon annan än sig själv” [no one can speak for anyone but him/herself] seems to be highly exaggerated (Agrell *et al.*, p. 7).

so-called precariat, and that it is hard for them to understand and write about how people of different ethnic background than their own experience precarious labour. But, while they doubt their ability to describe (darstellen) the experiences of all workers, they are not afraid of representing them politically (vertreten). The protagonist in *Cykelbudet*, makes it his business to speak for other couriers in conversations with politicians.<sup>33</sup> In Ericsson's *Taxfree*, the situation for foreign workers is not described in any detail. This can be read as an indication that the author does not believe he can represent them aesthetically. But the protagonist sees no problem in representing them politically and fighting against the precarious conditions under which they work. A similar story is told in Bogdanska's *Wage slaves*, which, even if it ends in a failure to unionise the migrant workers who experience the worst working conditions, insists on the possibility for unions to represent ethnically heterogenous worker collectives politically.

This focus on political representation makes it reasonable to conceptualise the relationship between authors writing about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden and the so-called precariat in *political* rather than social terms—analogue with the relationship between a union representative and the workers he or she represents. However, the distinction between aesthetic and political representation is a theoretical and analytical one and in practice, it is difficult to separate the two. For example, to represent a collective politically will almost always involve describing it. If one represents the collective in literature, it is virtually *impossible* not to do so. Furthermore, aesthetic representations can certainly have political effects, for example by contributing to the distribution of status and prestige. Thus, putting more emphasis on writers' political representation of workers does not mean that one can ignore questions about aesthetic representation.

The idea that writers must have a solid biographical anchorage in the worker collectives they represent has—as was discussed in Chapter Two—been underpinned by an epistemological argument: such anchorage has been seen as a guarantee that writers *know* the collectives in question and can therefore represent them accurately. In several literary works about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden, this idea is challenged.

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<sup>33</sup> Or—as was pointed out in Chapter Two—to help them articulating their stories, for example by putting them in touch with journalists or lending them media equipment.

One example is the insistence that the so-called precariat is a heterogenous collective that does not share any lifeworld that can be inhabited, known and represented in its entirety by any individual member. Furthermore, several works seem to object to the broader notion that the lifeworlds of others are fundamentally unknowable. For instance, as previously noted, the narrator in *Yarden* initially views the Filipino sailors that he encounters while working at the docks as radically different from himself—and therefore unknowable—but later realises that he can, in fact, understand their situation (and they his).

Similarly, *Cykelbudet* offers a multi-faceted and rich portrayal of the situation for migrant gig workers, despite the narrator's initial doubts that he will be able to understand them. In *Wage slaves*, the protagonist learns that those who come from distant countries occupy a weaker position in the labour market than she does, and she incorporates this insight into her narrative about precarious labour. The descriptions of precarious labour in *Rent åt helvete*, *Något har hänt*, *Kompression*, *Svenska palmen*, and *Svarta bär* are all created from life worlds that are very different from those occupied by the migrant workers they portray—without this being highlighted as a major problem.

In fact, in an interview, Teglund states that “[o]m man inte alls får skriva om ‘den andre’ kan vi lägga ner litteraturen” [If we are not allowed to write about “the other” at all, we can stop writing literature] (Hansson, 2024, p. 11). However, he immediately adds that writing about “the other” can be done “mer eller mindre lyckat” [more or less successfully]. And, as has already been demonstrated, he—as well as other authors writing about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden—describes writing about “the other” as a tricky, but far from impossible, endeavour.

Representing workers does not only involve *epistemological* challenges, but also *ethical* considerations. This is highlighted by Lundberg, who asks: “Har jag mandat att berätta min mors historia, eller är det ett övergrepp där jag låter min tolkning bli den enda giltiga? Vad är alternativet? Att tiga? Att gömma sig bakom en genrebeteckning?” [Do I have a mandate to tell my mother's story, or is it an abuse where I allow my interpretation to be the only valid one? What is the alternative? To remain silent? To hide behind a genre?] (Lundberg and Enander 2013, p. 10). His answer to his own rhetorical question is that he does have a mandate; therefore he does not remain silent, and he does not limit himself to telling his own story.

Nor do many of the other authors writing about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden. Often, their works are based on first-hand experiences and tell, mainly, their own stories. Therefore, they have been described as testimonies. For example, van den Brink (2022, p. 36) has called *Cykelbudet* and *Wage slaves* “vittnesmål från ett prekärt liv” [testimonies from a precarious life] and Gustafson (2020) has argued that contemporary Swedish working-class writers—including Lundberg—assume the role of witnesses in their works. The narrator in *Yarden* also explicitly adopts this position: “Den som skriver är också den som vittnar” [The one who writes is also the one who bears witness] (Lundberg, 2009, p. 33). He further asserts that literature “som inte är ett trovärdigt vittnesmål om våra förhållanden bara är ett meningslös mummel” [that is not a credible testimony of our conditions is just a meaningless mumble] (Lundberg, 2009, p. 94; emphasis added). Nevertheless, as has been demonstrated in the previous chapters, these works contain not only what the authors themselves have seen or heard, but also second-hand information and even speculations about other people’s experiences. This brings to the fore ethical issues pertaining to the relationship between workers’ experiences and authors’ interpretations of them.

The treatment of these issues varies. In Ericsson’s *Taxfree*, there is no direct representation of the discourse of non-Swedish workers. Information about them is almost exclusively mediated through the narrator or the protagonist. Sometimes it is based on hearsay, as when the narrator states that Eastern-European drivers “*verkar leva under mycket knappa förhållanden*” [*seem to live in dire conditions*] (Ericsson, 2004, pp. 26; emphasis added). The same approach can be found in *Fint hemma*, where the protagonist—as was pointed out in Chapter Two—*speculates* about how undocumented migrant workers fare in Sweden. Thus, in these narratives, the foreign workers’ own experiences are not given much attention, which means that they could be criticised for expressing an ethnocentric perspective on precarious labour in Sweden. At the same time, however, by *not* representing the experiences of foreign workers, they do not generalise such a perspective. And Fredholm even explicitly acknowledges that migrant workers (probably) experience undocumented labour differently than she does.

*Något har hänt* is based on interviews with migrant workers, whose experiences are reported in the third person, in a voice that is not their own. For example, in the testimonies, employers are called “arbetsköpare” [labour buyers] (Boss *et al.*, 2023,

p. 11). This is an expression that is common among the union activists that have conducted the interviews, but probably not part of the interviewed workers' vocabulary. Thus, while certainly reporting the migrant workers' experiences, *Något har hänt* does so in a way that gives interpretive authority to others.

This is also the case in Sunvisson's novels. In *Svarta bär*, several different workers' stories are told. Their discourse is often marked by Ukrainian colloquialisms, which creates a certain degree of autonomy from the all-knowing hetero-diegetic narrator. However, the fact that the migrant workers' reflections on their experiences—as was demonstrated in Chapter Two—are clearly influenced by Marxist theory places their discourse very close to that of the novel's (implied) author.

In *Rent åt helvete*, Torp often quotes migrant workers—thereby letting their own voices be heard in the text. Perhaps the best example of this is the listing of complaints that was quoted in Chapter One. But just like in the works discussed above, she articulates the migrant workers' stories in a discourse that does not come across as very authentic, as when she uses free indirect discourse to relate Chilo's experiences: "CENTRUM DÄR HON bor är en stor deppig låda. Insidan har hon dock däremot så smått börjat gilla för dess gröna lugnande färg" [THE CENTRE WHERE SHE lives is a big depressing box. The inside, however, she has slowly started to like for its green calming colour] (Torp, 2023, p. 111). These highly original formulations convey the impression that this is not a (translation of) a quotation, but an attempt by the author to illustrate Chilo's feelings in a discourse that is not hers.

In Boss' *Kompression*, the voices of the migrant workers have a higher degree of autonomy. The testimony poems are written in the first person (singular and plural) and often give the impression of conveying—through summaries and in translation—what the workers have actually said. The list of names at the end of the volume also connects the testimonies to real people. Furthermore, some of the poems express views that clearly differ from those held by the author. For example, several of them describe unions in a negative way (and none of them give positive descriptions of unions): "När facket kallade / till förhandling satte de firman i / konkurs och eftersom arbetsstillståndet försvann blev jag utvisad" [When the union called / for negotiations, they put the company into / bankruptcy and because the work permit was lost, I was deported] (Boss, 2023b, p. 141); "Byggnads bryr / sig inte. Ingen bryr sig!" [The construction workers' union / does not care. Nobody

cares!] (Boss, 2023b, p. 165); “Jag kontaktade facket / och chefen gav mig sparken direkt, han skrev / öppet att det var för att jag kontaktat facket. / Facket sa att jag hade varit medlem för kort tid, / så jag kunde inte få någon hjälp från dem” [I contacted the union / and the boss fired me immediately, he wrote / openly that it was because I contacted the union. / The union said I’d been a member for too short a time, / so I couldn’t get any help from them] (Boss, 2023b, p. 211); “Jag gick till / facket, de sa: Du har inget / personnummer, du får inte / vara medlem. Jag har inget / personnummer för att / chefen lurade mig” [I went to / the union, they said: You have no / social security number, you are not allowed to / be a member. I don’t have a / social security number because / the boss cheated me] (Boss, 2023b, p. 219). These statements go against the views of the author, who works as a union organiser. At the same time, however, they are presented within the context of the poet’s/speaker’s discourse which, even if it is typographically separated from the testimony poems, still affects their interpretation. For example, the poet/speaker’s mentioning of “den *ännu* omöjliga organisationen” [the *as yet* impossible organisation] indicates that the problems migrant workers experience with unions in Sweden could be overcome in the future (Boss, 2023b, p. 133; emphasis added).<sup>34</sup>

This combination of a strong authorial discourse and relatively independent worker voices can be found also in several other works about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden. As was shown in Chapter Three, Bogdanska’s *Wage slaves* promotes unionising as a way to fight labour precarity, while also representing dissident voices of workers who do not see unions as a way forward. The same thing can be said about Teglund’s *Cykelbudet*. Furthermore, its protagonist’s attempts to help other workers to tell their stories—by putting a migrant worker in contact with journalists or by providing access to a recording studio, as discussed in Chapter Two—demonstrate that his discourse about precarious labour is just one among many possible ones.

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<sup>34</sup> Something similar is done in the play *Kapitalet* (Boss, Feiler and Marx, 2025). It contains ten of the testimony poems from *Kompression*, placed in a context of songs, speech and acting that explain Marx’s theory about capitalist exploitation (the play presents itself as a “musikdramatiskt agitatorium” [musical-dramatical agitatorium]).

## Dialogue with working-class literature

There are many references to traditional working-class literature in literary works about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden.<sup>35</sup> For example, the narrator in Lundberg's *Yarden* several times mentions the so-called *statare* literature. As was pointed out in Chapter Two, *statare* were a class of agricultural workers that were hired on one-year contracts to work on the estates of landowners. They were paid primarily in kind and constituted the lowest stratum of the rural proletariat in Sweden until 1945, when the *statare* system was abolished through an agreement between employers and the agricultural workers' union. Several of the most famous Swedish working-class writers of the 1930s—including Moa Martinson (1890–1964), Jan Fridegård (1897–1968) and Ivar Lo-Johansson (often referred to as just Ivar Lo)—came from and wrote about this class, and it has often been claimed that they thereby contributed actively to the abolishment of the *statare* system (see e.g. Furuland, 1976, pp. 192–193). The narrator in *Yarden* states that when dropping out of school at the age of twelve (!), he created “ett eget universitet” [a university of his own], reading, among other things, Lo-Johansson and “hela statarlitteraturen” [the entire *statare* literature], and after running away from a mental institution at the age of twenty-two he again read “statarberättarna” [the *statare* story tellers] (Lundberg, 2009, pp. 79, 123; see also Nilsson, 2014b, p. 125).<sup>36</sup>

Lo-Johansson is also mentioned in several other works about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden. For example, when visiting his parents, the protagonist in Rolf Almström's *Svart arbete* finds one of Lo-Johansson's novels on their bookshelf. When flicking through it, he contemplates how his own situation relates to the one described there:<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> There are also references to other kinds of literature. For example, Lundberg (2009, pp. 16–17, 30) references Sartre and explicitly mentions older Swedish authors such as Carl Jonas Love Almqvist and Erik Johan Stagnelius. However, there are more references to working-class literature than to other kinds of literature.

<sup>36</sup> The formulation “ett eget universitet” [a university of his own] can also be read as an allusion to one of the most famous working-class novels of all times: Gorky's *My Universities* (1923). Literary scholar Birthe Sjöberg has identified thematic and ideological similarities between Lundberg and Gorky (Sjöberg, 2016).

<sup>37</sup> *Svart arbete* also contains explicit references to other working-class writers, including—as was pointed out in Chapter Two—Alan Sillitoe, whom the protagonist discusses with one of his friends, arguing

Jag rotade litet i bokhyllan. Tog ner en Ivar Lo. Bläddrade och kom rätt in i en måltid som var utförligt och sakligt, mycket sakligt beskriven. Helvete, har ni en aning om vad folk åt på den tiden? Inälvor. Rovor. Fan, de var glada för en potatis ... och ni fattar va? Vad är det jag gnäller om egentligen? (Almström, 2009, p. 127)

[I rummaged through the bookshelf a bit. Got out an Ivar Lo. Flicked through a few pages and got straight into a meal that was described in detail and objectively, very objectively. Goddammit, do you have any idea what people ate in those days? Intestines. Turnips. Hell, they were grateful for a potato ... and, you get it, right? What am I complaining about, really?]

In Boss's *Kompression* one finds the formulation "inte mina drömmars stad // inte på statarnas tid" [not the city of my dreams // not in the era of the statars] (Boss, 2023b, pp. 31–33). The first part of the quote is an allusion to a well-known Swedish working-class novel—Per Anders Fogelström's (1917–1998) *Mina drömmars stad* (1960, published in English as *City of My Dreams* in 2000)—and the latter is a reference to the statars literature.

*Kompression* also references *labour-movement literature*. The expression "när bälgen blåste / och blästern ljungade" [roughly: when the bellow blew / and the furnace blasted] is a quotation from Gustaf Fröding's (1860–1911) "Den gamla goda tiden" [The Good Old Days] from 1894, which describes workers who are abused and exploited and fantasise about striking back against their oppressors. It was often used in labour-movement propaganda and Fröding became an important source of inspiration for working-class poets such as Leon Larsson (1883–1922) (Uhlén, 1978, pp. 273, 280). The lines "inte när den öppna staden obefäst / slog upp mot rymdens ensamhet" [not when the open city, unfortified / opened up to the solitude of space] is a reference to Ragnar Thoursie's (1919–2010) poem "Sundbybergsprologen" [The Sundbyberg prologue] from 1951, which ends as follows: "En öppen stad, / ej en befästad, bygger vi gemensamt. / – Dess ljus slår upp mot rymdens ensamhet" [An open city, / not a fortified one, we build together. / – Its light opens up to the solitude of space] (Greider, 2005, p. 125). These lines were frequently quoted by the legendary leader of the Social Democratic Party, Olof Palme, and therefore the

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that even if his novels are set in the 1950s, they still speak to his situation (Almström 2009, p. 208–210).

poem—as has been pointed out by poet and literary critic Magnus Ringgren (2005)—has come to be seen as an illustration of the social-democratic project in Sweden.

In Johan Jönson's *Efter arbetsschema*, the *statare* literature is referenced. When reminiscing about a colleague, the speaker pictures him sitting in a sofa during the night shift “med en bok av Ivar Lo” [with a book by Ivar Lo] (2008, p. 641). *Efter arbetsschema* also contains references to the working-class poet Stig Sjödin. His book *Sotfragment* [Fragments of Soot] from 1949—which is generally considered to be the most important contribution to Swedish working-class poetry after World War II—contains a series of poetic portraits of workers. So does *Efter arbetsschema*, and in an interview, Jönson has described them as “hågkomster i Stig Sjödens anda” [recollections in the spirit of Stig Sjödin] (Jordebo, 2008).

Another older working-class writer that is referenced in literature about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden is Maja Ekelöf. One work in which she is mentioned is Elinor Torp's *Rent åt helvete* (2023, p. 161). Hanna Petersson's graphic short story *Pigan* also references Ekelöf, but here the reference is visual rather than verbal: the first panel in *Pigan* resembles the cover of Ekelöf's most well-known work, *Rapport från en skurhink* [Report from a Scouring Pail] from 1970 (see Nilsson, 2016a, p. 145):<sup>38</sup>



The first panel in Hanna Petersson's *Pigan* and the cover of Maja Ekelöf's *Rapport från en skurhink*.

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<sup>38</sup> Interestingly, it seems like male authors are referencing male working-class writers while female authors reference female working-class writers

In addition to the explicit references presented above, literature about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden also displays some formal similarities with traditional working-class literature, often using genres that have been popular with older working-class writers: the diary-novel, which Teglund uses in *Cykelbudet*, was also used by Ekelöf in *Rapport från en skurhink*; the reportage-form used by Torp in *Rent åt helvete*—as well as by Kerstin Fredholm, in *Fint hemma*—has been used by many prominent working-class writers, including Lo-Johansson (Olsson, 2004, p. 25); David Ericsson's *Taxfree* very much resembles a typical realistic working-class novel from the 1970s, such as Jan Fogelbäck's (1943–2017) *Körjournal* [Driver's Logbook] (1979), which also draws on the author's own experiences of working as a lorry driver; Sunvisson's *Svenska palmen* to a high degree follows the conventions of the most emblematic genre in Swedish working-class literature—the proletarian bildungsroman (this will be discussed in more detail below); and his *Svarta bär* can be read as a collective novel—a genre that several working-class writers, including Lo-Johansson, have experimented with (see Landgren, 2011).

There are also many thematic similarities with traditional working-class literature. For example, the criticism of non- or misrecognition expressed by almost all the authors discussed in *Writing Class* (see Chapter Three) is a prominent feature also in much older working-class literature. To illustrate this, one can point to the most well-known Swedish labour-movement song of all times, “Arbetets söner” [Sons of Labour], which is sometimes referred to as the national anthem of the Swedish working class. Its first chorus goes as follows: “Människovärdet vi fordra tillbaka. Kämpa för rättvisa, frihet och bröd” [We demand back human dignity. Fight for justice, freedom and bread]. To say that human dignity must be reclaimed is certainly to criticise misrecognition. That “Arbetets söner” highlights both material (bread) and more abstract or existential (dignity) demands points toward yet another similarity between literature about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden and older working-class literature.

As several scholars have pointed out, the high degree of reflectiveness that characterises many works about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden is something that can also be found in older working-class literature (Adolfsson, 1995; Nilsson, 2006, pp. 152–156; Agrell, 2016, p. 51). According to Agrell (2003, pp. 67–68; 2015, p. 298), this is the result of the cultivation in the Swedish labour movement in the years around 1900 of a specific “begrundande” [meditative]

reading practice, which was inspired by the religious revival movements of the time. At the heart of this practice—which came to influence Swedish working-class literature heavily—was the promotion of dialogic *reflection* on how what one read could be brought to bear on one's personal situation. Thus, one of the most important rhetorical strategies in literature about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden has long been important in the tradition of working-class literature.

Why, then, do authors writing about blue-collar labour-market precarity in contemporary Sweden reference older working-class literature? Of course, there are many possible answers to this question. For example, older literature can be used as a source of knowledge that can put present conditions into perspective. The quotation above from *Svart arbete*, for example, shows how the protagonist reflects on his predicament by comparing it to that described in a novel by Lo-Johansson. As was discussed in Chapter Two, references to older literature can also be a signal that the conditions for the so-called precariat resemble those of the working class before the welfare-state era.

However, the references to the tradition of working-class literature presented above primarily fulfil what J. L. Austin (1975) calls an illocutionary function—that of signalling “how an utterance is to be taken” (Furberg, 1971, p. 192). When discussing this function in literary texts, philosopher Mats Furberg (1971, p. 211) gives the example of “sub-headings such as ‘a Novel’”, which instruct readers how to read. Establishing connections to the tradition of working-class literature can also fulfil an illocutionary function by signalling that the text has the ambition to do what working-class literature has traditionally done, and that it should be read accordingly.

Working-class literature has done many things, but one of the things that it is most well-known for is that it has tried to contribute to social and political change. For example, as has already been pointed out, Lo-Johansson and the other *statare* writers are generally considered to have contributed to the abolishment of the *statare* system. This has led scholars of Swedish working-class literature such as Agrell (2003) and Christer Ekholm (2024) to propose that it should be conceptualised as a *rhetorical*—as the term is understood by Loyd F. Bitzer (1968) in the essay “The Rhetorical Situation”—literature: as a literature that tries to make readers aware of problems

and encourages them to solve them.<sup>39</sup> By referencing older working-class literature, including works by Lo-Johansson and the other ståtare writers, authors writing about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden invite readers to read their works as rhetorical texts.

Torp's mentioning of Ekelöf does indeed seem to have an illocutionary function that stresses her rhetorical ambitions:

En person [...] som synliggjorde städerskans vardag mer än någon annan är förstås Maja Ekelöf. Året är 1970. Hennes bok med den briljanta titeln *Rapport från en skurhink* väcker Sverige. [...] Genom sin politiska dagboksroman, helt ur städerskans perspektiv, öppnade hon ögon. Samhället började se människorna som vårdade deras kontor. (Torp, 2023, p. 161)

[One person (...) who did more than anyone else to make the everyday life of the cleaning lady more visible is of course Maja Ekelöf. The year is 1970. Her book, brilliantly titled *Report from a Scouring Pail*, woke up Sweden. (...) Through her political diary novel, written entirely from the perspective of the cleaning lady, she opened eyes. Society began to see the people who tended their offices.]

To make people see the cleaners' situation—and perhaps act on what they see—is also Torp's own ambition.

References to the tradition of working-class literature also help *legitimise* the authors' rhetorical ambitions. The consecration of working-class literature as a central strand in modern Swedish literature has opened up a space in the realm of literature for class politics by legitimising phenomena such as class and labour as literary topics—a space that is especially valuable today, when the labour movement is relatively weak and when it is therefore difficult to articulate critique of class injustices in the realm of politics (Nilsson, 2014b, p. 152). By associating themselves with the tradition of working-class literature, authors writing about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden enter this space, borrowing authority from their predecessors.

Given the many references to earlier working-class writers in the works discussed above, many commentators—as highlighted in Chapter Two—have placed them in

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<sup>39</sup> Another commentator, Magnus Gustafson (2020, p. 114), makes a similar argument, drawing on literary scholar John Beverley's concept of testimony—which highlights its ambition to make visible a pressing concern—to characterise contemporary Swedish working-class literature.

the tradition of working-class literature. However, as was also noted in that chapter, some have expressed scepticism toward this conceptualisation. Moreover, at least some authors writing about labour-market precarity in contemporary Sweden display a rather ambivalent attitude toward older working-class literature.

Lundberg is one such author. Sometimes he accepted being categorised as a working-class writer, or even embraced it, as when he joined *Föreningen Arbetarskrivare* [The Association of Working-Class Writers] (see Nilsson, 2014b, pp. 126–127). At other times, he was critical. While being sympathetic to the ethics of traditional working-class literature, he stated, he was sceptical toward its (alleged) commitment to realist aesthetics, which he considered an obstacle for capturing the intricacies of contemporary class injustices (Nilsson, 2014b, pp. 126–128).<sup>40</sup>

Lundberg's critique of the tradition of working-class literature should not be taken as evidence that he does not belong there. In fact, even emblematic working-class writers such as Moa Martinson have (at least on occasion) protested against being categorised as such (Nilsson, 2006, p. 76). Furthermore, every new generation of working-class writers in Sweden has been critical of, and tried to distance itself from, its predecessors, arguing that social and political changes have made necessary the development of new literary-political strategies (Nilsson, 2012; Nilsson, 2014a). Thus, Lundberg's ambivalence toward the tradition of working-class literature is, paradoxically, something that he has in common with many of its exponents and, hence, perhaps even an argument for placing him within it.

Lundberg's ambivalence seems to back up a common claim in scholarship on the representation in literature of labour-market precarity, namely that the rise of precarious labour necessitates, or encourages, the creation of *new* literary forms. For example, Joseph B. Entin (2023, p. 9) argues that precarious labour cannot be described with traditional literary means, and that this has led to the development of a new narrative form that he calls "precarious realism". In this realism, the "motifs and tropes from earlier radical literary forms" have been "substantially recast" (Entin, 2023, p. 35). In particular, "a new rhetorical figure" has emerged, which crystallises and condenses "the dynamics of post-Fordist flexible production", namely "the worker-in-motion" (Entin, 2023, p. 7). This figure is "typically depicted through

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<sup>40</sup> It should also be noted that the protagonist in *Cykelbudet* is somewhat sceptical toward being described as a working-class writer (Teglund, 2021a, p. 45).

motifs of displacement, motion, and transit that underscore the uncertainty and precarity of life, labor, citizenship, and class formation for working people” (Entin, 2023, p. 7).

In Entin’s discussion of precarious realism, older working-class literature—particularly proletarian literature from the 1930s—serves as a key point of reference. He discusses several authors (including Russel Banks) who, in response to “the shifting social, economic, and political conditions of late capitalist globalization”, have developed “new modes of narrating class and labor” that *both draw upon and diverge from* “the proletarian literary traditions developed in the first half of the twentieth century” (Entin, 2023, p. 25). This describes well Lundberg’s attitude toward the tradition of working-class literature, as well as the literary-political strategies employed by several other authors writing about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden.

Like Jönson’s *Efter arbetsschema*, Boss’s *Kompression* contains poems describing workers that resemble the portrait poems in Sjödin’s *Sotfragment*. Both Sjödin’s and Boss’s poems are generally characterised by a matter-of-fact tone, and the final lines often contain a *volta*, introducing some kind of tension or a new perspective. For example, one of the most famous poems in *Sotfragment*—“Kolskjutaren” [The Stoker]—describes a silent, calm and grey person who leads a secluded life. Then, in the last line, it is declared that “[p]å honom bygger man samhällen” [on him, societies are built] (Sjödin, 1965, p. 67). This volta sheds new light on him and encourages the reader—through what could be understood as a kind of Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* or Wittgensteinian *aspect change*—to reflect on the working class. Another portrait poem in *Kompression* that uses a volta to pack a sting in its tail begins with a description of bad working conditions on a farm producing cucumbers—long working days, low pay, workers having to handle carcinogenic chemicals without protective equipment etc.—and then ends with the laconic comment: “Det var ekologiska / gurkor” [They were ecological / cucumbers] (Boss, 2023b, p. 197). With this, the grim working conditions described earlier are framed in a larger context, namely that of a contemporary capitalism where ecological production can go hand in hand with brutal exploitation of migrant workers, since both generate profit.

There are, however, also significant differences between Sjödin’s and Boss’s poems. In particular, the relationships between author/speaker and the portrayed workers

are quite different. In the portrait poems in *Sotfragment*, the workers never speak, they are just spoken about. Their experiences are commented on and interpreted by the author/speaker from a distance. For example, that the stoker in “Kolskjutaren” is someone upon whom one builds societies is not something that he himself is necessarily aware of. And, in several poems, it is explicitly stated that the portrayed workers do not understand their predicament. About one of them it is said that he “såg aldrig sin sannings skugga” [never saw the shadow of his truth]—or, in other words, that there is more to his experiences than what he himself understands (Sjödin, 1965, p. 54). A similar description is given in the probably most well-known portrait poem in *Sotfragment*, “Bandvalsaren” [The Coil Roller]. It describes a worker who does everything in his power to provide a better future for his sons but then becomes alienated from them because of their social advancement. Its last lines read as follows: “Han ska aldrig förstå / vem som murat hans ensamhet” [He will never understand / who it was that walled in his loneliness] (Sjödin, 1965, p. 76).<sup>41</sup> It also says that to the coil roller, his sons are “trappor mot solen” [stairway to the sun] (Sjödin, 1965, p. 76). Given the fact that he is described as someone who never has had time to read books, this metaphor points to a distance between his experiences and the poetic form in which they are described. Like Sjödin, Boss puts workers’ experiences in a larger context and analyses them in a discourse that they do not necessarily share. However, he also represents their own ideas and expressions. Thus, he shows greater awareness than does Sjödin of the ethical problems involved in speaking for others.<sup>42</sup>

The differences between how the relationship between author/speaker and workers is expressed in Sjödin’s portrait poems and Boss’s testimony poems are conditioned by differences between the worker collectives they write about. Sjödin portrayed workers who shared a lifeworld that he himself had been part of, and who had—through the labour movement, which Sjödin was also a part of—a collective voice that could be relayed in literature. This is expressed in an emblematic way in a review of Sjödin’s poetry collection *Har ni flaggproblem?* [Do You Have Flag Problems?] (1970): “Han skriver inte om arbetare, han skriver som arbetare” [He writes not

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<sup>41</sup> The English translation of “Bandvalsaren” quoted here is made by Philip K. Nelson. It was sent to Sjödin in an (undated) letter and has been made available to me by Sjödin’s family.

<sup>42</sup> This can, of course, be a product of the fact that whereas Sjödin writes about typical characters (see Nilsson, 2021c, p. 171), Boss is portraying individuals.

about workers, he writes as a worker] (Adlerberth, 1970; see also Nilsson, 2021c, pp. 59–62). That Sjödin—whose experiences of manual labour in 1970 were decades-old—could be described as someone who writes as a worker is a clear indication that his connection to the working class was primarily understood in political terms.

The workers described in *Kompression* do not share any lifeworld—they are in motion, to use Entin’s formulation—and Boss does not share their working and living conditions. More importantly, they do not make up any political collective. Thus, Boss cannot write *as* or speak *for* them. This is recognised in *Kompression* through its thematization of the differences and the distance between the workers’ testimonies and the poet/speaker’s discourse.<sup>43</sup>

Another work about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden that displays an ambivalent relationship to older working-class literature is Sunvisson’s *Svenska palmen*. As was stated above, it belongs to the most emblematic genre in Swedish working-class literature, namely that of the proletarian bildungsroman. In fact, its main story line—about the Ukrainian migrant worker Ruslan—has many similarities with that about the protagonist in one of the canonical examples of this genre in Sweden: Adrian in Lo-Johansson’s *Kungsgatan* [literally: King Street] (1935; published in German as *Kungsgatan: Roman einer Strasse* in 1949). Adrian is a young man who moves to Stockholm from the countryside with the goal of shedding his identity as a farmer and instead becoming a worker, thus placing himself at the centre of Sweden’s transformation from an agrarian society to a modern social-democratic welfare state (see Nilsson, 2019). Ruslan’s background is similar to Adrian’s, as he too migrates from the periphery (rural Ukraine) to the metropolis (Stockholm). But his goal is—at least initially—simpler: he just wants to make money. However, in Stockholm he begins learning what it is to be a worker—it is to be someone who, along with others, performs labour that is so important that employers cannot ignore their demands—and starts dreaming of becoming one. But, unlike Adrian’s in *Kungsgatan*, Ruslan’s individual development does not take place against any backdrop of collective progress for the working class, but in a cold capitalist world

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<sup>43</sup> However, it is important not to essentialise this difference between literature about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden and earlier Swedish working-class literature. For example, in Lo-Johansson’s breakthrough novel *Godnatt, jord* (1933), the author’s sympathies for the labour movement are expressed only by one character—a socialist agitator who tries (and fails!) to organise estate workers in a union—while the vast majority of the workers express hostility toward this movement.

characterised by labour-related precarity. In particular, his status as an undocumented migrant means that Ruslan is excluded both from the welfare provision granted to Swedish workers by the state and—more importantly—from the labour movement. In *Kungsgatan*, it is emphasised by the protagonist's mentor, the social-democratic worker Modén, that just working does not make you a worker, you also have to join a union (Lo-Johansson, 1935, p. 107). Adrian does this and eventually succeeds in re-making himself and becoming a worker. Ruslan, on the other hand, fails. The story about his coming to Sweden to work ends with him facing deportation and his dream of becoming a worker falling apart: “Han hade trott sig tillhöra staden, liksom han trott sig tillhöra de arbetare som kunde ställa krav [...]. Han hade trott, men trodde inte längre” [He had thought that he belonged to the city, just like he had thought that he belonged to the workers who could make demands (...). He had believed, but did not believe anymore] (Sunvisson, 2021b, p. 252).

This tragic ending—which stands in stark contrast to how the story About Adrian's development in *Kungsgatan* ends—resonates well with Entin's observations regarding the relationship between earlier working-class literature and literature about contemporary precarious labour. “While proletarian literature regularly revolved around a tension between unity and difference, solidarity and separation”, he writes, “it typically tended toward a logic of consolidation and climax, in which isolation and alienation might be overcome through the emergence of a socialist imperative, consciousness, or movement” (Entin, 2023, p. 35). In contemporary narratives about precarious labour, however, he finds no trace of “the culminating strike or revolutionary commitment that marked many left texts from the 1930s, when a sense of radical possibility shaped much art and thinking” (Entin, 2023, p. 35). “These texts”, he argues

do not offer tales of consolidation or the overcoming of divisions in the construction of economic and social unity; they are not stories of revolutionary convergence, or of collective coming together in which an underlying working-class identity is realized or reflected. Rather, they are conjunctural stories of uncertain, at times explosive, encounter, intersection, and collision in which unity is most often deferred. The emphasis is not only, or even primarily, on what

workers have in common, but on the way both divisions and commonalities between working peoples are translated and experienced across borders of language, culture, nation, and citizenship. (Entin, 2023, p. 8)<sup>44</sup>

This is a very good description of the story about Ruslan in *Svenska palmen*. However, in the very last lines of the novel, a different perspective is opened up, when he has a vision of how, *in the future*, he and other migrant workers will be transformed into a politically powerful collective: “I det försvinnande ögonblicket av klarsynthet såg han den rätta tiden komma [...], såg han deras samlade växtkraft spränga stadens väggar inifrån” [In the passing moment of clarity, he saw the right time coming (...), he saw their combined power tearing down the city walls from within] (Sunvisson, 2021b, p. 252). Thus *Svenska palmen* follows the same narrative path that Entin identifies in the traditional proletarian novel—it too tends toward “a logic of consolidation and climax, in which isolation and alienation might be overcome through the emergence of a socialist imperative, consciousness, or movement”.<sup>45</sup> In fact, it even displays similarities with a very famous proletarian novel from a period earlier than the one mainly discussed by Entin, namely Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1904/1905). There too, the ending is utopian, and the coming triumph is described as a future proletarian conquering of the city: “*Chicago will be ours! Chicago will be ours! CHICAGO WILL BE OURS!*” (Sinclair, 2006).

That the representation of workers in literature about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden shares both differences and similarities with older working-class literature seems to confirm Entin’s thesis that the rise of precarious labour has resulted in a need to break with at least *some* of the literary-political strategies developed in the tradition of working-class literature. It is, however, important to remember that this tradition is a historical phenomenon that has often reacted and adapted to economic, political and social changes (Nilsson, 2017, p. 96). For

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<sup>44</sup> In a Swedish context, the author Karl Kofi Ahlqvist (b. 1992) has emphasised that in order to describe insecure labour-market positions and temporary jobs, it is necessary to “ta sönder” [break up] literature’s traditional “framåtblickande” [forward-looking] dramaturgy (Mogensén, 2024).

<sup>45</sup> And so do some of the contemporary works discussed by Entin. For example, he argues that Russel Banks’s *Continental Drift* (1985) “invokes what we might call the specter of solidarity—a version of what Tillie Olsen refers to as ‘the not yet in the now,’ the ghost of a hope that these characters could find common cause despite (and to some extent because of) their differences—only to underscore the social and political impediments to cross-cultural identification and mutual aid” (Entin, 2023, p. 43).

example, the rise of the Swedish welfare state and the Swedish labour-market model resulted in quite radical thematic and formal transformations of working-class literature (Nilsson, 2012, pp. 53–55; Nilsson, 2014b, pp. 34–55; Nilsson, 2021c, pp. 107–143). And so did the rapid economic, political and social development in Sweden from the 1960s and onward (Nilsson, 2012, pp. 55–60; Nilsson, 2014b, pp. 71–138).

Even if these transformations were sometimes quite radical, they have been understood—and should be understood—primarily as changes *within* the tradition of working-class literature. For example, in 1947, working-class writer Folke Fridell published a programmatic article titled “Arbetarna och proletärdikten” [The Workers and Proletarian Writing], in which he called for “en *förnyelse* av proletärlitteraturen” [a *renewal* of proletarian literature] to address the new configuration of Swedish class society shaped by the welfare state and modern industrial labour—phenomena absent from the working-class literature of the 1930s (Fridell, 1970, pp. 24, 37; emphasis added; see also Nilsson, 2014b, pp. 45–48). Sjödin’s *Sotfragment* represented, in relation to the working-class poetry of the 1930s, significant formal and thematic innovations and was also hailed as a renewal of the tradition. For instance, the poet, critic, and member of the Swedish Academy, Östen Sjöstrand (1949), argued that “den förnyelse inom arbetardikten som Folke Fridell med sådan intensitet efterlyst, på lyrikens område infriats av Sjödin” [the renewal of working-class writing that Folke Fridell had called for with such intensity had been achieved by Sjödin in the field of poetry]. Similarly, the critic Viveka Heyman (1949) described Sjödin’s book as “en ny och förnyad proletärlrik” [a new and renewed proletarian poetry]. Sjödin himself insisted on continuing the tradition of working-class literature, even as he was critical of both its forms and certain aspects of its politics. In many of his poems, he thematised how the revolutionary ideals and imagery of earlier working-class poetry and songs had become anachronistic in the context of the social-democratic welfare state (Nilsson, 2021c, pp. 123–124). At the same time, he self-reflexively presented his poetry as an *updated* version of these political poems and songs (Nilsson, 2021c, pp. 124–135).

One reason that critics and authors have insisted on continuity within the tradition of working-class literature—on speaking about its renewal rather than its end—even when re-configurations of Swedish class society have made necessary the development of new literary-political strategies, has been that the consecration of

working-class literature as a central strand in modern Swedish literature has legitimised class and class politics as literary topics and functions (Nilsson, 2014b, pp. 151–152). Associating literary works with the tradition of working-class literature—and, thus, perpetuating the latter—has meant placing them in a context that helps them fulfil their rhetorical, class-political, functions. Thus, the relationship between literature about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden and the tradition of working-class literature is not conditioned only by how well suited the forms and topoi developed in the latter are when it comes to representing the so-called precariat, but also by this tradition's status in the site of literature.

Placing literature about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden in dialogue with the tradition of working-class literature sheds new light on both. With the point of departure in an analysis of the claim that authors writing about the so-called precariat have failed to speak from the position traditionally associated with working-class writers—i.e. from within an already constituted class—it is possible to propose a more historically and theoretically sound conceptualisation of the relationship between authors and the worker collectives they write about, in traditional working-class literature as well as in literature about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden. The identification of new literary-political strategies for representing the so-called precariat has also made visible aspects of older working-class literature that have hitherto not been the object of scholarly attention, including its subsumption of workers' voices under that of the author. And the same can be said about the identification of thematic similarities. According to Entin (2023, p. 9), contemporary literature about precarious labour in the USA encourages readers to see that older labour narratives too are “organized around matters of precarity, insecurity, motion, and migration, in which issues of class identification, solidarity, and action are much more uncertain, fluid, and incomplete than we often have presumed”. This is true too for literature about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden.

# Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, the aim of *Writing Class* is to explore how literary representations of precarious labour in contemporary Sweden can deepen our understanding of such labour and contribute to struggles against the injustices associated with it, as well as to analyse the literary-political strategies that Swedish authors have developed in response to contemporary labour-market insecurities. In the previous chapters, these questions have been addressed from various perspectives. Chapter One foregrounded the different kinds of injustice described and criticised in literature portraying precarious labour, highlighting that many works are characterised by a high degree of reflectiveness. Chapter Two argued that authors writing about the so-called precariat do not do so in the same way that traditional working-class writers wrote about the working class. Rather than reporting from within a class, they try to contribute to the coming-into-existence of a class. Chapter Three examined how literature about precarious labour seeks to intervene in—or can be mobilised to support—struggles against labour-market precarity, emphasising that many works promote traditional labour-movement politics and unionisation. Finally, Chapter Four revisited the relationship between writers and workers, offering a more in-depth comparison between the representational strategies of traditional Swedish working-class literature and those found in contemporary portrayals of precarious labour.

One effective way to identify key features in the representation of class and precarious labour in contemporary Swedish literature is to compare them with Guy Standing's concept of the precariat. His theories have significantly influenced discussions about precarious labour in Sweden, shaped debates on its literary representation, and impacted the representations themselves. When asked where she got the idea to write *Prekariatet*, Liv Helm pointed to Standing's *The Precariat*, arguing that reading it gave her "en helt ny blick på arbetsmarknaden och samhället" [a completely new understanding of the labour market and society] (Malmö Stadsteater, 2020). Several themes from Standing's book can also be found in her

play, as well as in other works analysed in *Writing Class*—for example the reluctance among people working under precarious conditions to self-identify as members of the precariat, a strong focus on migrant workers, and the view that labour-market precarity cuts across traditional class distinctions. That Anders Teglund explicitly uses the term *precariat* in *Cykelbudet* also indicates that Standing's theories are an important point of reference.

Nevertheless, the portrayal of precarious labour in contemporary Swedish literature differs in several ways from Standing's descriptions of the precariat. First, Standing (2014b, p. 7) argues that the precariat is a distinct "*class-in-the-making*" which is not "part of the 'working class' or the 'proletariat'". In literature about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden, on the other hand, the precariat is described—as has been demonstrated primarily in Chapter Two—as belonging to a *broadly defined working class* (in itself). Second, Standing presents labour-market precarity as a contradictory phenomenon; while highlighting and criticising the injustices associated with such precarity, he also claims—in the first edition of *The Precariat* from 2011—that many in the precariat are "drawn into" it "looking for something better than what was offered in industrial society and by twentieth-century labourism" (Standing, 2011, p. 10). In the second, revised edition of *The Precariat* from 2014 he even states that the precariat *embraces* "anxiety" as a "part of freedom", and *rejects* "security" (Standing, 2014b, p. 190).<sup>46</sup> The portrayal of contemporary precarious blue-collar labour in Swedish literature is highly multi-faceted and complex. However, no attention is given to celebrations of insecurity and anxiety of the kind described by Standing. In fact, in Tommy Sundvall's *På äventyr i senkapitalismen*, the idea that people could prefer working under precarious conditions is explicitly ridiculed.

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<sup>46</sup> Standing produces little evidence for this claim. Therefore, he could be accused of reproducing what British writer Ivor Southwood (2011, p. 17) has called a positive "re-packaging" of precarity "as an unprecedented form of liberation".



Excerpt from Tommy Sundvall's *På äventyr i senkapitalismen*. In a discussion of gig work, one of the characters says: "Det finns ju dom som tycker att det här är utvecklande" [There are those who think that this is stimulating]. Then he laughs and explains that he was being ironic.

Because Standing emphasises the differences between the precariat and the working class, and since he is highly critical of "twentieth-century labourism", and even ascribes positive qualities to precarious labour, it is hardly surprising that he is negative to traditional labour-movement politics. Unions, he argues, "see the answer to precarious labour in a return to the 'labourist' model they had been so instrumental in cementing in the mid-twentieth century—more stable jobs with long-term employment security and the benefit trappings that went with that", but the precariat, he claims, has "no desire to resurrect labourism" (Standing, 2014b, p. 13).<sup>47</sup> In literature portraying precarious labour in contemporary Sweden, however, traditional labour-movement politics—particularly unionisation—are often

<sup>47</sup> Similar ideas have been propagated also by many other commentators who have argued that changes in capitalism have made labour-movement politics anachronistic and that it needs to be replaced by *new social movements*. An early and influential example can be found in Stuart Hall's "Brave New World" from 1984, which was later republished in revised form as "The Meaning of New Times" in an edited collection with the telling title *New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s* (Hall, 1988).

presented as the most effective means of combating the injustices associated with such labour. Consequently, this literature advances a political imaginary that diverges from the one proposed by Guy Standing.

This difference may stem from the fact that literature typically approaches the world from a different perspective than political or academic texts. According to literary scholar Gary Saul Morson and economist Morton Schapiro (2018, p. 14), literature—specifically the realist novel—emphasises particularity, which makes it a valuable supplement, or even contributor, to scholarly knowledge. A similar point is made by literary scholar Christian Claesson (2024, p. 71), who argues that literature about precarious labour is often highly “situated” and avoids approaching precarity “from a general perspective” or “from above.” Literature also tends to embrace complexity, offering alternative understandings of social phenomena compared to much academic thinking. “Whereas the fundamental impulse of the rationalist or scientist is to abstract the essence of a situation and apply general principles to it” Morson and Schapiro write, “literature tends to make the exact opposite move. Instead of showing the essential simplicity of things, it shows their complexity and teaches us to reason appropriately” (2018, p. 221). This perspective resonates with Ben Clarke and Nick Hubble’s analysis of class in working-class literature. They argue that class is “a contingent political category that not only alters in response to changes in the means and relations of production, but is always deployed under specific conditions for particular ends,” and that working-class literature is “essential to understanding this complexity, in part because it insists upon the specificity and complexities of working-class experience, which political, historical and sociological accounts often erase” (2018, p. 5). This emphasis on reflection and complexity also characterises the literary works analysed in *Writing Class*.

Scholars and politicians generally strive for generality and universality. Standing, for example, argues that the precariat is a global class, that its relationship to the working class is the same everywhere, and that it favours one specific kind of politics. Literary works, on the other hand, describe precarious labour in concrete contexts, focusing on its particularities. For example, the partisanship for labour-movement politics in literature about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden can be related to the political (but also literary and personal) contexts in which this literature has been written.

Labour-market precarity affects many workers in Sweden. However, full-time and open-ended employment remains the norm, and most workers continue to enjoy a relatively high degree of labour-market security. This is largely due to the fact that, although Sweden's social-democratic labour-market model and welfare state have come under pressure, they have not been dismantled. This resilience is, in turn, a consequence of the enduring strength of the Swedish labour movement—which, despite weakening in recent decades, remains one of the strongest in the world. In 2023, 62% of Swedish workers were unionised (Larsson, 2022, p. 2). While this represents a decline from the mid-1990s, when nearly 90% of workers were union members, it is still high by international standards. In certain sectors—particularly healthcare and manufacturing—and among employees with academic education, unionisation rates remain as high as 75% (Larsson, 2022, p. 2).

Several of the authors discussed in *Writing Class* have close ties to unions and some—notably Anders Teglund, Pelle Sunvisson and Emil Boss—have personal experiences of successful union work in the so-called precariat. Furthermore, many of them are inspired by the tradition of working-class literature, where labour-movement politics is often promoted. Against this background, it is hardly surprising that they view unions as a valuable resource in struggles against precarious labour.

Several commentators have argued that the idea about the rise of precarious labour is exaggerated. These include Joseph Choonara, who also claims that it has had radical and detrimental consequences for left-wing political thinking. “Traditional radical arguments, emphasising workers’ potential power”, he argues, have been “stood on their head” and workers have instead been portrayed as “abject victims of a profound restructuring of the economy accompanying neoliberalism” (Choonara, 2019, p. v). In fact, he argues, “despite historically low levels of collective struggle by workers”, the working class may be in a better position to challenge and reverse the attacks that they have faced in recent decades than is generally thought “even by those on the radical left” (Choonara, 2019, p. 4).

One aspect of the critique of labour-movement politics expressed by Standing and others who subscribe to his view that precarious labour is a consequence of a new phase in the history of capitalism is a scepticism toward idealisations of the past. Standing (2014b, p. 192), associates “labourism” with what he calls “the ‘bad’ precariat”, a reactionary class fraction “fuelled by nostalgia for an imagined golden

age”.<sup>48</sup> Such scepticism against backward-looking, nostalgic political visions has been common within the Left at least since Marx’s proclamation in *Brumaire* that the social revolution “cannot take its poetry from the past but only from the future”, that it “cannot begin with itself before it has stripped away all superstition about the past” and that it “must let the dead bury their dead in order to arrive at its own content” (Marx, 2002, p. 22). In later Marxist thought, it has been radicalised. For example, Marxist philosopher Georg Lukács dismissed all critique of capitalism which was inspired by past conditions as “romantic” (see Eiden-Offe, 2023, pp. 14–15). A good illustration of the strength of this position in contemporary socialist critique can be found in cultural theorist Mark Fisher’s claim in *Capitalist Realism* (2022) that socialists need to develop *a radically new* anti-capitalist language.

Sometimes the attitude toward the past in literary portrayals of precarious labour in contemporary Sweden could be described as romantic or nostalgic. Perhaps the best example of this can be found in Teglund’s *Cykelbudet*, in a description of how the narrator’s older relatives, Ernfrid and Siri, benefited from various social reforms during the welfare-state era:

1938 [...] kommer den första lagstadgade semestern. Tolv dagars betald ledighet per år. Det ska komma att bli bättre successivt. Fyra decennier senare, mot slutet av Ernfrids arbetsliv, är industrisemestern uppe i fem veckor. Han blir kvar på fabriken hela livet och lever pensionärsliv under åttiotalet innan han dör 1990 efter en kort tids sjukdom. En politisk retoriker skulle kunna hävda att han levde och dog parallellt med den traditionella socialdemokratins gyllene era. (Teglund, 2021a, p. 111)

[1938 (...) comes the first-ever legislation about paid vacation. Twelve days of paid leisure every year. It will get even better gradually. Four decades later, toward the end of Ernfrid’s working life, paid vacation for industrial workers has been extended to five weeks. He works in the factory his whole life and is a pensioner in the eighties, before dying in 1990 after a short period of illness. A political

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<sup>48</sup> At the same time, however, Standing can be accused of painting a rather rosy picture of the past. When contrasting the so-called precariat with the traditional working class, his description of the latter is often quite idealising. For example, his argument that unlike work done by the precariat, working-class jobs during the welfare-state era made it possible for workers to move “‘upward’ [...] in terms of status and income”, “gain skills” and “make use of competencies” obscures the fact that many of them worked dead-end jobs (Standing, 2014b, p. 23).

rhetorician could argue that he lived and died in parallel with the golden era of traditional social democracy.]

Here, the Swedish welfare state is described as more or less a golden age for workers. A similar idealisation of the past can be identified in Elinor Torp's (2023, p. 23) *Rent åt helvete*, where—as was pointed out in Chapter Three—Sweden in the 1970s is praised as the best country in the world when it comes to workers' rights.

Of course, nostalgia can be deeply problematic. It risks papering over problems in the past and divert attention from today's problems and opportunities towards conditions that are gone and cannot be recreated. Nevertheless, in recent years, the Marxist dismissal of historically grounded utopias has been challenged in interesting ways. Patrick Eiden-Offe (2023) has argued, in *The Poetry of Class*, that images of the past—including obviously incorrect ones—can meaningfully contribute to progressive political struggles. Furthermore, historian Enzo Traverso has shown that Marxism is not at all as future-oriented as is often assumed. In *Left-Wing Melancholia*, he identifies a “Marxist vision of history” which has “implied a memorial prescription: we had to inscribe the events of the past in our historical consciousness in order to project ourselves into the future. It was a ‘strategic’ memory of past emancipatory struggles, a future-oriented memory” (Traverso, 2016, p. 13). However, the failure and collapse of Soviet communism, Traverso claims, has made impossible this “dialectic between past and future” and led to the emergence of a more melancholic vision of history on the Left, one in which memories of defeat and disaster have replaced those of emancipatory struggles (Traverso, 2016, pp. 12–13).

In a Swedish context, the Marxist vision of history described by Traverso has not necessarily lost its relevance. Even if the Swedish labour movement is not as strong as it once was, and even if its most important achievements—the welfare state and the Swedish labour-market model—are under attack, it has not collapsed like Soviet communism. Therefore, it may still serve as both a source of inspiration and an actual resource in struggles against precarious labour. Furthermore, as Axel Honneth has observed, memories of past reforms are a valuable resource for the renewal of socialism. “The more legal reforms [...] that socialism can look back upon in its search for traces of its own intentions”, he writes in *The Idea of Socialism: Toward a Renewal*, “the more it will regain confidence in the realizability of its visions in the future” (Honneth, 2017, p. 74).

Literature about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden does look back at successful reforms, but it also—in a way that resembles the dialectical vision of history described by Traverso—portrays the struggles that made these reforms possible. For example, in *Cykelbudet*, Teglund not only describes the reforms that his relatives benefited from during the heyday of the social-democratic welfare state, but also their prehistory: the rise of the Swedish labour movement. He also explicitly discusses this prehistory's relevance in today's situation. This is done through his reflections on Per Olov Enquist's (1934–2020) novel *Musikanternas uttåg* (1978; published in English as *The March of the Musicians* in 1985):

Musikanternas uttåg skildrar en brytpunkt där något började röra på sig. Men det var inget som kom från ovan. Det var enskilda personer som tog strid i det lilla: i familjen, på arbetsplatser och i samhället. Dessa människor riskerade stora saker för små framsteg, de gjorde det för sin överlevnads skull och misslyckades ideligen. Med tiden fick de dock fler att ansluta sig, och stegvis skapades en förändring. Det kom inte gratis. I boken upprepas ett mantra som fångar denna premis: Det gives alltid något bättre än döden.

[...] Även om de fackliga framstegen gjordes i en annan tid, under en industriell blomstringsperiod och i ett annat politiskt klimat, så har det likafullt gjorts en gång i vårt land av människor som aldrig hade gjort det förut. (Teglund, 2021a, pp. 112–113)

[The March of the Musicians describes a turning-point when something began to move. But it wasn't something that came from above. It was individuals who fought where they were: in their families, in their workplaces and in society. These people took big risks for small steps forwards, they did it for their survival and they often failed. In time, however, they convinced more and more people to join them and gradually they created change. It wasn't for free. In the book a mantra that captures this premise is repeated: There is always something better than death.

(...) Even if the rise of the unions happened in another era, in a period when industry flourished, and in a different political climate, it is a fact that it has been done once before in our country, and that it was done by people who had never done it before.]

This approach to history constitutes a similarity between literature about precarious labour in contemporary Sweden and the tradition of working-class literature. Since as far back as the 1940s, many prominent Swedish working-class writers—including Stig Sjödin and Folke Fridell—have promoted a revival of the ethics and politics of the early socialist labour movement as an answer to contemporary (often new) class injustices (Nilsson, 2014b; Nilsson, 2021c).

Political scientists Geoff Dow and Winton Higgins (2013) have argued that the Swedish labour movement has been the most successful political movement ever in a Western democracy. A similar assessment is made by Göran Therborn (2018b), according to whom the Swedish Social Democratic Party has been “the most successful by far of all the world’s labour and social-democratic parties”. He also stresses that even if “Swedish social democracy is clearly in deep trouble” today, it “is not dying or becoming politically irrelevant” (Therborn, 2018b). Furthermore, in a recent book about the Swedish labour-market model, Irene Wennemo and Anna Fransson—who both work for The Swedish National Mediation Office—conclude that even if this model is challenged, primarily by ambitions within the EU to regulate labour markets, it remains vital and has good chances of survival (Fransson and Wennemo, 2024, p. 17). Thus, seeking inspiration from the history of the Swedish labour movement and the institutions it has built—primarily the welfare state and the Swedish labour-market model—should not be discarded as nostalgia.

In fact, there are several examples of how, in Sweden, traditional labour-movement politics has been an effective way for fighting precarious labour-market conditions. The struggle for a collective bargaining agreement described by Teglund in *Cykelbudet* was successful, and the syndicalist union SAC has—as described, for example, in *Något har hänt*—helped many migrant workers to stand up for their rights. Recently, The Swedish Building Workers’ Union, which is affiliated to The Swedish Trade Union Confederation and has approximately 80,000 members, has also begun organising migrant workers. When asked why, organiser Emelie Renlund answers as follows:

– Om lönerna dumpas, människor utnyttjas, sänks standarden för alla. Det blir ett hot mot den svenska modellen och mot de svenska byggnadsarbetarna. Det finns de som säger att de utländska arbetarna tar våra jobb. Men det handlar inte om det. De blir utnyttjade. Det är därför vi vill organisera dem så att de förstår vad de har rätt till och vad vi kan kräva här i Sverige. Får vi upp deras löner så att

de ligger i nivå med de svenska, då konkurrerar de inte längre genom lön. (Pogorzelska, 2025, p. 17)

[– If wages are undercut, people are exploited, standards are lowered for everyone. It will be a threat to the Swedish model and to Swedish construction workers. There are those who say that foreign workers are taking our jobs. But it's not about that. They are being exploited. That's why we want to organise them so that they understand their rights and what we can demand here in Sweden. If we can get their wages up to the same level as Swedish wages, they will no longer compete on the basis of wages.]

This line of argument is promoted in the works analysed in *Writing Class*. While it is unlikely that they have directly prompted the Swedish Building Workers' Union to begin organising migrant workers, they may have contributed to the formulation and dissemination of the *political imaginary*—that is, the shared system of images, ideas, and symbolic representations through which people interpret and engage with the world politically—on which such organising efforts are based. In this sense, they have had at least an indirect impact on struggles against precarious labour in contemporary Sweden.

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# Appendix:

## Summaries of literary texts

**Rolf Almström (b. 1961), *Svart arbete* (*Black-Market Labour*, 2009)**

A novel partly based on the author's own experiences of working in the unregulated labour market. Set during the economic crisis of the 1990s, the narrative follows Danny, a young man from the working-class suburb of Frölunda in Gothenburg, who turns to informal construction work as a day labourer without a contract. When Danny loses a bag of money belonging to his employers, the plot takes on the contours of a thriller. At the same time, the novel offers a critical reflection on the rise of precarious labour in the wake of neoliberal reforms and economic restructuring in Sweden, highlighting the social consequences of globalisation, deregulation, and unemployment.

**Amalia Alvarez (b. 1961), "Arbetare utan papper" ("Undocumented Workers", 2013)**

A trilingual (Swedish, Spanish, and English) graphic short story from the collection *Fem papperslösa kvinnors historier* (*Five Undocumented Women's Stories*). The story presents an interview-based narrative with a female undocumented migrant working in luxury restaurants and cabarets. Through stark visual storytelling, Alvarez exposes the exploitative conditions faced by paperless workers, including low wages and abuse by both employers and landlords. The work combines graphic reportage with feminist and activist perspectives, foregrounding the intersection of migration, gender, and labour precarity.

**Birk Andersson (b. 1987), *Natt* (*Night*, 2023)**

A poetry collection depicting the author's experiences of night-time work.

**Anna Arvidsdotter (b. 1992), *Händer att hålla i* (*Hands to Hold*, 2022)**

A poetry collection portraying the author's experiences of working as a mailman on a temporary contract.

**Daria Bogdanska (b. 1988), *Wage slaves* (2016)**

An autobiographical graphic novel that critically documents the author's experiences as a young Polish migrant in the unregulated labour market. Set in Malmö, the narrative follows Bogdanska's struggle to support herself while studying comics drawing, working multiple precarious jobs—primarily as a waitress in a South Asian restaurant in the multicultural district of Möllevången. *Wage slaves* describes exploitative working conditions, including unpaid labour, surveillance, and abuse, while highlighting the structural exclusion of undocumented workers from social protections. The book has been translated into several languages, including two English-language editions published in 2019.

**Emil Boss (b. 1979), *Kompression* (*Compression*, 2023)**

A hybrid work combining text and photo montages to explore the lived realities of migrant labour in Sweden. Structured around three distinct textual forms, the book opens with fragmented reflections by an anonymous speaker on themes such as time, space, migration, history, and writing—situated within the context of global capitalism. These fragments are interspersed with 42 first-person poems that offer direct testimonies from migrant workers about their precarious working conditions, including low or withheld pay, long hours, harassment, poor housing, and workplace accidents. Toward the end, the book includes a list titled “Efter samtal med” (“After conversations with”), naming 40 migrant workers alongside their occupations and workplaces. *Kompression* presents a powerful critique of labour exploitation and the invisibility of undocumented migrant workers in Sweden's informal economy.

**David Ericsson (b. 1958), *Taxfree* (2004)**

A working-class novel that blends social critique with elements of the thriller genre. The story follows Jack, a Swedish truck driver working for a forwarding company that has recently been taken over by a large foreign firm employing cheap migrant labour from Eastern Europe. Framed as a suspenseful narrative about union activism, *Taxfree* offers a politically charged reflection on the erosion of labour rights and solidarity in the face of economic globalisation and neoliberal restructuring.

**Kerstin Fredholm (b. 1944), *Fint hemma* (*Nice Home*, 2005)**

A literary reportage based on the author's undercover work as a cleaner in private homes over a six-month period in 2004. Blending personal narrative with investigative journalism, the text offers a detailed account of the social hierarchies,

invisibility, and emotional labour embedded in domestic cleaning. Interspersed throughout the book are excerpts from Swedish journalist Ester Blenda Nordström's *En piga bland pigor* (1914), a pioneering early twentieth-century reportage based on similar undercover work as a maid on a farm.

**Liv Helm (b. 1985), Felicia Ohly (b. 1989), and Matilde Böcher (b. 1983), *Prekariatet* (*The Precariat*, 2019)**

A documentary-based theatrical work by Liv Helm and Felicia Ohly with music by Matilde Böcher, based on interviews with individuals working under precarious conditions in today's Sweden. Through a blend of verbatim testimony, dramatic staging, and music, the play gives voice to the lived experiences of workers navigating instability, low wages, and insecure employment, while also engaging critically with broader socio-economic structures.

**Johan Jönson (b. 1966), *Efter arbetsschema* (*According to Work Schedule*, 2008)**

A nearly 800-page volume of poetry that blends diary-like prose with experimental verse to explore the physical, emotional, and political dimensions of labour. Drawing on the poet's own experiences in various low-wage jobs—including care work, industrial labour, and informal employment—the text foregrounds the body and its repetitive movements as central to both work and writing.

**Kristian Lundberg (1966–2022), *Yarden* (*The Yard*, 2009)**

An episodic, poetic, and self-reflexive autobiographical narrative that explores the author's descent into casual labour following a professional scandal. After reviewing a non-existent novel, the protagonist—a stand-in for Lundberg—loses his position as a literary critic and is unable to secure stable employment. Burdened by tax debt and unable to sustain himself through literary writing alone, he takes temporary work at a car transshipment hub in Malmö's harbour, the "yard" referenced in the title. Interwoven with these present-day experiences are reflections on a childhood marked by poverty, drug abuse, and the emotional toll of growing up with a mother suffering from mental illness.

***Något har hänt: 100 berättelser från den nya arbetsmarknaden* (*Something Has Happened: 100 Stories from the New Labour Market*, 2023)**

A collection of one hundred third-person narratives documenting the experiences of (primarily undocumented) migrant workers in contemporary Sweden. Compiled by members of the syndicalist trade union *Sveriges Arbetares Centralorganisation* (Central Organisation of the Workers of Sweden)—including authors Emil Boss and

Pelle Sunvisson, as well as Nils Brandsma, David Gariga, Agnes Lansrot, Sebastian Rosengren, and Pamela Otarola—the book presents matter-of-fact accounts of exploitation, precarity, and resilience. The stories, told in a restrained and factual tone, reveal systemic abuses such as wage theft, unsafe working conditions, harassment, and lack of access to social protections.

**Hanna Petersson (b. 1985), *Pigan* (*The Maid*, 2012)**

An autobiographical graphic short story that offers a feminist and socialist account of domestic cleaning work in private homes.

**Anders Teglund (b. 1983), *Cykelbudet* (*The Bicycle Courier*, 2021)**

An autobiographical diary novel chronicling the author's experiences as a bicycle courier in Gothenburg during the COVID-19 pandemic. No longer able to sustain himself as a pianist and publisher, Teglund turns to gig work, documenting its physical and emotional toll as well as its broader social implications. The narrative not only captures the precariousness of platform-based labour but also traces the author's transformation into an activist advocating for gig workers' rights.

**Tommy Sundvall (b. 1988), *På äventyr i senkapitalismen* (*On an Adventure in Late Capitalism*, 2021)**

A collection of comics offering a satirical portrayal of precarious labour in contemporary Sweden.

**Pelle Sunvisson (b. 1980), *Svarta bär* (*Black Berries*, 2021)**

A collective novel that portrays the lives of Eastern European migrant workers who travel to northern Sweden to work as berry pickers. Drawing on the author's own undercover experiences in the berry industry and his background as a trade union activist, the novel offers a grounded and politically engaged depiction of seasonal labour.

**Pelle Sunvisson (b. 1980), *Svenska palmen* (*The Swedish Palm Tree*, 2021)**

A novel—drawing its title from a Russian-language website advertising work in Sweden—based on the author's undercover experience as an undocumented migrant worker in the informal construction sector. Set during the COVID-19 pandemic, the narrative follows Ruslan, a young Ukrainian who arrives in Sweden without a work permit, seeking both income and personal growth. The novel exposes the systemic vulnerabilities faced by undocumented migrant workers, including long hours, low or withheld pay, unsafe tasks, and chronic insecurity.

**Elinor Torp (b. 1977), *Rent åt helvete* (roughly: *Way Off*, 2023)**

A literary reportage that investigates two kinds of precarious labour in the cleaning sector. The first is labour done by undocumented migrant workers—primarily women—employed by companies operating in legal grey zones or outright criminal contexts. Central to the narrative about this kind of labour is the case of Chilo, a Nicaraguan woman arrested in 2021 while cleaning the home of then Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson. Torp also examines working conditions at Samhall, a state-owned company that employs people with disabilities in subsidised cleaning jobs. Here, the story of a young worker who died by suicide while employed at Samhall serves as a tragic illustration of systemic failures.

**W**riting Class offers a compelling analysis of how contemporary Swedish literature represents precarious labour. Drawing on a wide range of literary forms—from novels and poetry to graphic narratives—it explores how authors respond to the rise of non-standard employment and its social consequences. Engaging with key debates in literary and cultural theory, the book situates these texts within broader historical, political, and aesthetic frameworks. Special attention is given to how contemporary literature both engages with and reconfigures the tradition of Swedish working-class literature. A vital contribution to studies of class, labour, and literature, *Writing Class* rethinks the relationship between literature and social change, revealing its potential not only to deepen our understanding of labour-market precarity but also to challenge it.

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