

# Privileged precarity and precarious class solidarity

Nikolaj Zeuthen's *Buemundet guitarfisk*

Nicklas Freisleben Lund

Centre for Uses of Literature/Danish Aging Research Center  
University of Southern Denmark

## Abstract

The article offers an analysis of the first Danish novel actively appropriating Guy Standing's term 'the precariat' – Nikolaj Zeuthen's 'precarious comedy' *Buemundet Guitarfisk* (Bowmouth Guitarfish, 2018). However, in contrast to the majority of the Danish literary works hitherto categorised as examples of 'literature of precarity', *Buemundet Guitarfisk* does not portray an easily identifiable 'underclass'. Instead Zeuthen's novel at first glance seems closer to the resourceful, modern middle class. Still, the article argues that *Buemundet guitarfisk* does depict the 'fall' into precarity of its protagonist, Stefan - a poet and former literary scholar. Thus, it highlights the heterogenous nature of the precariat, and if *Buemundet guitarfisk* is a novel highly engaged in the question of precarity and a novel markedly different from the existing Danish precarious literature, it is because it extrapolates the experience of precariatized existence among the more privileged demographics of Standing's class-in-the-making.

## Keywords

the precariat, the middle class, Danish literature, Nikolaj Zeuthen, precarity in literature

One may depict a process of 'falling' into the precariat or being dragged into precariatized existence. People are not born in it and are unlikely to identify themselves as members with a glow of pride. Fear, yes; anger, probably; sardonic humour perhaps; but not pride. (Standing 2014: 38)

Class, inequality and social segregation have in recent years become recurrent themes in contemporary Danish literature (Gemzøe 2016, Lund 2017, 2018). To mention just a few notable and recent examples, this is for instance the case in Thomas Korsgaard's *Hvis der skulle kommet et menneske forbi* (2017) (If a Human should pass by), Morten Pape's *Planen* (2015) (The Plan) and Kenneth Jensen's *Tragedie plus tid* (2015) (Tragedy plus Time); all novels portraying characters and environments situated at the bottom of the social hierarchy of contemporary Danish society.

In recent studies this trend has been associated with and analytically framed by Guy Standing's influential concept 'the precariat' (Lund 2017, Gemzøe 2017, Schwartz et al. 2018). The overarching argument of these studies is twofold. First, that the literary texts reflect ongoing transformations of class structures in contemporary Danish society. Second, that their importance lies in their insight into the lifeworld and affective experience of precariatization. The studies, however, also share a further characteristic: they have hitherto primarily identified the precariat with what the authors of *Det danske classesamfund* (The Danish Class Society), using a more traditional class terminology, describe as the growing, marginalised underclass (Juil et al. 2012: 87f).

This is not the demographic focus of the first work of Danish fiction actively appropriating the term: Nikolaj Zeuthen's novel *Buemundet guitarfisk* (2018) (Bowmouth Guitarfish), whose subtitle frames the text as a 'prekær komedie' (precarious comedy). The novel - whose peculiar title will be explained later - takes place in the mundane Frederiksberg neighbourhood of Copenhagen. Similarly, its protagonist evokes no connotations of 'the lower classes'. Stefan Bak Dalgaard is a former literary scholar and a (once) promising poet; a soon-to-be-forty father of three, married to Nete, the assistant manager of a day care institution.

*Buemundet guitarfisk* consequently seems closer to the resourceful, modern middle class than a dysfunctional, marginalised underclass. Perhaps therefore, the socio-economic dimension of Zeuthen's precarious comedy - its thematisation of precarity in Standing's sense - was downplayed in the novel's overall positive critical reception. Rather, the reviews tended to focus on Stefan's

private crisis; his increasing discontent with his family life culminating in an affair with a younger woman. Consequently, *Buemundet guitarfisk* was for instance characterised as a 'satirisk generationsportræt' (satirical generational portrait) with 'et sjældent blik for dobbeltheden i den privilegerede tilværelse' (Thomsen 2018: 13) (a rare understanding of the duality of privileged existence).

In sum, the reviews tended to link the novel's precarity with the existential meaning of the adjective, describing the fragility and insecurity that saturate 'aspekter af alle menneskers udsatte liv i globaliseringens medialiserede og krigeriske tidsalder' (Schwartz et al. 2018: 187) (aspects of the vulnerable existence of all humans in the medialised and warlike age of globalisation). One notable exception was Jon Helt Haarder's review in *Jyllands-Posten*. Here he suggested that Zeuthen's novel precisely explores how the two forms of precarity, the economic-sociological and the existential, interrelate (Haarder 2018: 7). The present article takes up Haarder's lead, as it poses the argument that *Buemundet guitarfisk* is a novel about precarity in Standing's sense, and that the hitherto more profiled aspects concerning existential fragility are intimately interwoven with the increased economic and social insecurity experienced by the protagonist. Prior to the action of the novel, Stefan has left a promising academic career to pursue his ambitions as a poet. In the following years he has received grants from the Danish Arts Foundation, but as the novel opens these funds have run out. Stefan applies for 'dagpenge' (unemployment benefits) but the application is dismissed.

Stefan's situation and the various conflicts it entails are very different from the problematics encountered in the contemporary Danish literature hitherto associated with the precariat. In this way *Buemundet guitarfisk* can be said to illustrate *the heterogeneity of the precariat*. This heterogeneity has, indeed, been addressed by Standing himself and, for instance, highlighted by his presentation of the precariat as *a class consisting of three social groups*: i) The fallen working class, ii) refugees and emigrants and, iii) the growing number of people with a higher education unable to break into the labour market (Rehling and Thorup 2016). Thus, when we are talking about the precariat, we are talking about the refugee *and* the freelance journalist, the long-time unemployed unskilled worker *and* the graphic designer relying on social benefits between projects, the temporary cleaner *and* the part-time lecturer. All of these might share characteristics concerning levels of income and modes of employment. But in regard to social and cultural resources, lifestyle and life expectations they are likely to differ significantly.

The comments above outline this article's starting point: that even if the precariat is considered a class, it must be approached as a heterogenous one, and – if we accept that lines of social division entail social and cultural capital as well as economic capital (Savage 2018) – a stratified entity. And if *Buemundet guitarfisk* is a novel highly engaged in the question of precarity *and* a novel markedly different from the examples of the contemporary Danish literature of precarity mentioned above, it is because it extrapolates the more privileged experience of precariatization.

The article is divided into two parts. The first and central part explores the experience of privileged precarity *in* the novel. Subsequently the closing part discusses the precarious class solidarity *of* the novel. On the one hand, *Buemundet Guitarfisk* critically addresses the conditions framing the precarious life portrayed in the novel. On the other, its critique or – paraphrasing the article's epigraph – 'sardonic humour' constantly oscillates towards an individual-oriented satire directed at its protagonist. In other words, the novel's attitude towards its precarious protagonist is marked by a peculiar ambiguity as it *both* presents Stefan as someone worth of the reader's sympathy *and* as someone deserving his/her ridicule.

### **Need, needy**

The opening scene of *Buemundet guitarfisk* portrays – through the novel's characteristic mode of free indirect discourse – Stefan ruminating on a skirmish with Nete:

Stefan havde stået i køkkenet og var blevet – ja, hvad skulle man kalde det – *needy*? [...]

Han havde taget fat i armen på hende. Han havde helt mistet den: "Du vender dig jo væk fra mig. Hvorfor gør du det? Svar mig. Svar mig. Svar mig" (Zeuthen 2018: 7)

(Stefan had been in the kitchen and had become – what could you call it – *needy* [...] He'd grabbed her arm. He'd completely lost it: "You're turning away from me. Why'd you do that? Answer me. Answer me. Answer me".)

Stefan's conclusion seems to confirm the general assessment of *Buemundet guitarfisk* as a quasi-universal 'hverdagskomédie' (everyday comedy) (Vesterlund 2018): 'I og for sig var det vel ingenting. En samlivsdetalje [...] Almindeligheder' (Zeuthen 2018: 7). (By itself it was probably nothing. A relationship detail [...] Ordinary

stuff). This evaluation is, nevertheless, destabilised by Zeuthen. The adverb 'vel' (here: probably) implies a degree of uncertainty, that reinforces the initial 'i og for sig' (by itself), likewise expressing a certain hesitance towards the subsequent formulations. Furthermore, this phrase indicates a kind decontextualised perspective. These subtle details are illustrative of the mode of narrative distance mobilized by Zeuthen and the opening scene precisely indicates that there might be *more* to the incident than suggested by the protagonist.

The nature of this 'more' is indicated by the very first line of the novel. The key term – also the title of the opening chapter – is *needy*. In Danish, the loan-word not only resonates with the adjective's emotional meaning ('needing emotional support; insecure' [Oxford 2019]), but also echoes the modern and more demeaning connotations (Urban Dictionary 2019). Yet, the English adjective also has a different material or economic meaning; 'to be lacking the necessities of life; very poor' (Oxford 2019).

Stefan and his family are obviously not poor in any conventional sense. However, the initial emphasis on Stefan's neediness serves to stress a correspondence between affective experience and material circumstance. The characteristics of this correlation are unfolded through the opening chapter. Here, Zeuthen resituates the initial skirmish within a relationship dynamic that by no means exists by itself. As already mentioned, Stefan has chosen to pursue a career as a poet. This has gained him some critical acclaim, but he is now struggling to get his third poetry collection published. Furthermore, the career move has also left him with a 'løst indkomstgrundlag' (Zeuthen 2018: 10) (loose income basis) and Nete as the family's main provider. In Stefan's (notably hesitant) words: 'Hun *forsørgede* ham ikke, det var ikke sådan det var, og alligevel eksisterede der en stille overenskomst her' (Zeuthen 2018: 10) (She wasn't *supporting* him, it wasn't like that, and yet there existed a silent agreement).

This 'silent agreement' forms the context of Nete's tired rejection of Stefan: 'Modydelsen var denne Netes ret til udmattelse af dertil en forventning om at Stefan klarede det meste af det huslige' (Zeuthen 2018: 12) (The quid pro quo was Nete's right to exhaustion, and the expectation that Stefan took care of most of the household chores). But Stefan's neediness exposes a growing frustration with Nete's lacking recognition of his invisible labour, which has become his main source of identity due to the current absence of professional acknowledgement. Thus, the initial skirmish converges several lines of conflict. One of them is *gender*. Stefan might interpret the incident as the conventional or ordinary scene of '[k]vinden der lige skærmer sig

for mandens begær' (Zeuthen 2018: 7) (the woman just shielding herself from the man's desire). However, on closer inspection the novel depicts a rearrangement of the gendered roles and economics of the traditional family structure: as the wage-earner, Nete might lack the freedom and spontaneity enjoyed (but increasingly *endured*) by Stefan. But her contribution to the stability and wellbeing of the family is manifest, incontestable and recognised in the family contract. Moreover, her job provides her with professional identity, recognition and promise of professional progression. In contrast, Stefan's contribution to the household is less notable, the everyday stuff of invisible labour. And his career as a writer not only involves a highly insecure income-flow, but also less reliable source of recognition and progression.

Accordingly, it is not solely new gender structures that are present in the initial relationship quibble, but also altered class formations. Zeuthen precisely situates Nete and Stefan on each side of the new line of class division, the division between salariat and precariat (Standing 2014: 12-14). In its own way *Buemundet guitarfisk* thus returns to the 1970s credo that the personal is political.

### **The poet and the precariat?**

At this point it is necessary to address a seemingly simple question. Is Stefan actually precarious in Standing's sense? One strategy for verifying the claim is to refer to the number of studies identifying the creative worker with the precariat (e.g. Bain and McLean 2012; de Peuter 2014; Gill and Pratt 2008). Another would be to repeat Stefan's economic and professional situation and his lack of several forms of labour-related security (Standing 2014: 17).

Still, the veracity of the equation *Stefan = precarious* is not self-evident. First of all, it could be argued - as has for instance Lizette Risgaard, chair of the Danish Confederation of Trade Unions (Baumann 2018) - that there is no such thing as a precariat in Denmark due to the often praised *flexicurity-model* of the Danish labour system. And even among sources insisting on the existence of a precariat in Denmark, we encounter other problematics. An example is the socio-economic think tank KRAKA's report *Prekariatet - hvordan ser det ud i Danmark?* (The Precariat - what does it look like in Denmark?) that stresses *in-voluntariness* as a key characteristic of the precariat, which the report consequently defines as 'de midlertidigt ansatte og deltidsansatte, som ufrivilligt er dette' (Steen-Knudsen et al. 2019: 2) (involuntarily temporary staff or part-time employees).

According to this definition, Stefan cannot be considered precarious, insofar as his insecure professional life is a consequence of a voluntary choice. Furthermore, it could be argued that the report in principle excludes Stefan from the precariat as his profession hardly matches categories such as 'employees' and 'staff'.

If Stefan does pursue a career that might not easily fit into the traditional labour market system, he, however, is by no means separated from its structures. Rather, his social existence can be described as an attempt to navigate on its fringes. Zeuthen stresses exactly this economic neediness by emphasising the economic factors making Stefan's artistic career possible. Furthermore, Stefan has remained a paying member of his 'A-kasse' (a voluntary unemployment fund) to secure his right to 'dagpenge', the highest rate of unemployment benefits, and thus acknowledges this dependency in practice.

However, as already mentioned, Stefan is in for an unpleasant surprise, as his application is dismissed. The situation is highly complex. But in Denmark one is entitled to 'dagpenge' for a period up to two years if one i) has been a paying member of an involuntary unemployment fund at least 12 months prior to unemployment and ii) registers with the Public Employment Service. However, the rate of social benefits does not only depend on the applicant's previous income level; you must furthermore fulfil a minimum requirement concerning labour activity in the last three years prior to unemployment (borger.dk 2020).

Stefan believes that he meets the various demands but is informed that he only qualifies for the lower 'arbejdsmarkedssydelse' (lit. labour market benefits): roughly 60-80 per cent of the dagpenge-rate. The explanation? That the grants cannot be considered as 'dagpengeberrettigede' (eligible for unemployment benefits): 'Det kunne ikke anses som løn for et arbejde, mente de. Det var en pengegave uden forpligtelser' (Zeuthen 2018: 62). (It couldn't be considered a salary for labour, they reckoned. It was a gift without obligations.)

*Buemundet guitarfisk* directly addresses the vast reforms of the Danish unemployment system that have taken place within the last decade. But to start with a broader perspective, Zeuthen also depicts a conflict between two wider political agendas. The government grants are emblematic of a notion – historically closely related to the welfare state – of culture as a social good that cannot necessarily be expected to subsist on market conditions and must be subsidised. However, in *Buemundet guitarfisk* this logic clashes with demands for obtaining

unemployment benefits that resonate with the ideology of the *competition state*. Introduced to a Danish context by political scientist Ove Kaj Pedersen, this term designates a political paradigm that can be described as an institutional reflection of the global spread of pro-business, neoliberal reforms. In regard to social and labour market policy it involves a heightened prioritisation of creating incentives for the citizens to enter and contribute to the labour market. And from this perspective – reflected in the decision of the A-kasse – Stefan’s mode of profession is deemed a deliberate choice to not contribute (enough) and thus does not entitle him to the fullest degree of social protection.

Here, Zeuthen echoes the widespread critique of the reform of the unemployment system introduced in 2010, which most prominently cut the period of dagpenge-entitlement from four to two years and restricted the requirements for re-qualifying for these benefits. This has had – as for instance political scientist Jørgen Goul Andersen argues – harsh social consequences due to the reform’s undermining of financial security, especially with regard to ‘langtvarigt arbejdsløse, kontanthjælpsmodtagere og personer, der bliver langtidssyge [...] Risikoen for social marginalisering er overhængende for mange’ (quoted in Olsen 2018: 23) (long-term unemployed, recipients of cash benefits and people who become long-term sick [...]) The risk of social marginalisation is imminent for many).

However, the reform has also been criticised for targeting those whose work life is characterised by the ‘atypical’ employment modes characterising the precariat, those who inhabit an increasingly fragile position in a new, less protective and more demanding unemployment system modelled on traditional modes of labour and employment (e.g. Dinnesen 2015; Friis and Kaasgaard 2015). This is precisely the case for Stefan in *Buemundet guitarfisk*. Due to these characteristics, I will argue that it does indeed make sense to link the narrative of Stefan with the political and social-economic developments forming the process of precariatization; this is so despite *Buemundet guitarfisk*’s setting in the inarguably privileged context of a Danish welfare state in transformation, a social competition state in the making.

### **Both-and**

Stefan never enters into these kinds of considerations himself: there are no allusions to the precariat, precarity etc. in the novel – only in the para-text of the subtitle. In this way *Buemundet guitarfisk* performs Standing’s argument that the precariat is a class in itself, not for itself. Stefan’s affiliation with the precariat is primarily depicted through a



strategy of negation, via the protagonist's relationship to the novel's middle-class representatives. This relationship is most clearly illustrated in scenes depicting family get-togethers with Nete's friends. Both of these friends have married husbands with steady and lucrative careers, which have made it possible for them to move into family-friendly houses in the Copenhagen area; a dream that Stefan and Nete have had to abandon themselves. But despite this aspect of economic difference, the families appear as rather identical, roughly sharing the same life world. Still, Stefan instinctively places himself in opposition to these characters:

Med disse venner var det altid et fast programpunkt at man på skift fortalte lidt om, hvor det gik på ens arbejde, og det var her, når Stefan lyttede til de andre mænds historier, at han diskret satte en dikotomi op med travlhed og karrierejagt som en negativ værdi og ro og tid i hjemmet som positiv.

[...]

Når det var Stefan i den varme stol, fik han hurtigt flyttet fokus væk fra sin egen temmelig hakkende karriere og hen på for eksempel de brød han bagte. Eller han fortalte om sine mange aktiviteter med ungerne. (Zeuthen 2018: 13)

(With these friends a fixed item on the agenda was to talk a bit about work, and it was here, when Stefan listened to the other men's stories, that he discreetly established a dichotomy between bustle and career hunt as a negative value and repose and time at home as a positive [...])

When it was Stefan's turn in the hot seat, he quickly changed the focus from his own quite stumbling career to, for instance, the breads he baked. Or he told about his many activities with the kids [...])

The quote stresses Stefan's oppositional attitude. But it also entails an attempt to beat Nete's friends on their own turf as Stefan humbly-braggingly displays a surplus of soft values such as 'quality time', cultural resourcefulness, spontaneity etc. All key elements in the vision of the 'good life' that Zeuthen in his debut *Verdensmestre* (World Champions, 2010) – set during the economic boom of the 2000s – satirically diagnoses as the all-compensating demand of happiness among the welfare state's 'narcissistic, demanding, very eloquent, self-reflexive, and individualistic spoiled citizens' (Simonsen 2017: 464).

These citizens simultaneously demand security *and* freedom, personal and professional self-realisation *and* the picture-perfect family life. And it is precisely this stressful idealism that in *Buemundet guitarfisk* resonates in Stefan's repeated desire to be a 'ordentligt menneske' (Zeuthen 2018: 91) (a decent person).

For now, it is sufficient to stress that Stefan again pursues a form of fringe-navigation. He insists that he can have the 'good' life of the middle class without fully submitting to its economic and professional demands. This vision comes forth as a variation of what Standing – with reference to Richard Florida's 'the creative class' (Florida 2000) – describes as a bohemian notion of precarity: a life of 'freedom', 'creativity and autonomy', however without too much loss of material comfort (Standing 2014: 134).

This vision is condensed in the plot element resonating in the novel's peculiar title. A supermarket chain introduces an advertisement scam aimed at their customers' children; for every 50 Danish kroner spent the customers receive a packet of animal trading cards. Stefan's children are soon preoccupied with acquiring a complete collection, which includes the rarest of the cards: the *bowmouth guitarfish*. Stefan is critical of the marketing stunt, but also wants to make his children *happy*. His solution is a simple return scam: he buys expensive items, receives the cards and then returns the purchases. Again, we encounter the vision of being able to maintain a position in opposition to the dominant economic logic of the middle class, whilst enjoying its privileges.

*Buemundet guitarfisk*, however, exposes the fragility of this vision. As Stefan's savings diminish, his creativity and writing stagnate, his fundamental sense of dissatisfaction increases and his relations with Nete and the children deteriorate. In other words, Zeuthen juxtaposes Stefan's existential crises with his descent into – in Standing's sense – precarity. As Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt have argued, the precariat can be described as the 'dark side of' the creative class, which in *Buemundet guitarfisk* is both economic and affective (Gill and Pratt 2008: 19-21).

### **Money, money**

The conflation is also present in the affair that constitutes the culmination of Stefan's downfall. It is facilitated by his reluctant involvement in the consultant initiative 'Stresskompagniet' (The Stress Company); a project funded by a so-called 'innobooster grant' aimed at start-ups instigated by *dagpenge* recipients and administered by the Public Employment Service.

There are several reasons for Stefan's aversion. Most obviously the involvement entails a retrogression to a type of 'unfree' professional life. However, it also entails a more principled critique of the project, which is satirised on several levels. The consultant services offered might concern prevention of stress and anxiety etc., but the majority of the people involved in Stresskompagniet – such as Stefan – do not receive actual pay for *their* labour, but rather promises of prospects of future income, networking etc. Consequently, there is indeed a sardonic humour in the fact that the consultant start-up is promoted by the Public Employment Service, which critically addresses the question of what types of labour are recognised as valuable and socially meaningful.

Stresskompagniet introduces Stefan to the young Rigmor, the project's student assistant, with whom he subsequently initiates an intense affair. Several critics have noted the cliché-filled schematics of this narrative (Amann 2018; Nexø 2018): the older man seeking refuge in the arms of a younger, less demanding woman. However, if Zeuthen activates this archetypal plot, he adds a new dimension to it, indicated by Stefan's question: 'Var der et skjult *økonomisk* motiv også? I disse drømmebilleder?' (Zeuthen 2018: 129) (Was there a hidden economic motive too? In these dream visions?).

The dream vision is precisely not one of absolute freedom. Rather it entails a set of new or modified obligations, as is apparent in Stefan's projection of his future life:

Han begyndte at dagdrømme om at bryde med Nete og flytte sammen med Rigmor. Så for sig en lille førstesalslejlighed et sted i Storkøbenhavn [...]. Kvarteret var virkelig ikke særlig pænt. Det måtte man bare sige. Men omvendt – var der ikke et eller andet hyggeligt over det også?

[...]

Sådan tog det sig ud i hans dagdrøm. Han kunne forsætte med at gå hjemme, mens Rigmor gjorde sin uddannelse færdig med arbejde ved siden af. (Zeuthen 2018: 128-129)

(He began daydreaming of leaving Nete and moving in with Rigmor. Envisioned a small, first-floor flat somewhere in greater Copenhagen [...] The neighbourhood wasn't nice. That was a fact. But on the other hand – wasn't there something cosy about it too?

[...]

That was how it looked in his daydream. He could continue staying at home, while Rigmor finished her education and worked on the side.)

The implicit dream vision of the affair is a type of peaceful descent into a lifestyle suited to Stefan's precarious economy. But it is notable that the rosy prospect is, upon closer inspection, still based on the vision of the very type of bohemian fringe-navigation that otherwise has gone awry in the novel. And ultimately *Buemundet guitarfisk* stresses the inadequacy of Stefan's dream vision itself. Rigmor breaks the relationship, leaves for her hometown in provincial Denmark and ignores Stefan's increasingly desperate attempts to revive the relationship.

All this forms the backdrop of the novel's final chapter. Here, the frustrated Stefan ultimately breaks down and – during his eldest son's birthday party – leaves the family: "Jeg bliver nødt til at tage lidt væk", mumlede han.' (Zeuthen 2018: 2019) ('I have to go away for a while', he mumbled). Stefan is, however, not alone. With him is his inconsolable daughter Sigrid – the novel's most 'unsullied' victim of the family crisis – and together they set out to find Rigmor. Their road trip, however, begins with a detour. Sigrid has grown obsessed with the animal trading cards and insists that they begin by conquering the card to complete her collection: *the bowmouth guitarfish*. This leads to a humiliating visit to the head of Stresskompagniet, whose daughter has an extra copy, which she is happy to hand over. The reason? The cards are no longer the hyped objects of desire among the other children.

The scene appears to be an ironic commentary on Stefan's own vision of absolute happiness and fulfilment, exposing it as a mere illusion: there will always be something else, something new to long for. However, it is important to notice that the card is still an object of significance and value for Sigrid. This is emphasised by her reaction, when she ultimately loses it again when the travel companions make a stop in a bakery. Here she manages to drop the card between two glass sheets at the counter. What follows is a highly unpleasant scene. Sigrid sobs hysterically, and Stefan desperately attempts to recover the card whilst coping with the growing irritation of the bakery's staff and customers. The climax – emptying the scene of its last, faint traces of comedy – is the depiction of Sigrid intentionally cutting open her hand on the sharp edges of the glass counter.

Whereas the novel so far has constituted Stefan's continuous confrontation with his failure to live up to his ideals, the bakery scene

finds him facing the consequences of this crisis. This insight resonates in his attempt to comfort Sigrid afterwards: "Det er ikke dig den er gal med." (Zeuthen 2018: 216) ("It's not you there's something wrong with"). Consequently, the seeming point-of-no-return ends with Stefan returning to the family. This might appear as an edifying, though demanding moral of the story, echoing the position taken by Nete after Stefan's return: "Vi har bygget noget op her, Stefan. En rutine. Kan du slet ikke se hvad det er værd?" (Zeuthen 2018: 220) ("We've built something here, Stefan. A routine. Don't you see the value of that?").

Another reading would be that Zeuthen – rather than taking a normative stand – descriptively exposes the dark side of the previously mentioned vision of all-compensating happiness. Such an approach frames *Buemundet guitarfisk* as a direct continuation of *Verdensmestre*. There is, however, an important difference between the two novels. As Simonsen notes, a key aspect of Zeuthen's debut is 'that money [...] is not really a problem' for its protagonists (Simonsen 2017: 454). In *Buemundet guitarfisk* this is not quite the case.

We are reminded of this in the final scene of the novel. Stefan is playing football with his children in the yard, as he receives a text message offering him a more 'steady role' at Stresskompagniet.

Han gav [Nete] telefonen så hun kunne læse.

"Nå", sagde hun og gav ham den tilbage. "Jamen, det var da en god besked at få."

Sigrid kom hen med sin forstørrede gaze hånd:

"Hvad var det?"

"Far har fået et arbejde", sagde Nete.

"Men er dit arbejde ikke at skrive digte?", spurgte Sigrid.

"Jo", sagde Nete. "Men det tjener man bare ikke penge på. Så far må også have et andet arbejde."

[...]

"Penge, penge", sagde Ask mens han løb rundt om dem og grinede.

"Er det ikke ret godt," sagde Sigrid og tog om sin fars arm.

"Jo," sagde han. "Det er godt."

"Skal vi så ikke holde en fest så?", sagde hun. "I aften. En fest for dig"

(Zeuthen 2018: 222)

(He handed [Nete] the phone, so she could read the text.

"Oh", she said and gave it back. "Well, that's good news."

Sigrid came over with her enlarged gauze-hand:

“What was that?”

“Dad has got a job”, Nete said.

“But isn’t your job to write poems?”, Sigrid asked.

“Yes,”, Nete said, “But you make no money doing that, so dad has to have another job.”

[...]

“Money, money”, Ask said, as he ran around them and laughed.

“Isn’t it pretty good?”, Sigrid said and embraced her father’s arm.

“Yes”, he said. “It’s good”

“Let’s throw a party for you, then, she said. “Tonight. A party for you.”)

The final sequence of the novel displays the children, delighted by the prospect of a party, throwing themselves on Stefan, weighing him down to the damp ground: ‘Han vil gerne have haft at fuglene var der, det tænkte han på, men der var kun den blå og tomme majhimmel’ (Zeuthen 2018: 224) (He would have liked there to be birds, he thought, but there was only the blue and empty May sky). The novel, thus, culminates with another expression of Stefan’s dissatisfaction; even the seemingly picture-perfect family moment is haunted with a sense of defeat.

From one perspective – for instance that of the competition state – the final scene is indeed worthy of celebration; Stefan appears to have found a solution to end his descent into the precariat. However, for Stefan it entails entering a career and a mode of employment he has envisioned himself in opposition to. Thus, in *Buemundet guitarfisk* the paradox is that Stefan on the one hand *does* experience the dark side of the freedom and autonomy of the creative class; the fragility and insecurity of the precariat, and thus the threat of losing the privileges he enjoys. But on the other hand, the type of professional life that entails a higher degree of security precisely comes with the cost of the privileges of freedom and autonomy.

In other words, Stefan is inarguably haunted by the stressful idealism described in Zeuthen’s debut. However, even if the protagonists in *Verdensmestre* constantly fail to achieve their goal, they do insist that they *are* in position to realise this happiness. The reader might be able to see through the irony, but the protagonists are still insisting, to paraphrase Simonsen, that they can have their cake and eat it too (Simonsen 2017: 467). In contrast, Stefan’s fall into

precarity involves the discouraging, even painful realisation that he cannot. In the final scene he is not only weighed down by the crushing visions of happiness. The materiality of the children, the dampness of the ground and the naïve credo of ‘money, money’ stresses a new focus on the material circumstances in which this vision is rooted.

The experience of privileged precarity in *Buemundet guitarfisk* does not entail an absolute break with the paradoxical affective structure of the resourceful middle class in Zeuthen’s earlier texts. Rather it involves an intensification of its implicit dilemmas. And the tragic comedy of *Buemundet guitarfisk* is that whatever Stefan choses, it entails a loss. It is not a loss of happiness as such – as in *Verdensmestre*, no one is really happy in *Buemundet guitarfisk*. Rather it is the fear of losing the mode of social existence that entails the promise of realising the ideal. The precarity in Standing’s sense here comes forth as intensifier of the existential precarity that in Zeuthen’s oeuvre constantly lurks in the lives of the welfare state’s heirs.

### **Precarious class solidarity**

The above analysis has been an attempt to pursue a ‘Standingian’ reading of Zeuthen’s precarious comedy. It could, however, be argued that by doing this, it downplays the satire and brutality of Zeuthen’s portrait of Stefan, who indeed bodies forth as pathetic, immature, laughable (e.g. Nexø 2018; Aamann 2018; Vesterlund 2018).

This is not incorrect. I would, however, formulate it like this: my approach has been to attempt an attitude of solidarity with Stefan, to which *Buemundet guitarfisk* itself does not quite subscribe and does not necessarily awaken. Thus, I have tried to emphasise the novel’s social and political critique, *qua* its enquiry into the recent transformations of the Danish unemployment system and the underlying ideological trajectories. An example of such change is the Danish parliament’s October 2018 revision of the reform of 2010 aimed at improving the conditions for the ‘atypical employed’ in regard to eligibility for unemployment benefits (Folketinget 2017). The novel’s critique is by no means annulled by the satire directed at the protagonist.

Nevertheless, the novel indeed makes it hard to sympathise with Stefan. The reason is simply that he *is* highly privileged, highly spoiled, highly demanding. With reference to the KRAKA-report’s emphasis on ‘involuntariness’, Stefan is precisely not left without choices. Whereas the most vulnerable members of the precariat in contemporary Danish literature appear – to quote Pape’s *Planen* – as ‘fremtidsløse børn’ (Pape 2015: 396) (children with no future), this is not quite the case

here. Stefan indeed has alternatives. However, none of them is the one he has imagined or wished for. In other words, all the ‘precarious novels’ do relate the precarity of their protagonists to the experience of *not* being able to set a meaningful and satisfying course ahead. However, the nature of their futurity crisis does vary significantly.

Zeuthen addresses this peculiar tension in his poetry collection *Frivers fra Howitzvej* (Free Verse from Howitz Road, 2012), that in many regards is quite similar to *Verdensmestre* and *Buemundet guitarfisk*. The speaker is yet another highly-educated Copenhagener, dreaming of artistic success while holding a temporary position and struggling with a sense of general dissatisfaction. In one of the poems he is facing a homeless man in front of a supermarket:

snart er det fyring og dagpenge igen  
men det kan jeg jo ikke sige til Hus Forbi-sælgeren  
som lugter af lim fra sin mund  
og som i øvrigt ikke har noget officielt sælgerskilt

Jeg kan ikke sige:  
Hey metaforisk set  
Ligger jeg også nede i de sidste havne  
(Zeuthen 2012: 45)

(Soon it will be layoff and unemployment benefits again  
but I can’t say that to the *Big Issue*-salesman  
whose mouth smells of glue  
and who, by the way, has no official seller’s permit

I can’t say  
Hey, metaphorically speaking  
I’m anchored in the last ports too)

The scene is marked by an ambiguity: on the one hand the speaker presents an unclear vision of community with the homeless man, bridging their immediate social division. However, on the other hand the speaker resists actually uttering these thoughts. Posing this kind of identity and solidarity would – to the speaker – be outrageous due to the obvious differences in their socio-economic status.

This tension sheds light on Zeuthen’s ambiguous portrait of Stefan. The ambiguity is an effect of its focus on what I have called the privileged precariat. If the solidarity of *Buemundet guitarfisk* is



precarious itself, it is because Stefan does not correspond to the social and cultural conventions of the pitiable poor and weak who demand our solidarity.

A recurrent feature in the current debates about precarity is the question of how to create solidarity between the precariat's heterogeneous members, to make it a class *for* itself. Zeuthen's precarious comedy raises a different question, that the novel itself indeed does not answer. How and to what extent can we feel solidarity with the privileged precariat? That is, how can we feel solidarity with those who in many regards have a lot – and demand even more -- but are nonetheless affected by processes of precariatization? This question is very pressing in a privileged Scandinavian context, whose welfare state foundations might limit and soften the downward trajectory of precariatization, but are by no means untouched by it.

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