

# Towards the Light, into the Silence: Danish Working-Class Literature Past and, Perhaps, Present

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This chapter presents an overview of Danish working-class literary history from the past to, *perhaps*, the present. Thus, the initial sections of this paper outline the established narrative of the tradition<sup>1</sup> from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the early 1980s; the closing part poses a seemingly simple, but highly contentious question: *Does a contemporary Danish working-class literature exist?*

In many national contexts such a question would seem superfluously polemic because the answer would be a rather self-evident *yes*. This is the case in Denmark's close neighbor Sweden, where working-class literature constitutes a dominating strand in modern Swedish literature and, furthermore, has enjoyed a veritable renaissance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Nilsson, 2017). The current Danish situation is markedly different. In 1985, John Chr. Jørgensen – an important contributor to the research field – mourned “the silencing” of Danish working-class literature (Jørgensen, 1985), and declarations of the “death of working-class literature” has since been repeated several times (Gundersen, 2017, p. 6). In terms of literary studies, Jørgensen's statement has proven itself correct. Since its latest peak in the 1970s, scholarly interest in working-class literature has drastically declined. As a result, if the tradition's first century is well-documented, its trajectory over the last four decades is generally unexplored.

A similar trend characterizes the status of working-class literature within the wider literary public. In the 1970s working-class

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literature was a highly profiled phenomenon. Today, outside specialized contexts as minor left-wing medias such as *Arbejderen* and *Pio*, the use of the term *working-class literature* generally is generally limited to, for instance, reviews of re-issues of Martin Andersen Nexø's works or feature-articles on the occasion of The International Workers' Day (cf. Gundersen, 2017, p. 6). Both the term and categorization of working-class literature is largely absent from the broader coverage of contemporary fiction and poetry. In the early 1980s, Jutta Bojsen-Møller and Simon Kværndrup could portray forty self-acclaimed working class-writers (1981); in the present day, hardly any Danish author making his or her debut in recent decades has identified with the category (cf. Larsen 2009). Danish working-class literature, unlike in Sweden, has suffered from a steady decline in institutional structures that could maintain and renew the tradition, a result of lacking scholarly, critical, and literary stakeholders. Resultantly, in the contemporary Danish context, "working class literature" appears as a markedly historical term designating a tradition of the *past*.

There are developments, though, that contradict the apparent narrative of disappearance. Working-class literature cannot be reduced to an exclusively discursive phenomenon. As the following pages demonstrate, the term has been used to designate literary texts that share a range of characteristics, however difficult to pin down. I argue we can identify contemporary literary texts as examples of working-class literature even if they generally have not been perceived as such. In recent years a rising number of Danish literary texts have focused on questions concerning class, inequality, social segregation and work (e.g. Lund, 2017; Gemzøe, 2016; Turner, 2015). This trending body of work *might* be interpreted as an evidence of the continued existence of Danish working-class literature.

Even the (very) limited number of recent studies exploring the possible connection to the tradition present no univocal assessment of the current state of Danish working-class literature (Gundersen, 2017; Visti-Tang, 2016; Gemzøe, 2016; Staun, 2016). As the chapter ultimately argues, these varied interpretations are a result of a problem inherent in the research field that is by no means new: that of defining working-class literature (e.g. Lauter,

2005; Christopher & Whitson, 1999). In other words, such contemporary studies continue the definitional debate that has shaped the history of Danish working-class literature. Consequently, the initial, historical sections of the chapter will emphasize the various understandings of the term that have determined the configuration of the tradition's past before exploring different interpretations of its present state.

### 1870–1900: Beginnings; Workers' Songs and Horror-Realist Novels

The Danish term for working-class literature is literally “worker literature” [*arbejderlitteratur*]. Similarly, a working-class author is described as a “worker-author” [*arbejderforfatter*] and working-class poetry is “worker-poetry” [*arbejderdigtning*]. The tradition's origin is generally found in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the period of Denmark's industrialization. This time period also finds the rise of the modern labor movement, usually dated to 1871, the year the Social Democratic Party was founded as the Danish branch of the First International (e.g. Bomholt, 1929; Hansen, 1939; Andersen, 1982).

It would be an exaggeration to attribute a coherent cultural politics to the early labor movement (Agger & Gemzøe, 1982, p. 410). Still, the first cultural activities, institutions, and debates appeared during these decades. A popular initiative was the so-called “*arbejdersangforeninger*” [worker-choral societies]. Among their repertoire we find what is generally highlighted as the earliest examples of Danish working-class literature (Bomholt, 1929, pp. 188–200; Agger & Gemzøe, 1982, p. 327; Andersen, 1982, pp. 251–261). In the 1870s, pamphlets containing *Socialistiske sange* [Socialist Songs] were published, followed in 1886 by publications such as the *Sangbog for socialdemokratiske arbejdere* [Songbook for Social Democratic Workers]. The workers' songbooks contained various genres of song but were centered around agitational songs such as Ulrich Peter Overby's (1819–1879) “Proletarernes vise” [“The Proletarians' Ballad”](1877). In the song, Overby thematizes the exploitation of the working class but also eulogizes its potential revolutionary force, culminating in the

closing lines with the emergence of a collective “we” prophesying a coming hour of retribution:

We have bone to pick with you  
 there'll be interest and interest rates  
 to you in the street  
 when we, in the midst of the turmoil,  
 settle our account  
 (Agger & Gemzøe, 1982, p. 352)<sup>2</sup>

“Proletarernes vise” fits the well-known formalist definition of working-class literature as a literature *by*, *about*, and *for* the working class, a conceptualization crowned—in the Danish context—by critic and social democratic politician Julius Bomholt in *Dansk digtning [Danish Literature]* (1930, p. 314).<sup>3</sup> This definition remains a recurrent point of reference in the research field, though often contested, expanded and reinterpreted (e.g. Agger & Gemzøe, 1982, p. 326; Petersen, 1977, pp. 5–6; Harrits, 1983, p. 185; Jørgsen, 1979, pp. 18–22). Thus, most conceptualizations are situated somewhere in the intersection of these criteria; however, they are prioritizing, combining and accentuating them in various ways (cf. Gemzøe, 2016, p. 3).

“Proletarernes vise’s” composer Overby spent years making his living through unskilled labor and was highly engaged in the labor movement. The song thematizes the social condition and experience of the working class, and, decisively, it was written “for” the working class. The song was performed both in workers’ choral societies and at political meetings and demonstrations. But the song can also be perceived as “for” the working-class in an ideological sense, as it contains “a description of the social condition of the class, an appealing emphasis of class-solidarity, a declaration of the demands of the class and forecasts the future victory of its vision of community” (Agger & Gemzøe, 1982, 327).

This characterization is found in the two-volume anthology *Arbejderkultur 1870–1924 & 1924–48 [Working-Class Culture 1870–1924 & 1924–48]* (1982 & 1979). Here the editors of the first volume, Ragnhild Agger and Anker Gemzøe, using Lars Furuland’s somewhat flexible term, precisely give precedence to the “ideological anchorage” of working-class literature in their conceptualization of the term (Furuland, 1962, p. 14):

[Working-class literature] is [...] literature, which in various ways and varying degrees, takes part in the ongoing struggle for the constitution of the working-class as a self-conscious class aware of its own interests. Such literature is connected to the everyday-experience of the working class, to the interests, efforts and prospects of the labor movement and working class. [...] [I]t seeks, as far as possible, to anticipate socialist forms of community and sociality. (Agger & Gemzøe, 1982, 326)

In this context, the inclusion of “Proletarernes vise” in *Arbejderkultur*’s collection of working-class poetry and songs is self-evident. In contrast, the inclusion of a song such as “Farvergadesangen” [The Farver Street Song] (n.d.) comes forth as more questionable. The song can best be described as a drinking song. It presents a rowdy and non-judgmental, yet melancholic portrait of the working-class Copenhagen neighborhood of Farvergade associated with broken families, violence, petty crime, and, well, drinking; in other words, the stereotypical characteristics of the “Lumpen-proletariat.” Despite its sympathetic tone, the song thus lacks the ideological qualities highlighted in the editors’ definition.

“Farvergadesangen” does, however, fit other conceptualizations of working-class literature. It can be perceived as an expression of authentic and spontaneous working-class culture, and as such it reflects the formalist definition (though only *for* the working class in the narrow sense), as well as Ian Haywood’s conceptualization that downplays “class consciousness” and emphasizes the role of “class factors” and the “material influence on a working-class text’s production and reception” (Haywood, 1997, p. 3). Finally, “Farvergadesangen” can be said to live up to Magnus Nilsson’s suggestion that the term *working-class literature* describes literary texts perceived as *connected* with the working class (Nilsson, 2014a, p. 24). This is precisely the case in *Arbejderkultur*: “Farvergadesangen” might not meet the ideological standards of Agger and Gemzøe’s conceptualization, but it is still included in the anthology’s collection of exemplary texts.

These above remarks are intended to highlight an ambiguity often present in the studies of Danish-working class literature. Scholars often present ideological-essentialist conceptualizations

of working-class literature. Their constructions of the tradition's history, however, often include text-corpora that do *not* meet the (idealized) criteria. In fact, several studies stress that working-class literature must be perceived as always already “flawed” or “impure” as it emerges within capitalist society and consequently assimilate—or is infused by—bourgeois ideology and aesthetics (e.g. Bondebjerg & Gemzøe, 1982, pp. 5–6; Andersen, 1982, pp. 238–240; Agger & Gemzøe, 1982, p. 326). At the same time, however, these studies still tend to differentiate between a) literary texts that, despite their various limitations or “blockings,” more or less fulfill the criterion and thus qualifies as “working-class literature” and b) texts that in various ways are immediately perceived as connected to the working class but are dismissed as “working-class literature.”

The situation of a group of late 19<sup>th</sup> century novels and feuilletons often dismissively labelled as “rædselsrealisme” [literarily “horror realism”] is a prime example. Though there was a sizeable output of songs, poetry and, to a lesser extent, dramas and memoirs affiliated with the labor movement during this period, such was not the case of prose-fiction. Most prose representing the working class was written by authors with little or no connection to the working class of the labor movement and focused on the lamentable lives of the urban *Lumpenproletariat* (hence the patronizing nickname).

This body of works has throughout the tradition's history been met with harsh criticism. An early example is Bomholt's discussion in *Dansk digtning* denouncing the “bourgeois perspective” of the horror-realist novels (Bomholt, 1930, pp. 190–213). Several central studies of the 1970s and early 1980s take up this lead. Here, novels such as Lauritz Petersen's *Gadens roman* (1896) [*The Novel of the Street*] and early 20<sup>st</sup> century successors such as Lauritz Larsen's *Halvmennesker* (1903) [*Half-Humans*] and Christian Gjerløv's *Bundfald* (1912) [*Sediment*] are often excluded from the category of “actual” working-class literature—as formulated in *Dansk arbejderkultur* (1982)—due to their alleged inauthenticity, the absence of overt expressions of class-solidarity and, most importantly, the representation of the worker as isolated and bereft of political agency (Andersen, 1982, p. 265). Still,

the horror-realist novels are treated in depth in Andersen's study (Ibid., pp. 265–293). The same ambiguity occurs in *Arbejderkultur*, which includes excerpts from horror realism-novels, but explicitly frames these texts as counterexamples to working-class literature (Agger & Gemzøe, 1982, p. 341).

This dismissive attitude of some critics is, nonetheless, challenged by others. In *Proletarisk offentlighed* [*Proletarian Public*], Bondebjerg precisely problematizes the rejection of horror-realist novels as examples of working-class literature (1979, II, pp. 196–202). According to Bondebjerg, at least some of the horror-realist novels contain important insights into “the tension between the radical, lumpen-proletarian ideology and a petty-bourgeois individualism or religiously toned utopianism” (Ibid., 1979, II, p. 198; cf. Due 1978, I, 19–60; Petersen, 2017, pp. 303–308).

Summarily, the works of horror realism have been ascribed a wide range of positions in relation to the Danish working-class literature tradition. The variations can be ideologically motivated, but they also reflect different approaches to, and understanding of, the political function of working-class literature. At times the horror-realist corpus is dismissed for its lack of progressive qualities, at others it is positively valorized for its “reflective” insights into the muddled reality of class experience.

Finally, it is worth noting that Gemzøe, the most persistent contributor to the research field, has gradually modified his position on the horror-realist novels. Though repeating his earlier ideological critique (Gemzøe, 1977, pp. 48–99; Agger & Gemzøe, 1982, p. 341), Gemzøe in *Dansk litteraturhistorie* [*Danish Literary History*] (1983–1985) officially includes the horror-realist novels in the tradition of Danish working-class literature (Agger et al., 1984, pp. 138–188). As he notes in a recent article, the term “working-class literature” must be considered a “broader term for many different literary trends, modes and genres” (Gemzøe, 2016, p. 114). This marks a transition from an essentialist-ideological conceptualization of working-class literature and towards an approach focusing on the tradition's literariness by designating working-class literature as an umbrella term denoting a heterogeneous body of texts.

It might seem strange to allot this kind of attention to a set of texts as marginalized as the horror-realist novels. The reasoning is twofold: First, as the closing parts of the chapter argue, the enquiry into the current state of Danish working-class literature re-actualizes the debate on the horror-realist novel's relationship to the tradition. Second, the above comments also serve to emphasize the often ambiguous or dual nature of the Danish working-class literature tradition. If it does indeed have a stable, relatively undisputed core comprised of literary works univocally designated as working-class literature, this core is surrounded by a body of works whose relationship to the tradition are oscillating between inclusion and exclusion. These works, however, are also characterized by their persistent connection to the tradition, remaining a recurring element in the narratives of the history of Danish working-class literature.

### **1900–1920: The Breakthrough and the “Big Three”**

The turn of the century saw the emergence of three authors who retrospectively have been perceived as comprising the tradition's core: Jeppe Aakjær (1866–1930), Johan Skjoldborg (1861–1936) and Martin Andersen Nexø (1869–1954); the central figures of the so-called ‘*folkelige gennembrud*’ [The popular breakthrough], a term used to describe the emergence of literary works portraying demographics other than the bourgeoisie and written by non bourgeoisie authors. Aakjær, Skoldborg, and Nexø also mark Danish working-class literature's own public breakthrough, insofar they all enjoyed critical acclaim, attracted attention from a wide readership and were able to make a living as professional writers.

The “big three” also highlight an important dividing line within the early Danish working class. The paragraphs above might have focused on the literary traces of the urban proletariat, but the Danish working class was largely comprised of a sizeable rural working class. Skjoldborg and Aakjær, both sons of sharecroppers, owe their central positions in the tradition to their portraits of the rural proletariat as well as their respective affiliations with the so-called “*husmandsbevægelse*” [the crofters' movement] and “*tyendebevægelsen*” [the servants' movement].



The subtitle of Aakjær's novel *Vredens børn* (1904) [*Children of Wrath*] precisely frames the text as "en tyendes saga" [a servant's saga]. Through the somewhat fragmented coming-of-age narrative of the boy Per, the novel exposes the degraded life of the agrarian proletariat. However, the novel also constitutes the political *bildung*-narrative of Per's ideological emancipation through his affiliation with the servants' movement. Per's organizational endeavor never manifests itself in social-political results within the novel; still *Vredens børn* is characterized by persistent visions of possible, but as of yet unfulfilled, future of social change; "[...] It will be different. Before one knows of it, there will be other times" (Aakjær, 1913, II, p. 123).

It is precisely this sort of *utopian impulse* that is often highlighted as the qualitative difference between "actual" working-class literature and the pessimistic, "petty bourgeois" prose fiction of horror realism. Thus, the term here designates the presence of, within the text, a future-oriented vision of the working class's potential to change the existing social order and to generate alternate, and better, ways of living and of organizing society.<sup>4</sup>

In *Dansk litteraturhistorie*, Aakjær and Skjoldborg, whose novel *Gydholm* (1902) bears several resemblances to *Vredens børn*, are precisely contrasted to the horror-realist authors because they portray the proletariat "not solely as objects for repression, but also an active societal force" (Agger et al, 1984, p. 175). In the context of *Dansk litteraturhistorie*, the quote establishes the relationship between Aakjær, Skoldborgs and the towering figure of Danish working-class literature, Martin Andersen Nexø, whose major works *Pelle Erobreren* [*Pelle the Conqueror*] (1906–1910) and *Ditte Menneskebarn* [*Ditte, Child of Man*] (1917–1921) elevated him to international fame. The prologue of *Pelle Erobreren* precisely frames the four-volume-novel as a "book about the proletarian" [...] about the working man's firm walk across the land on his interminable, half-unconscious journey towards the light" (Nexø, 2002, I, p. 9).

The works of Aakjær, Skoldborg, and, primarily, Nexø are often presented as the "classics" of Danish working-class literature (e.g. Bomholt, 1930, p. 213; Hansen, 1939, pp. 89–177; Andersen, 1982, p. 309; Gemzøe, 1977, pp. 48–49), defining the tradition that

generally had been associated with a) the realist representation of the working class, b) an ideological anchorage in the labor movement and c) a utopian impulse. These features also characterize the working-class poetry that flourished in the late 1910s and 1920s. The works of poets such as Frederik Andersen (1890–1974), Oskar Hansen (1895–1968) and Axel Engelbert Nielsen (1895–1939), despite their differences, possess realist inclinations infused with critical and agitative sentiment (Thing, 1993, pp. 95–105).

The dominating outlook has, however, marginalized other authors. For example, Jakob Hansen (1868–1909), Nexø's childhood friend, who died in poverty in 1909 leaving an eccentric literary estate often associated with themes of decadence, symbolism and impressionism (Aabenhus, 2019), has novels that contain several indignant portraits of the working class. Still, Hansen's relation to the tradition is a contested one. One reason is the heterogeneity of his *oeuvre*, another is the idiosyncrasy of his social texts, illustrated by the short-story "Lock-out" (1900). The story opens with a description of a young worker's economic distress, caused by the "lockout" of the title, but it culminates in a hallucinatory vision of a bourgeois family devouring the worker's newborn daughter. "Lockout" might share the class-perspective and indignation of the "big three," but it deviates from the realism of the popular working-class writers (Kristensen, 1974, p. 22), as well as the ideological anchorage and utopian impulse. Consequently, Hansen has both been hailed as "proletarian author" (Larsen, 1943) and expelled to the contested periphery of the tradition (Andersen, 1982, p. 268; Agger et al, 1984, pp. 164–167).

Despite Aakjær, Skjoldborg, and Nexø's importance in the tradition, it is, however, important to stress the limited nature of this breakthrough. Working-class literature in a Danish context is generally considered a peripheral phenomenon. Early contributions to the research field such as Bomholt's *Dansk digtning* and Eva Hammer Hansen's *Digter og samfund [Writer and Society]* (1939) both address the labor movement's limited effect on and presence in Danish literature at large. Symptomatically, Bomholt presents Nexø – who succeeded in establishing the "happy connection" between writings and labor movement—as a unique case in the period's Danish literature (Bomholt 1930, p. 213).

## 1920–1940: Consolidation

In the years prior to the First World War, the organization-rate among the Danish work force reached a staggering fifty per cent. Furthermore, over the course of four decades the Social Democratic Party developed from a small, peripheral party to the majority in the Danish parliament, culminating with Thorvald Stauning becoming the party's first prime minister in 1924. This fertilized the ground for an increased focus on the cultural question. Debates –though rudimentary– over working-class literature had occurred in previous decades (Agger & Gemzøe, 1982, pp. 410–429). Similarly, the first examples of historical-materialist studies of Danish literature such as Axel Schmidt's *Sociale strømninger i dansk litteratur* (1913) [*Social Trends in Danish Literature*] and Frederik Madsen's *Danmarks sociale litteratur* (1922) [*The Social Literature of Denmark*] had been published. But during the 1920's and especially the 1930s, the definitional debate reached a preliminary high.

The central contribution to the debate is Bomholt's *Arbejderkultur* [*Working-Class Culture*] (1932), in which he presents his vision of an ideal working-class literature. According to Bomholt, working-class literature must, among other things, a) be consistent with workers' lives and experiences, prioritizing content over form and composition, b) be based on the ideas and values of the working class, c) reject "gloomy realism" and "merciful sadness" in favor of "rebellion and aversion to decay and doom", and d) express optimism and emphasize the continued presence of revolutionary forces (Bomholt, 1932, pp. 160–62).

As already mentioned, Bomholt was not only a literary critic but also a social democratic politician, who was the first Danish Minister of Culture from 1961 to 1964. *Arbejderkultur* often denotes the so-called offensive phase (e.g. Bondebjerg, 1979, II, pp. 220–237) of socialist democratic cultural politics lasting from the mid-1920s to 1935. First and foremost, the 1920s and 30s saw the intensification of the labor movement's cultural and educational initiatives. At this point, the ambition for cultural access coincided with the ideal of a distinct working-class culture. Initiatives such as "Arbejdernes Oplysningforbund" (AOF) [The Workers' Educational Association] founded in 1924, aimed

at developing the societal and cultural knowledge of the working class by supporting and promoting a culture based on the experience and interests of the proletariat. A tangible manifestation of this co-existence was the establishment of the AOF Bogkreds [The AOF Book Circle], that published literature *for* the working class and sought to establish alternatives to the existing book market. The goal was to use the labor movement's existing organization to reach working-class readers.

The offensive phase of social-democratic cultural politics was, however, relatively brief. In 1934, Stauning presented the political program "Danmark for folket" [Denmark for the People], that marked an important change: The Social Democratic Party should transform itself from a "class party" to a "people's party." This trajectory is mirrored in the subsequent development of Bomholt's cultural thought. *Kulturen for Folket* [*The Culture for the People*] (1938) thus distances itself from the vision of a distinct working-class literature and instead promotes the notion of a comprehensive "people's culture" (e.g. Bomholt, 1938, p. 5). This turn is emphasized in a 1939 review, where Bomholt promotes the notion of "democratic realism," which he contrasts to the Soviet-inspired ideal of "Socialist realism." This doctrine was introduced in Danish contexts via the 1938 translation of Maxim Gorkij's speech "Soviet Literature" (1934), spurring a local and limited version of the realism debate of the 1930s (Thing, 1993, pp. 560–566); cf. Pedersen, 1982, pp. 7–10 & 82–84).

In the review, Bomholt attacks the agitational literary ideal of the "bolsheviks," which he believes is still caught in an outdated ideology of class. Bomholt maintains the importance of literature for the working class, but not in a sense of working-class literature promoting the values and interest of this specific class, but literature that investigates the relation between "man and man, between man and society", saturated by "a socially toned humanism" (Bondebjerg & Harsløf, 1979, p. 525).

It should be noted that Bomholt's review is in critical dialogue with several leftwing intellectuals. The changes in the Social Democratic Party during the 1920s and 1930s had intensified divisions within the Danish left creating a heterogenic oppositional wing critical of the alleged pragmatism and reformism of the

Social Democrats. This split also left its mark on Danish working-class literature during the 1920s and 1930s, resulting in a recurrent division between a “social democratic” and a “communist” branch of the tradition (e.g. Agger et al 1984; pp. 524–544; Bondebjerg, 1979).

The social democratic working-class literature is most often associated with authors such as Nils Nilsson (1897–1980) and Caja Rude (1884–1949), whose works depict the contemporary working class, focusing especially on the organized proletariat of the urban industries (e.g. Bondebjerg). Among the working-class writers affiliated with the communist branch are the later Nexø, Harald Herdal (1900–1978), and Hans Kirk (1898–1962). However, many of the period’s communist authors (several of whom were intellectuals without personal backgrounds in the working class) are seldomly categorized as working-class authors, but instead grouped under headings such as “committed” or “intellectual” writers and often associated with the loose term *kulturradikalisme* [cultural radicalism], designating a multifaceted left-wing cultural movement of the interwar years.

The communist authors most often identified as working-class writers were autodidact writers and/or those most directly thematically and aesthetically associated with the tradition established in the previous decades. This is, for instance, the case of Kirk, a central communist intellectual who did not come from a working-class background. Still, his works are often included in the Danish working-class literature tradition (e.g. Damsgård 1975; Harrits, 1983; Bondebjerg & Harsløf, 1979; Rasmussen, 2005, p. 28). The novel *Fiskerne* [*The Fishermen*] (1923) portrays the agrarian proletariat, while *Daglejerne* [*Hired Hands*] (1936) and *De nye tider* [*The New Times*] (1939) portray the societal development of a rural community during industrialization, both examining the development of class contradictions and highlighting the community’s revolutionary potential. As the brief comments above suggests, Kirk can be described as a consistent innovator (in particular regarding his mastery of the collective novel) of the working-class literature of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century due to his portrayal of the Danish working class and his “committed, realist” style (Agger et al, 1984, 457).

The case of Harald Herdal is more complex. Born into a poor working-class family in Copenhagen, for many years Herdal endured a tumultuous life characterized by unemployment and poverty. These experiences were mirrored in his rather vast *oeuvre* including the experimental collective novel *Løg* [*Onion*] (1935). Set in a Copenhagen working-class slum, the fragmented narrative portrays the lives of seven working-class youths characterized by their shared experience of social fixation, sexual repression, and general sense of hopelessness.

*Løg* triggered a feud between Herdal and Kirk after the latter critically reviewed the novel. Kirk, among other things, attacked the inadequacy of the sexual themes, which he stated inaccurately depicted the actual “erotic experiences” of the “proletarian youth” (Kirk, 1936). However, in several responses, Herdal dismissed Kirk’s own, more optimistic depictions of the working class as ideologically motivated, “naïve,” and in conflict with “the reality of things” (Thing, 1993, p. 592). As several studies note, the debate around *Løg* was ultimately invested in the question of realism, with Kirk stressing the “constructive processing of the experience material, while Herdal demanded exact reproduction of the self-experienced” (Bondebjerg & Harsløf, 1979, p. 101; cf. Thing, 1993, pp. 590–594; Bondebjerg, 1979, pp. 277–280). Thus, Kirks’ literary ideal prioritizes what we might call “analytical” or “ideological” insight over the background and experience of the working-class author and furthermore the presence of “optimistic revolutionary perspective” (Bondebjerg, 1979, p. 279).

Summarily, when the 1930s are described as the years of consolidation, is it due to the emergence of a persistent definitional debate that established the bounds of the term and the tradition. However, the debate simultaneously shows working class literature as a contested tradition and a multifaceted praxis. The decade can also be viewed, however, as a consolidation of the tradition’s marginalization. Only a few new working-class authors reached the wider readership. And though a rich debate over working class literature took place, this was a markedly intellectual endeavor, especially after the offensive phase of social democratic cultural politics (Thing, 1993, p. 581).

## 1940–1980: Towards the Last Hurrah?

Though the following decades are often described as a low point in the tradition's history (e.g. Barlyng & Bostrup, 1982, p. 9; Due, 1978, pp. 16–18), working-class literature continued to be produced; 1940s-examples include Gunner Gersov's (1915–1990) *Drømmen om regnbuen* [*The Dream of the Rainbow*] (1942), Ludvig Søndergaard's (1889–1960) *Kun en æske tændstikker* [*Merely a Box of Matches*] (1942) and Hilmer Wulf's (1908–1984) *Sådan noget sker faktisk* [*Such Things Actually Happen*] (1943).

Gersov, Søndergaard, and Wulff all continued their literary career in the following decades, as did several of the central working-class writers of the 1930s, such as Herdal and Nilsson. Additionally, working-class writers such as Ditte Cederstrand (1915–1984), Jens Jackie Jensen (1930–) and Erik A. Clausen (1930–) made their debuts in the 50s and 60s. In light of this, it could be argued that Danish working-class literature persisted, but it did not enjoy the same status it had in 1930s. This loss of status is generally explained by factors such as the general wealth increase of the 1950s and 1960s, the expansion of the Danish welfare state, and the rise of the new expansive middle-class, the so-called “mellemlag” [interlayers] of Danish society.

Against that background, the transition to the 1970s marks a caesura. The demand for the increased efficiency and new technological possibilities of automation during the late 1960s fueled labor disputes. Starting in 1973, labor issues intensified when Denmark experienced a tough economic crisis and rising unemployment. Intellectually, the late 1960s was characterized by the rise of leftist radicalism. This trajectory left its mark on Danish academia, in the form of the emerging so-called university Marxism of the 1970s and spurred a newfound interest in working-class literature amongst literary scholars.

The scholarly investment to working-class literature was not limited to the exploration of the tradition's past. Initiatives such as Litteratursociologisk Debatgruppe [Literature Sociological Debate Group], the organization Socialistisk Kulturfront [Socialist Culture-Front] and the literary journal *HUG!* attempted to form practical alliances between intellectuals and working-class writers, the aim of which was to promote literature

written by workers (Jørgensen 1979, 14). Thus, if ideological-essentialist conceptions of working-class literature, as described in the sections above, dominated the period's studies, the question of class-background remained a central factor in the debate on contemporary working-class literature. This is in spite of scholars and editors, such as Ole Hyltoft, who in the foreword to the anthology *Arbejdsliv* [*Working-Life*] (1978), simply defines working-class literature as literature "about workers" (Hyltoft, 1978, 8).

The prioritization of personal experience is also central to the initiative Ar-litt (an abbreviation of "Arbejder-litteratur;" literally "worker-literature") that was established in 1973 as an organization by and for "skrivende arbejdere" [writing workers]. The term, preferred to the more common "arbejderforfatter" [working-class author], is symptomatic for Ar-lit's insistence on their members' active relation to the working class. If a member achieved mainstream recognition, he or she had to leave the organization, which, for instance, was the case for John Nehm (1934–) due to his public breakthrough with *Man går ind ad en port* [*You Enter a Gate*] (1975) and *Ståsted ønskes* [*Standpoint Wanted*] (1976) (Barlyng & Bostrup, 1982, p. 12). Nehm is just one example of working-class literature in the period. John Chr. Jørgensen lists more than forty titles of working-class literature published between 1970 and 1979, several of them by established commercial publishers (Jørgensen, 1979, pp. 77–78), including Grete Stenbæk Jensen's (1925–2009) *Konen og æggene* [*The Woman and the Eggs*] (1973) og Åge Hansen-Folehaven's (1913–1979) *Mens vi venter på fællesskab* [*While We're Waiting for Unity*] (1974).

Both novels can be described as realist auto-fictive accounts of the authors' experiences as unskilled workers. The texts address themes such as deteriorating working conditions, job insecurity and the alleged resignation of the established labor movement. Furthermore, both novels explore the working life's effect on the private life of the protagonists and their families, including portraying a working-class torn between traditional working-class values (political commitment, class-solidarity etc.) and desires for social mobility, consumerism, etc. The critical gender perspective of Jensen's novel should also be noted. Combining the decade's



trending feminist “kvindelitteratur” [women’s literature] with its representation of class, the novel highlights the intersection of class and gender, which has also been thematized in some critical studies (e.g. Juncker, 1977; Agger, 1982).

Based on personal experiences, both novels were also representative of the dominant documentary trend in the decade’s working-class literature most apparent in book-published interviews such as Dagmar Andreassen’s (1910–1991) *Fabriksliv* [*Factory Life*] (1973) or the so-called “kritiske rapporter” [critical reports] that exposed and explored various labor problems. By extension, some scholars expanded their conceptualizations of working-class literature to include various forms of factual texts (Karlsen, 1977, pp. 154–156; Bojsen-Møller & Kværndrup, 1977). Still, the dominating critical and common understanding of the term remained “texts with fiction elements” (Jørgensen 1979, p. 22).

Hansen-Folehaven’s *Mens vi venter på fællesskab* and Jensen’s *Konen og æggene* attracted broad attention and media coverage. Nevertheless, the main audience of the working-class literature of the 1970s was found among “education seekers, students, academics etc.” (Ibid., p. 12; cf. Madsen, 1977, pp. 40–44), a demographic on the rise since the 1960s.

If working-class literature within the literary public was a profiled phenomenon, it was also a debated one, and a recurring dispute concerned the question of “literary quality” (Barlyng & Bostrup, 1982, pp. 22–23). The controversy surrounding Hansen-Folehaven’s *Mens vi venter på fællesskab* is exemplary. As a worker at the Tuborg Brewery in Copenhagen, Hansen-Folehaven came in contact with members of the abovementioned Litteratursociologisk Debatgruppe who urged him to finalize the manuscript of the novel (Jørgensen 1980, p. 55). Hansen-Folehaven’s professional life, however, left little time for the task. Therefore, he applied to the Statens Kunstfond [The Danish Arts Foundation] for a working grant.

The application was primarily rejected due to the lack of “documentation of Åge Hansen’s artistic qualities” (Bostrup 1982, 23). This spurred a public protest by scholars and intellectuals problematizing the implicit “social bias” of the existing “highbrow ‘quality criteria’” (Hertel, 1973; cf. Barlyng &

Bostrup, 1982, pp. 46–49). The protest ultimately succeeded. Following the intervention of the Social Democratic Minister of Culture, Hansen-Folehaven was granted extraordinary financial support. The episode, thus, illustrates the renewed responsiveness to working-class literature of left-wing politicians as well as of the labor movement during the decade (Jørgensen, 1979, pp. 10–11; Barlyng & Bostrup, 1982, pp. 107–124).

The debate, however, continued after the novel was published. The critic and author Hans Jørgen Nielsen's review is symptomatic. As an editor of *HUG!*, Nielsen was among the intellectual allies of working-class literature. Still, he emphasizes the novel's "massive lack of literary qualities" though simultaneously stressing the importance of its attempt to "present material from the entire life context of the working-class" (Nielsen, 1974).

Nielsen's review reflects a general cleavage in the book's reception. Critiques prioritizing the "content" of the book was generally positive, while critiques focusing on "formal" literary qualities (with regards to language, composition and so forth) were notably more dismissive (Bostrup, 1982, pp. 45–67).<sup>5</sup> Thus, as Nielsen states in his review, a principal question raised by *Mens vi venter på fællesskab* is whether working-class literature should be assessed and judged on the same criteria as "literature" as such (Nielsen, 1974).

A similar question stood at the center of the 1979-debate spurred by the authors Per Larsen (1939–) and Bent Vinn Nielsen (1954–), both of whom had been, occasionally considered "working-class authors". However, in the essay "Om en tendens som kaldes arbejderlitteratur" ["About a Trend Called Working-Class Literature"] (1979) they distance themselves from the label. Though stressing the importance of "literature with working class outset and point of view," the essay attacks the alleged discriminatory implications inherent to the term when used by "pseudo-solidarizing MA's and their students," fetishizing the supposed authenticity of working-class authors (Larsen & Nielsen, 1979). According to Larsen and Nielsen, the widespread intellectual support is saturated by a patronizing attitude neglecting "craftsmanship and simple respect for the profession" (Larsen & Nielsen, 1979), that ultimately counteracts the possibility of an

aesthetically ambitious and adequate working-class literature. In an earlier commentary, Nielsen had precisely characterized the contemporary wave of realist working-class literature as “completely ignoring several decades of literary and artistic development” and, consequently, unfit to “depict the condition of the [contemporary, NFL] working class” (Nielsen, 1978).

Though autodidact writers with working-class backgrounds themselves, Larsen’s and Nielsen’s own writing do differ markedly from novels such as Jensen’s and Hansen-Folehaven’s. Their respective debut novels *Krapyl* [*Rabble*] (1977) and *Arbejdssky* [*Work Shy*] (1978) represent the life and experience of working-class characters. The novels, however, are highly experimental and form-conscious texts, characterized by, among other things, sophisticated narratological techniques and meta-poetical reflections embracing modernist qualities such as ambiguity and ambivalence (e.g. Jørgensen, 1980, pp. 66–75; Handesten et al., 2007, pp. 328–332). Symptomatically, while some critics identified, for instance, *Arbejdssky* as working-class literature, the majority did not (Selsing, 1984, pp. 25–26).

Larsen and Nielsen’s essay was subsequently met with critical responses from working-class authors and intellectual supporters, several of whom—echoing the debate surrounding Hansen-Folehaven—problematized the exclusionary implications inherent in the notion of literary craftsmanship (Barlyng & Bostrup, 1982, pp. 100–105). This debate highlights two oppositional positions within the 1970s working-class literary sphere: one insisting on the working-class’s right to document its experience and conditions in its own terms, and one insisting on the importance of aesthetic awareness and ability (Jørgensen, 1980, p. 75).

If the 1970s reintroduced working-class literature as an important literary phenomenon and tradition, the decade also exposed it as a contested field. As Jørgensen notes, it would be misleading to univocally depict the development of decade’s working-class literature. Instead, Jørgensen visualizes it as a circular figure, the center of which consists of the “writing workers” and realists, while the “avantgarde” authors such as Larsen and Nielsen are situated at its periphery (Ibid., p. 58).

Jørgensen's circle-image is intended as a synchronous representation. However, it is also suitable for placing the decade chronologically in the overall history of Danish working-class literature. As in previous decades, the main strand of the tradition is still perceived in the 1970s as comprised of realist and ideologically committed texts most often written by authors with a personal background in the working-class. And, as like the previous eras of working-class literature, this core is surrounded by a diverse body of texts perceived as belonging to or at least connected with the Danish tradition of working-class literature.

### **And the Rest is Silence?**

In 1977, John Chr. Jørgensen described the repopularization of working-class literature as an "encouraging fact" (32). Only eight years later, he presented a defeatist assessment of the tradition portraying a situation where "all the talk about working-class literature has been silenced" (Jørgensen, 1985). According to Jørgensen, one factor in the silences was declining interest among Danish media and publishers. This, however, according to Jørgensen is merely a reflection of the fundamental explanation: declining support among intellectuals, the main readership of the working-class literature in the previous decade.

Jørgensen's explanatory model addresses a crucial and highly complex question in the study of Danish working-class literature: Why has the tradition—with the the exception of some notable titles<sup>6</sup>—generally failed to reach a popular audience? This has been a reoccurring question throughout the history of the research field and several explanations have been suggested, including the dominant preference of readers for "entertainment-literature," not least among the working class (e.g. Hansen, 1939, pp. 19–22 & 40), and the dominance of bourgeois aesthetics and literary stakeholders in the literary public (Agger & Gemzøe, 1982, p. 325) which is reflected in the marginalization of working-class literature in academic and educational institutions prior to the 1970s (Ibid., p. 17; cf. Jørgensen, 1979, pp. 12–16). Generally, the overall peripheral position of Danish working-class literature has been linked to its emergence – and subsequent existence – within

an already well-established national literary tradition characterized by longwithstanding norms and institutional structures (e.g. Agger & Gemzøe, 1982, p. 325; Hansen, 1939, pp. 19–22). Thus, the peaks of the 1930s and 1970s have relied on the temporary formations of powerful “counter-publics” that made their way during these periods into, and affected, the national literary tradition. However, working-class literature was never constituted as a main strand of the national literature.

With return to Jørgensen’s commentary, his diagnosis of “the betrayal of the intellectuals” appears somewhat hyperbolic (Jørgensen, 1985). Still, it is fair to say that the breakthrough of working-class literature and the revival of its tradition during the 1970s exposed its reliance on the support of a wide range of stakeholders in the literary public. And, as stated in this chapter’s introduction, this support has indeed declined drastically ever since, perhaps the most significant symptom being the general disappearance of Danish working-class literature as a subject of research and study. Consequently, no major and comprehensive revisions of the narrative of the tradition established by the studies of the 1970s and early 1980s exist.

The sections above have attempted to highlight the various conflicts and gaps inherent in the body of research. Due to its ambition of outlining the established narrative of the history of Danish Working Class, the chapter, though, is still based largely on sources emerging within a rather narrow historical horizon. It can consequently be accused of reproducing several inherent biases, including: a) an excessive focus on politics and ideology; b) a traditional national perspective, downplaying various transnational connections; c) a narrow definition of ‘literature’ that excludes, for instance, oral literature, low-brow literature and non-published amateur writing; and not least d) a focus on literary works primary authored by, as it often goes, white males. These, by no means comprehensive comments, outline tasks for future research, which would remodel, expand, and challenge the narrative outlined in the previous sections.

The disappearance of the research field also means that the tradition’s history after the early 1980s has been left effectively unexplored. The effect is apparent in, for instance, *Dansk litteraturs*

*historie I–V [The History of Danish Literature]* (2006–2009), a more recent overview study of the history of Danish literature from 1100 to 2000. *Dansk litteraturs historie* includes the established narrative of Danish working-class literature from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 1970s; it also effectively ends the tradition's history in 1980. Thus, the term is absent in the subsequent discussion of Danish literature from 1980 to 2000 (Handesten et al., 2007). Consequently, future research must also address the tradition's history over the last forty years, expanding it to entail new genres such as the graphic novel and popular cultural phenomena such as hip-hop. Such an endeavor lies beyond the scope of this chapter. However, the final section will offer a limited contribution to such endeavor as it explores the question posed in the introduction: *Does a contemporary Danish working-class literature exist?*

### **Contemporary literature, working-class literature**

Despite the decline of working-class literature as a research field, in recent years a limited number of texts have made enquiries into its current state: A few media commentaries (e.g. Staun, 2016; Ravensborg, 2014; Dressler-Bredsdorff, 20190), and two master theses (Gundersen, 2017; Visti-Tang, 2016) and Anker Gemzøe's article "Underdanmark i ny dansk prosa" ["Lower Denmark in New Danish Prose"] (2016). Furthermore, articles such as Gemzøe's "Den social drejning" ["The Social Turn"] (2017) and Peter Simonsen's "Forestillingen om at tingene var indrettet anderledes" ["The Notion That Things Were Arranged Differently"] (2018) both discuss contemporary author Helle Helle in the context of working-class literature and precarity. Together with a number of recent studies focusing on themes such as class and precarity, these texts can be said to outline a multifaceted list of potential candidates for a 21<sup>st</sup> century working-class literature. This body of works can be divided into three rough subcategories:

First, a limited number of titles appear as immediate successors to the tradition as they easily fit into the formalist definition of working-class literature. One example is Viggo Toften Jørgensen's *Den glade tømrer – og andre historier fra det virkelige liv [The Happy Carpenter – and Other Real Life Stories]* (2012). This

collection of stories, first published in a trade-union magazine, document Toften-Jørgensen's professional life as a carpenter with an emphasis on his commitment to, and activism in, the labor movement. Similar characteristics can be attributed the concrete worker Jacob Mathiassen's *Beton* [*Concrete*] (2011), the drainage worker Keld Stenum's *Skærveknuser* [*Iron Horse*] (2011) and journalist Peter Rasmussen's *Stillads* [*Scaffold*] (2014), a contemporary heir to the documentary interview-books of the 1970s.

Second, some literary works occasionally referred to as "arbejdspladsromaner" [work-place novels] also thematize the experience of work (Turner, 2015). However, if texts such as Kristian Bang Foss's *Stormen i 99* [*The Storm in 99*] (2008) and *Døden kører Audi* [*Death Drives an Audi*] (2012), Jacob Skyggebjerg's *Vor Tids Helt* [*A Hero our Time*] (2013), Kenneth Jensen's *Tragedie plus tid* [*Tragedy Plus Time*] (2015) and Lone Aburas's *Føtexsøen* [*The Føtex-Lake*] (2009) contain fictional and auto-fictional accounts of working life in low-wage industries and services, they markedly differ from the ideological anchorage of Toften-Jørgensen's and Mathiassen's books insofar that the labor movement play little, if any, role. The dominant focus is the unorganized worker, and several of the protagonists are merely temporary workers in their respective settings. This situation is characteristic for many of the authors. Several come from what might be described as working-class backgrounds and/or have experience in the depicted professions. However, they are often *also* graduates of universities or creative writing programs and are generally considered professional authors rather than "writing workers."

Third, a number of texts depict characters who are in an economical sense situated outside of the labor market or in an enduringly unstable, insecure and vulnerable relation to it; a multifaceted demographic consisting of the long-term-unemployed, recipients of social benefits, the sick, immigrants, and others in precarious economic and social situations. This, the dominant of the three subcategories, includes (in a Danish context) highly profiled titles such as Yahya Hassan's *Yahya Hassan* (2013), Morten Pape's *Planen* [*The Plan*] (2015), and Thomas Korsgaard's *Hvis der skulle komme et menneske forbi* [*If a Human Should Pass By*] (2017). Other, examples are Kim Basse's *Det halve menneske* [*Half a Man*]

(2016), Ahmad Mahmoud's *Sort land [Black Country]* (2015) and Mikael Josephsen's *Neden under [Down Under]* (2010).

The inclusion of these works in the existing enquiries into contemporary working-class literature firstly reflects the general agreement that working-class literature cannot be reduced to literature about work but entails literary representations of the entire life-world of the working-class (e.g. Harrits, 1983; Boysen-Møller, 1985). For instance, unemployment is a reoccurring theme throughout the tradition's history. Secondly, the inclusion of such texts –in other contexts described as “underclass literature,” “literature of precarity,” and “migrant literature” (e.g.; Lund, 2017; Gemzøe, 2017; Schwartz et al, 2018; Löström, 2015) – expresses a general understanding that the tradition's current manifestations must reflect the historical transformations of class formations and its intersections with, for example, ethnicity.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the recent studies generally align themselves with the processual understanding of class, suggested by, for instance Julias Markels, that designates class as a “hidden process of expropriation rather than a visible identity site” (Markels, 2003, p. 22). In this sense, class (and working-class literature) is not considered a question of fixed of identities and activities (working class equals white males selling manual labor for payment) but designate social-economic and political structures systematically distributing material and immaterial privileges unevenly and unfairly. This, again, entails an understanding of class as a historical, ever-changing process; an outlook that also applies to the subjects of working-class literature.

This understanding is reflected in the rather heterogeneous body of contemporary literary works outlining a multifaceted counter-narrative to the widespread claim that the Danish welfare state has moved beyond class (cf. Lund 2017, p. 27). Furthermore, it is possible to highlight some primary characteristics:

First, several titles, including Pape, Korsgaard, Hassan and Skyggebjerg's books, correspond to a dominant genre of Scandinavian working-class literature, “the more or less autobiographical realist *Bildungsroman*” (Nilsson, 2014b, p. 100). They develop auto-fictional portraits of characters raised in economically, socially and culturally emancipated environments, with



the recurrent topoi being the urban social housing estate and the so-called “fringe-Denmark” (impoverished provincial areas).

Second, several texts depict processes of upward social mobility. This is the case of, for instance, *Planen, Hvis der skulle komme et menneske forbi* and *Det halve menneske* as well as novels such as Kristian Bang Foss’ *Frank vender hjem* [*Frank Returns Home*] (2019) and Dennis Gade Kofod’s *Nancy* (2015). All convey narratives of working-class protagonists, in the expanded definition suggested above, “climbing the social ladder” and are often narrated retrospectively, from a vantagepoint following or near the end of the protagonist’s class journey. At first glance, such texts communicate a positive vision: That the working class no longer is helplessly tied to their class-origin. However, several works include a moment of ambiguity, portraying their protagonists as exceptions to the rule, as the majority of working-class characters inhabiting these texts are unable to pursue the protagonists’ upward trajectory. Thus, if individual characters – due to personal skills, help from various benefactors, and sheer coincidence – are able to “escape,” the class as such remains stuck in a degraded mode of social existence.

Third, this branch of contemporary fiction generally portrays the working class as fundamentally dysfunctional and destructive, associated with broken families, violence and abuse (cf. Gemzøe, 2016; Lund 2018). Though inarguably expressing sympathy with the working class and indignantly criticizing its condition these texts – crudely stated— generally run counter to the human, social, and political potential often afforded to it in studies of the “classics” of Danish working-class literature. As a result, as Gemzøe notes, a prevalent component of this contemporary body of works bears resemblance to the so-called horror realist-novels of the 1890s and early 1900s (Gemzøe, 2016, pp. 123–124). The contemporary class-oriented literature tends to focus on the “unorganized” working class and, despite expressing sympathy and compassion, it hardly ever envisions the lower-classes as a potentially progressive societal force. To quote Svend Aage Andersen’s critical assessment of the horror-realist novels, in much contemporary Danish literature the working class likewise comes forth as “socially *determined*” but not “socially *determining*”

(Andersen, 1982, p. 266). Expressed with the terminology of this chapter, the majority of abovementioned works of contemporary Danish literature thus arguably lacks the ideological anchorage and utopian impulse that were favored in the ideological-essentialist conceptualizations of working-class literature highly present in the research field.

Where, then, does that leave Danish working-class literature in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? In his 2016 commentary, Rene Staun, a literary critic at the social democratic online media *Pio*, highlights titles such as *Planen*, *Yahya Hassan* and *Beton* as marking a “new wave of working-class literature.” According to Staun, if we accept a broader, updated notion of the working-class, these texts fit “the common definition of working literature. Namely, literature written *by* working-class people *about* the conditions of the working class, and expressing an attitudinal standpoint [værdimæssigt ståsted] *for* the workers” (Staun, 2016).

In their master’s theses Gundersen and Visti-Tang reach similarly affirmative conclusions based on their updated conceptualizations of working-class literature. Among other things, these analyses erase the class-background of the author as a criterion. Due to their similarity, I am here quoting only Gundersen’s version:

The new working-class literature dealt with, actualizes or sympathizes with the professional or social conditions of the working-class (and/or the precariat) with a class-conscious, political or socially indignant tendency, often in a realist, documentary or auto-fictional style (Gundersen, 2017, p. 43; cf. Visti-Tang, 2016, p. 35)

Gemzøe’s outlook is more ambiguous. “Do [the contemporary literary representations of the lower class] then correspond to our notions of working-class literature?”, he asks before answering: “Not really. Not at all if an open and committed relation to the labor movement is understood as a main criterion” (Gemzøe, 2016, p. 124).

Before elaborating on the differences between these interpretations, it is important to highlight a commonality: Staun, Visti-Tang, Gundersen, and Gemzøe all give precedence to the political dimension of working-class literature and, thus, continue the

main trend of the studies of the 1970s and 1980s. Nevertheless, their varied outlooks on the current state of Danish working-class literature which can be explained by reference to their distinct views on the ideological or political dimension of working-class literature.

In Staun's, Visti-Tang's, and Gundersen's texts, terms such as "class consciousness," "solidarity," and "attitudinal standpoint" seem interchangeable with ideas of "sympathy," "critic," and "indignation." Gemzøe, too, acknowledges the "social commitment" of the emerging body of class-oriented contemporary literature (Gemzøe, 2016, p. 115). However, when he ultimately hesitates to identify these texts as examples of contemporary working-class literature, it is because, I would argue, his formulation of the "open and committed relation to the labor movement" implies a sterner understanding of class-consciousness and ideological qualities which I tentatively have identified with the terms "ideological anchorage" and "utopian impulse." As described in the sections above, it is precisely such characteristics that several central studies, including Gemzø's earlier contributions to the research field, employ to mark the qualitative difference between, for instance, the horror-realist novels and working-class literature. And it is this understanding, I would argue, that still resonates in Gemzøe's reserved, hesitant outlook on the current state of Danish working-class literature.

Despite the notable reservations of Gemzøe's formulation, the hesitating conclusion of the article is rather paradoxical, as Gemzøe here previously a) emphasizes that working-class literature must be considered a historically changeable phenomenon (Gemzøe, 2016, p. 113); b) approaches working-class literature, as noted in a previous section, as an umbrella-term including "many different literary trends, modes and genres" (Gemzøe, 2016, p. 114); and c) demonstrates "an astonishing continuity with regard to central trends of genre, stylistics and attitude" between the contemporary titles discussed in the article and the historical representations of the working class such as the horror-realist novels (Gemzøe, 2016, p. 124).

Gemzøe's article can be said to reflect the ambiguity inherent in the established narrative of Danish working-class literature, that,

as this chapter has argued, has favored and has been constructed around a relatively narrow core of literary works. However, a history of the Danish working-class literature that – as attempted in this chapter – includes the history of its construction exposes it as a tradition *also* in dialogue with, and attached to, a heterogeneous periphery of literary works, not always and not univocally assessed as working-class literature while still persistently connected to the tradition. Perceived in this way, Danish working-class literature reveals itself to be a much more contested and multifaceted field. Or, as stated in the closing paragraph of Gemzøe’s article (rather ambiguously following his hesitant assessment of the current state of Danish working-class literature):

Now, as before, working-class literature is [...] a phenomenon that seems to avoid our preconceived notions due to its characteristic diversity and historical variability, and due to its unexpected re-actualization in new directions and forms. (Gemzøe, 2016, p. 124)

If that statement is taken at face value, there are indeed reasons to insist on the continued existence of Danish working-class literature in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And despite the outlined developments and transformations, it is indeed possible to identify continuities between the tradition’s past and present. Such genealogies, however, do not smoothly follow the path of the perceived core, but span a complex braid with several central fixed points situated in the periphery of the tradition.

Consequently, the two crucial tasks facing scholars researching Danish working-class literature – the reconsideration of the tradition’s past and the exploration of its trajectory in recent decades – can ultimately be considered intersecting endeavors. Both are likely to reconceive the narrative of the tradition, not least regarding its continuities and rifts, and the perceived relationship between its center and periphery.

## Endnotes

1. “Tradition” is used in the sense suggested by Magnus Nilsson (2017, p. 96). Thus, it designates a retrospective and selective construction favoring some aspects and practices while excluding, marginalizing or downplaying others.

2. All translations of non-English quotations are my own.
3. Bomholt actually defines working-class literature as “literature written *by workers and for workers*” (Bomholt, 1930, p. 314); however, his argument at large points to the representation of the working-class as a (natural) criterion (e.g. *ibid.*, pp. 185–188).
4. The chapter’s notion of the term utopian impulse draws on the theoretical framework of the research project “Utopia Without Future” currently implemented by the Department of Arts and Cultural Studies, University of Copenhagen. See: <https://artsandculturalstudies.ku.dk/research/utopia-without-future/>.
5. The reception of *Mens vi venter på fællesskab* thus reflects the two dominating outlooks on working-class literature in the 1970s. “First, an aesthetic perspective that in general does not assign working-class literature high-literary status. The perspective is often linked to the aesthetic and literary ideals of modernism [...] and is often critical of the overt political character of much new working-class literature. Second, a left-wing ideological point of view, that generally emphasizes the importance of the creation of working-class as a counter-weight to bourgeois literature.” (Stæhr, 1978, p. 65).
6. The works of Aakjkær, Skjoldborg and Nexø reached a wider audience. During the 1930s – the heyday of the AOF Book Circle, that at its highest had 6000 subscribers (Agget et al, 1984, p. 522)— Nils Nilsson and Caja Rude could be considered well-selling authors; the was the case for, for instance, Grete Stensbæk, John Nehm and Ditte Cederstrand in the 1970s as well (Jørgensen, 1980, p. 16). Furthermore, according to editor Ole Hyltoft, some short stories from the anthology *Arbejdsliv* reached a circulation of between 500.000 and 750.000 copies due to their publication in trade union magazines (*Ibid.*, p. 16). Finally, contemporary titles such the debuts of Yahya Hassan and Morten Pape has topped the Danish bestseller-lists in recent years.
7. The heightened attention to ethnicity in contemporary class-oriented literature reflects a demographic change of Denmark within the last fifty years. Until the 1960s Denmark was an ethnically relative homogenic society. However, from the late 1960s to the early 2000s Denmark saw a steady increase in immigration. Parts of this this demographic belong to the “the growing under-class” and consistues a “new ethnic underclass” (Olsen et al., 2014).

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